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From defects to effects

Iara Boubnova

I would say that one of the most interesting and relevant aspects of the history of post-totalitarian culture, or "the culture from the period of transformation", is that it follows the birth and the disappearance, the alternations of utopia(s) and alternative concepts replacing each other all the time. Today this historical period could be defined as the time when culture turned its back on the Great Utopia (in the negative) of Communism/Socialism and now awaits optimistically the fulfillment of the next positivist utopia of global integration. It's interesting to see how we are moving from the Utopia known as reality to the external (international/ integrational) model perceived as Utopia.

The system which disintegrated (not without the help of our generation) along with the regime used to refer to the slogan that "art belongs to the people". The regime had brought together in the so-called Creative Unions the entire intelligentsia involved with art and culture. It had also subjected it to the forceful implementation of Lenin's formula for the Theory of Reflection. But at the same time, at least in Bulgaria, the regime had fairly quickly rid itself of some of its most repressive functions in order not to appear too "black" in color. It had delegated these functions to the same Creative Unions. The regime simply turned the state into the sole buyer of art works (almost all factories and plants "collected" contemporary Bulgarian art) and left it to the artists to

divide the commissions between themselves. As a result, the main characteristic of Bulgarian cultural life at the time was that everyone felt happy about it - the state, which recognized that the self-created hierarchy among the artists is more flexible then the one it had given them, and that no creative liberty would turn into "art"; the artists were being "fed" often enough and were freed from the fortuity of the market, and the public never suspected exactly how much it was paying for the same propagated culture and artworks it was quietly passing by. Thus the myth about the pleasure of being an artist was something like a reward of fate. This myth and the unquestioned faith of the artists themselves impressed quite successfully both the West and the East. The prosperity "freed" Bulgarian socialist art from the alternative, dissident trends - all attempts in this direction were duly tamed.

One sociological survey, commissioned by the official Union of Bulgarian Artists in the fall of 1990, proved beyond a doubt that the mass of Bulgarian artists was "singing" praise to the system of state-instigated restrictions recently passed on to all the juries and boards appointed by the state in order to evaluate, correct, approve and sanction the work of the artist, the main motivation being that there should be somebody - an institution, responsible individuals - to determine what's good in art. Practically none of the artists admitted to having felt a lack of freedom in his/her professional activities. Most artists even claimed that they felt absolutely free in their choice of subject matter, visual language, form, etc., as well as when exhibiting their works. Artists appeared to have been satisfied with their education as well and also with the chances to show their works outside of the country, whenever they themselves felt "confident enough to do so". When objections were voiced, they were directed at concrete individuals or artists who were

employed by the state while exercising “incorrect” influence on the cultural policies.

In the beginning of the 1990s one of the first utopias that came along was the one of market freedom and the expectation that recognition of the artist depends on it, just as the social and economic prosperity of the state depends on its existence. In our naive post-socialist consciousness “market” and money were not linked inseparably. Confused by unclear social theories that justified personal but not private property, they could not imagine very rich artists, only very famous (= good) artists. “The market” was expected to provide a new theoretical value system, as a democratic patron who will only readjust the hierarchies but will not affect life itself. The market, in the view of the artists, was supposed to dot the “i”, pushing the good artists to the foreground while eliminating the bad ones. The market was the big hope mainly for the younger generation that did not fall for the traditional concepts of creativity. Repeating the mistakes of the Russian post-revolution avant-garde artists, this generation hoped for direct recognition by the people, this time based on market values. In their struggles both the aesthetic conservatives and the aesthetic liberals were calling upon the future art market in the same way the Ancient Heroes would summon the Gods. Just like many other expressions of economic euphoria on the way to capitalism, this one disappeared quite soon. The cherished justice of the market did not take effect, and to everybody’s amazement the rich artists began to be considered good artists.... The echo of this situation has not subsided even now. The last hope of the artist is that, due to the economic crisis, money is not in the hands of the “right” potential buyers and collectors. During this period, the number of commercial, private and newly established galleries obviously exceeded the resources of the context. Until now it has

fallen from 50 to less than 10. It could be claimed that the disappointment with the art market coincided with its deterioration in the West as well.

But of course, the belief in integration, in the availability of common interests and a dialogue conducted in a common language have come along to substitute for the Great Utopias of all kinds that did not justify themselves. A lot of artists now yearn to enter into and engage the big community provisionally called the "international art world". And this is only a tiny segment of the common dream of entire societies and countries, to enter at any cost the huge, always already ordered, "international community". The existence of contemporary art in our countries is still considered to be a sign of democracy. Its subjects, artists, art critics, curators, theoreticians, dealers and even an audience very limited in number, see themselves as "agents of the West". On the other hand, it is no secret that some Western intellectuals (usually of leftist political orientation, with plenty of decision-making people among them) really started thinking of the Easterners as traitors, accusing them of betraying the Bright Socialist Idea by being the main force behind the changes. This is reflected in the decrease of individual initiative in the field of cultural integration.

Hopes for integration, from our side, are based on the belief that contemporary art has qualities of a supra-national lingua franca, as well as that within its space competition starts from equal positions. For awhile it looked as if the world beyond the regional borders were open for dialogue. The participation of East European artists in big international shows was noticed and appreciated, so there was hope that art from our region will be part of the social contract as in the societies of the West. But gradually it turned out that the fluently functioning mechanisms of geopolitical fashions have allocated to us only the right of local exoticism. This is being

realized increasingly often within the framework of the necessary minimum of civilized cultural exchange. The explanation for its modest size, as well as for the fact that it is the only possible form of "collaboration" with the East, is rooted in the lack of adequate institutional infrastructure, which in turn is caused by the lack of public funding and regulatory legislature that would provide for its formation. All of this makes our contemporary art "uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable", which is the definition for objects of colonization according to Abdul R. JanMohamed.[1] The local context of East European art is no less important than the Western one, and it is possible that its complexity automatically does not fit any of the Western standards for problems concerning globalization, total migration, self-identification, multiculturalism, etc. But the culture and the context do go together!

The West, and the EU in particular, insists on certain changes in the field of culture as a pre-condition for integration. The interesting thing is that at the start of the negotiation process between the EU and Bulgaria, for instance, coordination in culture was mentioned within the package of the first "themes" for the talks. Probably coordination in culture looked like an easy "theme" to coordinate. Less then a year after we were invited to join the EU, the problems of culture have been all but forgotten and excluded from the negotiation agenda and public debate, as if everything in this sphere were as clear as it seems.... While the Bulgarian parliament has been discussing the new Law on Culture for four years now, the international community manifests a noticeable tendency toward a policy of "let's keep them there". More and more West European countries are opening branches of their cultural foundations in situ. This could be seen as a form of respect for the local cultural subjects and processes. However, it looks too much like a measure of restrictive control and

observation at close hand. We could mention here one of the obligatory pre-conditions for sponsoring cultural projects through Council of Europe funds and programs - the 3 + 2 formula (three member states and two non-associated countries), or the recent changes in the German set of regulations for financing cultural initiatives inside the country which require taxes of up to 62% (additional budgetary expenses) on any funds spent on foreign participants in an event. And Germany has so far been the most active agent of cultural integration in Europe.... Or the French entry visa requirement demanding a business trip order from freelancers which is, of course, almost impossible to meet by artists.... One of the main principles of integration - "the free movement of people" - is increasingly being replaced by free movement of ideas or material results of cultural activities. This process is rather more obvious in the non-cultural spheres of integration.

The local situation has worked out two ways of responding to all of this. Both are specific utopian constructs which are alternative to each other. On the level of official policies the state is working out a scheme for national isolationism through which peripheral cultures are trying to reflect the idea of cultural identity. The newer the influences on the local culture, the more they are interpreted as foreign. The more successful the manifestations of contemporary Bulgarian art and culture in the international context, the more they are considered to be accidental and non-representative of the national context. In ten years not one of the branches of the state administration has announced a concept for national cultural strategy, at least not in the public space. From the insiders' point of view, it seems as if, in the opinions of our politicians, political, economic and social integration within the

EU is ideally possible without considering the participation of contemporary culture.

The conservation and promotion of national cultural heritage, paralleled by the preservation and the approval of conservative educational programs in the sphere of art, as well as publicly honoring cultural figures from the past only (not only historical but ideological as well), seem to be the only visible aspects in which the state is dealing with the problems of culture. The contemporary processes, phenomena, events and individuals are totally ignored. The state is quite happy that "things appear to be moving along by themselves" in the contemporary art scene and does not provide any support, even for officially initiated and/or nominated projects. The utopian belief that the main task of culture is to preserve itself within its own national parameters and, if possible, within the patriarchal model, could be illustrated by the last (first, and latest) cultural initiative of the Bulgarian President entitled "The All-Bulgarian Assembly". The President invited 2000 Bulgarian intellectuals to discuss essential problems relating to national culture. The problems concerning art and culture were formulated in two main questions ("concerns"): "How much is Bulgarian spiritual wealth worth?" and "Does Bulgarian culture need visa(s)?" I think that no commentary is needed, either for the language used or for the conceptual framework....

The local context of our contemporary culture gave birth to an alternative program which could be defined as a positive communicational utopia - how communication in/about art can function as a substitute for art institutions? The lack of institutional and market traditions provides freedom to experiment. The function of communication is being taken over by small, private cultural institutions that operate in various spheres of culture according to the principles of the NGOs. Similar to the

situation in the West in the 1970s, they have presented an alternative to the existing state/power units in culture. In terms of operational methodology they depend on the conviction that a "history" of only local "features" of art is unacceptable since it leads to total isolation, as well as that the direct import and adaptation of methodologies is a form of self-colonization (this term was coined by the Bulgarian cultural researcher Alexander Kiossev). They are attempting to achieve a constructive use of this self-imposed colonization by re-exporting the local product as a form of communication and to interpret international art with local "instruments". Their perspective theoretical goal is to construct a "national" history of art, assuming that Bulgarian art and art produced on its current territory has always been part of a larger cultural context without ever being at its center and that art of all periods, trends and artists has been defined by characteristics that are mixtures of "international" and local features, thus rendering the dominant methodologies not entirely applicable.

On a more practical level, this form of self-organization of the artistic environment is trying to turn the defect into an effect - the practice of art is a strategy for entry into the international art world. These small NGOs initiate international events while formulating their own cultural needs and interests without official approval. They are using the networks of independent institutions and units of individuals they have created, transforming them into alternative mechanisms of integration (for instance, ICA-Sofia and the "Locally Interested" show held in Sofia in the fall of 1999, the ATA Center for Arts-Sofia and the "Un certain art de vivre" show from the collection of FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon, Montpellier, France). Turning liabilities into assets, such private institutions often replace the state when necessary in international cultural

initiatives (for instance, ICA-Sofia and the first time, after 34 years, Bulgaria participated in the Venice Biennial, 1999).

Networks which include face-to-face relationships and the personalized production of artistic events and meanings are the basis for the new type of alternative institutionalization in art: “the confidential community - is a direct reaction to the mad dynamics of social transformations. Its efficiency in such a situation lies in that it is the only type of social institution in which time is not determined by external circumstances: it is determined by the participants themselves”.[2] They are trying to exist and function outside the real hierarchies and canons while they do not feel obliged to either follow or copy cultural models.

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[1] Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature", Critical Inquiry, vol. 12, #1 1985

[2] Victor Misiano, "Institutionalisation of Friendship", Transnationala, Ljubljana 1999.