

Art and war: a sense of the ridiculous prevails

Peter Aspden witnesses a coffin-bearing gondola from Macedonia and bullet boxes filled with human body parts in wax in the Albanian pavilion

The art of the 1990s is not famous for its sense of engagement with geo-politics. The inauguration of this year's Biennale took place on the very day that Nato began to enter Kosovo, but it was difficult to discern any trace of the Balkans crisis in this sheltered corner of indulgence and experimentation. Difficult, but not impossible.

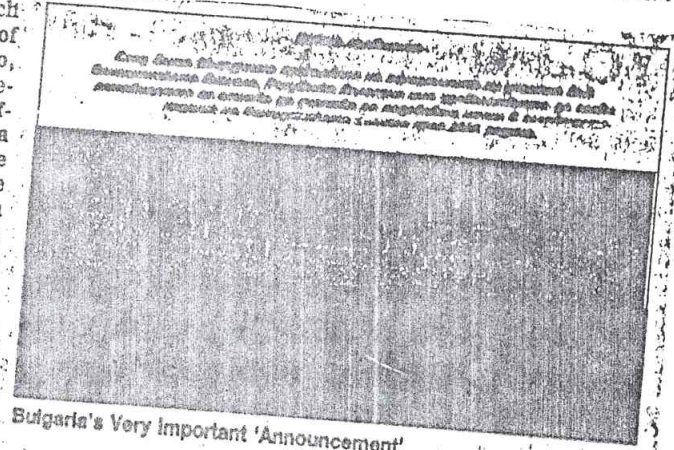
For half-way through the evening, an arresting sight momentarily snatched the attention of the first-night guests: a gondola floating

down the small canal which separates the two sections of the Giardini di Castello, adorned with a white-ribboned, open-topped coffin, its bottom lined with a mirror. At the back of the gondola, a striking figure read in English and Italian through a megaphone. A plaque at the front of the craft gave the work its name and provenance: *Wonderful Creatures from Macedonia*.

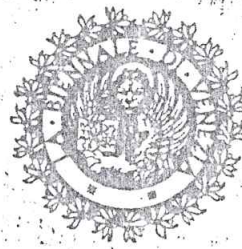
Iskra Dimitrova, the mysterious narrator of what turned out to be a romantic fairy tale, and her troubled nation are not an official part of this Biennale, but it is not difficult to guess the inspiration behind this mordantly ironic piece of theatre. "At first sight the project may appear ludicrous... but it involves an emphatic aspect of commitment reflecting the protest against the current situation in the Balkans, and in Macedonia in particular," explained the artist in a hand-out.

A similar sense of ridicule can be found in the Bulgarian entry, this time part of the official Biennale programme. *Announcement* by Nedko Solakov consists of the distribution of postcards, T-shirts and caps bearing the following message: "Very Important Announcement. After nearly 30 years absence from the officially participating countries at the Venice Biennale,

Unsurprisingly, the most obvious comment on the war can be found in the Albanian pavilion, present "in parallel" to the official Biennale nations in a quiet corner to the north of the Giardini. *Albania Today - The Time of Ironic Optimism* is full of powerful, disturbing work: Alban Hajdini's bullet boxes filled with human body parts in wax, juxtaposed against pictures



Bulgaria's Very Important 'Announcement'



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The Republic of Bulgaria is proud to announce that it is prepared to properly participate in the next Venice Biennale in the year 2001. No explicit reference to the Balkans war, but a vivid sense of insecurity laces the satirical fusion of public relations stunt and art performance. "It reflects the absolute reality of Bulgarian contemporary art history and its political and economic basis," says curator Iara Boubnova.

of kitsch pieces of porcelain; Adrian Paci's video of his young daughter telling a fairy tale, in which creatures from traditional fables are mixed with remembered images of warfare: "Once upon a time there was a cock and a cat, and then one day came the forces..."

In Astrit Vatnikaj's work, a row of photocopied Albanian passports is fixed to the wall, an ironic "classic quality" tag, such as one would find on a pair of denim hanging from a street market. Across the room, a corresponding row of velvet pillows, such as those that were used to present medals in the communist era, instead frame faded pictures of soldiers.

Sislej Khafa's precarious house, made from fruit crates, promises more than it can possibly deliver: once inside the house, clumps of garlic and salami hang tan-