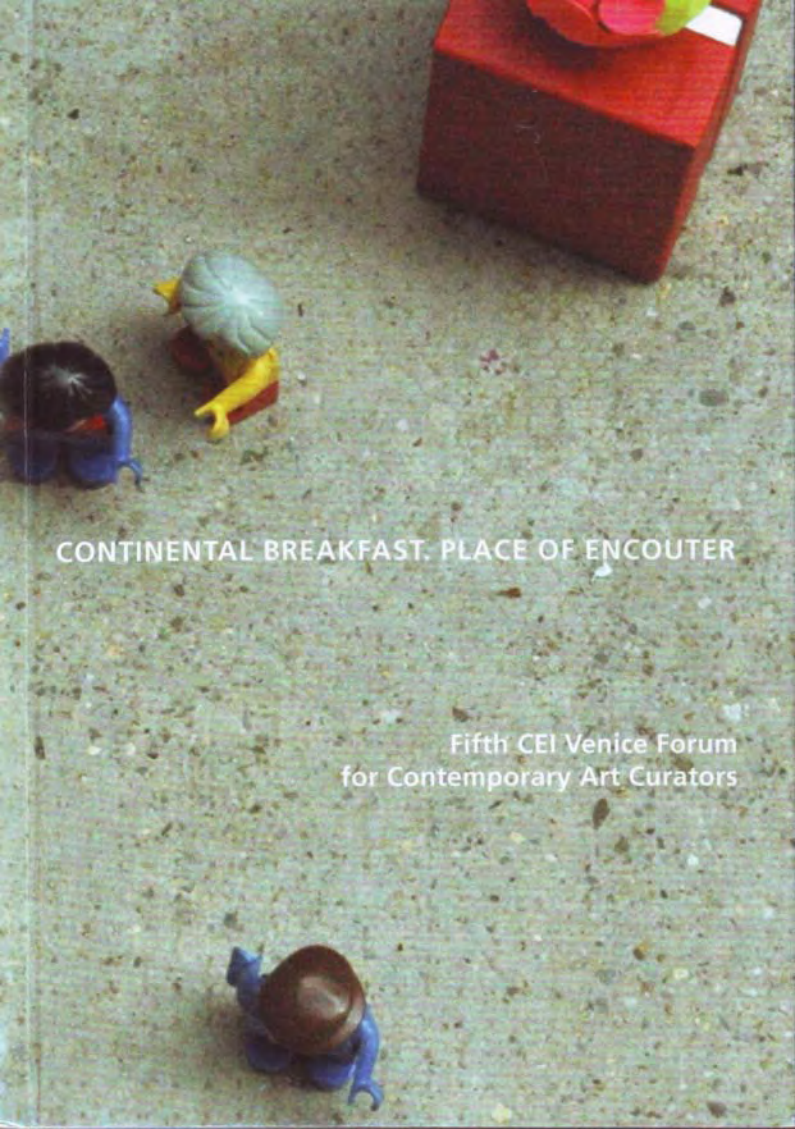




CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST. PLACE OF ENCOUNTER

Fifth CEI Venice Forum
for Contemporary Art Curators

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22 VENICE TALKS / IARA BOUBNOVA and LUCHEZAR BOYADJIEV

Iara Boubnova was born in Moscow and lives in Sofia. Her curatorial projects explore art, politics and society, identities and the self-empowerment of art scenes. She curated and co-curated exhibitions and biennials in Moscow, Frankfurt, Istanbul, London, Lille, Venice, etc.

Luhezar Boyadjiev (1957) is an artist living and working in Sofia. His work deals with urban environments, audience construction and personal interpretation of public processes.

MANAGEMENT OF "MEMORY" AS PROMOTION OF "AMNESIA"

History in "present tense" is a phenomenon of lasting amnesia, which is turning into a permanent state of non-historical and a-cultural treatment of both the past and the present. The current situation in Bulgaria is marked by a boom in museum building on the level of governmental programming. Largely triggered by available EU funding, the program under the heading of reconstructing the whole museum sector of the country, is meant to have 3 new art museums in Sofia within the next 6 months to 1 year. Without any dialogue with either the public or the experts in the field, without any prospective programming, concept for exposition or ideas for collection building the program is in fact a smoke screen to mask the nationalistic, populist and conservative agenda of a government not able to deal with overwhelming economic difficulties at a time when the possibilities for large scale corruption are still available only in the field of culture.

The following images and comments relate to the opening of two of the new "museums" that are museums in name only – the SAMSI (Sofia Arsenal Museum of Contemporary Art) with one floor officially opened in June 2011 at the renovated building of the city's Arsenal, a small and inadequate barracks from the first half of the 20 c.; and the Museum for Socialist Art, which opened in late September 2011 at a former school house in the outskirts of the city after the initial concept calling for a "museum of totalitarianism" turned out to

be impossible to realize due to the lack of a clear concept for what might be housed in such a collection... At the same time the concept for what is "contemporary" and the vision for contemporaneity that is needed in order to have a viable museum for contemporary art, turned out to be suspiciously past-oriented and centered on art practices (read that as plain conservative and bad sculpture) from the 1970-80ies. Not only that but often art works by the same artists (actually sculptors, just like the current Bulgarian minister of culture Vezhdi Rashidov who is the main government operative pushing along the "reform") are "published" simultaneously within the collections of: a/ the SAMSI project; b/ the Museum for Socialist Art; and c/ park-like arrangements on the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria within the hotel property of some questionable new capitalists who not only destroy the environment but also demand recognition for supposedly preserving the "spiritual" heritage of the country.

[fig. 1] The staircase to the inner yard and the sculpture garden of the Museum for Socialist Art, Sofia, September 2011; photograph: Maria Vassileva.

[fig. 2] The lineup of officials for the opening – note the presence of Eastern Orthodox priests who are just about to perform a (religious) ritual of pouring consecrated water onto the opening path of the "museum"; photograph: Maria Vassileva.

[fig. 3] The two young ladies in typical folk costumes are stretching and holding the ribbon that is to be symbolically cut up by the officials, which will constitute

the ceremonial opening of the "museum"; photograph: Maria Vassileva.

[fig. 4] The official lineup for cutting the ribbon of inauguration... From left to right: Tzvetan Tzvetanov (Minister of Interior Affairs), Boiko Borisov (Prime Minister), Simeon Dyankov (Minister of Finance), Vezhdi Rashidov (Minister of Culture). This image brings back nostalgic memories of national pride from the highest level of accomplishments of Bulgarian athletes at Olympic, World, and European Championships. The sport of Rhythmic Gymnastics, a discipline for female athletes, was dominated in the 1980ies by the Bulgarian national squad under the leadership of Coach Neshka Robeva. At that time that squad of beautiful young women athletes was given the endearing nickname of the "Golden Girls of Neshka". They were competing in the sub-disciplines of individual and team combinations using the ribbon, the hoop, the bat, and the ground mat. They were the ultimate pride of Bulgaria.

Against this background one might interpret all Bulgarian governments after 1989 as a variation of the "combinations" (read speculations) used by the Golden Girls... there were governments famous for collaborating with organized crime in team "combinations" with bats (the baseball bat is the ultimate weapon, attribute and symbol of the new mafia in post-socialist Bulgaria that is involved with extortion, blackmail, kidnapping and all sorts of violent crime); or with land (ground) – there were governments famous for swapping prime areas of real estate property owned by the state in the cities, the mountains or at the sea coast for completely useless

terrains in exchange of bribes, kickbacks, etc.; or with hoop – there were governments famous for having their own circles of preferred companies and corporations who were awarded state commissions and privileges in exchange for financial support for election campaigns and so on. The current government of Bulgaria is famous for inaugurating all kinds of things – from roads to kindergarten, while emphasizing the public ritual of “cutting the ribbon” over the substance and the quality of the inaugurated project, let alone the public debate. In the context of the so called museum reform the results are at the same time PR success and cultural disaster; photograph: Maria Vassileva.

[fig. 5] The sculpture garden of the Museum for Socialist Art. For many artists, whose works are displayed within the collection of this “museum”, it remains a total mystery why their art is branded as “socialist” instead of, for instance, the much less problematic label of “art from the period of socialism”. The collection includes obvious samples of official propaganda art from the period between 1944 and 1989 as well as works that have a very complex potential for interpretation...; photograph: Maria Vassileva.

[fig. 6] The crowd at the opening... In the background is the red pentacle star that used to be positioned at the top of the building of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party in downtown Sofia until it was dismantled sometime in 1990. Its dubious status of a beautifully crafted artifact of monumental decorative art as well as of a much hated (at the time) symbol of

the oppressive regime in the country is manifesting the confusing message of this museum – is it a celebration of the past; or is it a critical re-evaluation; or is it just a sample of targeted amnesia aimed at leveling the past into a source of political capital; photograph: Maria Vassileva.

[fig. 7] These are the popular with tourist and fisherman rocks at the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria just south of the ancient city of Sozopol. This photograph from the fall of 2004 is at the beginning of the period of heavy investment in the tourist industry of the country. This is just prior to the membership in the EU. The rocks had been like this for millennia; photograph: Luchezar Boyadjiev.

[fig. 8] This is the same location photographed in 2009. The new Anel Hotel complex has just been constructed there – the rocks are covered with landmass and artificial grass, the grounds are dotted with newly planted palm trees and strange sculptural artifacts – here in the background a cross and a Jesus on it; photograph: Kalin Serapionov.

[fig. 9] ...the same location. Note the bronze horseman sculpture in the foreground. It is by the renowned artist Emil Popov who became famous in the early 1980ies for his "spiritual" treatment of the human form. We will not discuss here neither his engagement with the new wealth nor the way his artwork "interacts" with the environment for all this is quite obvious; photograph: Kalin Serapionov.

[fig. 10] This is the entry area of the new SAMSI museum in Sofia during the opening in June 2011. Note in the foreground the bronze horseman sculpture... It is by the renowned artist Emil Popov who became famous in the early 1980ies for his "spiritual" treatment of the human form. We will not discuss here the vision for either contemporaneity or the status and the mission of contemporary art thus manifested in the SAMSI museum for it is quite obviously related to issues we are strongly opposed to – conservatism, commercialism, collaborationism, conformism, retrograde form and message, etc.; photograph: Luchezar Boyadjiev.

[fig. 11] Same location, same "museum", same vision, same mission, different artists... The sculpture in the background is by the current Minister of Culture of Bulgaria Vezhdi Rashidov; photograph: Luchezar Boyadjiev.

[fig. 12] The welcoming stone signs for the SAMSI museum in Sofia are nothing short of the great tradition of Bulgarian tombstones one can find in any cemetery around the country... We think that these two objects compliment magnificently the "vision" for contemporaneity manifested by the whole museum reform, let alone contemporary art; photograph: Luchezar Boyadjiev.

[fig. 13] Scene from the official opening. The sculptural group in the foreground is by the artist Pavel Koitchev. It used to be located in front of the National Gallery for Foreign Art (no comment on the name...) which

is a central museum in downtown Sofia. In order to compensate the artist for this obvious downgrading of his work Pavel Koitchev was nominated to take part in the Bulgarian national pavilion in Venice 2011 (which is a completely different story...); photograph: Luchezar Boyadjiev.

[fig. 14] The interior of the SAMSI museum at the moment of inauguration. We do hope the direction of this institution will become more relevant and up-to-date but we doubt it...; photograph: Luchezar Boyadjiev.

As it stands now both SAMSI and the Museum for Socialist Art are not legally recognized structures under the law of the land. In fact both are merely branches of the National Art Gallery in Sofia... That is why any relevant reform will have to start with elevating their legal status and upgrading their staff and programs.

ARTISTIC STREET SMARTS AS AN ART OF URBAN INTERVENTION

The new artistic trend, which we are promoting in Sofia, is to have low budget but high efficiency artistic interventions in the public space. This attitude is considered to be the alternative to the recent practice of inaugurating both confused museums and neo-liberal "wild style" monuments with unclear messages that are usually erected without public debate. The practice of spending public money without restrained or transparent procedures is countered (in a modest yet effective

manner) through hit-and-run tactics that aim to focus the attention on the dysfunctional aspects of urban space and public life 20 years after 1989.

The five young artists that were invited to take part in the project in the Spring of 2011 were given 250 Euro and 2 weeks each to come up with an idea, to realize it and to bring back photographic, video or sound documentation of their intervention. They were discouraged from anti-social or destructive acts; they were given logistical support (if needed). The full scope of the material thus collected will be presented in a group show at the ICA-Sofia Gallery in the late fall of 2011.

Here is a list of the most memorable interventions.

[fig. 15-17] Vikenti Komitski. *Corrected Nationalistic Graffiti* and *Public Cup-holder Project*, 2011.

Various locations; Spray paint; plastic cup-holders fastened to urban details; streets of Sofia.

During the past 20 years Sofia has become a user-unfriendly city... Only recently more attention is paid to the numerous city parks and their upkeep and safety. The streets however are a different matter. The artist suggested a simple but rather helpful way to accommodate the life of many Sofia dwellers who not only work on the streets, or look for temporary employment on the streets but also spend many hours in between other activities that are only partially related to either work or recreation.

[fig. 18-20] Veronika Tzekova. *Space Appropriators*, 2011.

Various locations; chalk drawings; various gadgets; streets of Sofia.

The shared spaces in Sofia – sidewalks, inner yards, spaces between the apartment blocks, neighborhood parks and playgrounds, are traditionally the space for young kids. In the past this was unquestionably so. In the present they are heavily contested by people and parked cars; by businesses and restaurant terraces; by adults and other adults... There is little safety or room for the children to organize playful activities that used to be popular and safe. The practice has nearly disappeared which leads to changed patterns of neighborhood life, the most visible aspect of community life in the city in the past. The artist is trying to re-invest and re-construct such practices for at least a short while and for at least her young daughter.

[fig. 21-23] Kiril Kuzmanov. *3 seconds later*, 2011.

Sound intervention into the urban environment of Sofia.

The artist constructed an elaborate machine in order to eavesdrop on the city life on the streets of Sofia.

The machine involves the interaction of microphones and umbrellas; laptop and external hard disks; a couple of powerful car batteries; a large speaker; and even a bicycle... While riding on the bicycle thus modified, the artist is picking up city sounds and people's conversations that are then broadcasted back at them with a 3 seconds delay (but relatively speaking – in real time). Although neither the intention nor the connotations of the work are overtly political, still it is a comment on the ever more problematic use of public space in the country. In reference to the media landscape of Bulgaria as well as

to its political life, the work sends an ironical message to people to be aware of being the puppet of power (with internet, telephone and media spying on citizens being one of the currently hot issues of public life in the country).

[fig. 24-26] Miroslav Hristov and the Plus Group. *Sleeping City*, 2011.

Interventions in various locations around the city of Sofia. A group of young people under the leadership of Miroslav Hristov, a graduate of the Department for Cultural Studies at the Sofia State University, made an extensive cycle of interventions within the living environment of Sofia in order to suggest that the urban space deserves a break from human abuse. By positioning the "Do Not Disturb" sign, usually found in hotels, next to people reading newspapers (or to the thousands of abandoned old cars in the city) the artist(s) are stalking the components of urban life at their most vulnerable – when they are actually NOT participating. At the same time with the act of positioning sleeping pillows, cleverly and totally convincingly, as additions to city sculptures and famous monuments from the past the group is revealing how the urban environment is in need of debate.

[fig. 27-29] Samyuil Stoyanov. *Temporary Alteration*, 2011.

Installation; 40 garbage bags, 40 fastening bands; street lamps; city of Dobritsch, Bulgaria.

This project was realized on May 20th 2011 in the city of Dobrich in northern Bulgaria. That was the official

Museum Night in the spring that was respected by all museums and galleries in the country. The clever visual and material transformation of the city lights in the center of town into garbage heaps hanging in the air was a scandalous comment on the lack of human dimension in public space; very often that is also a lack of elemental concern for beauty and rational simplicity. The "masking" of the street lamps at day and their magical transformation at night was a metaphorical comment on just how easy, in fact, might be to think of alternatives to official concepts and practices, especially in this case, the practice of the so called museum reform. Of course, the project has other connotations and sheer beauty. However, in the current climate of the country it acquired additional political aura.

The practice of contemporary art in Bulgaria at the moment seems to be suspended between the hapless official policies for culture and the individual or group art initiatives... This in fact is a statement we might have used 10 years ago just as well. The opposite sides however seem now to be getting more aware of their own status and profile. That may or may not lead to a confrontation. Certainly it leads to more consciously alternative artistic practices.



[1-3]



[4-6]



[7-9]



[10-12]



[13-14]



[15-17]



[18-20]



[21-23]



[24-26]



[27-29]

