

Vikenti Komitski

Kiril Kuzmanov

Vasilena Gankovska

Rada Boukova

Lora Nikolova

CONTEMPORARY WORK BY BULGARIAN ARTISTS

The Global Generation

In the last few years a different cultural and artistic atmosphere has settled in Bulgaria. Numerous artist-run spaces, private galleries and festivals have emerged. The state has started investing in the construction of museums (a process of a yet uncertain outcome) and a new business elite are considering the possibility of investing in contemporary art.

The scene has also witnessed the emergence of a new generation of artists, a generation that may be called global. It has transcended the country's boundaries—until recently a historical boundary, a boundary of political reality, of time, of the inherited traditions and language, and has established networks at various locations throughout the world. While it is specific to the local situation, this generation is also involved with the problems of a much more general and shared sense of the present. This is the present of global capitalism, of social and demographic issues, changing labour markets and the emergence of the "precariat", anarchistic moods, the search for alternative political models and the need for new social values.

In Bulgaria, this anthropologically global generation emerged following the end of Socialism and the so-called Transition period. These interweave in a complex pattern to create the dynamics of the political and cultural transformations in the country in the 1990s. It was a time when the notion of art was mostly related to the problem of how it could shake off the inertia of ideological production and be integrated into society.

This global generation still continues to address the large-scale re-thinking of the social and political role of art and the cultural institution, as well as the expectations concerning the role of the artist. For years such notions have been different for the situation "here" in Bulgaria as compared with the situation "there", in the West. Several generations of artists were faced with the need to translate their works from one context to another, to simultaneously represent the difference in Eastern European art while fighting the multiplying clichés ascribed to the Balkans and Eastern or South Eastern Europe.

For many of those artists who emerged with the international scene at the beginning of the 1990s, the

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desire to be part of the world is still predominantly connected with the utopia of freedom, while at the same time facing the issue of identity. It becomes important to answer the question of who they are and the place they occupy on the changing geo-political world map. The year 1989 in particular marks a sharp break in the relationship with the local art tradition in Bulgaria (which represents a form of late modernism that developed during Socialism), when many artists lost a direct link with the local context

They started to see their art as an export activity which lies within the scope of a larger institutional audience. This is a simultaneous opening up towards the "others", towards the audience, but also towards the market, accompanied by the need to set up new institutions, organizations and platforms. A central problem has been a growing awareness of the lack of a developed ecology for contemporary art. In other words, the lack of academies, museums, archives, commercial galleries, biennials, collectors and critics that could satisfy their desire to be aligned with the international contemporary art scene. These shortages are precisely the factors driving

many of the younger artists abroad in search of a better education and a more dynamic environment.

Those artists who chose to stay began founding institutions and establishing a framework for their own representation. The question, so essential during the 1990s, of whether and how we are different, has multiplied into questions about what do we identify with, where are we present, what do we want, how do we do it and what do we expect? These are exactly the questions facing the youngest generation of artists which, although global from an anthropological point of view, is not yet a fully fledged participant in the international art world. This new generation has continued to follow the principle of "do it yourself", instead of the one of "know how", and has made it its slogan. It has long forgotten about its imposed historical role of required participation in the progress of the Socialist state and has lost the sense of the "avant-garde", shared by the generation of the transition, and logged onto the Net.

Today, a great number of the artists actively exhibiting works across the country do not live in Bulgaria. They speak at least two foreign languages

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and cannot be attributed to any particular "tradition" in art, but to many simultaneously.

This is a generation which, although dissenting, is not a generation of revolutions, but rather of "punk" attitudes, bordering on different lifestyles. It is at once narcissistically in love with itself and ready to share. It is the generation of positivity as well as one of negation. It may be rational or emotional, able to ask questions or sink into apathy, isolate itself, communicate, set its own landmarks and create its own worlds. Consequently, the works of the artists in this exhibition are an eclectic set of images, approaches, media and artistic languages. They often mix reality and imagination, and without wishing to directly address social and political issues, prefer to explore the existential aspects of humanity.

These are problems that are no longer resolved within the frame of the artwork, but are internalized in the very body of the artists who are expressing the immediacy of life. This generation increasingly has less in common with the nation, tradition or particular cultural environments. It is a generation of travelers who come and go, carrying with them their personal stories, ideas and

projects for the future. Their community is a global one, showing a new way of staying together in this world.

Vladiya Mihaylova, *Curator*
Vaska Emanouilova Gallery
Branch of Sofia City Art Gallery