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Constructing New Identities: Images of Socialist Realism and Contemporary Fine Art in Post-Communist Bulgaria

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Abstract

The fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria witnessed the end of a grand recit, a metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984) that claimed total knowledge of human history, politics and economy. Socialist Realism, as an aesthetic that supposedly embodies this metanarrative, articulated its pretension as the authentic art form that defined relations in the artworld of the country. The images of Socialist Realism formed a framework of propositions for 'right' and 'wrong' in fine art in an attempt to construct a collective artistic identity. The collapse of the Communist regime should have also been the collapse of Socialist Realism. Similarly the collapse places fine art and artists, previously and inevitably connected to the Grand Recit through this aesthetic mode, in a new role. The fragmentation of the democratic art world within the country has shaped their search for new ways of legitimizing.

Introducing some aspects of a practice based research, this paper explores to what extent did this metanarrative end and what the aftereffects in a post-communist situation are.

It argues that Socialist Realism has not been overcome in terms of its functions and status, its images and their interpretations have influenced the debates on the totalitarian past thus affecting contemporary art practices in the country.

Through a comparative case study of two artists whose art spanned the Communist and Post-communist era (Svetlin Rusev and Ivan Georgiev), the paper scrutinizes the interpretations of the work and biographies of 'official' and alternative artists as one of the main trends that impede the critical debate on Socialist Realism. Their works are discussed in relation to the new visual modes of articulation and the 'lost identities'. The new "Museum of the Socialist Art" is explored as an intersection of the structure of the debates on communism and the images of Socialist Realism.

Keywords

Socialist Realism, fine art, collective identity, post-communism, metanarrative

Introduction

Socialist Realism seems to be overcome in post-communist Bulgaria. Indeed contemporary fine art practices are pluralistic in terms of means and subjects, at first sight they reject the monologue of Socialist Realism and its claims to be the only one authentic aesthetic. Fine art in the country seeks to participate in a global dialogue choosing subjects that go beyond the national borders. Images from Socialist Realism seem to be forgotten. The discussions on communism and fine art during this period appear to be shifted in aspiration for oblivion or re-writing the past and still no real dialogue has taken place in the public space. Focusing on some aspects of a current practice based research, this paper explores how (or if) the communist heritage in fine art has been overcome. It argues that Socialist Realism was able to construct a collective identity and elements of this identity are still influencing contemporary fine art in the country. The paper seeks to explore the after-effects of this influence. An argument is made that certain institutions (the "Museum of the Socialist Art") and formerly official artists (S. Rusev) support the restoration and reaffirmation of the collective identity. As one of the elements of its construction, the metanarrative of the communist ideology is explored. As such it is still influential in post-communist context, but now in different relations to contemporary fine art practices. The presence of the grand recit creates confusion amongst the artists and leads to fragmentation of the artworld in the country.

Exploring paintings and sculptures from the communist era, this paper seeks to examine how this collective identity was created and how did Socialist Realism take part in this construction. The function of fine art as ritual is scrutinized as one of the approaches of constructing collective identity. Essential element of this construction was its relation to the metanarrative of the communist ideology.

The concept of collective identity developed by Alberto Melluci is used as analytical tool in order to examine how it was constructed during communism.

“The Museum of the Socialist Art” is regarded as a ‘knot’ between cultural institutions in the country, images from Socialist Realism and debates towards communism in post-communist context. It is scrutinized as articulating a post-communist viewpoint over Socialist Realism and the constructed collective identity. The name of the museum and the arrangement of the works in the space are explored as component of an attempt the collective identity constructed by Socialist Realism to be renovated by means of new approaches in relation to contemporary fine art. Examples of paintings and sculptures from the museum’s exhibitions are discussed as images from Socialist Realism that influenced the creation of the collective identity.

As one of the official artists, Svetlin Rusev was involved in the implementation and development of Socialist Realism during the communist period. After the fall of communism he has remained on influential positions in the country. Ivan Georgiev was an artist, interested mostly in abstract art. His paintings were rejected as unacceptable aesthetic and as a result he chose not to show his works. Before and after the collapse of communism he has been forgotten, and his work was not discussed or exhibited (with exception of one exhibition). By comparing and juxtaposing works by the two artists, this paper introduces certain aspects of the two case studies as key examples for exploring the continuity and discontinuity in fine art after the collapse of communism.

“Museum of the Socialist Art”: Some Suggestions Arising from the Name

In 2011 new museum dedicated to fine art during the Communist period has been established in Bulgaria. Actually this was the first one and although its opening was a late one since communism collapsed more than 20 years ago, it turned into a major event, which attracted great interest. The museum has been funded by the state budget and is part of the National Art Gallery.

It has been called (and it is still called) “Museum of the Socialist Art”. The name avoids the term Socialist Realism. Thus it implies that the museum’s expositions claims to present the whole art world in the country, the so called “the Socialist art”. Moreover, the name suggests that fine art is closely connected to politics, in this case to socialism. This would assume that there is such thing as capitalist art, for instance. Discussions throughout the media on this matter were provoked. Some authors expressed their arguments against the name. Eventually it turned out that in the proposal that Ministry of Culture had submitted, the suggested name had been “Museum of Totalitarian Art” and it had been changed in the last day. And nobody knows who changed it. Consequently the debates took place after the deadline and were unable to change anything. This fact itself gave rise to questions about the way that debates are formed in post-communist Bulgaria and most importantly about their actual outcome. There had been no point in discussion because no real change has taken place after that. So who makes the decisions then? The matter reveals relations of power and knowledge. It exposes a pretention the museum to present “a whole picture” of the artworld in the country and thus is a way of understanding how the debates on the recent past are formed. In a pluralistic democratic situation this monologue is trying to revive a past reality and to turn it into a present one.

The Space of the “Museum of the Socialist Art”

When I entered the museum I found myself surrounded by enormous amount of Socialist Realist sculptures. They were all different sizes and represent various subjects – I could see big monuments of the communist leaders together with small sculptures of workers and partisans. The space of the museum is divided into two sections – a sculpture park, which displays a permanent exposition and a gallery space that shows different exhibitions of paintings and small size sculptures every six months. The works in the sculpture park are not arranged chronologically or thematically therefore one feels like the space is part of an actual reality. The fact that there are no comments on the works anywhere in the space exalts the effect of going back in time. There is no information about fine art during communism or the most famous and influential artists of that period. Or even a label that points out when Socialist Realism started. The only board in the space explains that the museum is “situated in a totally reconstructed building owned by the Ministry of Culture” and that the building is located on “area of 6300 sq m”. It also points out who are some of the “masterpieces of the exposition”. What seems to be the function of the board? The ascertainment that Ministry of Culture owns the museum is one of the few things worth mentioning according to its creators. This fact once again emphasizes that the museum represents a viewpoint sanctioned by the authorities. And that Ministry of Culture defines the works exhibited as “masterpieces”.

However, apart from the evaluation that the audience looks at “masterpieces” the works are placed out of an actual context of interpretation. The viewer is left alone with the paintings and sculptures and this creates a direct connection between him/her and the works. So they can choose how to understand these works. Does this indicate freedom of interpretations? John Berger says that “the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled” (Berger, 1977, p. 11). How

we see these works is defined to a great extent by our memories and knowledge about communism, by the stories that others tell us or texts that we have read about it. In this museum the communist heritage within fine art is not examined scientifically but rather outlived, it creates narratives that induce nostalgia towards a “secure and simple” past.

By refusing to set a context of the works the museum attempts to recover and rehabilitate a reality from the communist era and to transfer it in the post-communist situation. It replaces knowledge with narratives and thus impedes a critical debate. As one of the newspapers comments on the museum’s opening “in the end, common sense prevailed and a museum that elevates the prestige of Bulgaria has been created. And, objectively, it has not criticized but praised socialist art. It is unfortunate that there are people in our community and who do not appreciate this great and decisive truth” (Word Newspaper, 11.10.2011, ed. 232).

Images of Socialist Realism and Their Relation to the Collective Identity

How was the artistic collective identity constructed and how Socialist Realism took part in it? According to Melucci the formulation of a cognitive framework concerning goals, means and environment of action is the first step of negotiating a collective identity. Second, collective identity needs “a network of active relationships between the actors, who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions” (Melucci, 1996). Finally, “a certain degree of emotional investment, which enables individuals to feel like part of a common unity, is required in the definition of a collective identity” (Melucci, 1996). Socialist Realism can be considered as taking part of all of these stages thus affecting the construction of the collective identity.

First Step: Setting a Goal

Socialist Realism as an aesthetic subordinate to the communist ideology articulates its aims and values. Representing a component of the ‘superstructure’ fine art is regarded as dependent from economics, and changes historically (Berdyayev, 1948, p. 96). In this context aesthetic has relative independent status - it is a pure expression of ideology of a particular class (Lunacharski, 1908, p. 36). G. Markov in his “Absentia Reports” compares Socialist Realism to an “iron strait-jacket”, which “sees life through the eye of the [Communist] Party leadership” (1990, p. 20). Fine art becomes part of ideological propaganda and “a weapon in the ideological struggle between classes” (Krylov, 1996, p. 4). Socialist Realism is not just art that attended to the Communist party, it attempted to impede any other form of fine art to exist, and thus opened the possibility ideological goals of communism to be achieved¹.

The artist’s political aim is defined as “documentary reportage of the building of the new society – the advent of Socialist Realism” (John Morgan, 2006, p. 263). Operating in the oppositions between official/unofficial fine art, Socialist Realism defines the framework of the collective identity.

Not only the aims of fine art, but its means are also determined by Socialist Realism. Figurative art that uses the mediums of painting, graphics and sculpture, is specified as canonical and even a slight deviation from it is rejected. For instance, in 1966, the painting “Nude” by Ivan Georgiev was rejected at the National Art Academy as unacceptable mostly because of the “dark, minor, dramatic sounding so very different by the bright poetry of the 1960s young innovative artists” (Iliev, Fileva, 2008, p. 151).

Construction of the collective identity is a result from ideological principles, active participation of the official artists and the images of Socialist Realism that they produced. These images embody ideological rules and produce meanings, which enhance their influence and impact.

As elements of a collective action the images tend to be “incorporated in a given set of rituals [and] practices” (Melucci, 1996, p. 44). Some of the works displayed at the “Museum of the Socialist Art” seem to be suitable examples representing the ritual function of the images of Socialist Realism. One of the sculptures of Lenin exhibited at the museum (created by Lev Kerbel, a Soviet artist), was transferred from the square in front of the Communist Headquarter in 1989. It was a central monument in the manifestations dedicated to the Communist Party and important part of these ritualistic actions. As a pseudo-religious ideology communism deliberately maintained a connection with religious worships thus turning monuments into sacred images. During the manifestations portraits of the Communist leaders were carried in almost the same way as icons.

Moreover, A. Ignatov in his book “Psychology of Communism” describes the Communist ‘party mysticism’ revealed through the mandatory portraits of party leaders displayed in departments, stores, and in many private homes that served as icons in the past (Ignatov, 1991, p. 76).

The painting *The Red Horsman. 9.9.1944* by Tsanko Lavrenov applies elements of an Orthodox icon but replace religious with ideological purposes. In the picture St. George is depicted as a soldier from the Red Army and the dragon has four heads that resemble swastika symbol. The fight between evil and good is turned into a fight between communism and

national-socialismⁱⁱ. Taken out of the Lavrenov's work the religious elements still bear a connection to a religious icon. In this way the painting acquires new, pseudo-religious function, needed for the rituals performed by and for the Communist Party.

Four small size sculptures of Stalin at the museum (author unknown) repeat an almost identical image of the leader. Only small details distinguish the works from each other. Even the posture is almost the same – Stalin appears as a heroic figure, standing up and staring with confidence. The repetition of the image and rejection of the search for new and different means of expression supports the idea of a product of fine art, whose developing resembles a ritual. By this means Socialist Realism defined not only the aim and the aesthetic of these works but also the procedure of their producing. Artistic activity as supposedly individual was transformed into collective one.

Second Step: Creating a Framework of Opportunities

According to Melucci, the second step in constructing collective identity involves “multiple actors, and implicate a system of opportunities and constraints that shape their relationships. The actors "produce" the collective action because they are able to define themselves and their relationship with the environment” (Melucci, 1996, p. 43).

After 1944, in order to exhibit their works, artists had to join the Union of Bulgarian Artists, which became the sole artistic organization of artistic activities in the country after the revolution. Its creation was a result of the post-World War II absorption of all artistic unions in the country. As main arbiter and distributor of artworks, The Union of Bulgarian Artists defined the framework of collective actions. “In practice the Union of Bulgarian Artists was state-owned, and the state gained more and more direct artistic opportunities” (Danailov, 1990, p. 10). Over the years the Union built a “solid subsystem of financial and capital assets” (Trifonova, 2003), which supported its institutional stability. Its network of galleries and art residences throughout the country created a structure of selection of works. Their promotion did not depend on the public market, but entirely on the strategy of the state. The membership in the Union of Bulgarian Artists required artists to be members of the Communist party first. The opposition official/unofficial art was defined as almost canonical and it was correlated with politics. In this way the entire artistic process - from creating to displaying a work was subordinate to the communist state. Artists were actively involved in collective actions within the framework of the Union, connected and receiving recognition through the network of opportunities for exhibiting their work.

Third Step: Images of Socialist Realism and a Metanarrative

“Finally, a certain degree of emotional investment, which enables individuals to feel like part of a common unity, is required in the definition of a collective identity” (Melucci, 1996, p. 45). This paper argues that in the case of the collective identity constructed by Socialist Realism, emotional investment is supported by a sense of belonging to the metanarrative of communism. Socialist Realism, as an aesthetic that embodies this metanarrative and its claims for total knowledge, articulated its pretension as the only one authentic art form. Consequently fine art practices, connected to Socialist Realism were recognized and recognized themselves as authentic. This supported construction of a stable collective identity that lasted during the communist period regardless of the changes within the political context.

1989 - Collapse of a Metanarrative?

After the fall of communism the metanarrative has lost its function, its great heroes, and its goal. Therefore the democratic, pluralistic context has required new forms of legitimization of fine art practices in the country. New legislation in the cultural sector has been introduced, as well as “decentralisation of the cultural administration, democratisation of cultural production, reconstruction of the cultural infrastructure (including privatization and new legal status of the cultural institutions), and encouragement of market models for the development of culture” (Klamer, Petrova, Mignosa, 2006). “The model of the state as the main ‘owner’ of cultural industries is gradually being replaced by the model of the state as the main regulator through its economic and legislative functions” (Varbanova, 2003).

However certain structures have been preserved even within the new conditions. For instance, Ministry of Culture and the National Art Academy continued to function as highly hierarchical. The Union of Bulgarian Artists as one of the defining factor in the arts has been a subject of discussions after the fall of communism. Its structure also has not been changed after 1989. Although its members do not define art's criteria in a democratic context, its ‘net-like organization’, which consists of galleries and local branches throughout the country gives them opportunities to exhibit and evaluate their own creativity, thus recovering to some extent the dichotomy official/unofficial fine art.

During the communist period artists were inevitably connected to the metanarrative of Socialist Realism, either as official or unofficial artists. After the fall of communism, “when the Great Story collapsed, the sudden loss of former identity

leads to confusion, melancholy, and nostalgia” (Mazin, Turkina, 1999, p. 75). Boubnova recalls a sociological survey, commissioned by the official Union of Bulgarian Artists in the fall of 1990, which explores the relations between contemporary artists and the Union. According to her words, the survey

“proved beyond a doubt that the mass of Bulgarian artists was “singing” praise to the system of state-instigated restrictions recently passed on to all the juries and boards appointed by the state in order to evaluate, correct, approve and sanction the work of the artist, the main motivation being that there should be somebody - an institution, responsible individuals - to determine what’s good in art. Practically none of the artists admitted to having felt a lack of freedom in his/her professional activities. Most artists even claimed that they felt absolutely free in their choice of subject matter, visual language, form, etc., as well as when exhibiting their works” (Boubnova, 2000).

The missing ‘regulator of criteria’ reveals a nostalgic view on the collective identity and the metanarrative, as well as the distinct legitimization, which they supported.

Svetlin Rusev is one of the artists closely connected to the Bulgarian Communist Party during the communist era. He was a member of the Central Committee of the party, Vice-President of the Committee for Culture (1982-84), and Director of the National Gallery of Art (1985-88). A lot of his works were devoted to “partisan struggle, constructive labour and the new way of life under socialism” (Rainov, 1970, p. 30). For instance, some of his paintings’ titles are: *Bread, Partisan Oath, Execution – 1923, For Freedom, Blockade, Unemployed*, etc. Rusev’s pictures on scenes from the Bulgarian history articulate a relation to the metanarrative of the communist ideology in connection to the distant Bulgarian past. In the 70s, when the Bulgarian Communist party adopted more nationalistic approach and rhetoric, the artist produced paintings on the national history, choosing certain historical figures as ‘appropriate’ for the communist ideological postulates. He depicted figures that were connected to conflicts referred usually to the idea of revolution. Developing and repeating the image of “a great past” the communist ideology endeavored to prove as not being foreign to the national culture but rather as evolved from it.

Rusev’s painting *Oath* (1968) depicts scene from the April Uprisingⁱⁱⁱ a moment when few of the participants swear in front of a gun, a knife and a crucifix. The figures seem monolithic and the abstract background additionally emphasizes their monumental features. Elements to suggest the context, in which the action takes place, are removed. Therefore the figures tend to resemble almost mythological heroes. The subject is probably selected because of its connection with revolution as one of the ideological foundations of communism. On one hand, it follows the communist idea of history as built on conflicts i. e. the April Uprising appears to be chosen as a key moment that defines to a great extent the direction and development of Bulgarian history. On the other hand, in this painting origins of the communist revolution are sought to be discovered within this development.

After 1989 Rusev became MP and received the highest academic rank in Bulgaria. He has been lecturer at the National Art Academy since. In the same time, the image of Rusev as a dissident during the communist era is a widely spread interpretations after 1989. His work is explored as a “spiritual corrective of the ruling ideology” (Bubnova, 2006, p. 158). It appears that was one of the strategies used by communists to establish their new identity after 1989, a process described by Lomax as “elite replacement” (Lomax, 1997, p. 47). Rusev’s work has changed in terms of subjects and techniques, many of his paintings have been dedicated to social problems^{iv} or appear to be personal^v. Although his paintings have abandoned the ideological content, required by the Communist party, his active participation in the collective identity constructed by Socialist Realism could be traced within some post-communist art institutions in Bulgaria. In the context of complex relations between pluralistic fine art practices, the networks of these institutions and their members evaluate their art in attempt to restore the opposition official/unofficial art.

The Unofficial Artists and Their Connection to the Collective Identity: the Case of Ivan Georgiev

How were unofficial artists in the country connected to the collective identity created by Socialist Realism and how did their practices change after the collapse of the state communism? The unofficial artists were also related to the Great Story of communism as they represented its opposition - ‘unauthentic’ and ‘dangerous’ aesthetic. Their inability to construct an alternative collective identity^{vi} during communism resulted in fragmentation and isolation of their practices. A sense of belonging to identity that transcends the individual has remained unattainable.

Ivan Georgiev was one of the artists whose works were rejected by the National Art Academy as unacceptable. In 1966, after the rejection of his work, Georgiev decided not to show his paintings, he chose “a complete non-participation in a totally juried, managed, caress and encouraged art” (Iliev, 2008, p. 1). Georgiev’s paintings are interpreted as “antithesis of the characters of Socialist Realism – cheerful, confident and optimistic faces” (Iliev, 2008, p. 1). He was more interested in the form rather than the content of an artwork. His creativity gradually changed from figurative to abstract paintings, from realistic portraits and still lives to abstract shapes. Having used fast strokes and thick layers of paint he deconstructed

images of faces and objects, emphasizing their plastic features and colours rather than the subjects themselves. *Portrait of a Man* (1970s), *Still Life with a Plant* (late 1970s), *Portrait of a Lady* (1970s), *The Yard* (1970s), *House* (late 1970s), *Landscape* (1980s), *The House* (early 1980s) are some of his paintings.

Georgiev's work has not been discussed or shown. The lack of interest itself is indication of one of the cultural processes in Bulgaria after 1989, when formerly unofficial artists were marginalized at the expense of official ones. Their practices have remained fragmented and isolated from each other as part of the deconstructed artworld in the country after the collapse of communism.

More than twenty years after 1989 the metanarrative embodied by the dominant ideology does not seem overcome, it still affects the ability to debate on the recent past. The collective identity, constructed during communism has been destroyed to some extent, although an attempt to be recovered has been made by the "Museum of the Socialist Art" and other art institutions in the country. The missing link to the former collective identity has affected contemporary fine art practices, leaving them isolated as rubbles from a lost substance.

Notes:

ⁱ As G. Markov writes about literature during communism in his "Absentia Reports" "Union of Bulgarian Writers exists so there is no literature, it functions in order to make writers not to write" (Markov, 1990).

ⁱⁱ Replaced with the term fascism by Stalin.

ⁱⁱⁱ The April Uprising was an insurrection organised by groups of Bulgarians in the Ottoman Empire from April to May 1876, which was driven by the idea of an independent Bulgarian nation.

^{iv} See Rusev's exhibition *Asylum, A Retirement Home* etc.

^v See his paintings *My Mother, Girl, Stone Paintings*, etc.

^{vi} Possible reasons for the missing underground art movements will not be subjects of this paper.

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Bio-Note

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