

ost r a n e r i e 97

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Das Internationale Forum Elektronischer Medien
The International Electronic Media Forum

Bulgarian Media Culture

If we are to approach Bulgarian media culture through a set of stereotypes we can claim that it comes from the lower east end of Europe, clichéd as the land of fine wine and failed democracy and on the way to be promoted on the cultural map as a frustrating climate for emerging digital art. The topic prompts a focus on the national media art idiosyncrasy and relates it to the recent media art forum, called ARS EX NATIO/Made in BG, held in Plovdiv, May/June 1997. The Forum was conceived around the notion of the indigenous culture and the national identity. International two-day conference kept theorising the pressing issues of how distinctly European or cosmopolitan is the new media art „made in“ Bulgaria and how far its specific national features could reach. Even timewise the festival with its range of well-curated installations of 32 Bulgarian artists at about 10 Old Plovdiv's venues was crucial for questioning the increasingly more practised non-conventional art forms and the impact of local/global in the post-totalitarian reality in which uncertainty, chaos and change dominate the artistic perceptions. However these sophisticated media events tend to polarise the local art community and it did again split the art professionals into pro-traditional and pro-new media¹.

Presumably this split is the legacy of the development of non-conventional forms since the early 70s in this country when the concept of N-Forms used to be associated with the wide range of media practices like installations, happenings, objects, performances, assemblages and site-specific works. It was only recently when the binary revolution and its subtle and soft impact on the Bulgarian visual arts introduced video and electronic arts as practice and philosophy. Computer-aided and interactive works are still considered a novelty and there are just a few institutions, galleries and individuals initiating projects and events that are consistently involved with the encouragement of new media awareness and its new public acceptance. Not in the least because electronic art has tended to burgeon only in affluent societies where there is a strong post-industrial base which allows for the artists to work closely with the makers of techno-

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logy through special studio and research arrangements.

It was in late 1994 when an exhibition and a curatorial research brought an upsurge of self-reflectivity and renegotiation of about 15 years of scattered and marginalised alternative activities around the country. The exhibition, called "N-Forms? Reconstructions and Interpretations" (November 1994, Dossev Gallery, Sofia²) seemed to linger in the national media press like an open question well after it has been dismantled. The show emerged as a visual and textual documentary of the fringe, low-tech media events deviating from the mainstream state-controlled socialist realism. The show recognised the informal short-lived art collectives (known as „DE“, „MA“, „AZ“, „DP“) and groups with slightly long-run history like „Art in Action“, „Edge“, „OM“ and „Den“ as well the Club of the Young (or Young-at-Heart) Artists. Although marginalised they provided the infrastructure for the disordered ranks of almost all non-conventional artists and a membership option to the only stigmatized and monopolised Union of Bulgarian Artists. However now the first attempts in Bulgarian neo-avant-garde art are viewed as scarce in intellectual provocative energy and abundant in semi-religious belief in the cathartic energy of ritualised folk and cult-like actions. These self-sufficient activities were held outdoors, detached from social touch with reality and had no intention to question the rigidly institutionalized culture. These works were short of any revolutionary potential and used no new technology. Therefore "N-Forms?" Show was a turning point in Bulgarian media culture and the first in a row to be promoted and managed by the Soros Center for the Arts (SCA), the regional team of art practitioners and curators, operative within the Soros Foundations Network. Ever since SCA maintains a high profile of nearly the only grant giving body that funds both individual and large-scale media initiatives. ARS EX NATIO and Crossing Over + & ++ prove to be its latest ones.

Within the Bulgarian scene the majority of facilities available for digital media art are to be found in the flourishing advertising industry and the higher education sec-

tor, equipped by various EU, rather than governmental grants. However neither of them are easily accessible for emerging digital artisans. The irony is that the advertising agencies and the mushrooming private TV and Radio stations, preoccupied with commercials though, are providing intensive training for young underpaid print- and film-makers, while the art academies are tentative in utilizing the full capacity of their media labs. For instance the Higher Institute of Architecture, Sofia [<http://www.uacg.acad.bg>] with its Silicon Graphics venue for 3D and computer-aided design is open exclusively for the students in architecture. On the other hand the National Academy of Fine Arts is a proponent of techno-scepticism and is far from any course in cyber-culture since its syllabus notion of contemporary art reaches up to 1960s.

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Recently there was a breakthrough in the academic world which will gradually abolish the long-held mistrust for collaboration between the established and newly found academic and non-academic arts institutions.

The National Academy of Theater and Film Arts (NATFIZ) [<http://www.art.acad.bg>] takes the lead by initiating an innovative project for setting up a network for Bulgarian Education in the Arts. It aims to build up a web-presence of Bulgarian visual and performing artists, of musicians and film-makers. Although it originated as a TEMPUS/PHARE project with five European partners (of which three are British - Goldsmith College, London University; Nottingham Polytechnics; CPR, Aberystwyth) as role-model institutions aiming modestly at a feasibility study for re-structuring the schemes for international exchange of students and professors, of resource information and academic programmes the project has mastered even a bilingual web-site with extensive database on the opportunities for training in the arts in Bulgaria - both in the private and public, secondary and higher arts education institutions.

Since 1995 NATFIZ and its Audio-Visual Center turned to be a supportive partner of the SCA in a couple of video-

and cable TV-art workshops for visual artists who have hardly worked with a camcorder and editing facilities before. What is more these first steps in electronic arts production were embedded by the SCA curator in a festival context: public screenings of new video art, international artists' talks, lectures and discussions. There was a dramatic impact of the these workshops, called VideoShow 5 000 Seconds I & II³, run by a team of P.A.R.K. 4D TV, an Amsterdam-based cable TV and Crossing Over +& ++⁴, mastered by Nina Czegledy, freelance media artist and curator, based in both Toronto and Budapest. Quite a few young artists have developed a firm commitment to further pursue their video and lately web-aspirations. Krassimir Terziev, Mihail Dimov and Odilia Yankova are among the most prominent and energetic whose works have been selected for screenings at influential international media forums like P.A.R.K. 4D TV, Video Positive 97, Liverpool and Manchester/UK, Documenta X, Kassel/Germany, Ostranenie, Dessau/Germany and for residencies at Polar Circuit, Tornio/Finland and Ars Electronica97, Linz/Austria.

In her one hour „Lazy Piece“, 1996 the „young and restless“ Odilia Yankova is keen to turn the slow-moving, inquisitive camera eye to her own self in search of social and individual misconceptions about the body and identity of women artists and the pervasive emotion/mind clash. The single channel video work „Library Paranoia“, 1996 of Krassimir Terziev speeds up its vision and mocks up the classic suspense action movie set up in a ... public library. Enters the regular bookish visitor and suddenly indulges in a loop of gunshots, crashing cars and trenches of book-shelves growing anxiously apprehensive of his invisible enemy. There is hardly any comfort in the chaotic seemingly free flow of information. The mixed-media sound installation „Maximum Security Car Park“, 1996 stems from the paradox of the impoverished Bulgarian culture rating first in the number of Mercedeses, BMWs (and car thefts) per capita. Krassimir simulates the space of the parking lot with its own borders, surveillance, rules and toy cars evoking the meta-

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phor for a new class distinction and an overstressed environment. A car alarm goes off for hours on end haunting the proper gallery venue (6, Shipka Str. Gallery, Sofia) and the busy Sofia streets alike. Krassimir's later video installations „In Search of...“, 1997, „Inner Space“ (in progress) and media projects („To Cook the Reality“, 1996, „Let's Dance: Clothes for Collective Life“, 1997 and „To-Days (Hi)Story“, in progress) over and again tackle with his bitter and wry sense of humour the concept of the overwhelmingly devastated contemporary society undermined by economic, political and cultural shifting sands.

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Quite promising is the new academic course in video

and electronic art introduced in 1999 at the New Bulgarian University. The course combines a rigorous theoretical analysis of technological convergence with hands-on involvement in an individual practical research. „I was overwhelmed by the poor hardware standards at NBU provided for such a large number of students“, tells Ventsislav Zankov, the course leader and a visual artist in his mid-30s who juggles traditional and radical media activities in his art practice and theory. „Yet I am working hard for establishing contacts with media labs at other Sofia universities or ads agencies to make essential practical experiments of my students possible.“ Ventsislav is probably best known for his 13-channel video-sculpture „The Last Supper“, 1992-1995, installed at VideoHart Exhibition⁶. The project employs standard TV sets, facing each other, as if arranged around a regular table, broadcasting one single video image of a fellow artist who acts and talks as a news reader. But obviously there is something wrong in the message since the news-reader is involved in an elusive mis-communication with his other doubles only. Perhaps we can interpret Ventsislav's piece as a subversive attempt to juxtapose the Bible and the TV, the sacred and profane machines for dispersing meanings, lifestyles and power roles.

Another students-oriented media association, known as the Students' Society for Computer Art (SSCA), based at the ex-Youth Communist Party Building, is active since 1990 with a growing network of regional offices around the country. It is basically concerned with encouraging skills in computer graphics, music and animation and lately in CD and WWW formats. SSCA runs a low-profile annual forum Computer Space with a blend of commercial and artistic presentations and general public show events. However regular contributors so far are computer aficionados with non-artistic background as graduates of Technical University, Sofia (<http://www.vmei.acad.bg>). Perhaps that was the reason for SSCA to join efforts and resources in 1996 with the Soros Center for the Arts and to co-found another media entity, known as the Center for Computer Art which has supported the first round of 11 electronic art projects that are currently

being explored at the center in trust-testing teams of technicians and artists. One of the grantees - Petko Durnana, a fresh '96 graduate of the National Academy of Fine Arts, will shortly be much-written about in sensational local art reviews as the first interactive Internet-based artist in Bulgaria. Petko's ambitious project "Metabolizer" (<http://www.naturella.com/metabolizer>) could easily recall Steier's vision of the body as a host of new technology and his way of deconstructing the western metaphysics about the self and the Internet as affecting the human body physically rather than being merely a tool for transmitting information. Surprisingly or not both Petko and his software and web-partner claim to know nothing about Steier which can symptomise again our pre-assumptions about the contemporary art made by European Easterners as a belated replica of West-European or American practices without reading the local context. Petko is fascinated by the "raw" chance of prompting some control for Internet users over the metabolic changes of a cyborg. The viewers are able to test the limits of the virtual body through various "diets" on vitamins, proteins, hormones, drugs and alike. "Metabolizer" went through its first public premiere at home and abroad - KGL Gallery, Sofia and the SEAFair'97, Sicily.

(<http://www.soma.org.mk/sofia/sofia/pictures>). Initially the "Metabolizer" web-site was supposed to be projected on a huge screen, set against a sound background recorded in a body-building gym and a large-scale sculpture of a human figure flattened by a weight-lifting device. And typically Petko's project goes through further sophistication for it is in the nature of interactive art to add further branches without upsetting the whole as the labour-intensive production process allows for continual copies and renewal of what might once have been the original. As exhibitions are not only a time for interactive media artists to show their work, but also for them to "user-test" their work and find by direct observation what parts of the piece are making sense and what parts are confusing users or are less successful. Thus the process becomes interactive in more ways than the immediate push of a mouse. Audience response determines part of the work and different features are added or

obfuscations subtracted by the artist for the next version. Perhaps only then Petko will find more about another like-minded Australian artist John Tonkin and his recent web-projects, called explicitly Elective Physiognomies and Elastic Masculinities (<http://www.merlin.com.au/john/>). Perhaps the CD-ROM artists-to-be Dimitar Yaramboikov and Anastasia Salabasheva currently working at the Center for Computer Art on their project "The Conquest of the Irrational" will also be able to find some points of reference to the digital video film Magritte (10:32 min 1995) of Hiercim Neumann and Maciej Cwik, Poland. Since both of the projects, in different cyber formats though, are turning still masterpieces into mischievous moving images floating in a 3D world full of "quintations". The weird shift between virtual and actual surrealist imagery of Dalí is to be experienced by any viewer eager to interact with the poetics of the CD-ROM of D. Yaramboikov and A. Salabasheva which resembles that of a dream.

In fact KGL Gallery, which has popped up in the derelict Sofia Inn on Macedonia Square since mid 1994, is marked by the local press as an extraordinary and "giant-friendly" space. Anyone can grasp that "KGL" does not refer to the size of the tiny exhibiting area but to the exhibiting artists of considerable quality. It is an all-male-artist-run gallery which is consistently committed to promotion of N-Forms and E-Forms and to cool analytical observation of the harsh living reality. The KGL mission statement of one of its founding members Ghena Gataeva reads: "We are re-considering the identity of the artist in his/her role of a diagnostician of the social transformations, of the tainted cultural heritage and of the inadequate behaviour in the '90s". KGL will probably strike a competitive note to the only "media artists paradise" so far - Aka-Ray Gallery and its young sister one-Aka Gallery, run solely by Raymonda Mautova since the early 90s.

From Aka-Ray Gallery that has recently hosted an installation by Lucinda Bragdon - the Bulgarian media artist, environmental and curator whose name definitely rings a

bell abroad. Luchezar's most recent works deal with the convergence of traditional and new media and he was the only exhibiting artist from Eastern Europe selected for the Video Positive Festival, Liverpool & Manchester, April/May 1997 - the largest international electronic arts festival in the UK, established in 1989 by FACT, the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (<http://www.fact.co.uk>) (formerly known as Moviola) and organised on a biannual basis ever since⁸. Luchezar's highly successful Video Positive 97 installation Up and Down, Back and Forth, 1995/96 (<http://www.fact.co.uk/VP97.htm>) was also financially supported by SCA, Sofia and Visiting Arts, London and is planned to tour around the country later in the year. In focusing upon information which is "old news", Luchezar's project incorporates images from the film *The Great Dictator* by Charlie

Chaplin and the biographies of great dictators such as Hitler, Mussolini, Mao, Stalin and Franco, and collages them into the form of a reversed palm reading on a gigantic Xeroxed pair of hands. Luchezar rationalises further that the video element of the installation is there, "not as a narrative in time, but only as a specific visual presence; the film has been tampered with providing the clear form, as well as the missing semantic centre in the work".

What is more Luchezar was also a celebrated speaker at LEAF 97- Liverpool East European Electronic Arts Forum⁹ (<http://www.personal.u-net.com/~gas/leaf.html>), an integral part of Video Positive 97. The artist talked about his media art visions and the specific transition of Bulgarian media culture from interpassivity to interactivity though the prism of his coinage "the C-age", where "C" could easily trade places with Computers and Caves, and Cages.

I can only hope that it won't be long when the art world will begin to think Bulgarian media culture as diverse and controversial as it is and move beyond its much loved celebrity Nedko Solakov.

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This research paper was prompted by Camilla Edwards, Visiting Arts, London and a revised version is to be published in *Visiting Arts Quarterly*, November 97.

After a MA background in English, American and Cultural Studies since 1994 Iliyana has been involved in curating and organising international visual arts events within the framework of SCA Annual Shows in Sofia, Bulgaria like *Crossing Over* Mini-International Video Festival (shortly available on the Net), VideoHart Festival, N-Forms Artists' Talks. Iliyana has developed the long-term multimedia database project, known as B@R - Bulgarian @rtists Register (due to be web-visible by the end of 1997). During her residency from Nov 96 till Apr 97 as a Visiting Bulgarian Curator at FACT Liverpool Iliyana has initiated and co-ordinated the international media art conference within VideoPositive97, called LEAF. Lately Iliyana is a co-curator, writer and facilitator of a number of media events in/about Bulgaria.

Currently Iliyana is working on a web-based project, known as *CyberKnitting for Men and Women*, which has been launched at the Hybrid Workspace, Documenta X, Kassel, Germany. [Visit <http://www.documenta.de/workspace>] and <<http://www.v2.nl/east>>. Iliyana is also pursuing her academic aspirations as a Research Fellow at the Department of Contextual Studies, LJMU, UK.

¹ See Art in Bulgaria Magazine 42/97, Sofia for a heated debate around these issues

² See the catalogue "N-Forms? Reconstructions and Interpretations" @ SCA, Sofia, 1994 for further reference

³ See Art in Bulgaria Magazine 30/95, Sofia, VideoHart Brochure, @SCA, Sofia, 1995, & VideoHart Catalogue, @SCA, Sofia, 1997

⁴ See Art in Bulgaria Magazine 37/96, Sofia

⁵ For B@R News refer to the Insider, Bulgaria's Monthly 10/96 & 11/96, as well as to <<http://www.v2.nl/east/>> or <<http://www.osf.acad.bg>>

⁶ The curatorial concept of VideoHart, 1995 SCA Annual Show, where 'hart' stands for 'paper', is reported as unique in pairing the two most powerful media for distribution of information and content - paper and video.

⁷ See Sofia City Magazine, April 97 @ IIA Ltd. Printshop, Sofia

⁸ See Video Positive 97 catalogue: *Escaping Gravity* @ 1997 FACT and do visit its web-site <<http://www.fact.co.uk/VP97.htm>>

⁹ LEAF 97, April 12-13, 1997 was a two-day conference of 45 east and west European media artists, thinkers and practitioners. Organised by Iliyana Nedkova during her curatorial residency at FACT, LEAF 97 proved to be a productive debate on the recent east European revolutions in society, culture, technology, art.