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A Fresh Look: Contemporary Bulgarian Art from a Western Perspective

"One advantage Bulgarian artists have is that they have not been spoiled and privileged, so that gives them an edge and a fresh look as well as unlimited ability for inventiveness." [1]

In the quotation above, Ivan Pazlamatchev, one of 10 artists included in the exhibition *Dancing on Embers: Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Bulgarian Art*, identifies a fundamental characteristic of contemporary Bulgarian Art—its failure to experience commercial success or recognition abroad, and the unique aesthetic conditioned by this relative isolation from the Western Art Market. In this small, prideful country with a population of only 8.5 million, and a history spanning several millennia, art has inevitably been influenced by the culture's abundant visual and folk traditions. Characteristics particular to this rich dynamic continue to pervade the artwork of contemporary artists, even as Western artistic practices begin to seep in at this time of global integration.

Oppressed by the Ottoman Turks for 500 years, from 1396 to 1877, and then again by Communism, from 1945 to 1989, cultural institutions such as museums, theaters, etc., only briefly emerged as independent agents in the first half of the 20th century. In the second half, however, Bulgaria's cultural infrastructure remained essentially isolated from Western market developments until the fall of the country's socialist regime in 1989. Artists have until recently never had the option or experienced the need to abandon their spirituality or let their cultural aesthetic bow to preferences within an international art market. Periods of historical isolation have allowed stylistic flexibility rather than conformity, simultaneously encouraging a unique aesthetic for each artist, yet hindering the development of a market system supporting the critical assessment and public exposure of this little-known phenomenon.

In order to acquire the renown and 'privilege' mentioned by Pazlamatchev, artists must supply an aesthetic product for an audience in demand. Western European and American art markets function under the dealer-critic system, emphasizing commercial success based upon critical assessment and public exposure. Dealers act as managers for artists, operating exhibition spaces while recognizing potential buyers, catering to social markets and preferences.[2] In order for a dealer to maximize the demand for his particular artist's product, a favorable climate of opinion must exist towards the given artistic production. Working simultaneously as publicists and ideologues, critics provide broader opportunities for the artist through culture-related publications, magazines, newspapers, journals, etc., helping determine public opinion about a particular artist or exhibition. This exposure contributes to a public dialogue emphasizing the signature styles of an individual, or 'genius-artist,' giving critics the power to 'create' or 'destroy' an artist. [3] Well-known western examples of aesthetic super stars created by mass marketing and exposure include the cult-like followings of Jackson Pollock's 'action painting', Andy Warhol's thirty-two soup cans, or Christo's installations, most recently 'The Gates' in

Central Park.

In order for a dealer-critic system to succeed, it needs a structural base consisting of both artists providing marketable products, and an audience interested in pursuing ownership. Ideologically opposed to both private property and individualism, two underlying principles supporting the dealer-critic system, Communism emerged as the dominant political force within Bulgaria by 1946, lasting until the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989. For several decades the totalitarian regime dictated the rules for artistic production, limiting artists of all expressive mediums to only official style, Socialist Realism. Defined in 1934 at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet writers, socialist realism was based on the principle that the arts should glorify political and social ideals of Communism. Every artist had to join the "Union of Bulgarian Artists", which, controlled by the state, dominated the market for Bulgarian art. Commenting on these commissions and conditions of patronage in her article “From Defects to Effects,” Iara Boubnova describes how “the regime simply turned the state into the sole buyer of art works (almost all factories and plants ‘collected’ contemporary Bulgarian art).[4] Although private buyers were non-existent, the government established a solid demand for commissioned artworks, emphasizing public artworks as tools instill pride for the Bulgarian people on a path towards communist glory.

Although thematically restrictive, Bulgaria’s socialist regime allowed a great deal of stylistic flexibility when compared with the artistic environments of other Soviet satellites and states. With the security granted by a union job and free from the brutal consumerism often associated with the West’s dealer-critic system, artists actually experienced a great deal of ease, preventing the extreme ‘dissident trends’ associated with nonconformist movements in more repressive communist governments. Pazlamatchev describes his experiences, ‘the political control over the art during totalitarianism was in the form of allowing only certain art to advance and certain artists to receive the commissions and recognition. But that did not stop many artists from work diligently and steadfastly in mediums, styles, and messages alternative to the socialist realist norm. In short, all artistic form of expression known to the rest of the world was present in the art scene in Bulgaria.’[5] Western forms may have been known to Bulgaria, but censorship deprived artists of opportunities to publish, exhibit, and exchange works and texts with the outside world.

Now transitioning into a fully capitalist society, Bulgarian images remain absent from the Western perspective. Enduring the difficult transition to capitalism, the artistic environment is adapting to the dealer-critic system of the international art world. In the words of Tomas Pospiszyl, the editor of one of the first Western texts including discussions about contemporary Bulgarian art, ‘The old totalitarian statues and monuments are gone, but the spaces on their pedestals remain empty, both metaphorically and in reality. The forms and ideology of the new era have not yet been established and simply do not fit into frames left to us by history.’[6] The lack of institutional and market traditions coincide with a polarized economy, consisting of people doing either extremely well, or poorly under capitalism. Small galleries have opened in Bulgaria, catering

mainly to the 'newly rich' Bulgarians flourishing under the new system—mafia members, bankers, government officials, etc. Until both an economically secure middle-class and system of communicative criticism are established, the Bulgarian art market will remain somewhat backward from a Western perspective. Fortunately, more and more international cultural initiatives are being taken to export 'the local product as a form of communication,' as described by Iara Buobnova.[7] What remains to be seen, however, is what will happen to Bulgaria's rich aesthetic legacy as it finds its place on the international art scene.

[1] Pazlamatchev, Ivan. Interview, March 25, 2005.

[2] Cynthia A. White and Harrison C. White, Canvases & Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993): 94.

[3] White, Cynthia A. & White, Harrison C. Canvases & Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993): 158.

[4] Boubnova, Iara. From Defects to Effects: Self-Colonization as an Alternative Concept to National Isolationism

http://www.eipcp.net/diskurs/d01/text/ib01.html

[5] Pazlamatchev, Ivan. Interview, March 25, 2005.

[6] Hoptman, Laura, and Pospiszyl, Tom s. Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002): 303.

[7] Boubnova, Iara. From Defects to Effects: Self-Colonization as an Alternative Concept to National Isolationism

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