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For the "Cultural power of the Curator" session

After 1989 reality "mixed" artistic life with political agendas and forced its reaction to the instability and insecurity of the time. The need to rethink stereotypes, to analytically dismantle previous realities, to indicate new perspectives, to speak more of the future than of the past, materialised in the responsibilities which had to be assumed by the curator(s). In the countries of Eastern Europe, Bulgaria as well, the word "curator" was loaded with manifesto-like connotations in confrontation with the conservative late totalitarian context. I still believe that the content of the curator's profession is redefined with each project, but the "opening up" of the post-ideological isolation identified the curator as a symbol of change and freedom. Often beyond the "space proper" of culture and art. In the early 1990-ies the few curators were the principle mediators of the international art events together with the more numerous, of course, participating artists in the Biennials in Istanbul, Sao Paulo, Venice-Aperto, Johannesburg.

To quote the Russian critic and curator Liudmila Bredikhina, "...contemporary art in the West functions as a well-known democratic index. And it looks so natural that one can think it has appeared together with democracy itself". The responsibility to create such index in our societies fell on the young curators rather than on the artists. Their activities, actions, and acts triggered discussions about contemporary art as a signifier of freedom. In the whole post-totalitarian region the curator(s) became alternative and progressive voice within the social and political debate about the nature, substance and meaning of contemporary culture. The instrument of the curator, the representation and visualisation of group tendencies and individual artistic pursuits, was/is a powerful tool not only in the formation of a new conceptual space for art but also in encouraging artists to exploit a specific cultural moment.

However, belonging to the system of contemporary art is a more difficult task then to just coexist simultaneously. This task was quite heavy for cultures where the patriarchal canon did not quite experience the modernistic destruction. This is very typical for the Balkan countries. The curator acquired new, extremely important informational and educational aspects. Curatorial activities are substituting for the lack of such missing elements of artistic life as education in history and theory of contemporary art and culture, Public Relations, administration and management. The new technology in art and its potential for communication further turns the curator into an interdisciplinary mediator.

One of the most important curatorial functions is that of translator from the language of art in the global context (but not only) which is accepted as "Western," into local art language(s). An example for "untranslatable distances" (as was the brilliant title of the AICA round table at the opening of Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana). In 1995 a colleague in Sofia and I, were contracted to translate into Bulgarian a well-known British Dictionary of Art Terms. The difficulty was that it contains terminology-covering practices from many millennia and territories. Bulgarian culture had nothing to do with most of these practices. We were "translating" not only from English but also from Japanese, French, Italian, German, Spanish, etc. A single Bulgarian word related to a local practice, its materials, routines, etc., had to encompass all foreign language variations and specific details. Often we couldn't find any Bulgarian word to use and produced new ones. We committed acts of retrospective colonialization regarding our culture. Trying to "reduce" a distance, we were making it visible, as well as the "untranslatability" of culture(s)...



The function of the curator in our region is to secure the possibility for dialogue, for the constant realisation of a reversible translation between the local context and the relevant international discourse. I would like to mention the "Locally Interested" project, which was realised in the fall of 1999 in Sofia after the initiative of Nedko Solakov, me and the ICA-Sofia, an NGO where I am a founding director. We invited internationally acclaimed artists for a show and a cycle of lectures/meetings with the local public. We wanted to find out why Douglas Gordon, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Peter Kogler, Pipilotti Rist, Uri Tzai, Oleg Kulik, and Nedko Solakov, who are "cosmopolitan art assets" for the local public, should be as valid and important for the isolated context of Bulgaria. Provided, the artists come from both East and West but "the world" is their context. The goal was to start a translation of distances that exist between the local and the global contexts, but not through the boring "post-colonial" cultural exchanges. The lectures functioned as a tool – by explaining to the local audience the context and the "effect" of their works, the artists were "forced" to "walk" the distance between the world "at large" and the world "at hand"... The artists were as much an object of observation, as they were agents/tools of translation, with ICA-Sofia as a "babysitter" moderating the "walk" across the distance(s)... The local audience had to do some "walking" as well...

One of the activities a curator performs is to be a politician. That's obvious in larger international projects. But even in smaller initiatives the curatorial project can be a contribution to solving problems of political nature: establishing and regulating the relationships between contemporary art and national tradition, between artist and society, as well as assisting the process of construction of new value systems.

For instance, the artist Luchezar Boyadjiev from Sofia accelerated the mutual "getting to know each other" within the context of an art show. When invited to participate in "The Other Side of Europe" at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, he suggested the project "Artist(s) in Residence Program." Within the context of the 2<sup>nd</sup> part "Social Reality, Existence, Politics" he "mutated" into an artist/curator of a new kind and transferred most of his space into a studio/viewing room. He invited 4 artists from the Balkan region (Sokol Beqiri – Kosovo, Uros Djuric – Yugoslavia, Alban Hajdinaj – Albania, Slavica Janeshlieva – Macedonia) to Paris on a 1-month residency in the museum. He knew the artists from before (although they did not know each other), he appreciated their work, and most importantly, they all came from the countries most affected by the war in Kosovo. Boyadjiev attempted to transfer an entire context. Participants could show their own works but also enter mutually beneficial encounters with the local audience. Working with the constant reversals of the host/guest paradigm, Boyadjiev and the others were inviting still more artists for presentations, a process that transformed the space into a meeting ground. At the end, the situation was completely reversed. The Balkan artists were hosting local Parisian artists, thus functioning as representatives of the international art world. They offered privileged assistance and "career patronage" aimed to promote the "locals" into the space of an art institution these would hardly have a chance to exhibit in soon. Thus, the "unacknowledged voices from neglected parts of Europe" turned out to be the young artistic voices from Paris...

Another example is the Bulgarian participation in the Venice Biennial of 1999. I will not go into the much-advertised details of this project by the artist Nedko Solakov and myself. Its substance was a gesture – by handing out of postcards and T-shirts a message was communicated to the audience that Bulgaria is ready to take part in the next Biennial in a proper way... The goal was to position Bulgaria officially within the world of contemporary art at the highest level show. This official participation was invented as PR for Bulgaria and was planned to extrapolate its characteristics over reality. Lacking both pavilion and



funding, there was nothing to communicate but a promise that might never be kept... certainly not in 2001... We were also teasing Power in Bulgaria, stimulating officials to make a step ahead...

I hope my examples demonstrate at least one existing process - the spectrum of tasks and functions transforms the figure of the curator into an "institution." The curators are building up a new paradigm where their function in communication and representation of art can substitute for the lack of institutions. Curators compensate the deficiencies of local art infrastructure by energetically exchanging information with individuals and institutions outside the country; by transforming personal archives to function as "museums of local contemporary art". The most important goal "beyond/inside the profession" is to find a constructive use for this self-imposed colonisation (adopted methodologies and practices) by exporting the local product of art or by showing international art with local "curatorial instruments".

Initially the curator was an alternative. Currently she/he is turning into an institution, which is based on communication and friendships. One example is my ICA-Sofia that was established in 1995. It achieves realisation through inter-cultural collaboration similar to the workings of a network. Although a curator from Eastern Europe functions mainly within the borders of a national art scene, the whole logic of his/her existence is related to cross-cultural and across-the-border communication (political and symbolic borders). And the cultural power of the curator now more and more transfigures from representation or manipulation towards connection and creation of proximity.