



Captured **State**

**New Art from
Macedonia**
curated by Jon Blackwood

Ephemerki
Verica Kovacevska
Igor Toshevski
OPA-Obsessive Possessive Aggression

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CapturedState

Captured State is an exhibition that has been a long time in the making. I have been working in the Macedonian and former-Yugoslav context for over a decade, and during that short period, unimaginable change has taken place both in the physical appearance of the country, in the developments of its politics, and its geopolitical significance.

When I first visited Macedonia in the late 2000s, the capital city, Skopje, still had very much the appearance of a Yugoslav city. The international architectural styles shaping the rebuilding of the city, after the terrible earthquake that struck on 26 July, 1963 made Skopje a fascinating venue for students of architecture; here, the old fault lines of the Cold War were very visible. Kenzo Tange's architectural idealism to the south west of the city centre, around the new railway station, was held in lively tension with the Soviet-built Karpoš estate to the East; architects from Greece, Mexico, Poland, Bulgaria contributed notably as the city rebuilt itself. Temporary housing erected by the British army in the suburb of Gjorgje Petrov gave a brand name to a whole area- Dexiongrad.



Skopje cityscape, looking across the city centre, towards Mount Vodno, February 2015.
Photo: Andy Kennedy

This experimental architectural laboratory had assumed the patina of two generations of history, a dissolution and partial re-constitution. In September 1991, the people of Macedonia voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to leave to crumbling socialist federation of Yugoslavia, and become independent. In so doing, it became the only former Yugoslav republic to leave the federation entirely peacefully. The conflicts that were to shape the politics of Macedonia since that time, however, have yet to be resolved.

I will spend a little necessary time talking through the nature of some of these problems. Firstly, is the name of the territory from which these artists have emerged; a dispute that even President Barack Obama professed to be “bored” by in 2011. In short, the newly independent Macedonia wanted to join the United Nations under the name “Republic of Macedonia”, and Greece to the South objected. Greece has its own territory of Aegean Macedonia, based around the city of Thessaloniki, and it regards the use of the name “Republic of Macedonia” as an irredentist claim to Greek territory.

The fact that the Macedonians have neither the means nor the will to stake such a claim, should it even meaningfully exist, appears not to have factored into the calculations of successive governments. Eventually, the new country entered the UN in April 1993, under the compromise name of “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”- FYROM. As of the current moment, this is still the official name of the country, although it has increasingly less currency in international diplomacy.

If seemingly obscure issues of nomenclature and vexillology delayed Macedonia’s entry into the international community after independence, the knock-on consequences for the Macedonian economy and culture are also still felt keenly. In Yugoslav times, Macedonia was seen as one of the republics needing the greatest assistance in terms of economic and cultural development (alongside Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and the then associate republic of Kosovo). Macedonia benefitted not only from an expanding industrial base and infrastructure development, but also from the construction, from the ground up, of a cultural ecology based on the republic and guiding the efforts of those artists active in it.

Before the second world war, contemporary art was a marginal concern of interest only to a few urban intellectuals in Skopje, Prilep and Bitola. Debates between surrealism, realism and abstraction had no purchase whatever amongst a population that was largely illiterate and rural. After the second world war, the defeat of the Bulgarian occupation locally and

the Nazi-Fascist aggression on a Yugoslav level. Art had a distinct purpose; to reinforce simple yet persuasive political messages, and to help combat illiteracy, as well as to build a sense of a genuinely popular “high” culture.

Skopje’s first art high school, for students aged 14-18, was established in 1946, and a national gallery soon after; before the war, there had been no dedicated public art space in the territory of Macedonia. Artists such as Nikola Martinovski (1903-73), a kind of Macedonian JD Fergusson, Lazar Ličenovski (1901-64), Vasilije Popović-Cico (1914-62) and Borko Lazeski (1917-93), quickly found themselves overwhelmed with opportunities funded by the state; to teach, to make public murals and commemorative sculptures, to travel abroad to international festivals to represent Yugoslavia, to produce simple drawings to communicate socio-political messages quickly and decisively.

Bojan Ivanov’s essay that follows outlines the key philosophical trends in the years of socialist Macedonia. I would like to make two further observations, though, before returning to contemporary times. In the last twenty years of Yugoslavia, Macedonia had a rather contradictory position in terms of visual art. A museum of contemporary art was built in the years after the earthquake, the building donated by the Polish government; it opened under the directorship of Boris Petkovski. At its opening, the museum was one of only two dedicated contemporary art museums in the whole of Yugoslavia- the other being in Belgrade.

This gave Skopje something of a prominence in the display of contemporary art that was not matched by infrastructures of teaching and production. Skopje did not establish its own dedicated university-level art school until 1980; even after then, many of the best emerging young artists travelled elsewhere for their training, according to long-established centres of art instruction in Yugoslavia; Belgrade for drawing and painting, Zagreb for sculpture, and Ljubljana for graphic art. New art practices, such as video art, did not arrive in Macedonia until the second half of the 1980s. The result was an art world that seemed, from the outside, to be a little conservative and provincial; the art world of Macedonia was seen by many as a distant offshoot of the Belgrade art world, which in its own way was very little interested in what was going on in Skopje.

Late Yugoslav society was another kind of “captured state” too, for artists. Whilst culture was not subject to the kind of oppressive scrutiny and intrusion faced by cultural actors in the Warsaw Pact countries, nonetheless compromises had to be made. Opportunities to exhibit and to grow a career internationally, existed in Yugoslavia, in return for the avoidance of certain political topics and, at the least, an acquiescence to political power as wielded by the League of Yugoslav Communists, both at Federal and local levels. This impacted even at seemingly trivial level; students were not permitted to exhibit their work publically until they had graduated from the academy; a young Igor Toshevski flouted this ban by exhibiting his work anonymously as part of group projects, and by producing work for comics. Although artists had good opportunities and state support in the Yugoslav period, still this was not a “democratic” cultural order in any sense of the term.

What might the notion of a “captured state” mean in contemporary times? Macedonia, in the early summer of 2017, is emerging from nearly five years of political protest and crisis, and over a decade of authoritarian right-wing ethno- nationalist government. In 2006, Nikola Gruevski, leader of the largest Macedonian right wing party, VMRO-DPMNE, became Prime Minister of Macedonia. Initially presenting a moderate, reforming face and supported widely in the ranks of European conservatives, Gruevski and his party, by the end of the last decade, had initiated a process of state capture and attempted neutering of the power of democratic politics, whilst maintaining it for the sake of appearances.

This is a political process that will be very familiar to observers of the politics of Hungary under Viktor Orbán, Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić, or Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Initially presenting a moderate and conciliatory face of reform to garner international backing and credibility, Gruevski at home slowly morphed into a regional “strongman”, setting aside concerns of democracy and the rule of law in favour of a chimerical national “tradition” and “economic development”.

Gruevski also set himself as the champion and leader of Macedonia’s Orthodox Christian population, and had an open disregard for the complicated and rich ethnic mix in the country. Orthodox Macedonians may well be the largest community in the country, but to govern in their name is to ignore the rights of citizens from other ethnic backgrounds- Macedonian Muslims, Albanians, Vlachs, Turks, Bosniaks and Serbs. Claiming that present day Macedonia was descended from Alexander the Great, Gruevski sought to portray a largely fictitious image of Macedonia as a mighty nation slowly shaking off the chains of millennia of oppression- from the Ottoman



Valentina Stefanovska, Warrior on Horseback, 2010/11.
Plostad Makedonija, Skopje, photo taken February 2015. Photo: Andy Kennedy

empire, from royal and socialist Yugoslavia, from perceptions of existential threat to Macedonia from neighbouring Greece and Bulgaria, as well as from the Albanian community within.

The visual outworking of this curious brew was the megalomaniac “Skopje 2014” rebuilding scheme, announced in 2009, begun in 2010 and only finally stopped in May 2017, with the coming to power of Zoran Zaev’s social-democrat-led coalition government. In those seven years, the old Yugoslav appearance of Skopje was overwritten entirely in the city centre by the largest Baroque re-building programme enacted anywhere in the world. Gruevski’s government spent €660 million on the Skopje 2014 scheme, attempting to conjure up the appearance of pre-earthquake Skopje and cladding Yugoslav modernist buildings- most notoriously the government building- in bogus stucco and Styrofoam classical columns. The central square of Skopje, Plostad Makedonija, formerly a rather empty ceremonial square next to the River Vardar, is now dominated by the provocative neoclassical “Warrior on Horseback” sculpture, designed by the previously unknown Valentina Stefanovska. The sculpture, 92 feet tall, is known locally as Aleksandar Veliki (Alexander the Great) and points south towards Greece.

“Skopje 2014” was a scheme deriving from the principle of “antiquization” of a modern city and based on the highly contingent and controversial reading of history by Gruevski and a close circle of advisors. Having captured the state politically, they also now sought to re-write its past entirely, as a means of re-casting its image to attract foreign investment and establish a permanent hegemonic footprint for this set of political ideas.

It is important for the reader to grasp these broad contours of Macedonian cultural history in order to locate the contemporary practices that can be seen in the Captured State exhibition. In the second half of the essay our focus shifts onto the curatorial ideas in this exhibition and the specific nature of the practices represented in it.

The artists chosen for this exhibition are all critical artists; that is to say, they have maintained a practice based on research and unsparing critical enquiry, ranging across aesthetics, social engagement and politics, even in the unpromising circumstances outlined above. In the period of Skopje 2014, artists in Macedonia were faced with three choices; to join in with the scheme and take part in the opportunities to earn money and exposure within the Macedonian context; to retreat into silence, neither criticising the scheme nor supporting it officially; or, to turn all their abili-

ties as artists towards holding up the cultural policies of the Macedonian government to scrutiny and critique, and to try, through their practice, to engage others also seeking to maintain a space for civil society and the free exchange of ideas to endure.

However, this exhibition would be of limited interest were it merely based on the principle “Look at these poor Macedonian artists”. Whilst the cultural context that I have sketched in brief detail is incredibly complex and specific, nonetheless the questions that they pose in this exhibition- the nature of the artwork, relationship to modernist and avant-garde traditions, the ownership of public space, the shaping and developing of a geographical area over time, class and gender relations, the status of art criticism and education, the struggle against the limitations imposed on the individual by family, regional and national identities- have a piquant relevance not only here in Scotland but also, internationally.

The concept of “Captured State”, then, refers not only to the immediate consequences of Skopje 2014 and the impact that those disastrous ideas had on local art practice, it refers much more widely to the role of the artist in society at the end of capitalist times. What is that function, and how has it changed? If artists reject the invitation to perform as dancing bears in the circuses of politics and big finance, then how can their work endure and who will be the audience, and how will it affect them? In their own way, all these artists seek to move beyond the nets of nation, to push back against stereotypical scripts of nationality and identity, to critique the capture of public space by private capital and to illustrate the radical potential of public debate and common ownership; to highlight the real changes wrought on people’s lives by casino capitalism, and the painful absence of former safety nets and mechanisms for those struggling at the bottom end of society.



Igor Toševski has been active in Macedonia since the mid 1980s, firstly as part of “Grupa Zero” and later maintaining an international practice from Skopje. His long-running series Dossier in the 1990s and Territories from 2004-11 dealt, sequentially, with the dubious privatisations of state owned factories and facilities in the 1990s and the asset-stripping and profiteering that followed on. Territories, meanwhile, used the language of the radical avant-garde from the early twentieth century to open out notions of the ownership of public space and the obligations placed on the individual’s behaviour in that space; the relationship between art and the everyday. Igor’s work was censored in 2009 when his temporary territory in Plostad Makedonija was erased within twenty- four hours by the government, as it intervened in a sensitive debate about the future changes that had not yet been made, under the plans for Skopje 2014, in the square. Igor, together with OPA, was also part of the radical Macedonian cultural initiative Kooperacija between 2012 and 2015, which ran an intensive series of exhibitions of contemporary art in Skopje as a means of keeping debate going on contemporary art and highlighting the role that contemporary artist could play in critiquing the collapse in Macedonian cultural infrastructure and public debate.

OPA (Obsessive Possessive Aggression) is a long running artistic collaboration between Denis Saraginovski and Slobodanka Stevčeska. Through performance, video and installation, for the last fifteen years OPA have sought to use provocation and humour as an invitation to debate and as a means of cultural exchange between Macedonia and the many European countries they have visited and worked in on residencies. Like skilled practitioners of taekwon do, they seek to use the forces of Macedonian society against itself. From their early project Realité Macedonienne, a fake “documentary” featuring a mocking, fictitious self-portrait as the darlings of the Paris contemporary art world, through the nomadic Project which is not a Project, which exhaustively documented the cultural distance and social experience of a journey and residency in Estonia, OPA have sought with forensic seriousness to chronicle the changing role and position of the artist in a society where opportunities are very limited, and the position of the critical artist is very marginal. In a society where the cultural infrastructure has been politically captured, where the economy dictates that a critical artist cannot survive from the work that they make alone, then these are vital questions to propose for discussion, even if definitive answers remain elusive.



Igor Toshevski, Territory, Plostad Makedonija, 2009.



OPA, Project Which is Not a Project 2003-12. Photo credit John Grzinich

The other three artists in the show work outside of the Macedonian context and are based abroad. Verica Kovacevska trained in Plymouth and Cambridge, and is now based in Zürich. Her video piece *The Artist* (2013) wittily breaks down a creative life into its constituent processes and questions the value society places on such activity. From early works such as *Colour Caller* (2009), performed in both Skopje and its twin city, Bradford, to recent performative interventions such as *The Boat is Full* (2016), Verica's work displays a strong social engagement and concern with contemporary debates on identity, immigration, citizenship and diaspora. Macedonia unwittingly found itself at the centre of the global refugee crisis in the summer of 2015, being a key country on the route of desperate displaced people from the Middle East seeking sanctuary in central and Western Europe; in parallel, *The Boat is Full* sought to deal with the human consequences of refugee status, of diaspora, of the often arbitrary decisions made on inclusion and exclusion and the life changing consequences that these can have.

“Ephemerki” are the performative collaboration between Jasna Dimitrovska, based in Berlin, and Dragana Zarevska, who now lives in Prague. Their performative practice deals in a humorous way with the traps and snares of philosophical language; a perception that pushes against the specious use of theoretical jargon as a means of excluding rather than encouraging understanding; the re-imagining of complex philosophical ideas in an everyday context of exchange. Beginning their collaboration with a focus on the untranslatable Macedonian word *Lele* (very loosely an equivalent of the Scots *och*) and presenting that as a commodified experience to a gallery audience in 2011, their work has developed subsequently via an engaging blend of surreal alternative imaginings (*The Laid-Off Cosmonaut*, 2014) and focused, demanding performative pieces, such as the iterations of *Context vs. Discursor* so far performed in Belgrade and Ljubljana and receiving a renewed presentation here in Edinburgh. Deriving loosely from Foucauldian notions of power expressed in *Discipline and Punish*, this is a performance piece that seeks to hold up the processes of giving meaning to a specific situation via words and subsequently controlling their use, as a means of examining the role of the operation of power through discourses of language and education, more broadly.

The sheer breadth of the ideas mentioned through this brief outline of the careers, and interests, of these critical artists allows the opening out, in conclusion, of the notion of “Captured State” and the differing responses offered to it. What we have before us is a variety of responses to this broad notion, in installation, video and performance. Whilst the notion of “state capture” from Macedonian politics may have informed the initial



Verica Kovacevska, *The Artist* (film still), 2013



Ephemerki, Retrospective Exhibition of Jasna Dimitrovska and Dragana Zarevska, 2012

discussions behind the ideas for the exhibition, as it has worked out, it has not limited those ideas. Macedonia today is in a lively moment of political re-orientation and societal re-formation; it may be said that the Macedonian people realised their own democratic power in setting aside the authoritarian rule of the former government. Consequently, artists themselves are at the very beginning of a process of re-evaluation of the politicisation of culture and public space in the last decade, and are embarking on a lively debate as to how to address the legacy of that period in the future. As a result, this exhibition is timely; standing at a crossroads between an authoritarian past and the as yet unrealised potential of the future. And, in dealing with the questions of public ownership, public space, censorship and self-censorship, migration, knowledge and power, this is a group of artists asking questions that resonate on a European level. It may well be fair to say, then, that this “Captured State”- a glimpse of visual culture from the opposite corner of Europe- may well offer compelling parallels for UK audiences to consider, as our own cultural and political trajectories remain so anxious, contested and uncertain.

Jon Blackwood

Jon Blackwood is a lecturer in Critical and Contextual Studies at Gray’s School of Art, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, and the curator of the “Captured State” show. He is the author of “Critical Art in Contemporary Macedonia” (mala galerija, Skopje, 2016) and divides his time between Aberdeen, Skopje and Sarajevo.

Ephemerki

Ever since we met we were working on language-based artworks. We are both fans of that childhood thing; when you don't know what a word means and you try to assign your own meaning to it, until you get to know the common meaning. That information gap, that limbo between the time you are having your own meaning of a word and you control it, and the time you get informed about the "real" meaning - opens up the imagination, and lets Wittgenstein in. You become an L-man/L-woman, where L stands for "language". We wanted to have that again as adults, and sculpt with language by making performances full of layers of philosophy, up-to-date scientific data, and other various elements of insanity. "Contexter vs. Discoursor" is a performance about gaining and holding power through the academically-magic objects called The Curatables.

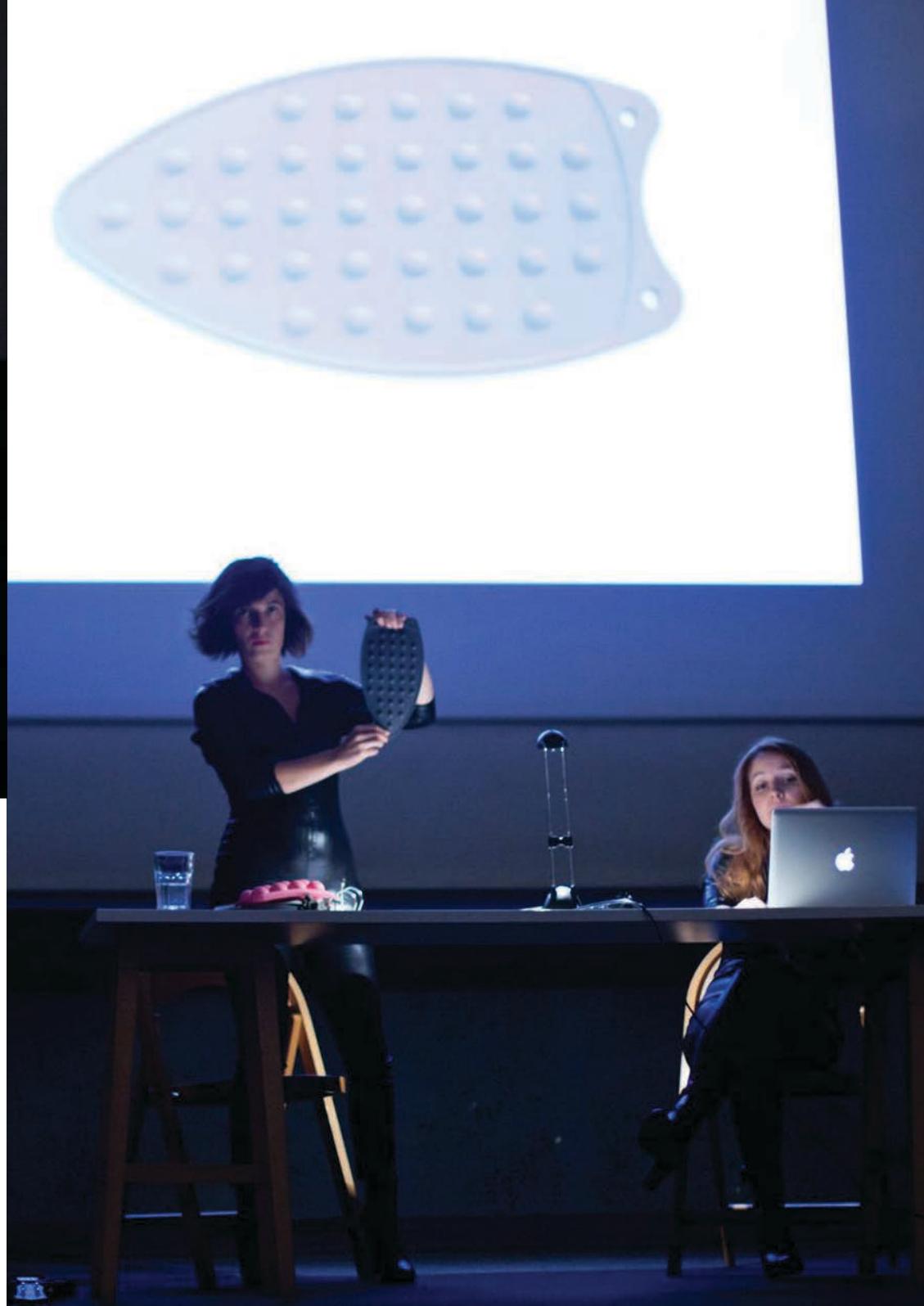
www.ephemerki.com

www.jasnadimitrovska.net / www.draganazarevska.com

PRESENTATION



Ephemerki, Contextor vs Discursor, performance, Ljubljana, 2015





Ephemerki, The Curatables, 2015



Ephemerki, The Curatables, 2015

Ephemerki are a performance duo (Jasna Dimitrovska b. 1983, Dragana Zarevska b. 1985) from Skopje, working between Skopje and Berlin. Their work started in 2011 and is focused mainly on experiments with language and encoding contemporary philosophy's concepts into ordinary life anecdotes.

The name of the duo is a derivate of the word Bapchorki - a band of grannies who used to sing Macedonian traditional songs in a polyphonic nasal style, suggesting that Ephemerki are Bapchorki's ephemeral contemporary version.

Ephemerki were one of the four finalists for the YVAA DENES Young Visual Artist Award for 2014. Selected exhibitions: AKTO 2011 (Bitola, Macedonia), Kondenz&Locomotion 2011 (MKC, Skopje), Solo exhibition 2012 (OGS Museum of City of Skopje) October Salon 2013 (Belgrade), DENES awards exhibition 2014 (CAC Gallery, Skopje), City of Women Festival (SKUC Gallery, Ljubljana), Solo exhibition (OGS Museum of City of Skopje)

Verica Kovacevska

The House We Grew Up In (2017) tells the story of the prefabricated houses built in Skopje, Macedonia, after the devastating earthquake in 1963.

After long having surpassed their intended lifespan, these houses are now slowly disappearing. Over the years, however, they have become a phenomenon. A unique, but authorless architecture, they have shaped the city and the lives of three generations of people, including the artist's.

<http://www.kovacevska.net>



Verica Kovacevska, The House We Grew Up In, Installation (detail), 2017



Verica Kovacevska, The House We Grew Up In, Installation (detail), 2017



Verica Kovacevska, The House We Grew Up In, Installation (detail), 2017

Verica Kovacevska is an artist, born in Skopje and living in Zurich.

In 2004, she graduated in Visual Arts with Theatre and Performance from the University of Plymouth (UK). The same year she attended the 10th Advanced Course in Visual Arts led by Jimmie Durham at the Fondazione Antonio Ratti in Como (Italy). In 2007, she graduated from the University of Cambridge (UK) in MPhil Arts, Culture and Education, and was awarded a one-year art residency at Christ's College, University of Cambridge.

Kovacevska has taken part in many international exhibitions and festivals, such as re.act.feminism, Akademie der Künste (Berlin); Belgrade: Nonplaces, Museum of Contemporary Art (Belgrade); 255 804 km2, Brot Kunsthalle (Vienna); Other Possible Worlds, Casino Luxembourg (Luxembourg); 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (Moscow); and Manifesta 11 (Zurich). Among her solo exhibitions was Everyday Art, the Art of the Everyday, Museum of Contemporary Art (Skopje).

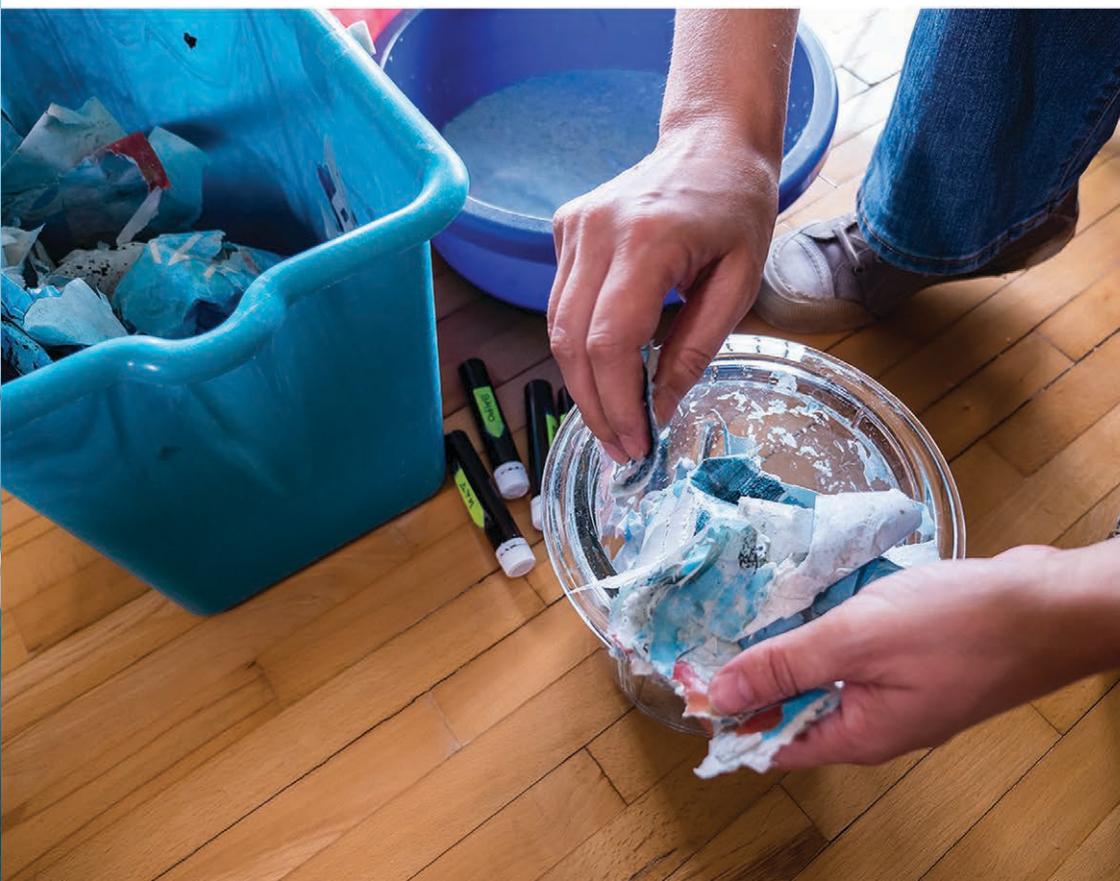
In 2017, she received the Visual Art Award of the City of Zurich.

OPA

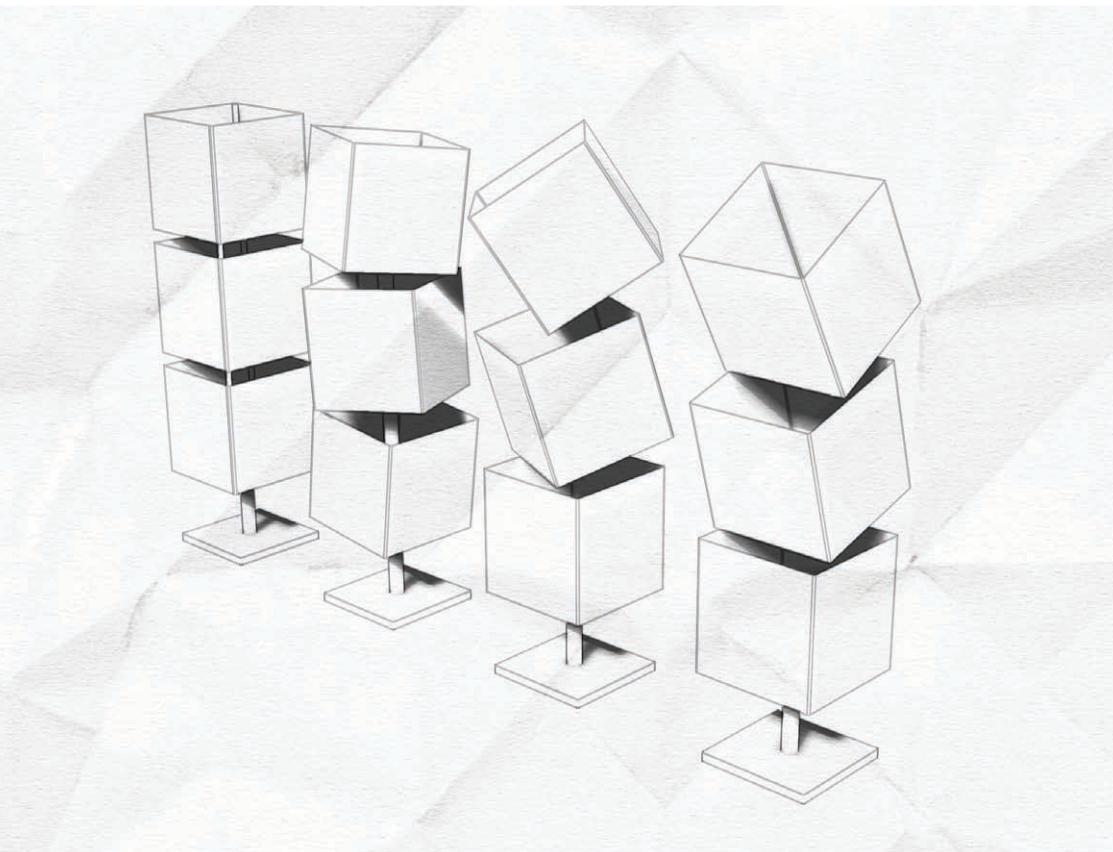
Obsessive Possessive Aggression

OPA Professional's fascinating new objects invite visitors' gaze diverting their attention by questioning the intersection of the manifestation and beauty. The materials used as ingredients, incorporated into this body of work enable us to grasp and approach the creation from a different perspective. The political, the decaying ugliness and The Beast are transformed into new Beauty. The aggressive political body becomes new aestheticized value, carefully conceived and meticulously crafted. The derived material becomes gateway to a new delightful essence.

www.o-p-a.org



OPA, A Proper Title to Be Defined, 2017, installation [inkjet print: Claria ink on Premium photo paper; three objects (metal, LED lights, hand made paper: posters, graffiti pigment, bronze), variable arrangements and dimensions, part of the project OPA Professional. Documentary photographs of work in progress.



OPA, A Proper Title to Be Defined, 2017, sketch

OPA (Obsessive Possessive Aggression) is a collaboration founded in 2001 by the visual artists Slobodanka Stevceska (*1971, Macedonia) and Denis Saraginovski (*1971, Macedonia). Both of them studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje and are working on the borderline of art, media and performance. OPA focuses on researching social, cultural and everyday issues, as well as the ways of looking, thinking and behaving of certain communities, in shifting social and political conditions.

OPA reacts to the actual situations conceptualizing them into an art form by meta- situations/positions/narratives. Thus their activities include actions, context-specific projects, video, TV screenings, and mockumentaries,. Their projects are often related to the societal life of the artist and the art system, deconstructing the artwork and its units.

OPA has had solo exhibitions in Macedonia, Estonia, Croatia, Slovenia, France, Germany, USA and the Netherlands, and has exhibited widely in group exhibitions and festivals such as Transmediale, Berlin; Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin; Biennale of Contemporary Art, Moscow; Transeuropa - European Theatre- and Performance Festival, Hildesheim; Freewaves' Biennial of New Media Arts, Los Angeles; I Had a Dream, Kunstraum Baden, Switzerland; Victory Obsessed, Zamek Culture Centre, Poznan.

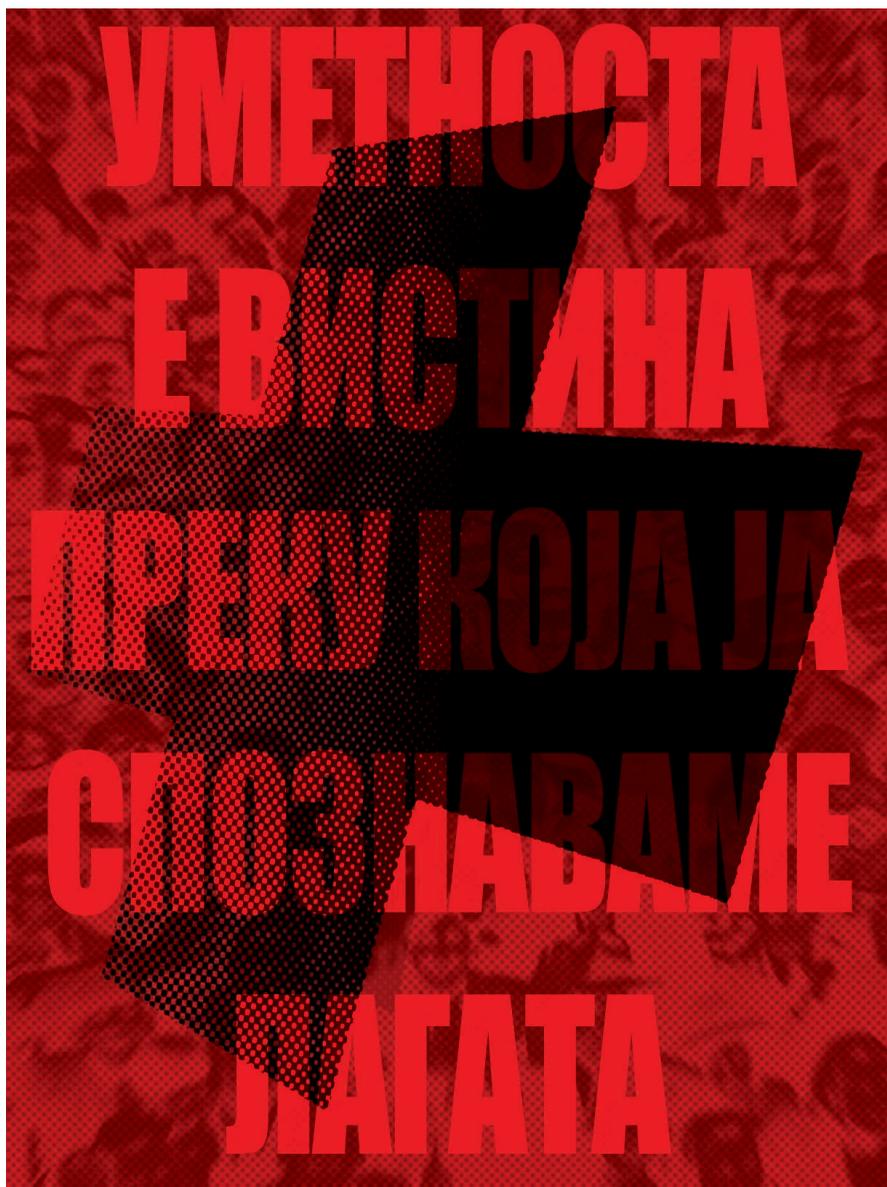
OPA received residency fellowships in Estonia, France, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, The Dragisa Nanevski Award at AKTO Festival of Contemporary Arts, Bitola (2010) and The Young Visual Artists Annual Award DENES (2004). OPA was a co-founding member of the Kooperacija Initiative (2012-2015).

Igor Toshevski

A compilation of selected archived materials comprises a portable installation addressing the question of borders as a physical and metaphorical expression of division and identity. Among selected artifacts are drawings, maps, objects and photographs documenting a history of specific actions and long-term projects executed by the artist over the last 10 years, thus forming a condensed retrospective of his efforts in exploring themes of freedom and the power of self-expression. Accompanying the installation is an outline of a Free Territory designed specifically for the Sciennes Gallery space. Issuing a Certificate of Participation signed by the artist validates the participation by each visitor.

The fragmented narrative of this assemblage suggests an almost blurred line in interpreting the perception of constructed realities and those based on personal memory/ identity.

<http://www.toshevski.weebly.com>



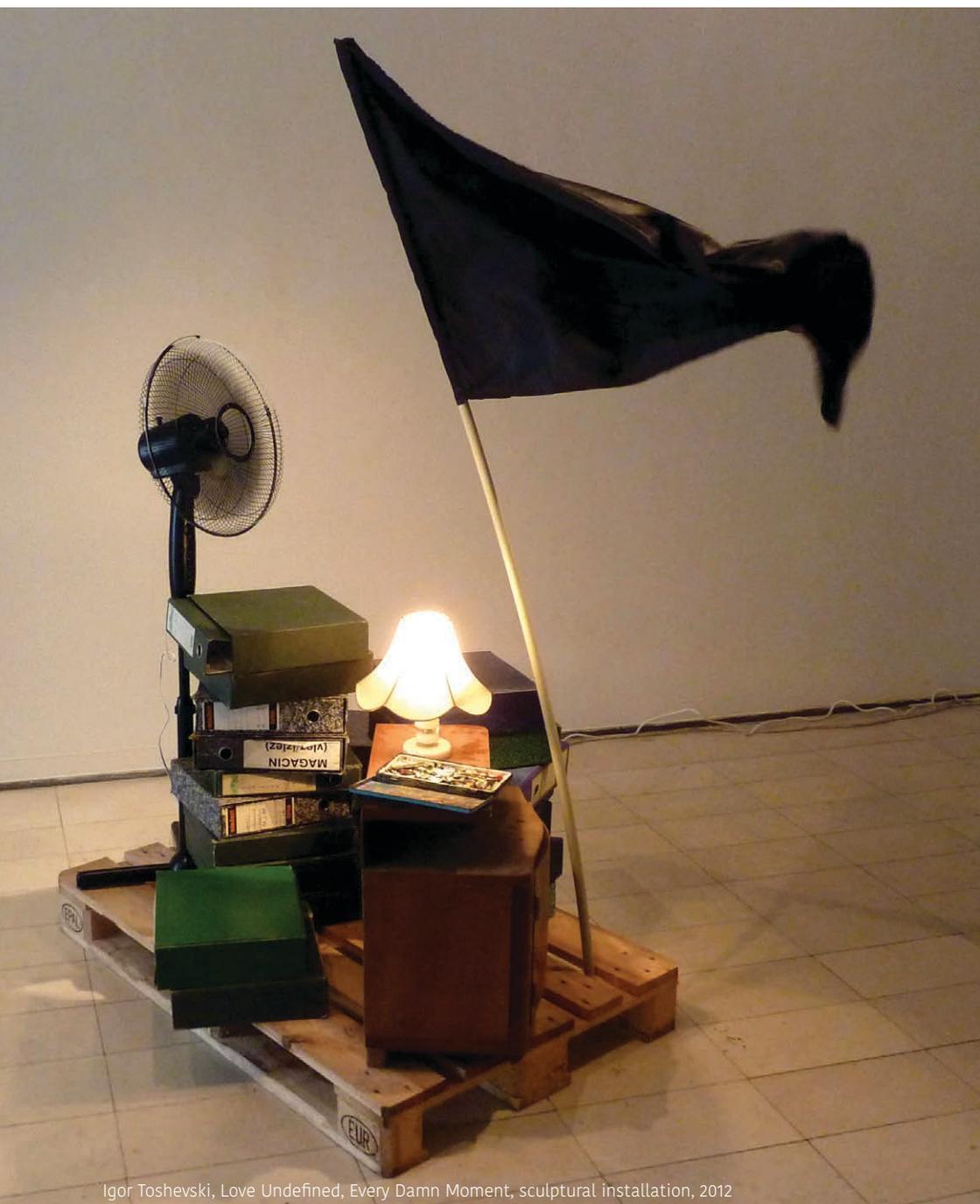
Igor Toshevski, Art as Truth, digital print on canvas 200x158cm, 2013



Igor Toshevski, Between, National Gallery, installation view (Lazeski), Skopje 2016 / photo: Denis Saraginovski



Igor Toshevski Territory, Polstad Makedonija, Skopje, 2009 . Here, the art work is being erased twenty four hours after being installed, on the orders of persons unknown.



Igor Toshevski, Love Undefined, Every Damn Moment, sculptural installation, 2012

Igor Toshevski (1963, Skopje) graduated in printmaking at the Kuvataideakatemia, Helsinki (1988) and gained his Masters degree in sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Skopje (2011). He has been a founding member of several art collectives, including the group Zero (1985-1990) which had a significant role in the development of the alternative art scene in Macedonia.

As an individual artist, in his installations and long-term projects, Toshevski explores the relations between conceptual art, and its radical position in the social and political context of post-socialist societies. He was one of the founding members of the Kooperacija initiative (2011/2015) - a collaborative effort of several Macedonian artists whose main objective was focused on institutional critique, exhibiting critical art outside the framework of the cultural institutions controlled by the authoritarian government.

Selected solo exhibitions: Dossier (City Museum, Skopje, 1997); Process (MoCA, Skopje, 2004); Territories (2004-2012); Love Undefined Every Damn Moment (MoCA, Skopje, 2012), Between (National Gallery of Macedonia, 2016). Selected group exhibitions: After the Wall (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1999); Love it or Leave it (Cetinje, 2004); Cosmopolis Macrocosmos x Microcosmos, (Thessaloniki, 2002); Illuminations (La Biennale di Venezia, 2011)

On the canvas and about the frame

Explanation before the interpretation



OPA's Bollocks video-installation, curated by Bojan Ivanov, mala galerija, Skopje, 2010

Being well aware that it reads as a lame metaphor, I still claim my critical space to be - concurrently - on the canvas, and outside the frame, of the Macedonian contemporary moment. Moreover I would dare assume that it is also a stance that a good many of cultural critics elsewhere will be familiar with, reflecting the protracted disintegration, nay, the utter demise of the historical, constitutive bourgeois subjectivity.

I should hasten to add that this understanding of the waning subject as the single secular subject matter of the modern culture is yet another tentative figuration aimed at setting periodization of the topic (structural tendencies) and boundaries around the topicality (conjuncture) I intend to present in the following argument. Namely, it has to do with modernity and modernization or, more to the point, with that historical, cultural and institutional scaffolding against which the current Macedonian art is propped up.

Being also in the hereness (mostly) and in the nowness (somewhat less frequently), I would attempt at translating in general terms the question of any recognizable intellectual attitude and viable critical position that I may be standing for. For this purpose - explanation before the interpretation - I should point out that during the last thirty odd years I made it my habit to persistently dismantle and rebuild my tradecraft (of an art critic) in ways that were ultimately always bound to fall back upon the crudest interpretative model of historical contradiction: a negation from within. In this sense, when moving from the level of methodological towards the realm of the substantive, I taught myself to address whatever cultural there is at present, by way of assessing the very contradiction of modernity as a historical concept (in the past) and of modernization as a set of socioeconomic practices (not entirely of the past).

Now, in order to lay down a coherent storyline I should propose its starting point beyond which there is only a complex maze of mid-19th century revolutionary lineages, of class-based affiliations, and noble ethnic origins.

Thence, the incipient form of that which was to become the Macedonian modern project is clearly recognizable from the very onset of the 20th century in the Ilinden uprising and the ensuing, short-lived Krushevo Republic. Its principal agency represented a brittle, uneven alloy of autonomist and pro-independence strivings that mainly consisted of class-based ethnic and nationalist self-assertions.

The ensuing Balkan Wars - as a preface to the latest Thirty Years War - ended with setting new and enduring political lines of territorial divide across the Macedonian whole ... as it was experienced or imagined within the borders of the crumbling Ottoman Empire. The demographic, political and cultural consequences of this violent physical division entered the structural causalities which eventually restricted the survival of the Macedonian modern project exclusively to those spaces that were appropriated by the newly formed Yugoslav polity.

At present, the point of historical bifurcation - specifically, the moment of fruition of the Macedonian aspirations to modernity - is unanimously placed somewhere in the closing years of the Second World War and the subsequent attainment of statehood by a leftist dominated, and yet broad alliance of antifascist forces, representing most every aspect of the Macedonian social substrate. This resistance movement in effect forced the reconstruction of the erstwhile Yugoslav context of interstate and intrastate relations into a backdrop of the teleological horizons for the development of the contemporary Macedonian political, social and, above all, cultural realities.

Actually, the subject that assumed state power in Macedonia (i.e. the statehood of a constituent part in Yugoslavia's federal community) was an uneasy synthesis of socialist and nationalist anti-systemic movements from the inter-war decades. In no time that concept of dual agency of social change turned to received knowledge for generations to come. The formulaic expression would usually state that the antifascist liberation struggle in Macedonia was primarily a mere logistic requirement beneath the historically inevitable social and national revolution. This viewpoint about the converging synchronicity of the popular and people's demands for emancipation remained a standard narrative in the Macedonian

educational curricula up until the mid-1990s when it was displaced by a discourse of post-socialist transition, imbued with lethal doses of post-colonial bitterness.

At this point, before I turn to the tribulations of interpreting the Macedonian cultural modern idiom, I am due to provide some further explanations of two idiosyncratic traits of the erstwhile Yugoslav socialist ideology and political praxis - two departures of sorts which had a rather far-reaching import for, and exerted deep impact on the issue at hand.

First off, it is about the ways in which the Yugoslav polity sought to manage, to contain the latent anti-systemic radicalisms of its own popular and people's struggle for liberation ... radicalisms which continued to dwell in the subdued, yet long-standing grievances over unfinished, unfulfilled history. Here I would bring forth only the outcomes: the egalitarian demands of the social revolution were negotiated through practices of an actually existing radical social democracy, while the aspirations for political sovereignty inherent to the national revolution were tamed into an actually existing form of tolerable and tolerant cultural nationalisms. It worked, ... mostly.

Secondly, a certain exceptionalism of the modern Macedonian cultural nationalism within the Yugoslav federal union proper should be noted: only the Macedonian nationalist strivings for political assertion and recognition were admissible on the Yugoslav bargaining table, and only when originating inside and being resolved within that typically Macedonian, slightly overdeveloped and rigid framework of cultural, educational and civic institutions. This exceptionalism in its turn created a favourable atmosphere for cultural public debates which fuelled and - at times - directly steered the modern literary, theatrical, musical, film and visual arts production in Macedonia. It worked, ... for a while.

Representation and interpretation

There are topics which need to be represented and the problematic which requires an interpretation - of course, by this I am referring to the main social issues which informed the modern Macedonian project as well as to its dynamic of strenuous relations between both, the notion of modernity and the modernization processes it gave birth to. Once again, I must point out that the apparent derivativeness of this account and of its vocabulary is due to a single, fundamental assumption: the critic cannot but revisit all the commonplaces of the modern cultural history and, hopefully, engage its canon.

In this instance however, an inverted approach - a sort of capsized idiographic simplification of the Macedonian path to modernity - may be considered a more appropriate overture. Namely, all it takes is to grant a constitutive character to just one topic, that is to say, to the representation of modernity as the universally acknowledged sense of history; then, from there one may proceed with an interpretation of the clashing ends and means of the modernization problematics.

Actually existing conditions of possibility

The commonplace I am about to revisit is an actual place: it is commonly referred to as the aftermath of the Second World War; it is a place wherein the notions of political victory and military defeat were merely a moral markers scattered all over the mercilessly and utterly devastated continental demographic and economic base. On the south-eastern edge of this place, and - I should have mentioned this earlier - taking place during the first postwar decade, the new Macedonian geography was quickly evolving into a historicity, that is to say, into a conjuncture.

At first, the conjuncture in question retained its value of spatial reference. There was this mental picture of Macedonia as a fragile probe protruding from the much larger Yugoslav mainland mass, an appendage of sorts that was exposed to the freezing winds of the Cold War as they were blowing from all directions over the southern tip of the Balkan Peninsula. True enough, the Macedonian geography in the early postwar years was severely afflicted by historical turmoils in the neighborhood: fires of the civil war blazing to the south and the coincident clang of the lowering Iron Curtain to the east provoked a relapse of nationalist phantom pains.

As Macedonian federal borders were quickly turning to impermeable frontiers, the Macedonian society - facing the mood swings of the Yugoslav tacit acquiescence - opened itself to the influx of embittered refugees, expatriates and deportees; this nation of perennial stateless persons impressed lasting structural features of a settlers culture upon the then precarious developmental patterns of the Macedonian social life. All of this, being primarily received as a historical moment of causal overdetermination was - at some deeper level - perceived also as the main, nay, single cause of that ineffable and persistent undercurrent of timeless resentments, ideological denunciations, and revivalist tendencies which are particular to the Macedonian instances of economic, political, and cultural modernity at large. But then again, there still remains that other - purely temporal - weave of junctures, ... that postwar piece of Macedonian historical cloth in a need of critical attention.

The aftermath of the Second World War was truly a united space solely due to its uniform political time flow: firstly by reconfiguring the past into a palatable historical account, secondly by reconstructing the present into a firm foundation of the economic rationality, and lastly, in reaffirming the jointly assumed commitments by the humanity to some brighter, better future for the world. The problem was in determining the subject of the bliss to come: better future for everyone or for everybody?

The Macedonian modern project erred on the side of the latter, boasting thus a noble anti-systemic lineage that could be traced back to its Austro-Marxist origins. In that same vein, a homegrown understanding of modernity was in compliance with every other socialist anti-systemic movement: the old revolutionary goals of liberty, equality, and fraternity still reigned supreme. And yet, in course of the first post-war decade, the manifold modernization concepts and new strategies took on the leading role in the highly choreographed staging of the political legitimation power play.

The Macedonian leftist heritage sorely lacked the context of an assumed state power: it was merely envisaging a framework for a society based on republican values, secular (slightly anti-clerical) orientations, and welfare commitments.

Therefore, the very formation, advancement, and preservation of the Macedonian national interest was oftentimes relying on the Yugoslav prerogative to frame, level out, and eventually reconcile some of the competing demands and unsettled issues within the broader federal polity. The result was twofold: starting afresh in this place which is commonly referred to as the aftermath of the Second World War, Macedonian modernity adopted the common strategy of an institution building process, as a platform of expressing and promoting its national interest; at the same time, the institution building and the nation building processes became indistinguishable from one another. And that is all there is ... sort of.

Topics of our time



Jordan & Iskra Grabul, Makedonium, 1973-75, Krushevo, Macedonia

The actually existing conditions of possibility to tell apart that which is logical from that which is historical are by now - hopefully - starting to emerge in their roughly outlined scope and complexity. I am aware that the objects of thought in question are not displayed in a clear and unambiguous manner. Only personal biases and professional habits affected my decision to impress an unidirectional temporal sequence over

the regional structural tendencies and sub-regional, local conjunctures of a period which is in effect a place in history. Although this also may seem an inaccurate rendering of a situation, there is a wider interpretative context to consider - the one that is made up of longer term secular trends. As I may have intimated thus far, it is to do with the extended transformation of modernity, seen as the production of time (currency of future), into a modernization, experienced as the production of spaces (politics of change). Hence, stepping out from that place which hitherto was referred to as the aftermath of the Second World War, one is immediately entering the forty odd years of the actually existing late modern culture.

Somewhere half-way through this period, the last social revolution - the one of the 1968. - took place, setting the new boundaries of contemporaneity without modernity. It provided, among other things, the general language of critical assessment and the vantage point for critical observation. Nowadays, the legacy of this revolution continues to spread and permeate - as if by capillary action - the lives and attitudes of a largely oblivious posterity.

During the years preceding this generational and, altogether social rupture in the Macedonian late modern chronology, there was but one public debate of deeper impact: it was really an actual strife between the Modernists and Realists; it concerned primarily the literary circles that were divided in clearly delineated opposing camps which, in turn were supported by literary magazines, publishers and critics; it started somewhere towards the mid-1950s and lost its meaning by the beginning of the 1960s. A single offshoot of this debate survived in the writings of the Macedonian art critics up until the mid-1960s; it concerned the barren pondering over the artistic, social and ideological merits of that which is national and of that which is traditional by nature and origin in the Macedonian modern visual arts. Of course, the underlying purpose of pitting Modernists against Realists was eminently ideological. In spite of it being disguised as a confrontation between urban and rural thematic fields and formal predilections, it was in reality all about the class-consciousness against ethnic identity. The outcome appeared irresolvable then, but it is now quite clear: the debate instilled in the society a strong and a long lasting belief that modernity is Macedonian destiny.

In 1963. a devastating earthquake hit the Macedonian capital, Skopje. As the relief efforts from Yugoslavia and from abroad brought a number of civil engineers, architects, artists and town planers to aid the reconstruction, the next cultural debate started taking momentum.

And, for a change, it was a real debate immersed in that creative, slightly unkempt spirit of late-1960s university campuses. The cardinal point of discussions was the synthesis of art and architecture - a Utopian concept of life as an ultimately aesthetic experience of the economic, political, and in general, social instances. By the beginning of the 1970s, or at the dusk of "the glorious thirty", the Macedonian productive base and its cultural superstructure enabled a conjuncture that was literally rubbing shoulders with the Utopian impulses of an actually existing aesthetic society. The impetus was sufficient to maintain the vitality and longevity of town planning endeavours, public art practices, and monumental memorial projects well after the morose ending of the 1970s.



View of Solidarity, an Unfinished Project, curated by Zoran Petrovski, with the sculpture Untitled, by Jordan Grabul in the foreground. Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje, Macedonia, 2014

The closing chapter of the Macedonian late modern culture was perused for one last time during the second half of the 1980s, and ... that is that. Modernity as a notion kept its relevance only with reference to the dominant post-modern cultural newspeak. Leading the debate on the emancipation of the Macedonian art scene were the Macedonian artists themselves. Their thesis claimed the achievement of independence from the old art world structures and strictures while, in effect, they were merely witnessing to the political disintegration of the delegitimized Yugoslav cultural context. In a matter of years, the very independence thesis turned to an ageless, ostensibly interminable experience of cultural isolation.



OPA, Bollocks installation shot, mala galerija, Skopje, 2010

April theses, or April fools?

I deliberately left out from this account a vast portion of important historical narrative and heaps of accumulated, highly specialized scholarly knowledge on the subject. There are also no references acknowledging any sources in support of my argument, no empirical data or indexing of terms. What I have proposed thus far is neither accurate representation nor true interpretation of the state of affairs. It is merely indicative of my current critical positioning: on the canvas and outside the frame of the Macedonian contemporary moment.

Being an art critic lacking knowledge, my preference is for artists devoid of art. Then, who are those artist that I am referring to, and what are they doing?

Well, ... in brief, these artists are my people, ... the only people I am interested in knowing better. Their interest on the other hand is, either in attending to the production of a contemporary political space, or in bringing about cultural strategies for the production of social goals, ... or both. Come to think of it, ... political space, social goals, ... today, these may well be the only redeeming features of the modernity. Moreover, those art-less artist may be holding just now the answers to the questions which are lying ahead of us.

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