

Focus Sections

 Who_we_are

 People_and_Organizations

 i_CAN_Reader

 Available_Publications

 Destination_Spotlight

 Top_Websites

 Contact_us

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Suzana Milevska

Story With Many Beginnings

One of the best ways to make mistakes while generalizing about art and art history, is to extrapolate, without knowledge of the specific context, like in Achille Bonito Oliva's text "Neo Europe (East)" published in Flash Art ten years ago (1988, No. 180). In his text Oliva proclaimed that all the Eastern countries, including Yugoslavia, had found in the personality of Mikhail Gorbachov a catalyst for dialogue and critical approach. Considering the fact that after 1948 rupture with the "Informbiro" Yugoslavia was never very dependent on the political situation in the ex Soviet Union and taking into account the country's dissolution only a few years after the death of its leader Tito, it is obvious that from today's perspective such a claim sounds too superficially.

The Macedonian contemporary art scene, for a long time marginalized within the framework of the Yugoslav scene, (itself on the European periphery), was perhaps the only party "profiting" culturally from the war. The country had gained the independence not fighting for it or taking the initiative as did the other ex Yugoslav Republics. Enjoying a relatively calm and peaceful development, untouched by the war on its territory and having not more than sixty war casualties (soldiers in the ex Yugoslav National Army at the moment of beginning of the conflict), Macedonia recently experienced an unexpected flourishing cultural field, in part because its development was not longer frustrated by the "key system" (proportional participation of the Republics in the area-wide and international events).

The first signs that something exciting was happening in this small southern place (and the first conscious reactions from the Yugoslav critics) were noticed during the last big exhibition that unified all the artists from different Republics: The 1989 Documenta in Sarajevo. The shift from provincial out of date abstract expressionism seen at the previous exhibitions of the Macedonian artists was especially obvious in the field of sculpture. However, the early 1990's had marked the starting point for the exit of the Macedonian artists from anonymity and their inclusion in the international professional art context. The first foreign presentation of the artists from this region under the name of the independent Republic while the country was still not officially recognized was The exhibition Standpunkt: Macedonien Gruppe Zero Aus Skopje Osteuropaisches Kultur und Bildungszentrum, Cologne, (May-June, 1990) was the first foreign presentation of the artists from the independent Republic of Macedonia (the country was still not officially recognized). The artists Aleksandar Stankovski, Igor Toševski, Perica Georgievski, Zlatko Trajkovski, Bedi Ibrahim and Miodrag Desovski had been working as a group since 1985 (from 1985 to 1990 they realized more than fifteen performances, murals and installations). Although promoted by the Museum of Macedonia and by the art critic Vladimir Veličkovski in two big exhibitions including young artists, their first institutional exhibition as a group was, paradoxically, organized abroad, thanks to Thomas Strauss from the Ignis Center. Their project Zero Shakti presented in the Museum of Macedonia in 1990, was their second intermedial project to embrace sculptural, ambient and video installations. After two years some of the members of the group (Aleksandar Stankovski, Zlatko Trajkovski and Perica Georgievski) invited other artists: Žaneta Vangeli, Ismet Ramičević and one critic, Suzana Milevska, and realized the exhibition "Order/Chaos" based on the chaos theory. Along with their intermedial and "dirty aesthetics" there were other attempts to overcome the established modernists elite which included abstract and minimal artists, mainly nourished by the Museum of Contemporary Art. Among them Gligor Stefanov and other artists

influenced by the Italian arte povera, Petre Nikoloski who represented Macedonia (with Stefanov) for the first time at the Venice Biennial 1993, Aneta Svetieva, a sculptor who, at the 1997 Venice Biennial, exhibited sculptures inspired by the prehistoric and antique heritage of forms found in the Balkan archeological sites, and other new media artists (video art, performance, installation, electronic arts) like Žaneta Vangeli (exhibiting at the 4th Istanbul Biennial 1995), Iskra Dimitrova (Selesta Art Biennial, 1997), Robert Jankuloski (Manifesta 1), Mirna Arsovska, Bogdan Grabuloski/Violeta Blažeska (Sao Paulo Biennial, 1996). All of them enriched the art scene with an intertextual and intermedial intertwining of the works of art combining materials taken from different contexts and used as a quotation or reinterpretation. The same goes for the members of the group Zero who, after 1990, started to exhibit separately, under their individual names. Exhibitions like Image Box (organized in 1994/95 by the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts (SCCA - Skopje, Macedonia) and the production of the first artistic CD Rom in Macedonia in 1996 by the same institution and the same curator Nebojša Vilić (the Director of SCCA-Skopje) included the artists that already worked in the field of media before and promoted some new artists that were provoked by the awards and commissions which was not a policy of the other art institutions. Almost the same artists exhibited at the exhibition "9 1/2: New Macedonian Art" curated by Zoran Petrovski, the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The usual statement of the Macedonian art critics about the situation of contemporary arts in Macedonia after the Second World War - i.e. that the most easily recognisable difference between the local scene and that of the other Eastern European countries lies in the fact that the social realism had never become over-dominant in Macedonia - started in the late 1980's to become a heavy mortgage. The formalism of the minimal and object art as a legacy from the most established abstract expressionists (due to the fact that the most prominent painter and professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Petar Mazev, was mostly inspired by CoBra), was not really adaptable to anything new. The artists who were following the principles of modernism and were supported by opportunities to exhibit in the Museum of Contemporary Art were very young. After participating in four Youth Biennials (1987, 1989, 1991, 1993) they found themselves in a very absurd situation today when this, the only organized promotion of the youngest artists, has been canceled of unknown reasons.

The most prominent artists from the late eighties: Jovan Šumkovski (Sao Paulo Biennial, 1994), Blagoja Manevski, Dragan Petković, Stanko Pavleski, Tome Adzievski, Slavčo Sokolovski, who at that time presented their investigations in structural analysis of shape, composition, colour, light - during the first half of the 1990's started to change the aesthetic principles they had followed at the beginning of their career. They began to show interest in the new media, thereby abandoning the painting for the three dimensionality of the object and installation. The last attempt to face the art not only as an isolated island closed in the self referential circle dealing exclusively with the issues of representation and artistic procedure, but also as a site for engagement and commitment, became reality in the exhibition Parallels held in Berlin's IFA Gallery 1997 (curated by Nebojša Vilić). Trying to deal in their recent works with problems of ecology, violence, war etc., the artists Tome Adzievski, Slavčo Sokolovski and Jovan Šumkovski entered a new phase of their artistic activities, which dealt with external, reality based issues outside the framework of art. The project Dossier '96 by Igor Toševski, dealing with the problems of transition and privatization of the factories, was the most radical in that sense, with its consciousness of the authentic context, its careful planing and depth, as well as the final powerful, witty game of the replacing of the piles of rejects with projection of the words from the transition vocabulary, made a big impact. Wishing to provoke similar projects the Board of SCCA -Skopje, Macedonia announced the competition for the Third Annual Exhibition under a title "Scandal" but it never materialised.

In opposition to the strongly controlled policy of curators and institutions, three independent projects, including more than sixty projects, were organized by the artists themselves 1995, 1996, 1997 in the abandoned space of the old Turkish

bath Čifte Amam. In 1996, the same space hosted "Liquor Amnii", the first project by women artists featuring five Macedonian artists (Iskra Dimitrova, Žaneta Vangeli, Mirna Arsovska, Margarita Kiselička Kalajdzieva and Nora Stojanović) along with five artists from the Boston Mobius Artists Center. The second part of the project took place in Providence, USA, and was the biggest presentation of contemporary Macedonian artists in the States.

The biggest problem in the realizing any independent project is the lack of financial support, since the only sources of founding, the Ministry for Culture of Republic of Macedonia and the SCCA - Skopje, Macedonia - mostly back up the institutions or printing the catalogues. Thus, a very authentic Macedonian paradox is born: in a situation where most artists are unemployed, without scholarships or grants, not having studios or any possibility of commissions, luxuries catalogues are printed in order to promote the inexpensive small projects, while actually producing the works themselves has become "a mission impossible".

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