

# RECONSIDERING

## *Typical Legal and Managerial Situations, Specific Concerns and Problems*

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### **From the country status to the status of visual arts:**

Bulgaria, like all countries in transition, suffers from the consequences of totalitarianism. This historical heritage has left a deep impact upon the attitudes of people forming the cultural policy, and also with artists, who have just broken up with an epoch, in which the function of culture was defined in an entirely different political, economic and social context, and during which exclusive state

control was exercised.

As a result, Bulgaria has inherited an extensive cultural infrastructure, which, with the decreasing financial funds and unstable political and economic environment, cannot be maintained on a long-term basis. Although expectations from the transition have not been completely satisfied yet, a number of positive initiatives have been undertaken in the field of culture. They have not, however, changed the nature of the system, the problems of which are extending far beyond the field of culture. In this sense, the paper refers also to all countries being in transition period.

Arguments for investing in culture need a new formulation, prepared in respect to the 21st century, where aesthetical and value criteria will be interwoven with educational, social and economic arguments, aiming at emphasizing on the significance of culture for the future welfare of Bulgaria. A similar result can only be obtained within a serious national debate, which will

outline the wanted change before a maximally large audience, the change that cultural policy is trying to achieve in the post-communist period.

Regardless of this, Bulgaria has to do a revaluation of resources which are separated for culture and of the expected results from cultural activities. This revaluation should be based on political, economic and social arguments, and should also provide the answer to the difficult question: what type of culture does Bulgaria need and can it afford it?

Skills, necessary now to cultural managers, such as ability for managerial strategic planning, marketing and entrepreneurship, were not only superfluous with the previous totalitarian regime, but they were not encouraged either – however, they are what is needed now.

The third topic of the day for Bulgaria is the active communication with the best from the European cultural practice.

The European Council is to provide assistance for the promotion of these recommendations using vehicles within its competences. Such are, for example, the provision of technical assistance, staff training, assistance in concluding bilateral and multilateral agreements, encouraging of cooperation above national level (in the Balkan region, with countries that have encountered analogous problems of transition, as well as with the other European countries).

### **Political context:**

The Constitution of 1991 establishes the legal basis for parliamentary pluralistic democracy. Its Article 23 stipulates the obligations of the state to the field of culture in the following way:

“The State creates conditions for the free development of science, education and art, and assists them. It also takes care of preservation of national historical and cultural heritage.” The Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and of mass-media. Article 23 (1) reads: Since 1989 there have been four parliamentary elections held and, at present, the National Movement Simeon II is the major political power although, not long ago, the Union of Democratic Forces passed one of the most successful measures for the economic stabilization of the country and, in international aspect, it achieved

agreements on Bulgaria's joining NATO and the European Union. Since 1989, 7 Ministers of Culture have changed, each of which has paid specific interest in a particular field – music or cultural heritage, for example – depending on their professional profile.

### **Economic context:**

For the period from 1990 to 1995 the Gross Domestic Product decreased down to 86.6% of its value in 1990. The GDP per capita is US\$1276, while in Turkey it is US\$2298, in Greece – US\$7169, and in Austria – US\$22678.

The increasing unemployment and the lack of major investments in Bulgarian economy hinder also the future possibilities for increasing the funds for cultural needs. The decreasing number of students, the low school and university teachers' salaries, emigration abroad – all these are continuous processes.

### **Impact on people's attitudes:**

Historical context has given its impact upon everybody who deals with culture, both at administrative and decision-making level, and with people producing cultural products. Most significant is the impact upon attitudes of cultural workers although, during the whole regime, especially in its last stage, authoritative creators appeared who opposed to the existing status quo and expressed principally different understanding of cultural activity.

The basic features of this attitude are:

- Expectation that the decision making is on a hierarchical basis and always comes from the center – from the Ministry of Culture to the periphery. The responsibility for development, planning and rule observation belongs to the center.
- Consciousness that positions and jobs are guaranteed provided one is only adapted to the regime.
- Belief in one's own capacities, responsibility and initiative were not encouraged. In a sense, no other responsibility than the one instructed "from above" ever existed. There was no civil responsibility to exceed the instructions of the party.

- Consumer's needs were never taken into account.
- Incorrect information about the West, on the basis of which its image was very often represented as “false” and illusionary – both with positive and negative sign. As a result, lots of people estimated their consequent contacts with the West, to a certain extent, as a disappointment.
- Uneasiness that creative independence is threatened in case of market engagement and that art is desecrated by the imposed usage on behalf of multinational companies of artistic talent for the purpose of selling products through media (cinema, television, music and publishing), as well as through advertisement and design.
- The idea about management as something different from administering, as something that presupposes ideas for purposeful and self-managed activity is missing. In this sense, the maximal utilization of resources and their efficient management has not become a task of priority and an acquired skill yet.

### **What happens with the art history of visual arts in Bulgaria.**

*“He needs a friendly hand to pull him out”*

*Seneca*

One of the hot dialogs in modern art for the past few decades has been the one between the pure visualization and mystification, between the cultic self-sufficient of plastic form and the power of speech, between the aesthetic influence and the challenging destruction of its fragile parameters. During the years, these two directions have assumed different forms and outlines, sometimes even opposing to their own precedents. Regardless of this, the conflict is still existing, maintaining different numbers of followers on both sides of the division line.

### **The artistic object and beyond it**

\* The discussion on the future of art in the conservative Bulgarian soci-

ety is still of a dramatic character. The followers of “traditional” art ignore its meaningful expressions at the expense of “untraditional” “multi-edibility”.

\* Personal dramas continue to be the form of existence for a number of artists – between hatred and contempt, between ignoring and mocking. In this aspect, the AC/DC Exhibition with curator Svilen Stefanov is for sure located at the point, which is the crossing point of the ideas of “the end of the world” and “a new beginning”. The ironic attitude of authors and curator, the lack of conviction that what is shown is something exclusive, “unsurpassed” and at a world level, acquires a signal meaning for the generally degraded role of culture by the political structures at the present moment.

\* The depressing enumeration of the missing items in Bulgarian art in the 20th century as part of the European, Eastern European and even Balkan art, leads to issues that are existential for modern Bulgarian art. At the largest plane of comparison, we can say that the lack of independent financial sources, alternative to the governmental (collectors, sponsors, materially independent artists that fund their events by themselves) is definitely and sadly outlined in Bulgarian art of the 20th century.

\* In spite of collectors’ predilections of highly educated persons such as Lawyer Grigor Vasilev, the wide span of collecting, typical for other European countries, even Balkan countries like Greece, is missing in Bulgaria.

\* There is no institution like a Museum of Collections, for instance. Even if it had been possible to create something like this in the late 50s or early 60s with small collections from before the war, it would not have been designed as a cultural idea. Nowadays, as per the new laws, private and state collections must be registered and supervised (controlled) by governmental institutions.

\* The results from the observations on neo-avant-garde in former socialist countries from the late 50s till the early 70s place Bulgaria as an almost drastic exception.

\* In Bulgaria, it was just during the past two years that the alternative to the governmental art started being formed. It is usually funded under projects by foreign cultural institutions and foundations. It is still ideologically hard to be accepted. A similar center for alternative art is the XXL Gallery,

Alta-Rai – Sofia, Ancient Bath – Plovdiv. There also exists the practice of separate curator projects in the City Gallery of Sofia and the Foreign Art Gallery in Sofia, as well as two festivals – Process-Space with curator Dimitar Grozdanov, and Froncommunication in Plovdiv. These are events and centers that, as centers of artistic experiments, show famous Western European and American artists together with Bulgarian ones.

\* Curators of alternative art events (representing them in Bulgaria and abroad), due to the fact that they provide possibilities for direct communication of artists from different countries and formal participation in global processes of visual art, enjoy the professional respect and good feelings not on behalf of young authors, but on behalf of the middle aged, too.

\* Regardless of the fact that due to different reasons presentation of modern visual art of Bulgaria has no clear system, almost always whenever it happens, no matter where in the world, it achieves certain public visibility. It is another issue that for the past fifty years, Bulgaria with its visual arts and culture has not been present yet in the united art history of the “two Europes”.

\* One of the most important novelties, being now performed in cultural geography, is the creation of cultural networks. Nowadays, to be in the “network”, no matter whether exhibiting in Istanbul, Cairo or Ljubljana, is more important than to exhibit in a small gallery in Paris or New York. The networks of art institutions, working with modern art, have been created for the purpose of trans-border exchange of exhibitions, actions, information and means. To be included in such a network, a territory should propose its adequate place, an institution (preferably governmental). When this is missing, the flows of art exchange simply pass by such a territory. Probably the reason for all these missing items, however trivial it may sound, is rooted in the absence of Bulgaria from Europe till the close of the 19th century. This explains also the lack of contacts, traditions of communication, etc.

But what must be done today with all such missing things? Should they be included in the unpublished history of the 20th Century Bulgarian Art? On one hand, facts are missing (-isms and neo-isms, neo-avant-garde and under-grounds), by means of which Bulgarian art can be “thrust” in European art of the 20th century (the way Romanian artists are associating themselves).

\* Bulgaria has not any influential (actually none) methodological school in art criticism, which to convincingly move the accents from alterna-

tive to state supported and accepted art. In this situation, isn't the solution in the denial of what has happened so far declaring it for insignificant? Let us assume, for instance, that this history is not worth being studied and this is why we are going to create the new one to date (in the art expert's case – we will only write about young artists and nowadays' pieces of art). Thus we will continue the tradition of the continuous discontinuity that has led to the impossibility to identify Bulgarian position in the world of visual arts. And this, by itself, explains its cultural "invisibility" that has been recently noted by notorious foreign art critics. The interview of Ruen Ruenov with Pierre Ristani published in the Culture newspaper was exactly in this sense, it proves, however, that even the lack of art history in Bulgarian is conserved regarding our century (both the first and second halves), this will not solve the problem with the missed contacts and communities. It is impossible to search for cultural (and not only) participation and to continue the incognito development. In case Bulgarian art historians do not write their own version of Bulgarian art history and its missing items very soon, this will for sure be done by somebody else and then a foreign generally acceptable version will have to be adopted. Regardless of the fact that the position of the country does exist on the map of Europe, it remains somehow invisible in the context of the common European history of visual culture and values. The lack of book publishing in this topical field, even from specialized publishing houses, is drastic. It is exactly these "cultural breakdowns" in the history of Bulgarian art criticism that have led to the "staling" of hundreds of scientific publications – books, research studies, critical materials, monographs about the most famous Bulgarian artists, which, in this situation remained without their due position in history.

\* Hundreds of authors of visual arts, who mostly suffered from the impact of the economic crisis, the last of which in 1997 drove the country to the edge of a national catastrophe, remained doomed to oblivion and sporadic interest of researchers. The lack of target funds for purchases with state galleries has led to blanks in the national collections and still more drastically this happened to the regional ones.

\* The struggle against the unified point of view towards culture is just starting to obtain certain visible results. Before 1989, there existed no

engagements on behalf of state structures and institutions regarding modern trends in art. For the past years of transition in the political system of Bulgaria, the issues of differences, multiple identity, or “multi-cultural basis” take especially important place. They have a priority position in the programs for funding of different cultural institutions, foundations, both Bulgarian and foreign. In 2001, 35% increase of subsidies for Bulgarian culture and arts were voted, which till that moment amounted to 1% of the total state budget.

\* Political leaders themselves continue preserving a kind of indifference towards cultural processes of democratic reform and this is due to the still restricted vision upon the cultural situation in Bulgaria. Especially with visual arts, the thematic range and artistic forms are still bound by priority to realism in its most popular version of the 70s and 80s, when it was a replica to separate styles and trends of Western European art. The mass preference of artists who moved along this taste and understanding imposed by the public community, create a type of art with a definitely commercial hue, which turns a large part of private galleries in the country into art shops.

\* It can be stated that, to a large extent, the situation of isolation and conscious detachment of the general cultural art traditions of Western Europe and the world have been overcome, especially through the new radical practices of electronic forms of art.

\* In the period of democratic processes after 1989, with the reorganization of cultural institutions and the general economic stagnation, the traditional connections that existed with the former socialist countries have been strongly broken. The reasons lie also in the new art practices, through which young generations radically detach themselves from the common aesthetic and ideal features of the socialistic realism art. The fruitful contacts with Asian countries – Japan, India, China, South Korea, etc. are supported by the priority funding for Bulgaria and it has other grounds for “hidden” investment in the field of economy and market extension.

\* Western institutions of culture, regardless of the fact they are in a situation of “difference”, initiate and support projects directed to overcoming



the “other character” and conceptual association to the common European value system. Especially significant are the efforts made for the organization of different forms of training in art management and marketing, the aim of which is not only to reach the necessary management structure and self-funding of cultural institutions in Bulgaria, but on an international scale too, to materialize cultural products – the PHARE Program of the European Commission, seminars of Soros Art Center together with the Swiss cultural foundation Pro Helvetia, American Center of Culture, etc.

\* The official state programs of the Ministry of Culture and the Union of Bulgarian Artists, whose decentralized structure has its long history, are oriented towards activities and events, the purpose of which was and still is “to spread the glory of national art and culture” throughout the world. This is performed at institutional level also through the network of Bulgarian cultural institutes all over the world, which are minimally funded by the state in the face of the Ministry of Culture and are searching for various legal forms of additional self-funding. This restricts their activities and prestige. Their program activity is developed under the control of the state in the face of the Ministry of Culture. One of the least balanced sides of their activities is the impossibility to establish an adequate dialogue when studying mutually favorable opportunities with western European countries.

\* The attempts to export cultural products at the world exhibitions of visual arts are the result of sporadic interest and initiatives of separate curators and artists, of private institutions and, at the least extent, of state official art associations. The reasons for this lie in the lack of a seriously constructed unified structure for promotion and propagation of modern Bulgarian art.

\* The lack of dissidents among the creators of visual culture at the moment has no significance because the process of democratization itself proved to be introvert psychological and ideological for the separate artists.

\* In the situation of social inequality and economic stagnation, Bulgarian visual arts have not been able to get rid of their hermetic nature, even after the changes when lots of Bulgarian artists left (and are now leaving) the country. Even after they settled in different countries worldwide, as another generation, they couldn’t manage to gain world fame and signifi-

cance as it happened with the famous avant-gardist Christo (Hristo Yavashev) some decades earlier.

\* The processes of hermetic sealing of modern visual culture of Bulgaria are gradually being overcome through the untraditional forms of post-totalitarian art but as initiated episodic projects with the participation of partners from Western European countries. Modern Bulgarian art is still outside the orbit of world culture which has been conceptually developing during the last years of the 20th century. We can find the reasons for that in its historical burden, as well as in the formal reality of Bulgarian culture during communism, which created a self-supporting and self-generating within known limits type of art, which restricted and hindered the ability of self-analysis and criticism.

### **Transition Results:**

After the changes in 1989 and the concord achieved on transition to democracy and market economy, the enumerated characteristics of the existing attitudes and centralism in the organization of cultural processes have created serious difficulties to people involved in the field of culture:

At the level of cultural policy, these difficulties are:

- There still exists the opinion that the whole cultural sphere is within the range of responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture although there are commercial, independent and volunteer cultural initiatives.
- In spite of the declared transition to decentralization and privatization, people involved in cultural policy, for instance at the Ministry of Culture, are still inclined control processes from the center. The procedures on budget planning are still governed by rules created before 1989. For example, the level of subsidies released is defined by the number staff rather than by product quality or range of events.
- Liberalization of conditions under which the subsidized cultural sector is functioning is performed rather too slow and with numerous hindrances. For instance, it is difficult and sometimes almost impossible for a subsidized gallery to open its own bank account or use its revenues for reinvestment.

- Resources are administered and not managed. The administrative approach is characterized by registering the resources of certain organization and simple fulfillment of predetermined requirements. The managerial approach, on the contrary, is concentrated on what the organization wants to achieve and how it could materialize its goals. In other words, the accent here is upon policy and strategic planning, which, on its turn, is related to training or human resources management, marketing, etc.
- There is no experience in the human resources management and way of thinking with the concepts of management, as the state used to be the “large source” of resources till recently.
- The manufacturer was the motivating power of cultural processes, so that the needs and wishes of customers, consumers or audience were not paid much attention to. As a result, the marketing skills are rather undeveloped.
- Due to the restricted contacts with the West, excessive expectation was formed at certain points regarding the possibilities of the West to contribute to the stabilization and development of cultural life in Bulgaria.

The reference point of this paper is the development of a brisk historical point of view to the modern status of socialized culture and sensitivity of people from the late 90s. What could be said about a cultural situation that has is not complete yet – although, about fifteen years have passed since the beginning of “non-conventional processes”? All, who earlier or later took part in the creation of modern art in Bulgaria, feel that things have irrevocably changed and the end of the 90s does not match by far the tendencies in their beginning. Did post-conceptual art win? This absurd outside the Bulgarian context question cannot be answered synonymously. On international scale, as participations and prestige, definitely yes (unlike our “traditionalists” whose chance to exhibit outside the country consists of commercial expositions in petty-bourgeois small galleries without any influence upon modern art). As the object of critical analyses here and abroad – also. More and more artists see their art within a more global context, but paradoxically, in their own country they are not the “norm” but violators of cultural conventionality. This situation naturally generates a particular form of cultur-

al opposition, which, in many aspects, appears to be the reason for the origination of the so-called “new radicalism” of the 90s. This phenomenon is to a certain extent related to the overall context of art development too, but its pathos of a violator of post-colonial conventions places it in another dimension, provoked by the specificity of social milieu. Post-totalitarian horror of replacement of value references led to the painful world perception, which found a sort of confirmation in the art of the most problematic in their transition former socialist countries. So, the total post-colonial situation replaced to a great extent post-modern way of thinking – something that simply could not be materialized in the version of its game-like, free of rules pluralistic eclecticism. Eclecticism yes, but not pluralism. Here it plays for the withered lines of value that want to preserve the value references of late totalitarian art. “Radicalism” is also capable of using the game-like paradoxical metaphor of the post-modern, but in a way that questions certain ideological status quo although according to some authors such a discourse belongs to the past and is characteristic only for classical modernism. In Bulgaria the aesthetical discourse is not the one of criticism, it is alternative-confirmative.

Principally, in the beginning of the 21st century the status of the aesthetical discourse in the most innovative areas of modern Bulgarian art is entirely different and indicates that the contra-punctuality characteristic for avant-gardism acquires new actuality. As a paradox, in front of the eyes of the new generation in Bulgarian art, art universe is again disintegrating into two parts – adequate viscosity, opposed to certain “national” cheap-taste art hidden behind the mask of its institutionalism at state level. Again, on a regional basis, Clement Greenberg’s classical thesis about art being divided into “avant-garde” and “cheap-taste” comes to life. This opposition seems normal for a situation where each new thing is forced to make its way by means that will not come from anywhere but from the repertoire of classical avant-gardism. Namely due to this, development of events in a country like Bulgaria cannot be easily foreseen.

It is not sure that the “new” will ever come in place of the “old”. This is a line of thought based on evolution, which often proves entirely utopian in peripheral situations.



Nadegda Kuteva



Teodor Dukov

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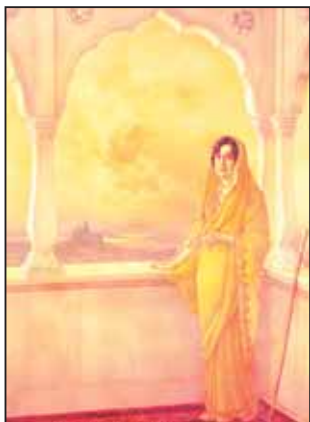
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*Altar II*

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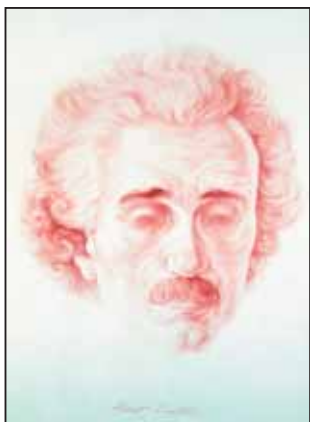
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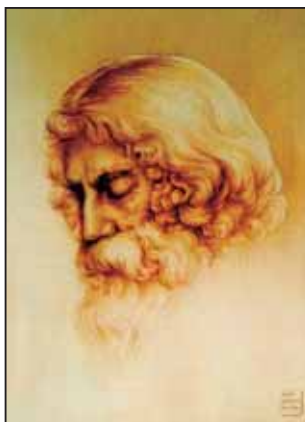
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