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# Critical Art in Contemporary Macedonia

Jon Blackwood

**мала галерија**  
**mala galerija**

Skopje  
2016

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

“We believe that the art scene, contemporary art and culture at the moment, need to be with the citizens, in the fight for human rights and freedoms.”<sup>1</sup>

As this book is finalised, the Republic of Macedonia, independent since 1991, is in deep social and political turmoil. Street protests which began in the late spring of 2015, and which were quietened by the beginning of the autumn of that year, have once again erupted, in response to a long running saga of government wire-tapping, corruption and electoral fraud. At the time of writing, a tense stand off between citizenry and government is taking place, with supra-national actors- the European Union and the USA- seemingly out of ideas as to how to resolve the current impasse in a straightforward and transparent manner. It also comes at a time when Macedonia is in its most prominent geopolitical position since the dissolution of Yugoslavia; as part of a now-closed migrant route from the Middle East and Africa to the European Union.

The research and writing of this book then, has been bookended by two phases of political street protest in Macedonia, and I foreground these issues quite deliberately. This is a book that focuses on artists who have adopted a critical stance towards the particular social, political and economic circumstances in which they find themselves, and toward the attendant atrophy of contemporary art, at national and institutional level. It is also a book more interested in the position of artists and art workers, rather than the objects and events that they make.

In Macedonia it is simply not possible to make a living from art, and the marketplace for the exchange of artworks is comparatively tiny, and dominated by government money. Artists- particularly young and mid career artists- are part of an underemployed reserve army of labour, subject to precarious conditions and in most cases uncertain freelance work. In this way, if in few others, the conditions faced by artists in Macedonia differ little from elsewhere in neo-liberal Europe. In fact, it may be possible to argue that these precarious conditions for artists are more intense than those faced by colleagues in more politically stable territories.

The “official” Macedonian art world is also weak, from the point of view of cultural institutions, and financial resources available. The institutional framework is little changed from Yugoslav times and operates on a tiny fraction of the money made available before 1991.

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1. Filip Jovanovski, facebook status update, 20 April 2016

On the surface, these institutions function in putting on exhibitions, but are hamstrung in terms of the research programmes that they can develop, to say nothing of their duties with regard to the care of permanent collections. The intensification of patterns of work, and lack of media capacity or motivation to hold these cultural institutions to account, means that there is very little broad public awareness of their programmes. Moreover, cultural institutions in contemporary Macedonia are hobbled by political appointments; directors and senior management are appointed primarily on the basis of political affiliation, rather than professional competence. This adds an unwelcome layer of political supervision of, and interference in, the work that cultural institutions try to do.

In the interview section, one thing that unites all the cultural actors interviewed, is the belief that the official network of galleries and cultural institutions either cannot or will not fulfil the tasks that such institutions should be concerned with. In the context of this abdication of responsibility, individuals active in contemporary art throughout Macedonia- artists, art workers, writers and activists, have for around a decade now, organised themselves into different groupings and voluntary associations, in an attempt to fill the void, on a self-organised basis. Contemporary art, in the Macedonian context, is not the highly marketable, high profile, generator of debate and cultural awareness that it is elsewhere; rather, it treads the uncertain high wire between individual entrepreneurship, and collective oppositional subculture.

In the introductory text, I explain the differing positions taken by artists in the contemporary art world, and offer an explanation for the focus on one particular sub-set of the Macedonian art world. The people interviewed here do not represent an exclusive list of Macedonian artists who adopt a critical position, but they do provide a representative cross section of artists, curators, thinkers and writers; current residents of Macedonia, and Macedonian people who live and work abroad.

The beginnings of this project came with my first visit to Macedonia in the summer of 2009. Back then, I had notions of writing a book which opened out the history of art of Yugoslavia beyond the familiar centres of Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana- the “SHS” art which artists and critics in the other republics of the defunct federation were long frustrated by.

As Zoran Petrovski acknowledges in his interview for this book, in the 60s and 70s, the other capitals of the republics- Sarajevo, Skopje and the former Titograd- were provincial places by comparison, with an artistic infrastructure that was developing only slowly, and with few opportunities outwith commemorative public art. Skopje’s fine

art academy did not open until 1980, and even after that, the best Macedonian students of the visual arts continued to aspire to develop their skills at the established centres of Fine Art in Yugoslavia; painters in Belgrade, sculptors in Zagreb, and graphic artists in Ljubljana.

I was lucky to see Skopje before the ruinous, ethnically divisive, spiteful Skopje 2014 scheme was visited on the city. Skopje is a city that has undergone almost unimaginable change since the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was a small and little known location in the Ottoman Empire. The tragedies of the First World War, and the Fascist occupation from 1941-44, are in turn overlaid by the events of 26 July, 1963; the great earthquake that destroyed much of the city, and saw, in its wake, a mass programme of international co-operation in re-building a new Skopje.

The years of “international” Skopje, from 1963 until 1991, included the building of one of only two Museums of Contemporary Art in the Yugoslav Federation as well as, in the 1970s, a series of truly revolutionary architectural designs, first envisaged by Kenzo Tange and later accomplished by architects working in collaboration with colleagues from all around the world. This inspiring story is still commemorated in the Museum of the City of Skopje, and its housing in the partially destroyed old railway station, left in exactly the state it was reduced to by the earthquake, as a permanent memorial to the trauma suffered by the city.

During my second, much longer visit in 2011, the “Warrior on Horseback” had already begun to dominate public space at the centre of the Macedonian capital, which has subsequently been turned into a building site; Las Vegas-style classicism achieved by cheapest possible poured-concrete and metal-rods techniques from a bygone era; a seemingly haphazard jumbling of history puffed up with a bogus styrofoam-clad significance. The same process has been undergone, to a smaller extent, in towns and cities around the country.

The results have been catastrophic for contemporary culture and politics in Macedonia, bitterly dividing the population and ensuring a debate on contemporary culture based on crude power politics, violence and intolerance of differing points of view. In one sense, it can be argued, this scheme is aimed explicitly against the type of international co-operation and solidarity shown by the re-building of Skopje after the earthquake. It is an attempt to re-instate, architecturally, the appearance of the pre-earthquake city centre, buttressed by a fictional narrative of nationhood that flattens the complexities and dissonances in the multiple stories of the Macedonian people.

The attempt to control history and identity in the neoliberal era of the perpetual present, it might be argued, is an attempt to re-cast a national profile, without any awareness of the yawning gap between nationalist rhetoric, and the desperate economic realities of most Macedonian citizens. Arguably, this re-casting of Macedonia’s capital city, according to ideology rather than material need, has been as devastating as the 1963 earthquake for the country’s population, without any hope this time of remedial international aid.

The aim of this book is not to provide yet another attempt at an explanation of Skopje 2014 and a cataloguing of differing opinions on the subject. Although differing views and ideas on Skopje 2014 and what might become of it are inevitably raised, this is a text that seeks to open out a much broader set of questions, with application beyond the immediate surrounds of Skopje and Macedonia.

Moreover, quite deliberately, I have sought to give the artists active in this space to develop explanations and discussion of the circumstances in which they find themselves, as much as possible, in the interviews. The Western European researcher active in the ex-Yugoslav space has a responsibility that is very challenging, and difficult to discharge successfully.

It is a responsibility that must set aside the old fashioned research model of visiting a space for a fortnight every two or three years, and, having met a few “important” people, imagining that one has a panoramic and informed understanding of the cultural space visited, and a few sufficient texts to comment upon in a generalist fashion. The responsibility is to open out the terrain of investigation for future researchers, and also to develop and promote understanding of the circumstances in which the research has been conducted, and in which the creative endeavours of the subjects of the research are shaped. The cultural circumstances of Macedonia are interwoven in such a complex and specific manner that any traditional generalist approach to this subject would simply confuse further, rather than enlighten.

This is a text, therefore, based on a long-standing participatory observation of a critical art scene in a very specific, complicated and rapidly evolving set of circumstances. It is a text which, beyond the introductory essay, which proposes a set of specific variables and historical circumstances that have to be taken into account, in approaching contemporary art made in the Macedonian context, allows the artists to speak for themselves in response to a broad set of questions. Moreover, it relies on techniques of institutional critique, and the metaphor of a contemporary art world as an ecosystem, in order to show the inter-relationships between differing elements and groupings, and their development over time.

Just as the introductory essay shows the critical relationships between individuals, art groupings, cultural institutions, and the overarching imperatives of neoliberalism and kleptocratic local elites, so too this project would have been impossible without the interaction of many different groups and people, whom I must thank.

This book is the main output from a Research Incentive Grant generously awarded by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, awarded in the summer of 2015. The work is also built on the support of friends, colleagues and students at Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

The reaction of Gray's students to the unfamiliar environment of Skopje, during a class trip to the city in February 2015, and the generosity of the local art world in receiving them and facilitating an exhibition at the city's Menada space, was a really important early impetus to the pushing through of this project. The role of research in informing, and being informed by, students, was a vital dialogue in developing this work.

I must also thank all the artists, art workers, curators and writers who gave up their time not only for the formal interviews that form the core of this work, but whose informal support and help beyond that formal process has been so invaluable in bringing the book to a conclusion. In no particular order, I would really like to thank Darko Aleksovski, Yane Calovski, Ana Frangovska, Alma Idrizi, Ana Ivanovska, Hristina Ivanoska, Vladimir Jančevski, Gjorgje Jovanovik, Filip Jovanovski, Maja Kirovska, Jasna Koteska, Verica Kovačevska, Vladimir Lukaš, Oliver Musovik, Dorotej Neshovski, Mile Ničevski, Doroti Packova, Melentie Pandilovski, Zoran Petrovski, Nada Prlja, Denis Saraginovski, Slobodanka Stevčeska, Saso Stojanovik, Igor Toševski, Nikola Uzunovski, Ivana Vaseva, Nebojša Vilić, Zorica Zafirovska, Dragana Zarevska and Velimir Žernovski. Colleagues who were unable to take part, whom I also must thank, for sharing their knowledge and experience of Macedonian art, include Suzana Milevska and Sašo Stojankovik.

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Biggest thanks of all must go to my friend and publisher, Bojan Ivanov, whose support and comradely interest in my work since 2010 has been so critical to its development. It is rare to have a publisher who is so critically perceptive, and not afraid to raise difficult questions, and in that I have been very lucky indeed.



*Bojan Ivanov (left) with Jon Blackwood and students from Gray's School of Art, Skopje, February 2015. Photo: Andy Kennedy*

Finally I must thank my wife and best friend, Maja Zećo, not only for her work in designing this book and providing such support and encouragement in difficult moments, but also for helping to shape fundamentally how I see and understand the ex-Yugoslav space.

Jonathan Blackwood  
Montrose, Scotland  
May 2016





Valentina Stefanovska, *Warrior on Horseback*, 2010/11, Plošad Makedonija, Skopje.  
Photo: Denis Saraginovski

## An Ecology of Contemporary Art in Macedonia

At the time of writing, in May 2016, the Republic of Macedonia, a small landlocked territory with just under two million citizens, is gripped in a paroxysm of political turmoil, a situation that has been on-going for eighteen months. Rarely in recent European history, have expressions of popular dissent from a claustrophobic, authoritarian politics, featured such a lively visual element. A clash of visual styles is the key symbol of the country's crisis.

For months, every night, citizen participants in what has come to be known as the "colourful revolution" have pelted government buildings, from parliament, the grandiose "Warrior on Horseback" monument, to the Porta Makedonija triumphal arch in the city centre. The weapons of choice for the protestors are pellets of brightly coloured paint.

These are loaded into a large elastic sling, held in tension between two of the stronger members of the crowd, and launched at these symbols of political power, to great cheers. Whilst the protests have a humorous appearance on the surface, the point that they are making is in deadly earnest: showing contempt for, and dissent from, the ideology of a right wing ethno-nationalist government, demanding nothing less than the re-making of their nation, in a different image.

The targets of the protestors' ire, in the main, have been the re-vamped buildings and monumental statuary of the government-sponsored Skopje 2014 project. Intended as a symbolic re-casting of independent Macedonia, both visually and in terms of political content, this scheme, since its public inauguration in February 2010, has bitterly divided the country and is a significant factor in its present political and social unrest. In order to understand this fully, we have to go back a little further in history, and understand how the present day republic of Macedonia was shaped over time.

## Macedonia : A Brief Cultural History to 1991

In common with other ex-Yugoslav republics, such as neighbouring Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonian history has been shaped profoundly by five centuries as part of the Ottoman empire. A century ago, the capital, Skopje, was a little known Turkish outpost called Üsküp; the city of Manastir, present-day Bitola, was perhaps more politically and economically significant, in the late Ottoman period, as the “city of consuls”.

The Ilinden uprising in August 1903 saw the brief establishment of the “Kruševo republic” in the south of the country, that was brutally suppressed by the Ottoman forces after ten days of existence. The legend of Ilinden, and the selfless efforts of its leadership, was one of the validating founding narratives of the later Socialist Republic of Macedonia, one of the six full republics that made up the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and of today’s independent Macedonia, which came into existence after a referendum on 8 September 1991.

With the retreat of the Ottomans after defeats in the First Balkan war in 1912, confirmed by the Second Balkan War shortly thereafter, Macedonian territory was divided into three. Pirin Macedonia, a small territory surrounding the Bulgarian city of Blagoevgrad, was retained by Bulgaria; Aegean Macedonia, centred around Thessaloniki, with Greece; whilst Vardar Macedonia – roughly contingent with the present day republic – was appropriated by Serbia.

Macedonia, therefore, at the end of the Great War, became part of the newly-founded Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, under the Serbian Karađorđević monarchy. Macedonia’s national status at this time was very much in question and the nomenclature for the country and people slipped between differing terms a great deal in the 1920s, with the territory often simply being referred to as “Old Serbia”. In this period, a radical Macedonian nationalist organisation, VMRO – forerunners of today’s governing political party – were involved in acts of political terrorism, including being involved directly in the assassination, at Marseilles, of King Aleksandar on 9 October 1934.

Five years earlier, in 1929, in response to a parliamentary crisis caused by the murder of the Croat deputy Stjepan Radić, by a Montenegrin radical, in the Yugoslav parliament in Belgrade, King Aleksandar Karađorđević re-drew the map of his kingdom, and abolished national identities based on ethnicities. Present-day Macedonia became part of a banovina or province named Vardarska, a territory including all of the present day republic, plus a significant corridor of territory in Southern Serbia and Kosovo.

During the Second World War, Macedonians fought a struggle parallel to anti-fascist forces operating elsewhere in Yugoslavia. Whilst the Nazis occupied Southern Serbia, and the Italians took the Kosovo part of Vardarska banovina, Bulgarian fascists occupied much of present day Macedonia, with a small Italian occupation on the westernmost fringes of the country. This bitter occupation, resisted by bands of Communist and nationalist Macedonian partisans, lasted from 19 April 1941 until late 1944.

Cut off from the much better documented theatre of partisan operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Western Serbia, and Croatia, organised armies of Communist and nationalist fighters gradually eroded the ability of the occupying Bulgarians to govern the territory. The date of the first “people’s uprising” in Macedonia, commonly associated with a partisan attack on occupying forces in Prilep and Kumanovo, at opposite ends of the country, is recorded as 11 October 1941, and is still celebrated in post-Communist times.

By 1944 the partisans had swept occupying forces from the country, under the leadership of ASNOM – the Anti-Fascist Liberation Council of Macedonia. This body assumed power in Macedonia until the end of World War Two, and moved to peacetime governance with the international recognition of a socialist Yugoslav federation, which had been founded at Jajce in Bosnia on the 29th November 1943, under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito.

In socialist times, Macedonia, together with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, was a republic that was regarded as needing much investment in terms of infrastructure, education, healthcare, cultural and economic development. In the period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, modern Macedonian art was in a fitful and uncertain stage of development. Although Macedonia was culturally extremely rich, in terms of Byzantine religious architecture and fresco painting, there were no art schools, and very few places where one could organise an art exhibition. Widespread illiteracy before the Second World War made modern art very much a minority interest, to a few well-educated urban dwellers.

Aspiring artists from Macedonia were obliged to study in other regional capitals – Belgrade, Bucharest or Sofia – in order to build the skill sets and networks required to develop a career as a contemporary artist in the inter-war period. Artists now regarded as amongst the founders of modern Macedonian art, the painters Lazar Ličenovski (1901-64), and Nikola Martinovski (1903-73), studied respectively in Belgrade and in Bucharest in the 1920s, later exhibiting frequently in Skopje in the 1930s.



If the development of modern art was rather a peripheral concern to society in Vardarska banovina in the 1930s, the same could not be said after the emergence of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia at the end of the Second World War. The infrastructure for contemporary art changed rapidly, and art which reflected the historical narratives, and founding values of the Yugoslav socialist federation, found a very ready client in the state.

Modern artists were key to developing the visual foundations and messages of Macedonia, and of the broader federation. The five years after the end of the war saw a frantic pace of development in Macedonian art infrastructure. Of cardinal importance was the establishment of the School for Applied Arts in Skopje in 1945. This school, which still exists today and provides young artists from the ages of fourteen to eighteen with a thorough technical grounding in all aspects of art and design, has shaped generations of Macedonian artists. Almost all of the artists interviewed for this book went to the school, and most remember their time there more fondly, than they do their years at the university-level Faculty of Fine Art.

The following year, the *Društvo na Likovnite Umjetnici na Makedonija* the Society for Fine Artists of Macedonia, DLUM, was founded, providing a membership organisation and professional framework for the development of contemporary art in the republic. In 1949, a gallery of Fine Art was established in Skopje, providing the first organised exhibition space for Macedonian artists; more informal shows, in public buildings such as the House of the Army, also took place in the 1950s. Beyond Skopje, the authorities began to develop a regional network of cultural centres and art galleries in other urban centres, such as Bitola and Prilep.

The post-war period was a time of dizzying opportunity for the small group of modern and contemporary Macedonian artists; to make public art, to teach, to draw cartoons, put on exhibitions of paintings and sculptures, and to collaborate with colleagues in the world of theatre and music, in making some of the most innovative set designs in the Yugoslav federation. The small base of Macedonian professional artists meant that, by comparison to the pre-war years, there were almost limitless professional opportunities to take advantage of.

A good example is found in the career of Vasilie Popović-Cico (1914-62), best remembered as the designer of the coats of arms, both of the city of Skopje and of Macedonia. Popović-Cico, who had trained in Belgrade in the pre-war period, found himself teaching drawing at the School of Applied Arts, as well as being continuously employed as a set designer by the National Theatre of Macedonia; as a book illustrator for texts aiming at raising the literacy rate in the country; and as a cartoonist for newspapers such as Belgrade's Politika and

Skopje's daily newspaper, Nova Makedonija. This athleticism and wide competence across a range of different media is a trend that still can be observed amongst critical contemporary artists active today in Macedonia.

Public art was central not only to reinforcing the political narratives of the Yugoslav state, but also to framing the development of public space in the socialist period. The work of Borko Lazeski (1917-93) is a cardinal example. Lazeski's early figurative work, based on Prilep fishermen, exhibited quite a strong class-consciousness in the later 1930s, and following the war he was in a good position to take advantage of the opportunities offered by governments both in Belgrade, and locally in Skopje. Lazeski completed a monumental fresco, entitled The National Liberation War, between 1951 and 1956, which was five metres tall and forty five metres in length.

This was perhaps the best example made in Macedonia, for a Macedonian audience, of the Yugoslav "socialist modernism" aesthetic. This was a type of art which allowed for some formal experimentation along European lines, particularly in terms of post-Cubist, abstract and informel elements, as long as certain political orthodoxies were observed. It should also be noted that whilst many emerging modern artists in 1950s Macedonia were busy completing public works and occupying pedagogical positions in state institutions, many also found the time to participate in unofficial avant-garde groupings. Groups such as Denes (Today) and Mugri (Dawn) were short lived, but opened up a space for the expressions of new ideas and aimed explicitly at growing an audience for contemporary art in Macedonia.

Given the small size of the Macedonian art world, it was easy for artists to occupy positions both in official and unofficial milieu at the same time, and for this apparently contradictory position to be perfectly orthodox. The ability of artists to move between working for the state, and working with friends to develop experimental ideas in avant-garde groupings, is a trend that persisted throughout the history of art production in Yugoslavia, and is still discernible in the present post-socialist transition period.

Had Lazeski's vast National Liberation War frieze survived, it is likely that it would have been a major tourist attraction in contemporary Macedonia. Instead, only the partially demolished site of where this painting once hung, in the old railway station of Skopje, survives. The early period of Macedonian reconstruction and building of a new cultural infrastructure and system of art production, was shattered on the 26th July, 1963. In the early morning, an earthquake measuring 6.1 on the Richter scale destroyed over eighty per cent of the city, killing over one thousand and rendering



two hundred thousand people homeless. This national tragedy was met with an international response from across the Cold War divide.

In the years that followed, Skopje was re-shaped in a decidedly socialist and international fashion. With the Americans, British and Soviets prominent in early recovery efforts, the city in the following years became a laboratory for contemporary and experimental architecture, as it was re-built.

The renowned Japanese architect Kenzo Tange devised a master plan for the city centre, arranged according to his architectural principles<sup>1</sup>; a broader reconstruction plan for the urban area, was devised by the Polish architect Adolf Ciborowski.

On the grounds of practicality and cost, only a small part of Tange's vision was completed, around the new railway station, south east of the city centre, whilst Soviet architects built new housing, in the Karpoš area to the west of the city centre. Many other nationalities from all around the world helped either physically, or in kind, in the re-construction effort.

The old railway station was left in its partially collapsed state as a memorial to the victims of the earthquake, and today is the premises of the Museum of the City of Skopje. Soviets, Czechs, Greeks, and Mexicans all collaborated on re constructing different streets of the city, and in building whole new districts.

Significantly for our study, a Polish design was chosen, from an international competition for the design of a new building for a Museum of Contemporary Art. Established in February 1964, the new Museum building opened in 1970, under the chairmanship of Nikola Martinovski. The Museum was one of only two spaces devoted to contemporary art in the whole of Yugoslavia, the other being in Belgrade, the federal capital. The collection for the new museum was formed with donations from some of the most prominent names in international art of the period, including Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, and Alexander Calder.

The years between the disastrous earthquake in 1963 and independence in 1991 were years where the federal and local authorities sought to re-build what had been lost in cultural life, alongside all other sectors of society. Huge sums were poured into the building of some genuinely radical public monuments, such as the remarkable Makedonium building, commemorating the Ilinden

1. See Lin, Zhongjie (2010), *Kenzo Tange and the Metabolist Movement: Urban Utopias of Modern Japan*, Oxford: Taylor & Francis. See also "Kenzo Tange's Reconstruction Plan for Skopje" at <http://tststsss.tumblr.com/post/8342830969/kenzo-tange-reconstruction-plan-for-skopje>



*Jordan and Iskra Grabul, Makedonium, 1972-75. Kruševo, Macedonia.  
Photo : Jon Blackwood*

uprising, designed by Jordan and Iskra Grabul and erected between 1972-75.

The fate of this building, in Kruševo, well illustrates the huge cultural and political shifts that Macedonia has undergone in the forty years since it opened. In Yugoslav times, this extraordinary concrete structure was a chance to show off the advanced nature of Yugoslav construction and the dexterity of the contemporary art scene in Macedonia; politically, it commemorated a revolution that, in Socialist terms, had come "too early" to achieve the success only later recorded in the national uprising against fascist occupation.

In post-independence times, the building's interpretation has morphed into a celebration of the resilience of the Macedonian spirit, against all the odds, under the yoke of the successive Yugoslav states, reflecting the strongly nationalist mindset that has dominated thinking in the political elites in the twenty first century.

Zoran Petrovski, in his interview for this book, acknowledges that the art world in Macedonia in the 1970s was "a bit provincial" in comparison to bigger urban centres in Yugoslavia. Critical writing, both during Yugoslav times and after, have concentrated on what





*Grupa Zero, Murals, Galerija 7 Tea Shop, 1984. Skopje, Macedonia.*



some, in frustration, refer to as “SHS” art<sup>2</sup>; the conflation of art produced in Yugoslavia with art produced in Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. Until 1980, talented art students from Macedonia had to go to other republics to continue their studies after they had finished at the school of applied arts; painters tended to go to the academy in Belgrade, sculptors to Zagreb, and graphic artists, to Ljubljana.

The founding of a faculty of Fine Arts in 1980, at what is today the University of St. Cyril and St. Methodius, in Skopje, began to change that picture in the last years of Yugoslavia. Igor Toševski remembers a strongly international atmosphere in Skopje in the eighties, with students from all over the Middle East and Africa attending the university; he remembers, too, a lively and challenging cultural atmosphere, in which academic art, cartoons and the unofficial public art produced by Grupa ZERO all jostled for attention. A fertile collaboration between the Museum of Contemporary Art, and national television, saw practices in video art begin to emerge in this period.

For the observer of contemporary Macedonian art, these developments seem as remote as the butterfly-life avant-gardes of Skopje in the fifties. With the Yugoslav federation rapidly disintegrating during the presidency of Slobodan Milošević from 1987 onwards, precipitating Slovenian secession from the federation during 1990/91, and the outbreak of war in Croatia shortly thereafter, Macedonia was faced with the choice to leave a union that clearly no longer worked as its founders had envisaged. 96% of votes cast on 8 September 1991 were in favour of Macedonian independence, and this date is now celebrated every year as independence day in the country.

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2. This “SHS” label refers to the names of Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia in the local languages: Srbija Hrvatska Slovenija.

## Since Independence

Macedonia’s history as an independent country has been a difficult one. It was internationally isolated from 1991 until 1993, owing to Greek objections to the use of the name “Republic of Macedonia”; from the Greek perspective, this implies a nationalist, irredentist claim to Aegean Macedonia. The fact that Macedonia had neither the means nor the will to act on any such irredentist claims did not really factor into the Greek calculations; the long –running “name dispute” has hampered every attempt by Macedonia to develop its profile and international links since independence.

A compromise name of “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, was reluctantly agreed to, with Macedonia joining the United Nations on 7 April 1993 under the reference of FYROM, pending resolution of the name dispute with Greece. To date, twenty-three years later, resolution of this problem is no nearer, despite intermittent bilateral and international efforts to find a solution to the matter. The name dispute has subsequently seen Macedonia blocked from entry to NATO, and has hobbled such attempts that have been made, to progress accession to the European Union. As a result of the isolation brought about by this intractable name dispute, and by the poor performance of governments since independence, at the time of writing Macedonian accession to the EU remains a distant and rather forlorn prospect.

With Macedonia in international limbo during the early 1990s, culture continued to be administered according to the same system as had obtained in SFR Yugoslavia. With its admission to the international community, new actors began to appear on the cultural scene, most significantly, the George Soros-funded Contemporary Arts Centre. Soros’ CAC was opened in 1994, with Nebojša Vilić as its first director, and was funded for a period of five years, after which it became an independent NGO, continuing to organise international events in Skopje well into the new century.

The work of the CAC, with director Melentie Pandilovski prominent in its activities from 1995, provided a vital new bridge between the contemporary art world elsewhere in Europe, and in Macedonia. Significant new festivals such as the SEAfair international festival of electronic arts were established at the turn of the century under its aegis. Although Soros, in keeping with contemporary art centres in other countries in the former socialist world, withdrew his funding after a set period, the CAC left a significant legacy for artists reaching maturity in the nineties and early in the new century. Of particular significance, too, was the critical, theoretically advanced curatorial practice of Suzana Milevska, at the Museum of the City



of Skopje. Milevska’s probing intellect and willingness to take risks left a mark on the emerging artists of the 1990s, and also impacted on a fresh generation of younger students at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje, where she taught theoretical studies for a period in the 2000s.

The current political epoch in Macedonia begins in 2006, with the election of a conservative nationalist government under Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, leader of VMRO-DPMNE, the biggest right wing party in the country. VMRO-DPMNE, which traces its roots to Macedonian secessionist nationalism in the late nineteenth century<sup>3</sup>, has remained in power ever since, winning four successive elections and currently governing in partnership with the largest party representing the Albanian minority, the DUI<sup>4</sup>. The political turbulence and popular demonstrations against the government, from May 2015 onwards, derive in part from the questionable legitimacy of some of those election “victories”<sup>5</sup>.

The type of government represented by VMRO-DPMNE and its allies has been characterised by the social scientist Katerina Kolozova as a “hybrid regime”<sup>6</sup>. Kolozova defines a “hybrid regime” in patriarchal terms, as follows:

‘...Typical of the state model at issue is the centrality of the role of a strong leader, such as Victor Órban in Hungary or Vladimir Putin in Russia. As a rule, it is an authoritarian figure enacting the essentially patriarchal role of paterfamilias whereby the nation is treated as a community of genetic kinship, a “family” (ethnos as genos) rather than a nation (or demos)...The general trait of the style of ruling is, I would argue, patriarchy. The latter enables ethnocentrism, religious conservatism and strong state control.’<sup>7</sup>

It is Nikola Gruevski who has, since 2006, sought to build for himself an image as a firm but fair paterfamilias; someone not afraid to make necessary reforms, but also someone who defends and defines the ethnic group of which he claims a leading role- Macedonians. It

3. VMRO- which stands for Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation- was founded in 1893, and lasted until the middle 1930s when it was forced underground and outlawed, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The present-day VMRO-DPMNE- (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation- Party for Democratic Renewal), is a new party, founded on 17 June 1990, which claims ideological descent from the original grouping.

4. The DUI (Democratic Union for Integration) was founded in 2001, under the leadership of Ali Ahmeti. The DUI, as a political organization, grew out of the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA), which briefly fought with government forces in the 2001 Macedonian insurgency. The military conflict was brought to an end by the signing of the Ohrid agreement, which saw the NLA disarmed, and the DUI, amongst other ethnic Albanian parties, founded.

5. See BBC World, “Macedonian Protests: Anti-Gruevski Rally in Skopje”, 17 May 2015, accessible at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-32771233>

6. Kolozova 2015, p. 7

7. Kolozova, 2015, pp. 8-9



Details of Skopje 2014, looking across the River Vardar towards the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Photo : Andy Kennedy

should be noted that, by implication, Gruevski regards the Macedonian nation as congruent with this largest ethnic group, rather than as representing a mix of differing ethnicities and religious beliefs.

Macedonian people who adhere to the Orthodox Christian faith may well constitute the largest ethno-religious group in the country, but to limit a definition of contemporary Macedonian statehood to this group, by implication, excludes Albanians, Macedonian Muslims, Roma people, and smaller ethnic minorities such as Vlachs, Bosniaks and Turks from ever being regarded as full and equal citizens within the modern Macedonian state. This is a type of nationalism that has been transmitted through ‘official’ Macedonian culture, more so than in any other sphere of government influence.

It is in this context that we should approach the highly controversial Skopje 2014 programme, publically announced by VMRO-DPMNE planners in February 2010, and which, five years later, is yet to be completed. This scheme is nothing less than the biggest ‘neo-classical’ and ‘Baroque’ building scheme anywhere in the world. For proponents of the makeover, Skopje 2014 aims at a truly Macedonian style of architecture; for opponents, it is nothing more than aesthetically and architecturally illiterate kitsch, which has ruined the city.



The aim of this scheme has been to alter, fundamentally, the appearance of the Skopje constructed in Yugoslav times. The aim of the Skopje 2014 scheme, then, is fundamentally a rejection of the modernism and internationalism that characterised the rebuilding of Skopje in the 1960s and the 1970s, and the international atmosphere that some remember in the city in the 1980s, in the last decade of Yugoslavia. Skopje 2014 is an attempt to re-cast the Macedonian capital physically, and dominate its public spaces ideologically. The architects of Skopje 2014 have sought to over-write or erase the previous appearance of post-earthquake Skopje, and to emphasise what they regard as the national identity of Macedonia. In the words of the anthropologist Andrew Graan:

‘...(Skopje 2014) houses a cascading set of state goals, each targeted to different audiences: it aims to sculpt Macedonia’s image and boost its international visibility, to “normalize” and “Europeanize” the capital, and to assert(ethnic) Macedonian identity against factors perceived to be threatening (i.e., Greeks and ethnic Albanians). By proactively establishing Macedonia’s “European” character among international publics via branding strategies, Macedonian leaders hope to secure economic advantages and also to trump regional and internal challenges to state authority and national authenticity.’<sup>8</sup>

It is this complicated, delicate and overlapping set of competing cultural discourses that frames the terrain for the production of contemporary art in Macedonia. The project also accounts for the vast majority of cultural spending, currently, in the republic. Originally envisaged by planners as costing eighty million euros, by July 2015 the cost of the project had mushroomed to six hundred and forty million euros, with no end in sight to either development or expenditure. The bi-annual budget for Macedonia’s participation in the Venice biennale, by contrast, is in the region of fifty thousand euros, with Yugoslav-era institutions struggling badly in survival mode, partly due to lack of funds, and partly due to political interference in their operation.

Skopje 2014 is the outworking of a world-view dominated by a strange mixture of grandiosity and paranoid grievance. It seeks to provide credulous visitors with an impression of a mighty nation, long dormant, shaking off the chains of centuries of oppression by invading empires and political ideologies.

But there is a paradox at the heart of this counterfeit hubris. In fact, its deep root is insecurity; insecurity at multiple perceived threats to the integrity of the Macedonian republic from neighbouring countries, and also from “internal enemies”. The narrative of the truly

8. Graan, 2013, p. 170



Valentina Stefanovska, *Warrior on Horseback (detail)*, bronze, 2010/11.  
Photo: Andy Kennedy

bizarre “Museum of Macedonian Struggle and Victims of Communism” reflects a crude distortion of national history; distortions that are so thin and transparent, that visitors are not permitted to walk around the displays unaccompanied, but must be part of an official tour led by an approved museum guide.

If Skopje 2014 presents a simulacra of a great nation, aiming to convince public opinion internally of its permanence, and international opinion of Macedonia as a rapidly growing state open for investment, then it must follow from that that the artists and architects who have contributed to its developments must themselves be part of a “simulated” art world.

In point of fact, although the policies of the current Macedonian government are radically opposed to those of the Titoist era, their management of contemporary culture is not so different. In order to be considered as participants in the scheme, and recipients of some of the fees involved, artists must either be ideologically convinced of the VMRO-DPMNE government’s direction or, at best, willing to suppress concerns in acquiescent silence.

As in Yugoslav times, government dominates the market for the products of artists. An ever-bigger source of employment is the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Founded in 1967, the church is not recognised by the wider Orthodox community as independent, but wields significant social and economic power within Macedonia itself. Macedonia is now one of the most religiously observant countries on the face of the earth, and it is a commonplace to observe that organised religion has expanded to fill the ideological vacuum left behind by the collapse of Titoist communism at the beginning of the 1990s. The church invests significant sums in hiring young artists in the task of fresco painting and decoration in new religious buildings, and maintaining and updating frescoes in existing structures.

With these two major power brokers dominant in the market, the independent private market for contemporary art is vanishingly small, with Macedonia only able to support a few independent galleries and host annual, internationally funded art fairs such as Paratissima.

It may have seemed bizarre to begin an account of critical contemporary art in Macedonia, with a potted history of the country, and an analysis of its contemporary politics. But I make no apology for starting in this way. Without a grasp of the broad sweep of historical events of the last hundred years, and its development in contemporary Macedonia, interested observers stand little chance of understanding the complex, layered and specific circumstances of cultural production in the country, or of the very specific concerns that critical artists address in the contexts that have been outlined.

Indeed, this brief introduction raises far more questions than it answers. In the circumstances outlined, what does “critical” mean in the Macedonian context? How is it possible to operate independently as a contemporary artist, with scant access to a local art market, let alone to the international exchange of goods and ideas? Does the critical art that is made in contemporary Macedonia emerge from a robust education system, or in spite of a weak and old-fashioned curriculum? What opportunities are there to see critical art in Macedonia and are these opportunities provided by the country’s cultural institutions, or independently from them? What awareness is there of critical or contemporary art in Macedonia and who are the audiences for exhibitions, performances and events? What is the relationship between critical artists in Macedonia and their colleagues in the archipelago of art scenes dotted around the globe? Where is the space for critical art and how can it develop, according to what strategies, and with what results?

In order to begin to try and find some answers to these pressing questions, we will first have to outline the critical approach that will be adopted, and the direction that we will take.

## The Making of this Book : Interviews and Participatory Observation

This text has been in the making over a period of several years. It is founded upon three broad principles. Firstly, I am determined that the voices of the artists who are interviewed, or who feature in the essay, are foregrounded above mine. Secondly, the interpretations presented in my text are based on long, open-ended interviews, and participatory observation of critical art in the Macedonian context.

Finally, I realised quickly that this book would not succeed at all without careful delineation of the ecosystem of contemporary art in Macedonia; the very specific and fine stitching that binds together artists, writers, curators, audiences, the society that has shaped the role and function of art and the artist in such a very specific way. Only through a grasp of this ecosystem, poisoned politically and malfunctioning in practice, can we begin to understand how specific critical themes have emerged, and how Macedonian artists deal with them.

The interviews were conducted in July and August of 2015. In itself, this was an unusual summer in Macedonia. Significant political protests had put Prime Minister Gruevski under enormous pressure between 4th May and 19th June of that year. Gruevski and his government were destabilised progressively by the slow revelation of secret wiretaps, by opposition leader Zoran Zaev, the so-called “bombs”<sup>9</sup>. These “bombs” contained evidence of senior government figures being involved in abuse of power, illegal covert surveillance and communication intercepts of up to twenty thousand citizens; electoral fraud, economic mismanagement, corruption and malfeasance. Threats of violence against political opponents and dissenting journalists were also overheard.

Gruevski’s insistence that all the recordings were the fabrication of un-named foreign intelligence services convinced few. On May the 17th, well over one hundred thousand citizens protested outside government house and brought Skopje to a standstill; supporters camped out outside the building until the end of July, blocking the major traffic artery of Bulevar Ilinden for over six weeks.

Simultaneously, Macedonia found itself, unwittingly, in a key role in the refugee crisis that engulfed Europe in 2015, with displaced peoples from Syria, Lybia and Iraq making their way through the country to seek sanctuary in the European Union. Documentary footage

9. Readers can follow the “bombs” scandal in English via the Al-Jazeera website. See <http://www.interactive.aljazeera.com/ajb/2015/makedonija-bombe/eng/index.html>

in western news packages chronicled the plight of these refugees and, shamefully, their mistreatment in some cases by the Macedonian authorities. Appalled Macedonian citizens to offer help and support to the refugees, as they crossed the border from Greece into Macedonia at Gevgelija, through a grass-roots charitable movement, “Help the Refugees in Macedonia”, organised via facebook. As a result of both internal and external political crises, then, the country found itself, last summer, in the full focus of an international media attention that it had not seen since the Kosovo war of 1999, and the short-lived insurgency in Macedonia, led by Albanian militants, in the summer of 2001.

This, then, was the complex and troubled reality faced by Macedonia and its citizens in the summer of 2015 and formed the backdrop to the interview process. In these circumstances, how were the artists who feature in the interviews section chosen? To answer this, we have to return to our definition of what a “critical” artist is in the Macedonian context.

It proved easier, firstly, to rule out certain groups of artists from consideration. Very early on, the decision was taken not to approach any artist involved in publically supporting, or making objects for, the Skopje 2014 project. As we have observed already, participation in this scheme precludes an artist in contemporary times from being considered “critical”; participation in the scheme can only have taken place from a position of narrow material self-interest, or ideological support for hegemonic authoritarian nationalism.

Moreover, we decided not to approach artists who are involved in teaching full time at the Faculty of Fine Arts. Professors at state institutions find themselves in a very tricky position. Employment in state educational facilities makes it difficult for them to speak out against Skopje 2014 or express dissent from the government’s politics, with personal livelihoods at stake. This is not a value judgement, merely an observation of the position of academies and universities within Macedonian society and that of individuals employed by them. The reality is that there are also many who tacitly disapprove of the Skopje 2014 makeover in the academic system but for reasons that are obvious, such individuals are obliged to remain silent, or to share opinions only with trusted friends.

We should also state at this stage that our definition of “critical” does not necessarily imply critical, in the political sense. A significant minority of artists interviewed eschew politics as a sphere of activity or artistic intervention altogether. Our use of “critical”, therefore, is in a much broader sense.

Our definition of criticality can include, for example, institutional critique towards the (in) action of Macedonia’s cultural institutions. The paralysis of official cultural infrastructure has led many artists to try and set up their own exhibiting opportunities, and a kind of unofficial, parallel network of cultural spaces to foster debate and discussion. This is a sensibility linked to an awareness of the ecosystem of contemporary art in Macedonia. Other artists have expressed critical attitudes towards the education system, or through aesthetic interventions in social problems such as homelessness, child welfare, the position of single mothers, the consequences of the botched privatisation of public property, or the environment.

An interest in politics and even engagement in political activism is only part of that broad spectrum of actions. This is before we come to consider the work of artists whose work can be considered critical from the vantage point of the international art world; practices that develop from a deep process of research and inquiry, following through these ideas in a creative trajectory in the studio. Such practices have thrown up significant insights into subjects such as national identity, national histories, the use and abuse of Macedonia’s significant national heritage, amongst other subjects. These will be developed fully in the sections below.

The kind of art that these “critical” attitudes produce occupies, in the current situation, a marginal, counter- or subcultural status, largely in Skopje. It is difficult to speak of a critical contemporary art beyond the nation’s capital, bar some individual practices such as that of Mile Ničevski (Gevgelija) or group based activities such as Bitola’s AKTO festival, or the newly founded TEKSTIL cultural centre in Štip. As Alma Idrizi discusses in her interview, ad hoc attempts are made to exhibit contemporary art in regional centres, such as the exhibition in 2014/15 of a collection of contemporary art from Naples, in Gostivar, in order to try and develop an interest in and understanding of contemporary art beyond the capital. However, when we speak of critical contemporary art in Macedonia, then, we are almost always speaking of activities based in the capital city, or indeed outside of Macedonia altogether.

The choice of artists, then, was restricted to within the small strata of Macedonian artists employing a level of criticality, as defined above, in their work. I should be clear that the artists that were chosen do not represent an exclusive list of those working in such a manner, but form a very representative cross-section. The choice was developed from a long standing participatory observation of critical artists at work in Macedonia, and abroad; through involvement as a spectator at exhibitions, as a curator, as an interlocutor, as a result of a process of inquiry and research over a long period.



The people chosen for interview four different generations, from individuals who had a mature working life in Yugoslav Macedonia, to those who have just left art school a few years previously. Moreover, I have sought to engage with critical art practice from the perspectives of curators and art writers, as well as artists themselves; included in the sample were those who had been part of the small subset of critical artists in Macedonia, who are now living abroad. Contemporary Macedonian art is still largely object-based; the selection of interviewees here sees a full range of contemporary art practices represented, from painting, sculpture, drawing and photography through to video, environmental art, site-specific installation, socially engaged practice and durational performance.

By conducting the research through the process of open-ended interview, I have sought to give those with whom I spoke the space and time to develop their ideas as they wished to. Interviews were conducted in a spirit of partnership, rather than as a one-off interrogation; interviewees had the right to alter and extend their answers if they felt it necessary, and had the final sign off before the record of the discussion was committed to print. This exchange between equals, was a vitally important part of the approach as it allowed for the ironing out of misunderstandings on my part, and time to nuance and shape answers according to the thinking of the person interviewed. Whilst questions regarding the individual's first memories of art, and their views of the future of contemporary art in Macedonia, were asked of all participants, other questions responded specifically to the nature and development of the individual practice over time.

The Western researcher in the territories of ex-Yugoslavia can be in a difficult position. I had no wish whatever to try and write an "authoritative" text based on partial knowledge developed via a few conversations, and secondary reading. This traditional method of working- visiting briefly and relying on already written histories and accounts- was completely discounted as irrelevant to what this project has attempted to do.

I never had any interest in being a "gatekeeper" to the views and preoccupations of critical artists in Macedonia, for those who do not know these artists or this art world. The views that are presented, beyond this introductory essay, are the competing and sometimes clashing voices of Macedonia artists and cultural workers, which taken together is aimed at giving the reader a much more rounded understanding of the breadth, diversity and debates amongst those engaged in working critically.

Rather, I wanted to use this period of research and this analysis to develop discussion and debate within Macedonia and beyond, about

the state of critical art in such a society; to invite comparison with similar contexts in other ex-Yugoslav republics not yet in the European Union, and to draw some parallels with other critical art practices beyond the region. It follows on from this that, as this debate develops and as the selection of critical artists here is not complete or exclusive, that this text and these interviews are just the first part of a longer personal journey of inquiry.

Having outlined our approach, and taken note of some of the specific social and political factors that shaped the time in which the research was conducted, we turn now to outlining the very specific ecosystem of contemporary art production in Macedonia, in order to open out some of the critical practices that have emerged in these very specific circumstances.

## An Ecology of Contemporary Art in Macedonia

"The contemporary and alternative art scene does exist, only it functions on the margins of Macedonian society, and in two main varieties: either as a private, tiny affair (artists working against the present moment, in the remoteness, in love with their own instruments, etc.), or as a politically engaged art, partly against the meanness of the Skopje 2014 project which put the Macedonian art scene under siege."

Jasna Koteska's verdict on the status of critical art in Macedonia may seem a harsh one to the outsider. Leaving aside the reservations one may have about the use of the term "art scene", it is true that the artists we discuss here operate either parallel to, or against, the forms of art production encouraged by and supported with funds from the Macedonian state. How has such a situation emerged and with what consequences?

Broadly, we should acknowledge that Macedonian art and art history are relatively isolated from the global art market, and barely acknowledged within the new art histories that are being written about the former Yugoslavia. Those artists that have emerged in front of audiences beyond the south-east European region, have done so through a mixture of their own initiative and through adroit network building. They have reached the level that they have in spite of the cultural conditions prevailing in Macedonia, rather than because of them; or, in some cases, have left these circumstances behind altogether, by emigrating.



An acknowledgement of Macedonia's status on the "periphery" of Europe is not enough to understand why Macedonian art is so little known by comparison with similar countries such as Serbia, Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In fact, Macedonia's relative isolation depends on much longer standing factors. In Yugoslav times, until the foundation of the art academy in 1980, Macedonian art was seen as a provincial affair, orbiting round the distant sun of Belgrade, which was little interested in it. The relatively late development of conditions for contemporary art practice in Macedonia, and its low profile in Yugoslav times, are at the root of its present isolation.

This is a trend reflected in recent exhibitions that have dealt with Yugoslav art internationally. For example, the comprehensive and challenging show *Monuments Should Not be Trusted*, at Nottingham Contemporary in February 2016, featured over twenty artists from Yugoslav times, not one of them from Macedonia. This is but one example of a trend in the historiography of Yugoslav art.

Dubravka Đurić and Miško Šuvaković's canonical 2003 text, *Impossible Histories*, barely mentions Macedonia at all in its five hundred pages. It is telling that the best secondary texts on the history of Macedonian art can be found either in the incomplete *Likovna Enciklopedija Jugoslavije*, two volumes of which were published in Zagreb in the late 1980s, or in catalogues or art periodicals available only in Macedonia itself, often written only in the Macedonian language. Consequently, the visibility of Macedonian art, in historical terms, is low, and as a result isolation becomes self-perpetuating in the curating of contemporary exhibitions on the subject of Yugoslavia, or the post-socialist Balkan region.

Macedonia has also struggled to attract curators or cultural brokers of a significant calibre, in order to try and build bilateral or international cultural relations. The country's isolated political status internationally, is mirrored in the realm of cultural exchange. As Yane Calovski and Ivana Vaseva both point out in their interviews, the brief window opened up by the Soros-funded CAC at the turn of the century did not stay open for long enough to encourage a sustained interest from abroad, or a continuing dialogue with engaged partners. Creative portfolios from artists such as Kosova's Petrit Halilaj, Serbia's Igor Grubanov, or Bosnia-Herzegovina's Lala Raščić or Adela Jušić, have risen to prominence internationally thanks to differing networks of international gallerists, curators, residencies and clients, nurtured and developed sustainably and with purpose. Such a process has never happened in Macedonia, in a systematic way.

Isolation, and the great difficulties that Macedonian artists have in transcending specific local circumstances, is however just a symptom of the problems of the contemporary Macedonian art world,

rather than a cause of them. In order to fully understand how the vestigial system of art in Macedonia does not function, we have to turn firstly to the source of professional arts in the country- the system of art education.

At the age of thirteen or fourteen, children choose, in the Macedonian education system, which focus to adopt for their secondary education. Students deciding to focus on art- often after a battle with their own levels of self-confidence, and in some cases with their parents' fears for their futures- enter the School for Applied Arts (sometimes referred to in the interviews that follow as "art high school"). It is rather telling that many of the people interviewed for this book look back with much more fondness on this period of their education.

At the school for Applied Arts, students are exposed to all kinds of artistic expression, from drawing and painting through sculpture, decorative arts and design. The focus is on four years of developing practical skills, to then allow the student to progress to the Faculty of Fine Art and specialise in a particular medium. As Nikola Uzunovski makes clear in his interview, at this stage, theoretical discussion is not on offer:

"In our art high school, there was just technical information; there was no discussion of the meaning of art, or its relationship to society, or of its potential connections to social change. In the context of Italy, eighteen year olds had already done conceptual work, and could elaborate the background of art works; this really was a surprise for me."

Once he or she leaves art high school, the young artist has few choices as to where to go next. In the twenty first century, some new private universities have opened up in Macedonia, but the vast majority of young artists elect to continue their studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje. In keeping with many universities in the former Yugoslav space, the curriculum is in a slow period of change, from the old style Yugoslav pedagogy, to new systems informed both by local political imperatives and the broader Bologna process that has been underway in the European Higher Education Area since 1999.

The courses, generally, are still held to be very traditional and little related to the needs and desires of students of contemporary art. Anecdotally, it is very telling that young students of art from the academy often cite long-dead artists such as Jackson Pollock, Pablo Picasso or Henri Matisse as inspirations for a developing twenty first century practice, to say nothing of the Renaissance and Baroque exemplars that captivate students interested in the nationalist aesthetics of the Skopje 2014 scheme.

The academy does not provide students with information on the contemporary art world or how to find a role within it after graduation. Only a small minority of staff members, such as Slavica Janešlieva, Blagoja Manevski, or Suzana Milevska, during her time working at the Faculty, emerged in this research as having any understanding or insight into contemporary art. As a result, the academy continues to produce uncritical artists without an informed grasp of broad trends in global contemporary art, or the significant figures who have developed high profile practices within it.

When a young artist graduates from the faculty of Fine Art, what opportunities are open to start to develop a career? Unfortunately, there are very few indeed. The principal reason for this dearth of opportunity is the non-functioning of cultural institutions themselves, for a variety of complex reasons.

The cultural infrastructure in Macedonia is little changed from Yugoslav times. The first time visitor to Skopje can see a good collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art and the National Gallery, as well as historical displays at the Museum of the City of Skopje. The Macedonian Youth Cultural Centre, to the east of the city centre hosts some visual art, notably the Paratissima art fair every June. There are one or two small private galleries specialising in contemporary art, notably Galerija FLUX under the directorship of Goran Menkov. Beyond the capital city, other Yugoslav era cultural centres, such as Centar Marko Cepenkov in Prilep, and the Makedonium in Kruševo, function in a much more fitful and intermittent manner.

The fate of cultural institutions in Macedonia is a story of transition. Conceived in a system where the principal functions of culture were to educate, and to reinforce certain political messages, as well as to create a space for new and experimental cultural practices, these institutions have carried on into a time where none of these functions are prioritised. Yes, the museums still exist and are open on a very basic survival mode, but in the current circumstances they have neither the capacity, the resources or enough appropriately qualified staff to fulfil the functions that they did historically.

The cultural institutions have been rendered peripheral by the rolling out of the Skopje 2014 project. Thirty three million euros have been spent on statuary alone as part of this scheme, which has dominated cultural spending in Macedonia in this current decade. Such sums dwarf the budgets available to cultural institutions in Macedonia. The over-concentration on a counterfeit Baroque statuary and architecture has left the network of cultural institutions in Macedonia in a state of chronically underfunded, mismanaged atrophy.

The role of cultural institutions should be to safeguard existing collections, add to them through a carefully planned acquisitions scheme, and use money to develop a coherent programme of exhibitions based on those developing collections, and, through collaboration, temporary exhibitions of local artists and borrowing from collections regionally and abroad. The sum total of such activities, across several different institutions, would be the development of a national debate on the role, development and significance of culture on a national scale.

Macedonian cultural institutions are simply not able to fulfil these basic functions. Cultural institutions do not operate independently, but rather are managed politically by the government of the day. Qualified staff are obliged to answer to politically appointed directors, many of whom have no relevant qualifications whatever to manage such an institution; the director's role in this instance is not to grow, develop and set the direction of travel for the institution, but rather to provide a layer of political supervision of the institute's activities, and to minimise the money spent.

Politics, therefore, trumps all the other functions that cultural institutions should perform; governments of all hues have been little interested in developing a genuinely independent, critical and discursive cultural sector. This trend of political interference, supervision and the creation of "non-jobs" at cultural institutions for political clients, is not restricted to the period of the current government, but has been a factor in cultural policy since the early 1990s.

The most that cultural institutions can offer to younger artists is an exhibition where part of the costs may be covered by what little money is available. Once a year, the ministry of culture opens a call for artistic projects, where the maximum sum of money that can be paid to help with the production of an art exhibition, is five hundred euros. Monies are offered on a competitive basis. It will be obvious to anyone who has been involved in the curating or promotion of an exhibition that such a sum, a little more than the average monthly middle-class salary in Macedonia, is not at all sufficient to meet the costs of time, labour, materials and promotion.

Thin gruel, therefore, is on offer from the barely functioning cultural infrastructure in Macedonia, for the emerging or established artist. In the words of Darko Aleksovski:

"We don't really have a structured art scene here. The art scene is dispersed and confused, and conditions are really bad in Macedonia, to make a living from art. We have no real access to foundations, and the Ministry for Culture only has open calls once a year, which realistically is only open to more established artists with a background of exhibitions."

Darko's point is a crucial one to understand. It is not simply a question of lack of money, rather a question of lack of capacity for contemporary art to be discussed, debated and understood widely, in the Macedonian context. The number of professional curators of contemporary art, active in Macedonia, numbers no more than a dozen, and the role of the curator is still little understood and largely outdated. As Ana Frangovska has observed:

"I still think people don't really know what being a curator is, or curatorship. The trade union for cultural workers is preparing a new agreement according to which we will be placed on a new level; the term curator is very low as they don't understand what it means. They probably think it means being a technician, or something like that."

The 'low' status associated with curatorship in the Macedonian context really sets it apart from other similar art worlds. With very limited understanding of the function that curators perform, let alone how their work might operate to open out critical discussion and debate, through research-based exhibition concepts and presentations, understandings of the potential power and influence that a curator can occupy, simply is non-existent. Zoran Petrovski talks in his interview, of perceptions of the curator still being that of the old fashioned "custodian" of a collection of objects, setting aside any notion of interpreting or interacting with the histories of those objects, in order to present them in new ways to different audience demographics.

Critical curatorial practice in Macedonia, that provocative conductor of ideas between critical artist and critically informed public, is rendered near-impossible by the ecosystem of art practice in Macedonia. The same can also be said for critical writing on art. The published media has largely withdrawn from covering contemporary art in any detail, beyond noting the exhibitions of Macedonian artists abroad, or commenting in brief detail on the bigger openings. Increasingly, newspapers have moved away from offering detailed analysis of contemporary art events. What writing there is, is largely descriptive, and formalist or subjective in nature.

Many interviewees observed the very low level of criticality in cultural debates in Macedonia, and the fear of giving offence, in an art world small enough for everyone to at least be on nodding terms with everyone else. Ana Frangovska has noted this in her comment that: "relations between people in a small country can be tricky, where everyone is fighting for his place, and these disagreements can be emphasized...". Criticism of works or ideas is often mis-interpreted as personal criticism and as a result is rarely welcomed.

Noted art critics that are still working either publicise their writings on facebook, such as Nebojša Vilić with his detailed status updates, continue to produce academic texts for a specific audience, or work through professional bodies such as AICA Macedonia, to maintain a level of debate and to encourage and develop professional standards in art writing.

We have seen so far that the ecosystem for contemporary art in Macedonia is currently in rather bleak condition. The education system produces technically competent artists more suited to the art world of 1976, than 2016. The cultural infrastructure is in a state of politically supervised inertia. The emphasis of the political elites on the aesthetics and ideological justification of the Skopje 2014 programme, and of religious authorities in restoring and building up their built estates, and buttressing new found societal influence, understandably absorbs the talents of many younger artists. Such artists simply see few other opportunities to use their training and their ideas in a severely limited marketplace. Audiences for contemporary art are very limited, and even exhibitions made in the context of national institutions often elicit little reaction either from the audience, from peers, or from the print media.

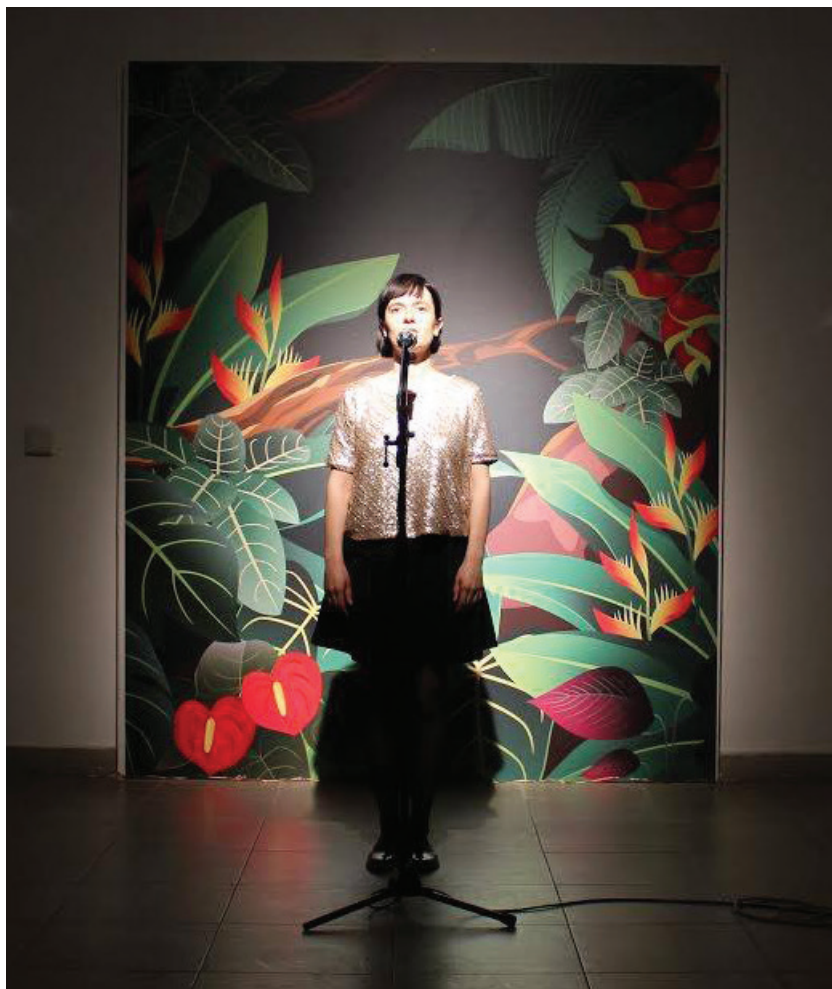
Even in such circumstances, critical contemporary art continues to be made. Before moving on to the strategies and thematics of these artists, we should conclude with a few observations of the nature of the contemporary artist in Macedonia.

## The Critical Artist and Group-Working Strategies in Macedonia

Firstly, art is a full time occupation for a vanishingly small number of people; slightly less than half of the subjects interviewed for this book. Those not employed as academics are obliged to work on a part time basis only, buying time by whatever means they can to develop their own practice. In this ecosystem, only the most determined and resourceful creative practices can survive.

It is commonplace for young artists in most countries, after leaving art school, that they have to put together their week between varied remunerated work, and unpaid creative labour. For the vast majority of critical artists, their creative efforts bring them, at best, pocket money. In Macedonia, however, this is a reality that persists well beyond what would be described as an "early career" art practice, in somewhere such as Germany. There is, for many artists, no discernible opportunity for progression beyond this status. This is a





*Dragana Zarevska performs as Telemama during the DENES award ceremony, May 2016*

staggering reversal of the position of the artist before independence; a return to conditions similar to those of the 1930s.

Secondly, in order to survive in such a challenging economic set of circumstances, contemporary artists have to be able to fulfil a number of different artistic roles and operate in several different media in order to have a chance to earn some money from their art. Just as in Yugoslav times, artists are obliged to work in a range of disciplines, sadly for very different reasons. Whilst in Yugoslav Macedonia, ambitious artists could operate across a range of creative activity in order to take advantage of as many opportunities as possible, in contemporary Macedonia the critical artist is obliged to acquire skills across a range of different activities and media, in order to maximise exposure to the scant opportunities that currently exist.

Many of the artists interviewed for this book earn at least part of their income from diverse activities such as teaching, graphic design, freelance film editing and video production, musical performance,

project management, theatre and set design, caricature and book illustration, and occasional journalism, in addition to the demands of a varied practice.

In the twenty first century, a defining feature of the contemporary artist is nomadism; being on the move continually to take advantage of residency and exhibition opportunities abroad. For an art market as depleted as Macedonia's, such nomadism is much more important than it may be to artists active in more predictable market conditions. An early opportunity to build an international network comes through the DENES award for young visual artists in Macedonia, based on an annual competition. The reward – a month long residency in New York City and subsequent exhibition – is one of the few remaining bridges from the local art world, to a range of international connections.

Beyond institutional opportunities such as DENES, Macedonian artists largely have to rely on their own initiative to try and enact this nomadic strategy to their own benefit, in order to raise their profiles further and try to establish dialogue with neighbouring countries and further afield. In recent years there have been prominent showings of critical Macedonian art in Sarajevo and Prague in 2014, in Rijeka, Baku and Zagreb in 2015, and, as we go to press, in Munich in summer 2016. Such exhibitions are either a matter of private initiative and connections, or are more formally organised as part of a cultural exchange by the Ministry of Culture and curated by a member of staff from the National Gallery.

This “nomadic” approach then, whereby an artist maintains a base within Macedonia but travels abroad frequently to take advantage of opportunities, affects most of our interviewees; some, indeed, have emigrated altogether. Most of the artists in this book spend at least part of every year following this “nomadic” strategy, not only to engage professionally in different cultural contexts, but also to earn money from opportunities to enable them to survive in the domestic context.

For artists whose practice takes place principally within Macedonia, a key strategy for survival is collective work and artist's groups. It is important to take time to understand the range of motivations and out-workings of collective practice by critical artists.

Artists' collectives are formed according to one of four motivations in the Macedonian context. The first, simply, is to keep a practice going after formal education has finished, and to try and grow mutually supporting networks beyond the university. These are groups formed out of circles of friendship and affinities of interest that do





*Dreamer's Observatory, Maja Kirovska and Maja Taneva, Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T, Skopje, 2010*

not adhere to any particular aesthetic or ideological programme. Such groups include the Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T that operated from 2009-11, and its all-female successor, MOMI, founded in 2012.

Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T grew out of a series of conversations between recent graduates of the Faculty of Fine Arts in the summer of 2009. Beyond the ties of friendship and camaraderie, the group also developed from a very practical need; the lack of studio space, and the difficulties faced by young artists in maintaining creative networks once their studies at the Faculty are over. Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T was based in a building vacated by the Geological Institute, which has now been demolished.

In the two years of its existence, Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T, whose members included Maja Kirovska, Ana Ivanovska, and Zorica Zafirovska, amongst many others, delivered an event-heavy programme that sought to build and maintain a new, younger audience for contemporary art practice. Quite deliberately, the group avoided drawing up an aesthetic programme and its members steadfastly refused to engage with political questions. Individual members were simply left to develop their own practice and to use the group as an umbrella support network for this development, with regular opportunities to exhibit provided. The group was run on a horizontal, democratic basis and major decisions taken by votes of the membership, and it maintained a stolid independence from state and NGO funding structures, preferring instead to fund the initiative through money earned from day jobs and occasional sales.

Whilst such groups may be familiar to readers from other parts of the world, where they are part of a standard survival strategy for



*Exhibition MOMI II, House of Culture Koco Racin, Skopje, 2013*

the first difficult few years after art school, in the Macedonian context such efforts are invaluable, not only for the visibility of the work of younger contemporary artists, but also for the practical training “on the job” that it provides.

Running an intensive programme of public events, often featuring openings, performances and happenings on a weekly or fortnightly basis, the core membership learned through first hand experience the skills needed to hang an exhibition, promote it, and to grow and



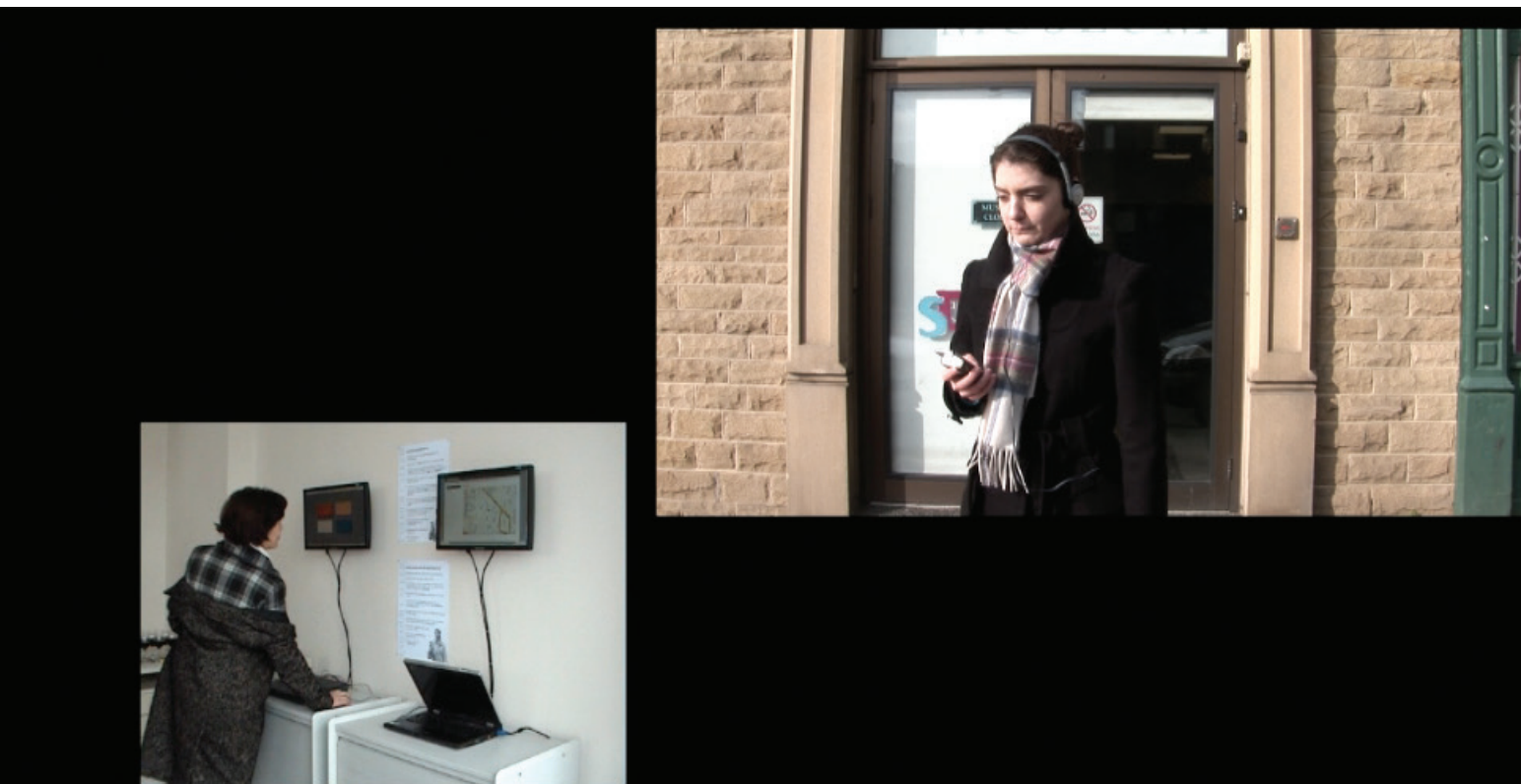


*Press to Exit project space, "Where (not) to go?", 2014/15  
Group exhibition of contemporary Macedonian artists  
Installation view of the at the MC Gallery, NYC, February 2015, Photo: Yane Calovski*

hold onto new and diverse audiences for contemporary art. For all Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T.'s eschewal of political involvement, this strategy is in itself a very political way to operate within the Macedonian context; an attempt to carve out a self-funded, independent art space outside the troubled terrain of official cultural institutions.

The successor group, MOMI, featuring the seven women members of Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T, continues in a similar structure, without a core space of its own. MOMI have exhibited in Skopje, and throughout the network of regional galleries in Macedonia, marking a slight change in strategy from the original group.

A second group strategy can be found in the activities of the Press to Exit project space, founded in 2004 by the artists Yane Calovski and Hristina Ivanoska. The main focus of Press to Exit is on making links between critical artists working in the Macedonian space, and peers in a broader European and US context. Calovski and Ivanoska, who are the highest profile artists from Macedonia working internationally, have sought to turn their growing networks amongst European artists, alternative spaces, museums and galleries, and funders, towards an effort to build professional capacity and networking opportunities for domestic artists. Press to Exit



*Verica Kovacevska Colour Caller 2006  
Mala Galerija, Skopje*

has welcomed names including Wolfgang Tillmans, Albert Heta and Tadej Pogačar to Skopje and sought to establish an on going dialogue between younger practitioners in Macedonia and peers, internationally. For an isolated art scene these are extremely valuable connections, that again take place outwith the framework of official cultural institutions.

The strategy of "capacity building" for contemporary art has been paralleled in two other notable examples; Bojan Ivanov's Mala Galerija which ran an exhibition programme from 2007-12 in a small premises in Karpoš 2, to the west of the city centre; and Nada Prlja's Serious Interests Agency space, which opened in 2014 in the Debar Maalo district of the capital. In his interview, Bojan describes his role as providing an opportunity for development to younger artists who were shut out of the official gallery system; to give them a small space in which to experiment and to develop new work in a gallery context. His intention was again one of capacity and network building, and acquisition of skills. Bojan has a profound scepticism of the role of the "curator" as conceived of in broader discourses of Western visual culture; rather, his role in providing these opportunities was to act as a cultural broker between young artists and the audiences that Mala Galerija attracted.





*Obsessive Possessive Aggression (OPA) exhibition at Serious Interests Agency, Skopje*

In a similar way, the recently established Serious Interests Agency is another attempt to try and provide a functioning independent contemporary space in Skopje. SIA, as Nada Prlja has made clear, partly grew from a desire to form a base of operations for her interventions in visual culture as both artist and curator, after a long period living abroad, with further plans for invited exhibitions focusing on new work, and on imaginative re-interpretations of Skopje's modernist architectural heritage. Both Mala Galerija, which now operates as a label without premises, covering a diverse portfolio of cultural activities, and SIA, rely on private funds for their survival.

The third motivation behind adopting a group strategy by critical artists in Macedonia, is to organise on an activist basis. Perhaps the dominating cultural debate within critical art in Macedonia, in the last three years, has been the debates surrounding the relationship art and activism; the limits of both discourses seen on their own, the way that each discourse informs the other; and the sometimes unsatisfactory blurring, in the current times of political protest and uncertainty, between art and activism. In his interview, Igor Toševski outlines the problem succinctly:

“Art and activism can function together, but not always; even when they do, one of them loses. I believe art is about discovering new territory, it's about bulldozing where no one has been before, and if there is a path ahead, it's about putting road signs there. Sure, activists can continue on from there; but art will go on further, so

it can discover other new fields. So it is a kind of avant-garde, yes. I hate that term, but I don't know any other way to describe it. Art has the capability to see much further. Today, the whole perspective is totally changing, thanks to technology; art is political in many spheres of life. This aesthetic is present in politics, but politics is also present in art, in a wider context.”

The questions raised by the uneasy coexistence of art and activism in Macedonia, are a tributary of the broad fragmentation of what was once called “performance art” into Live Art and socially engaged practice, in the last decade, and the blurring of the divisions between radical art practices, and politics that espouse a radical, extra-parliamentary programme.

It is worth taking the time to talk through some differing manifestations of the working relationship between art and activism. The workings of art-activist groupings have taken place against a backdrop in the growth of civil society in Macedonia in the twenty first century. Lacking a history of democratic engagement and citizen involvement in political decision-making processes, citizen's groups and non-governmental organisations have evolved in the last twenty years, operating a mixture of direct action, protest and PR strategies for the causes that they have adopted. The same is true in the field of critical art.

Whilst advocacy groups such as Prva Arhi Brigada (First Architectural Brigade) and Plošad Sloboda (Freedom Square) have focused directly on the subject of the Skopje 2014 scheme, small art-activist groupings have sought to bring some humour and easily understandable aesthetics to the situation as a means of encouraging wider involvement and discussion.

For example, the activist choir Raspeani Skopjani (Singing Skopjeans) has since 2009 sought to transform the old socialist form of the people's choir, to perform a similar function, for contemporary times. The choir, numbering ten participants and with many associate members from across the spectrum of the creative arts, responds to political developments through humour and public performance, in order to raise the issues of the day in a way that not only resonates but remains with their audiences<sup>10</sup>. Performances by Raspeani Skopjani often remain with those who witness them much longer than on line debate or topical discussion on the television.

10. For further insight into the activities past and present of Raspeani Skopjani, see Risto Karajkov, “He Who Sings Means No Evil”, Osservatorio Balcanio e Caucaso, 30 December 2009; and Elena Marčevska, “Solidarity and Self-Organisation as Generators of Change ; The Role of Self-Organised Art Initiatives in Macedonia”, published 1 April 2015 at <http://www.openengagement.info/dr-elena-marchevska/>



Humour with a more cutting satirical edge can be found in the work of Sviračinja. Cutting across music, radio, video performance and cartoons in order to express themselves, Sviračinja, consisting of Vladimir Lukaš, Gjorgje Jovanovik, Dimitar Smardjiev, Ljubiša Kamenjarov and Vuk Mitevski, has been in existence since 2006. The group's recent activities have focused on cartoon and surrealist collage in the web portal okno.mk as well as suggested surrealist interventions in the cityscape of Skopje itself.

Activist messages with a very cutting political edge have appeared in Skopje in the last year, with the authors of these actions remaining anonymous. Styrofoam shark fins were attached to rocks in the River Vardar, in August 2015, causing great citizen alarm and a high profile response from the city fire brigade.

In March 2016, an over-sized orange pill was installed in a prominent Skopje location, mischievously reported as a Monument to Diazepam. In an urban landscape and a political culture where the visually surreal and overblown has become normal in the last five years, such humorous interventions focus citizen attention in a memorable way on certain issues; environmental destruction, and the increasingly reliance of many Macedonian citizens on prescription anti-depressants.

Although no artist has come forward to claim responsibility for these humorous interventions, they are clearly linked to a visual strategy merging humour with social issues and street politics<sup>11</sup>. The potency of such messages in public space perhaps provides a reason for the humourists continuing anonymity. The fact that these interventions are made in public space, as opposed to appearing in the context of a gallery exhibition, belies the powerlessness of Macedonia's cultural institutions.

If groups such as Raspeani Skopjani and Sviračinja, in addition to anonymous artists working on their own initiative, use humour and the forms of popular culture to try to engage citizens in public debate, then activities such as the establishment of a mobile gallery in Skopje's city park, in 2012, under the auspices of CAC, marks perhaps an attempt to engage on the more familiar terrain of cultural politics. The mobile gallery, built out of temporary construction materials, can theoretically be pulled down and re-assembled in any given space, taking contemporary art to the Macedonian public, rather than expecting the public to come to it.

11. See Filip Stojanovski, "Anonymous Artists Place 'Monument' to Anti-depressants in Macedonia's Capital", Global Voices, 10 March 2016. Available at: <http://www.globalvoices.org/2016/03/10/anonymous-artists-place-monument-to-antidepressants-in-macedonias-capital/>



Mobile Gallery, City Park, Skopje. Photo: Jon Blackwood





*KOOPERACIJA, Art as anti-hegemonic propaganda, Skopje, 2014.  
Photo: Denis Saraginovski*

Since its establishment the mobile gallery has played host to a number of changing exhibitions on social and political themes, contemporary debates, and has hosted events associated with the annual award for young artists, DENES. Rather than aiming at a utopian set of solutions, the art-activism associated with parallel cultural institutions like the mobile gallery seek to deliver on achievable and verifiable targets.

A fourth and final group strategy can be seen in the three-year existence of the cultural initiative Kooperacija. Founded in the spring of 2012, when Skopje, in the words of Gjorgje Jovanovik, was a “city of zombies”, the aim of Kooperacija was to adopt an uncompromisingly critical attitude not only of cultural infrastructure, but also of some aspects of political activism. Kooperacija adopted a mobile strategy, not tying itself to one premises but moving across the city of Skopje, intervening in non-art spaces in a rapidly unfolding series of pop-up exhibitions and events.

Having begun its exhibiting life in a launderette, with a show wittily entitled 800 Revolutions per Minute, the group engaged in regular exhibiting activity in the following two years. Exhibitors were not limited to the core group, but, through a process of invitation and discussion, added other names from the critical artists considered in this book, including Yane Calovski, Vladimir Lukaš, and Oliver Musovik, in addition to invited artists from abroad, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina’s Ibro Hasanović.

Quickly, Kooperacija took on its own dynamic not just in the Macedonian context, but also in the wider Balkan region. A mixture of guerrilla tactics, a shifting membership and provocative discussion saw a reliable following attend the group’s events in Skopje. Whilst



*KOOPERACIJA, Utopias / Dystopias-Documents exhibition, Skopje, 2013  
Photo: Denis Saraginovski*

openings in official cultural institutions generally attracted audiences of around one hundred people, reported attendances of over three hundred were attracted to the group’s later events. In this way, Kooperacija not only called to mind avant-garde formations from late Yugoslav times such as Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), but also the strategies of post-Yugoslav formations such as Novi Sad’s Arte Klinika and Sarajevo’s Ambrosia. For a period during 2013-14, the name of Kooperacija was synonymous with critical art from Macedonia, on a regional and on a European level.

Kooperacija activities were predicated on three broad areas of activity. Firstly, institutional mobility, keeping their audience guessing by renting different non art spaces- offices, empty public buildings, and other commercial premises- for short periods of time. In so doing, the collective showed how it was possible to deliver some form of self-organised, self-financed institution of contemporary cultural





KOOPERACIJA, *The Horses' Legs Are Too Short*, REMONT, Belgrade, December 2014.  
Photo: Denis Saraginovski

production that did the jobs the immobile and moribund official cultural institutions were not.

Secondly, through these activities, Kooperacija sought to open out local perceptions of what public space might be, and how to win back common space in a city centre increasingly privatised by political and business elites. The group challenged perceptions of what public space might be and how the artist, as a public figure, might operate within that space; using, it might be said, the operation of the artist in public space as an exemplar of democratic values in action. The activities of this group were always discussed and planned thoroughly in advance, with key decisions taken by democratic vote after debate; no public funds were asked for, and the group was entirely self-financed. Solidarity and mutual aid through example were key to these processes. Taking part in these processes, implicitly, was a rebuke to the official political milieu where debate, criticism and open discussion are simply unwelcome.

By acting politically through the medium of the art exhibition, Kooperacija sought to challenge and undermine the marginal and powerless position of the critical artist in the Macedonian context; to try to start a debate about the role of the artist in society, the responsibilities of the artist, and by suggesting different strategies as to how the artist might operate. These developments were summarised in one of the group's final exhibitions, entitled *The Horses' Legs are Too Short*, in Belgrade's REMONT gallery in December 2014.

A few months later, the group ceased to operate for a variety of complex reasons. Artists involved felt that it was perhaps self-indulgent to be focusing on discourses of contemporary art at a time of national crisis and protest in the spring and early summer of 2015. There was a degree of institutional fatigue after the pressure of organising so many events in a relatively short space of time; there was also some internal discord amongst the membership, with regard to the debate already mentioned, between the overlapping and in some cases antagonistic, roles of contemporary art and political activism. Whatever the ultimate cause of the group's demise, Kooperacija showed the potential for what could be achieved, through confronting society's problems in the development of challenging critical art nourished by group work and rigorous debate, both internally and through public engagement. As a result, their example resonates a year on, as perhaps the most significant recent critical contemporary formation, to have emerged from the Macedonian context.

In this section we have outlined the deep-seated difficulties in the ecosystem of contemporary Macedonian art. Contemporary art, from the perspective of the current Macedonian government, is synonymous with the Skopje 2014 project; a project that has overwritten the symbols of Macedonia's Yugoslav past, in an attempt to impose a highly problematic interpretation of Macedonian history at the centre of cultural debate. The project seeks to neuter contemporary art by stripping it of any critical possibility, and by marginalising its producers, instead using art as a tool to provide banal entertainment, and as a crude symbol of investment-friendly transformation. In so doing, they have created deep fissures in the small body of artists who work professionally in the country.

Institutions involved in the teaching of art focus on the technical development of young artists, but are unable to shape or condition them to work as artists in the local, let alone global art market. Cultural institutions, meanwhile, founded in the Yugoslav past, find themselves in a strange limbo in the post-Yugoslav present, subject to political control, lack of money, lack of forward vision, and consummately unable to intervene in public debates of taste and visual ideas, or to help grow and develop a body of working Macedonian artists, in the way that they should.

In these circumstances, we have seen that those artists in Macedonia working critically, have adopted a number of strategies to ensure that their practice can still occupy a small space in the public imagination. Group work, employed with different motivations and tactics, is key to the survival of critical art in the country. The ability to range across a diverse portfolio of critical practices with equal facility, capacity building for contemporary art, art activism, and in the stimulation and promotion of critical discussion surrounding

contemporary art, all function as strategies that, taken together, mark the building of a parallel, grassroots contemporary art world, run by artists and cultural workers, to try and meet their own needs and priorities.

The building of a parallel art world and parallel cultural institutions, is nothing less than an attempt to claw back public space and attention from the heavily politicised official discourses of visual art. It is involvement in some or all of these activities in the contemporary Macedonian context that marks out the artist as critically responsive to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Having built a rounded understanding of the ecosystem of contemporary art in Macedonia, we will now turn to the analysis of specific works that illustrate the wide range of thematic concerns that critical artists and cultural workers have engaged with, in recent times.

## Specificities : Selected Works

“Skopje 2014 has divided the art world in a very radical way. Some people approve of it ideologically, but some have approved of it because they feel the battle is over, and that the scheme is too far underway, to be reversed.”

Dragana Zarevska’s observation, marks what appears for some to be the terminus of the debate surrounding the Skopje 2014 scheme. We cannot speculate here as to what the fate of the commissioned monuments, new buildings and altered buildings may be, should the political climate change in future; we can only outline some of the responses by critical artists to the scheme, and the ways in which they have developed. Of course, these critical artists find themselves on the opposite side of the divide, to the wide range of Macedonian academics, and professional artists, who have participated in conceiving and developing Skopje 2014 from ideology to reality.

A wide range of artists have been responsible for delivering Skopje 2014. Including amongst the participants are former Yugoslav avant-gardists, such as Aleksandar Stankoski<sup>12</sup>, through to relative unknowns such as Valentina Stefanovska. Both have been promi-

12. Stankoski (b. Kičevo, 1959) was a member of the leading contemporary art group, Grupa Zero, based in Skopje, in the 1980s. In present times his practice features a pseudo-historical, mock neoclassical style dealing with some events from Macedonian history. Zero began their activities in Štip in 1984, with the group fizzling out at the beginning of the 1990s. Other members of Zero included Sinisa Cvetkovski, Miodrag Desovski, Perica Georgiev-Pepsi, Bedi Ibrahim, Zoran Janevski, Tatjana Miljovska, Igor Toševski, and Zlatko Trajkovski. For more details of Zero’s activities see Milevska, S & Veličovski, V. (2009), *Zero: Retrospective 1984-2009*, Skopje: National Gallery of Macedonia

nent in the ideological justification and material outworking of the Skopje 2014 project. Whilst Stankoski has functioned consciously as an ideologue for the project, the younger Stefanovska has specifically avoided political comment, preferring instead to use the project as a means of exhibiting her sculptural ideas on a grand public scale. Stefanovska was named in Balkan Insight’s special investigation into Skopje 2014, as the highest paid individual artist who has been involved.

Stefanovska is the author of the centrepiece of the Skopje 2014 project, the monumental bronze Warrior on Horseback (2010 /11), commonly known to locals as Aleksandar Veliki (Alexander the Great), as well as a Triumphal Arch, and a sculpture of Filip II of Macedon, within walking distance of this flagship equestrian sculpture. Prior to completing these works, Stefanovska was relatively unknown and she has had few, if any, shows of work beyond her public statuary.

Faced with the planning and delivery of such works, critical artists in Macedonia were quick to respond. Amongst the earliest reactions to Skopje 2014 was found in the paintings and cartoons of Matej Bogdanovski, in a series executed between 2009-11 and entitled Skopje You Will Shine.<sup>13</sup> Bogdanovski’s satirical, mocking series mixes sharp observations of some of the newly commissioned statues, set against the daily realities of life in the city for many. In one memorable image of, Bogdanovski juxtaposes two religious figures making a Hitler salute, whilst a Roma street cleaner, his small motorcycle overloaded with garbage, splutters along an empty boulevard below. Beneath the crude humour in these images, however, is a palpable sense of bewilderment and disorientation, as Skopje began to be transformed out of all recognition at the beginning of the 2010s.

The surreal disorientation and alienation expressed in Bogdanovski’s work lies at the root of one of the main critical responses to the development of Skopje 2014, based on the occupation of public space by symbols of a contested political ideology. Prominent in this aspect of the critical debate on the fate of public space and its privatisation by stealth, has been the site-specific installations of Igor Toševski.

In point of fact the theme of privatisation and the fate of formerly public spaces has been a leitmotif of Toševski’s work, since the first years of Macedonian independence. In the 1990s, his Dossier project traced the fate of former state owned factories and offices. Toševski made a journey around the country, collecting objects and items from these abandoned facilities.

13. Matej Bogdanovski’s Skopje you will Shine can be seen online at: [https://www.facebook.com/matej.bogdanovski/media\\_set?set=a.1344191121304.2051515.1127015389&type=3](https://www.facebook.com/matej.bogdanovski/media_set?set=a.1344191121304.2051515.1127015389&type=3)





Igor Toševski, *Dossier, Veles, 1996*

*Dossier*, tracks Toševski's building of individual site-specific installations, as a response to the privatisation process. In the Macedonian context, during this often very dubious procedure, leading businessmen, took on these concerns at ridiculously low prices and deliberately ran them into the ground, in a crude process of asset-stripping. In the process of making these installations around Macedonia, Toševski also establishes a dialogue with the historical avant-garde, casting each of these installations in a manner that referenced former European artists who had worked with ready-mades in the past. Toševski's research saw a marriage of high modernist aesthetics with the crude reality of power politics in Macedonia in the 1990s, and this method was developed and extended in his approach to the debate surrounding public space in Skopje, when the details of Skopje 2014 became known.

Toševski's reaction formed part of a series called *Territories*, begun in 2004, which lasted until 2011. By far the most controversial of the thirty eight *Territories* installed as part of this series, was the one that was briefly visible on Plošad Makedonija, months before the installation of Stefanovska's equestrian statue.



Igor Toševski, *Territory, Bitola, 2004*

"Territories" revisits the language of Utopian modernism and recasts this in temporary free locations, in urban spaces. The space of each "territory" is delineated by yellow plastic tape which is durable, and which can be easily removed. The future methodology of KOOPERACIJA, of which Toševski was a founder member, can be found here; using simple ephemeral aesthetic means for the strongest impact.

The ideas behind these 'Territories' are clear. Firstly, the artist questions the relationship between the individual citizen and public space; how is behaviour regulated and what is possible? According to the rubric of the 'Territory', and activity or object that takes place within its border, is considered a work of art. Following on from this, Toševski focuses on the notion of the line as border, as arbitrary symbol of the division between human beings and the different societies in which we live.

Thirdly, the territory is site specific. In each articulation of the 'Territory', the artist grounds contemporary practice in the legacy of the international language of early twentieth century modernism; refusing to engage with the limitations of the Macedonian present,





Igor Toševski, *Territory being erased, Plošad Makedonija, Skopje, 2009*

he instead confronts his audience with the possibility of imagined alternatives becoming, temporarily, real; the possibility of a different set of social relations and creative interactions.

In the spring and early summer of 2009, the government's plans for the antiquizing of the capital's ceremonial square were being discussed in the media and by citizens, with public opinion strongly divided as to the merit of the proposed scheme. In this early articulation of the plans, a space for a monumental Macedonian Orthodox church was envisaged, as a key part of the new architectural layout. It was in this sense that Toševski's proposed 'Territory' was calibrated as a pointed intervention, for it occupied exactly the same spot as the site of the proposed church, in the shape of a cross.

The artist could not have foreseen that in March and April 2009, tensions were provoked as the extent and nature of the antiquization plans were revealed. Looking back at the incident, Toševski observed that '...people saw that the city was about to become a caricature, and they rightly protested. This protest led to an open conflict.'

The focus of the protests were differing groups of students, and NGO activists. Prva Arhi Brigada (First Architectural Brigade) were the first group to initiate the protests, with the slogan "Don't Rape Skopje", with Plošad Sloboda (Free Square) prominent slightly later on. These peaceful protests were confronted with violent disorder on 28 March 2011, when a group of Orthodox believers, estimated at 1500, physically assaulted those protesting at the building of the church, with the police standing by idly<sup>14</sup>.

14. See Igantova, E (2009), "Macedonia: Student Protests End in Violence"

In this fraught political context, Toševski's territory piece was bound to provoke strong reactions. The unveiling of the piece was scheduled for autumn 2009, as part of a broader exhibition with three German artists. The necessary permits to install an artwork, temporarily, in a public space, were obtained from different levels of city authority. As a final hurdle, the artist had to get the approval of the city mayor of Skopje; this was forthcoming a matter of days before the exhibition opened. The quick process of establishing the artwork in its position was completed, in the presence of police who, with all legal and administrative formalities complete, supervised the work, but did not intervene.

Within a matter of hours of the work being completed, un-named government officials ordered the work painted over as a priority, by city council workers. Reflecting on this experience, Igor Toševski said:

'...the government ordered the erasing of the yellow cross, and it became the black cross, which was lovely in a way...it was a really interesting situation, as everyone saw one another naked...I didn't expect such a reaction, I had done thirty-eight territories before and never encountered such a response. The whole context is important; I suppose it was a good time and a good place, to do this'<sup>15</sup>.

The resonance of this work lasted longer than the tense situation in Skopje in 2009. It is important to acknowledge that, whilst this work took place in the context of the beginnings of protest at the Skopje 2014 scheme, it was not a protest against that scheme itself, whose details were not officially announced until February 2010. Rather, this piece was about ownership of public space and, by extension, the divisive use of religion and ethnicity as a means of control in contemporary Macedonian society. As events transpired, the proposed Orthodox church was not built in Plošad Makedonija, as there simply wasn't the space there for it.

The use, abuse, and ownership of public space is a theme that other artists have entered into, most notably Darko Aleksovski in his ongoing *Factories* series, a project that focuses on the empty factories of his home-town, Veles. The artists remembers, as a child, these factories providing employment for both his parents; these facilities have now long stood empty, with their original purpose half-forgotten. In contrast to Toševski's toying with the language of the historical avant-garde, Aleksovski employs a relational approach to this subject. Producing a series of black and white drawings, the artist leaves these on a table in the exhibiting space, and invites the audience to interact with the images of they wish. Presented in a number of cities around the region, including the 55th Oktobarski salon in

15. Igor Toševski, conversation with the author, 23 July 2015.



*Ephemerki, The Lele Method, 2011*

Belgrade, Factories offers the prospect of a gentle look backwards into the industrial history of the region, and the symbolic reclaiming of these formerly socially owned spaces by means of a child-like, commonly authored act of colouring in.

If public space, its creeping privatisation and occupation by business and political elites, is an issue that transcends nationality and local context in neoliberal Europe, then the use of humour in critical Macedonian art operates in a much more specific, local context. Engaging an audience little versed in the strategies of critical art through humour, is a key tool in the attempt to further grow an audience and a following.

The jokes made by these artists vary from the gentle and self-deprecating observation of the performance duo Ephemerki, to the caustically cutting paintings and cartoons of Gjorgje Jovanovik. Ephemerki, consisting of the young artists Jasna Dimitrovska and Dragana Zarevska, play of the audience's sense of the familiar, or of the absurd, in some of their works, in order to engage the public imagination. One of their earliest works, the Lele Method plays with one of the most common expressions in the Macedonian language. Lele doesn't actually mean anything: it is a catch-all word that can connote everything from exasperation to filling in a gap in a sentence but it is a recurring feature of most conversations in Macedonian.

In taking something as readily familiar, and turning it into a brand and a method of interaction, Ephemerki seek to problematize patterns of production and consumption and, in a similar way, question the relationship between public and private property.

Gjorge Jovanovik, meanwhile, in his humorous painting *Where is this Boat Sailing To?* of 2013, offers a bitter-sweet take on the growing predicament of Skopje and wider Macedonia, and through the laughter, asks some troubling questions. In this image, the boat is clearly orientated in the milieu of Skopje, as the familiar clock of Skopje's railway station, stopped since 26 July 1963 at the time of 0520, is carved on the prow of Gjorgje's surrealist vessel.

The occupants, meanwhile, are figures who will be recognisable as having played a role in the history of the city, since the earthquake. The visual style blends cartoon and fresco aesthetics as a means of immediately engaging the eye, and holding it. As we take in the details of the ship's occupants and consider their role in shaping recent history, the artist makes a deliberate play on the idea of the "ship of fools", with little forward plan or idea beyond their own self-advancement.

This is more than a merely fashionable statement of resentment and dissent against the political class. The image subtly invites the viewer to consider their own part in the development of the country's history, and perhaps pricks the conscience; there is a suggestion that individual citizens are as much to blame for the difficulties of Skopje and the wider country, as their passivity and disengagement has empowered the figures in the boat and given them the space to take the decisions that they have. In *Where is this Boat Sailing To?*, therefore, humour quickly turns to melancholy, and introspection, laced with a fear and uncertainty concerning the future.

Critical artists also confront debates surrounding Macedonia's decaying cultural heritage, and problematize the process of over-writing the past, for ideological purposes. Filip Jovanovski's 2014 installation, *I Love the Museum of Contemporary Art*, and the *Museum of Contemporary Art Loves Me*, offers the spectator a place to dream in, set apart from the difficulties of everyday reality in the world of visual art.

Tracing a plan of the museum on the floor, and providing an outline of the 1970 building on a wall under the slogan "To Dream is the Ultimate Political Act", Jovanovski seems to be hinting at a retreat into the parallel space of the imagination, or the utopian; his installation is firmly grounded in contemporary reality, however. A third important element of the installation is an overview of all the different critical artists currently active in the Macedonian context, and how they fit together in terms of the groupings and affiliations that they have. The installation expresses love for the institution of the Museum of Contemporary Art, as an expression of international solidarity, and tries to acknowledge its importance as a space for the contemporary generation of artists to dream; at the same time, it is







an implicit denunciation of the socio-economic circumstances that have reduced it to its current “survival” mode of existence.

Whilst the object of Filip’s investigation into cultural memory and shared cultural experience still exists, a recent public art project completed by Nada Prlja commemorates an object that has since been destroyed. In 2015, Nada was commissioned by the curator Ana Frangovska to re-imagine Borko Lazeski’s lost murals in Skopje’s

*Nada Prlja re-painting Borko Lazeski’s National Liberation War murals, Skopje, June 2015*



main post office. Lazeski’s murals, painted at the end of the 1970s to decorate Janko Konstantinov’s brutalist new concrete structure, were lost in a mysterious fire in January 2013, since when the building has remained closed to the public. For a period of a week, Nada re-painted the murals on a large scale, in order to jog the public’s memories, and to engage with them in sharing their recollections of the closed off post office space, and the paintings that used to hang there. This action, then, was a mixture of re-making lost works of art produced in a bygone political era, and a consideration, publicly, of the values that they represented.

The ways in which critical artists insist on examining and re-presenting cultural heritage are part of a broader debate surrounding identity. The photographs of Alma Idrizi, for example, focus on the role and aspirations of women in a traditional and patriarchal society, and beyond that, the struggle of individual to escape the scripts that have been written for them, from an early age:

“My photographs deal with the conflict between tradition and modernity...Women in Macedonia have to deal with this conflict every day; whether to follow the wishes that they have for their own lives, or whether to conform to society’s expectations.”

Idrizi is not the only artist dealing with gender; the works of Dijana Bogdanovska, for example, deal with the female form in terms of medication, drugs, self-destruction and resistance to the commercial forces weighing down on self-image in contemporary society.

Critical artists have also questioned, in a humorous way, some of the aspects of the religious identity that has become congruent with “Macedonian” identity for right wing nationalists in the years of independence. In April 2012, many Macedonian Orthodox adherents believed that they had witnessed a miracle, at St. Demetrius Church, one of the oldest churches extant in Skopje. The frescoes on the walls of the church, long stained with dirt, appeared to have cleaned themselves miraculously; the gold halos of the saints once again shone out brightly in the church interior, without having been cleaned or treated at all. Many who witnessed the transformation claimed the mysterious cleansing as a miraculous event, even if scientists and religious leaders treated the matter more cautiously. Thousands of worshippers came to see the frescoes, which were also the subject of a visit by Prime Minister Gruevski<sup>16</sup>.

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16. See Marusic, Sinisa Jakov (2012), “Macedonian Scientists Ponder Fresco ‘Miracle’”, Balkan insight, 12 April 2012. Accessible at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/science-cautious-about-macedonian-miracle>



Coincidentally, the Macedonian art duo Obsessive Possessive Aggression (OPA), consisting of Slobodanka Stevčeska and Denis Saraginovski, had been invited to take part in a festival organised by the Ars Akta organisation, in June 2012. Entitled Skopje Creative Festival, the project featured twelve commissioned billboards, allocated to different artists and designers, to come up with an example of the city's creative potential.

OPA decided to produce a witty response to the miracle incident at St. Demetrius church. Producing an "advertisement" for a fake cleaning product, their work showed what appeared to be a cleaning spray placed in front of the outline of eight glowing haloes. Underneath the spray, a strapline text says 'Reaches Even the Most Hard-to-Reach places'.

Slowly, images of the work began to be shared on social media by users, with many enjoying the sardonic joke at the expense of the alleged miracle, earlier in the year. From social media, television journalists picked up the story, and began to run it on the mainstream media, a rapidly-evolving process which provoked a sudden backlash from the conservative and religious right.

The public debate surrounding the work, in response to items on television, quickly provoked heated online debate. Church officials complained that although the work had been sanctioned by the Skopje Creative Festival, and the billboard space had been paid for, the Church's approval had not been sought before the image had been erected.

The use of parody, and a cheap, poor, readily comprehensible aesthetic, was morphing rapidly into a full-blown scandal, the scale of which surprised the artists and their peers. Reflecting on the incident in her interview, Slobodanka Stevčeska observed that:

'People became more and more aggressive...people like this have support from higher up. When you discuss religion, it is problematic, as you appear to be attacking their beliefs. When we made the project, we realized it would have consequences...but we didn't think that response would be so intensive. It was a good experience, and good for our work.'<sup>17</sup>

The image was unveiled on the 10th of June; discussion grew firstly on social media, and then was picked up by mainstream media organisations, on the 11th and 12th of June; on the 13th of June, an agent, acting on the orders of unknown officials, had ripped the image off the billboard, destroying it totally.

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17. Conversation between OPA and the author, 18 July 2015.

This image fulfilled three broad functions. Firstly, it encouraged a public response by using a simple, easy to understand image and gentle parodic humour of the alleged miracle at St. Demetrius. Through this humour, OPA sought to open out a broader debate about the power of the image; the power of the church to use religious imagery for manipulative ends, counteracted by the ability of the artist to reveal those networks of power in response.

Further, it opened out discussion on the acceptable boundaries of image making, and on the responsibilities of the artist in a society such as Macedonia. There was a brief and intense fusillade of discussion surrounding an artwork that would simply not have taken place, had it been exhibited in a gallery context. Consequently, this is also a work that deals implicitly with self-censorship, and the failure of art institutions and artists to function in any meaningful way. If engagement with the public is an afterthought, then what is the purpose of making the image in the first place?

The themes of the use of public space, humour, the identity of the artists, the purpose of the image, and the urging of the Macedonian public to engage with critical images, are amongst the most compelling themes in contemporary Macedonian art, in response to the very particular socio-economic context in which these images operate.

## Conclusion : Contemporary Macedonian Art in the future

In the final question of most of the interviews for this book, I asked my interlocutor whether they were optimistic or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia, and what reasons they had for their point of view. It seems only fair that, in concluding this introductory essay, that I give some ideas of my own based on what I have observed and learned of the development and diverse workings of critical art in this context.

In common with many other sectors of Macedonian society, the cultural infrastructure needs to be re-designed, probably from scratch. There has to be a debate about the role of culture in shaping a nation state such as Macedonia, and the responsibilities that an artist has towards the public, as well as the fostering of a two way dialogue, so that the artist is aware of what expectations the interested public has from them.

The transmission belts for these types of discourse, the public education system, and national cultural institutions, are broken beyond repair in Macedonia. This has far reaching consequences for

the future of contemporary cultural production. Nebojša Vilić states bluntly that nothing has emerged in the wake of the dismantling of the old socialist system in education, whilst Ana Frangovska's take is even starker:

“...if these things do not change, and I can see the artists that are at present coming out of the Faculty of Fine Arts, then unfortunately, soon the situation will be catastrophic, and I can't give any predictions as to how it (contemporary art) will develop.”

The future of critical contemporary art in Macedonia is at something of a crossroads. Its fate is tied up, as with the future of Macedonian civil society, with the fate of the current political struggle between the VMRO-DUI government, and its own people. If the “colourful revolution” succeeds in its aims of achieving a technocratic government and a cleansing of the endemically corrupt political culture that has developed in this century, then there will be a more public place for the kind of art that has been the focus of this text. If, however, this citizen movement does not succeed, and hegemonic political power re-asserts itself, then it is hard to see critical art progressing beyond its current subterranean and counter-cultural position. The opening of the Cultural and Artistic Centre “TEKSTIL”, in the eastern manufacturing town of Štip, is an example of type of relationship that can be made between critical artists and broader citizen movements, to their mutual benefit.

In the event that there is a period of transition away from authoritarian nationalism in Macedonia, then the change in conditions for contemporary artists will not be noticeable or immediate. The types of reforms that we have mentioned already will take one or two generations to make any kind of meaningful impact, and the results are by no means certain. In addition to radical educational reforms, and a re-thinking of cultural infrastructure, there needs to be profound change in how critical discourse and criticality are received and understood in the Macedonian context. The current equation of objective and constructive criticism with a personal attack on the individual is deeply damaging for the development of any kind of engaged critical discourse surrounding contemporary art.

Such a discourse, as artists such as Gjorgje Jovanovik and Filip Jovanovski hint at in their interviews, will be vitally important in a future national debate as to the fate and future use / development of the monuments visited on Macedonia under the Skopje 2014 scheme, which has so dominated analyses of visual culture from this part of the world, in the last five years.

Critical contemporary art in Macedonia, regardless of the outcome of the current political deadlock, will of course survive. But, as Nebojša



Opening of the Cultural-Artistic Centre “TEKSTIL”, Štip, Macedonia, July 2016.  
Photo: Martin Kangalov

Vilić asks in response to my question, what should we expect of critical art in the future? Based on the research done and the friendships formed in the making of this book, we can only expect critical art to still fulfil a role in the Macedonias of the future, according to the development of social and political cultures of which they are a part.

In this essay, we have seen the enormous adaptability of critical voices, across a range of different visual media. We have noted the ability of artists to form alliances of stylistic and intellectual affinity and to work together in solidarity according to those interests. Hard though the circumstances may be, artists still are emerging from this space with a challenging and compelling body of work, intervening in key debates that have a resonance well beyond the country's borders; identities, the future of public space, Dadaistic humour, imagination, and a passionate level of social, and sometimes political, engagement. Jasna Koteska picks up on this when she observes that:

“...We have already obtained the recipes from global culture. If you want to be successful, try really hard. If you insist on being obscure, don't complain that you are not understood. And if you are really talented, your art might contribute to a pan-human good.”

There seems little doubt that the group of artists interviewed in this book, and some of their other colleagues who have been mentioned, will persist, whatever their circumstances, in challenging and confronting the problems of Macedonian society, scratching at the itch of how Macedonians see themselves, and consequently, continuing to contribute to this pan-human good, in the years to come.





*Darko Aleksovski Factories 2014,  
exhibition at Paratissima Art Fair, MKC, Skopje, June 2015*



Darko Aleksovski was born in 1989 in Veles. He graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje and now works as a visual and performing artist. Darko has completed residencies at bm:ukk in Vienna, and Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, Germany. In 2012 he was programme co-ordinator at AKTO festival in Bitola. Darko has exhibited internationally, and works between Skopje, and Veles.

[www.darkoaleksovski.blogspot.com](http://www.darkoaleksovski.blogspot.com)

## Darko Aleksovski

## What are your earliest memories of art?

DA: I have two early memories of art. I remember being in the kindergarten and really wanting to draw and paint when I was 4 or 5, and make stuff with my hands. I remember over-hearing a teacher explain to my parents that I had a special talent for drawing, that distinguished me from the other kids at kindergarten. I remember wondering what talent is. This was a memory that stuck with me through elementary school, I was saying to myself then that when I grow up, I will be an artist...without then really knowing what an artist was.

I can also remember a reproduction of Van Gogh's Night Café that we had at home. It was a cheap reproduction that someone had given my mother as a gift, about thirty years ago. This was the only painting or reproduction on the wall at home and when I was young I was mesmerized by it. I remember wondering who the artist was, and what this painting (I didn't realize then that it wasn't a real painting) was doing in my house. All other objects in the home had some kind of function (the chair for sitting, the bed for sleeping), but the painting didn't have any obvious function.

## How do you look back on your art education in Macedonia, and how valuable has it been to you since you finished?

DA: I studied at the high school for applied arts in Skopje for four years, and then continued for a further four years at the faculty for Fine Arts. I studied painting at both. These years were a really important period in my life. My parents wanted me to continue at the gymnasium but I was determined to study what I really loved, so came to Skopje. It was more about focusing on art rather than wanting to get away from Veles. Veles is a small town, maybe a little too small, but still moving to the capital to study art was the primary motivation.

For these eight years my whole life was dictated by art. I met my best friends at High School and we are still close. Art high school has also shaped my career and my thinking about art. I learned that the teachers at the art high school, and the professors at the faculty, inhabit different worlds, and inhabit different parts of the art world here.

High School taught conservative, academic drawing. Once I left, and was in the Faculty, I was determined to forget everything that I had learned there, and to start from scratch. To leave behind the routine

of drawing, painting, thinking about art in a certain kind of manner, took me about a year to leave behind. Towards the end of my time at the faculty, I learned some of my most important lessons about art; the theories and practice of institutional critique that shaped the projects that I completed after graduating.

Suzana Milevska was teaching institutional critique at the Academy then. At first I was resistant to it, and a bit apathetic. But gradually I began to take much more to it. By nature I have always wanted to expose things and am the first to raise my hand and complain. Institutional critique really provides a way of understanding how you can shape the artistic context that you live in, and offers a way of dealing with specific problems in the here and now. It also leaves behind a body of knowledge and relations that act as a legacy for the future of art.

## What do you think of the infrastructure for contemporary art in Macedonia?

DA: We don't really have a structured art scene here. The art scene is dispersed and confused, and conditions are really bad in Macedonia, to make a living from art. We have no real access to foundations, and the Ministry for Culture only has open calls once a year, which realistically is only open to more established artists with a background of exhibitions.

Being a young artist here is really difficult. Networking is hard and we are completely reliant on e-mail and skype, and nothing more. When I had experiences of residencies and programmes abroad, coming back here was really difficult, in the knowledge of better conditions and supportive institutions in other countries.

Of 45-50 students in my year at the Faculty of Fine Arts, I estimate that only five are still working as artists at some level. Of course this is a similar rate to other countries; but, say, in Germany, you have more choice; the conditions for being an artist exist there, and do not really, here.

At the moment I am working full time as a graphic designer in marketing agency, to support myself, and I have to focus on the art projects I love in my spare time. I have to be selective in what I participate in, as I simply don't have time to participate in everything that I would like to.



## What effect does this “part-time” status have on your practice?

DA: It is hard to say. My practice is influenced by conditions. My first ideas were guided by the desire to do something different to what I had done previously...performance, or something like that. After I have done it, I lose interest. It's like whenever I start a new work or project, I want to try something that I have never tried before, like a new medium, or a new methodology. It may be simply that I don't want to repeat myself, or get used to a routine.

I travel to work every day, from one city to another, and sometimes it is difficult. I lack a budget for expensive materials, for a studio. I have only ideas, which I want to realize some day. I have tried to rationalize this. I work with ephemeral and participatory works because I want to engage the audience in a practical, interactive way. This is something that I saw abroad, the close involvement of the audience in an artwork; young artists have an obligation to engage audiences in this way.

If you produce art that consciously goes towards notions of interaction with an audience, it can eventually happen, but then again, sometimes nothing happens.

## Where is the audience for contemporary art in Macedonia, and what is their response to your work?

DA: It's an interesting question. In 2012, I did a project called Home. The audience had not a bad response to it, but I realised that audience reactions are something that have to be planned for. Some people were really thrown by it, asking what the exhibition was, and where the paintings were. For these people, the exhibition passed them by; it is a work that only really works in tune with an audience response.

In this last projects I did with the factories in Veles, after I had exhibited them a few times, I found a way to work with all audiences, from kids to pensioners; at that moment I realised that one needs a methodology or a system by which you can involve the audience in the work. It is necessary to treat the audience as a mass of people who do not want to propose or anything, they want clear instructions; when I started in this way, the response to the work really was overwhelming, even beyond what I had planned for the work. The notion of leaving the work unfinished encourages the audience

to complete it, each in their own way; this was for me the relational aesthetics aspect of the work, in which I step aside as an artist and only make proposals, rather than finished works of art.

## Recently, you have done collaborative work with two artists: Open Game Studio, and The Toyroom with Ivana Prodanova, and One Hour Together One Hour Alone with Sergio Valenzuela of Chile.

### Can you tell us how these works developed, and what the implications are for your future practice?

DA: These really are two different collaborations. I have been friends with Ivana since High School, and she was in the sculpture department at the Fine Art Academy. We were in this project by Warren Heidich, together in Suzana Milevska's class, called In the Mind's I; it really was a success for us.

We were then invited to participate in AKTO Festival in Bitola; in the working context of AKTO we began to think through ideas of collaborating together. We decided to concentrate on objects and toys, and developed a social collaboration based on toys, games and play in art.

This was a collaboration based on mutual interests and on spending a lot of time together; it happened naturally. We didn't know where our careers or art practice would go after graduation, and felt that pressure, so it is also a collaboration based on the adrenaline of the creative process when the deadline of an exhibition opening is close by. I can still feel the rush of adrenaline from our first exhibition!

In the collaboration with Sergio, Suzana was also involved. She has been teaching in Vienna, and arranged collaboration between her current students in Vienna, and those from the past in Macedonia. I worked with Sergio on research through skype; there were some really interesting parallels that arose from his institutional critique of contemporary art in Chile; there are similar things happening everywhere in the globe, which appear local until you find the parallels in other places.

Both these collaborations are on-going. When the collaborative process with someone goes well, you know the collaboration result will be great. And the process is the most important. The end result is always of secondary importance if the process was a mutual

learning and growing experience. Although they started from different points, I don't really feel much difference between good collaborations with different people.

### **You have now participated in quite a few residencies and exchanges in Europe. What have you taken from those experiences?**

DA: These were all great experiences in their own way. Conditions are radically different. I spent three months with other artists in Austria; then I was in Germany for a month; also, I had a two-week spell in Sweden.

The most important experience was in Vienna. My first few days there were overwhelming. I was a different artist before going to Vienna, and I am a different artist now; I realised the power of the contemporary art world there and learned a lot from observing how people interact with one another and with institutions. It is not some vague, faded ritual there. In Macedonia, fifty people will come to an opening; forty-five are other artists, and the other five are usually relatives. I was really struck by a visit to the Kunsthistorisches Museum there, seeing people queuing for tickets and engaging with the exhibition; it was amazing to see how alive art can be and what a central role it can play in shaping a nation's culture.

Frankfurt was another thing. Art there is strongly shaped by the art market and I met a lot of artists who do not even start a work, until it is sold. It's a very money oriented art world, but the art audience is far larger than anywhere else I've been. Every single opening that I went to attracted an audience of hundreds and opening speeches that last for over an hour, with people speaking in German, French and English. It was very surreal to see art relations like that.

### **Tell us about your latest project, Factories**

DA: This was a project I developed with the Mark Pezinger publishing house in Vienna, run by Thomas Geiger and Astrid Seme. I was sent ten pieces of paper in 2013 after I returned here from Austria; I was told that I could draw anything that I wanted, as long as I returned the papers for the publisher to sell.

I wanted to do something specific related to Veles, and I focused on the factories that are no longer working, which were once a major

part of the city economy. I did some small drawings with goldacrylic colours; I sent them to the publisher, who returned some scans to me; I had the idea to develop it further, to make it relational and interactive. I worked with Ivana at the time on the toys and puzzles and colouring books, remembering what I was doing as a kid. The idea was to do something political in a completely informal way.

Factories is a very personal project, more personal than I would like to admit, although it has that naïve and nonchalant vibe to it. It looks like something that I have done in a couple of days, when it actually took me a year to develop and produce. I dedicated the work to my parents, since they were employed and worked in two of the factories for years. A lot of preparations, creative decisions, plans, sketches, photos and research went into it, and at this point the project has a nice trajectory and potential. It was shown in a number of different exhibitions and in different contexts that produced different results.

The thing I really love about it is that I don't do anything as an artist, meaning I don't interfere with the work. I just make agreements, technical requirements and the rest is up to organizers and curators to just exhibit the work. From there, it's up to the audience to move the work in one direction or another. Sometimes, they leave the posters untouched, but mostly they try to leave some mark on them. I imagine one day collecting a huge archive from all the posters.

### **Do you agree that contemporary art is something of a subculture in Macedonia? If you agree, what are the consequences of this subcultural status?**

DA: Look, we cannot deny that contemporary art in Macedonia is really divided. The sculpture of Alexander the Great on horseback is really bad art, but we cannot deny that it is art. This odd piece of art happened here, and came from this society.

Then there is another, perhaps more important kind of art, that is actual contemporary art; it is the result of limited resources, severely limited at institutions, and limited means of production. Artists here are disappointed, every day, with art, and dream of escaping or doing something else. These types of art, good or bad, take place on the level of hobbyism; most artists have a full time job, and freelance work on the side. When I was living and studying in Skopje, there were three or four openings a week which I would make an effort to go to; these things are happening, sure, but no one is really exhibiting at any decent level.



It's a strange time for the contemporary scene in Macedonia. There is the really obviously bad art in the public arena that everyone is aware of at the same time, we have young artists with potential who are doing nothing because of the conditions for making art.

In my view there are a few possibilities for the future. It is possible that our artists will start to organise more artist-run spaces, as a counterpart to the major institutions that are not functioning properly. It will take this to happen a few times before people will get used to the idea of independently run spaces. It has to be done carefully however as any art scene can produce these spaces without giving much thought to quality or any future strategy. There are a lot of facebook pages in Macedonia appearing to deal with contemporary art, but which are just there for facebook and to be seen; the works say nothing, and there are no overarching critical themes.

Here, in Macedonia, spaces can exist, at least on paper, for a long time without really producing anything, as we lack a critical audience. We lack a breadth of spaces or a set of commonly agreed criteria to judge work by. By contrast, in Austria, artist run spaces are working competitively and at a very high level, they want to bring out the best to push forward debate surrounding contemporary art. They are judged by the high quality of their exhibitions and how they work alongside or challenge the discussion of contemporary art put out by the state's institutions. There is no point of comparison with the conditions here.

I must also say that our art institutions will take a long time to recover from years of mistaken cultural and exhibiting policies and the current difficult political climate.

The real problem is a problem of the discourse surrounding contemporary art in Macedonia, or lack of it; people are not producing anything at all. For me, as a young artist, it is quite simple. If museums are not working, why should I bother making something when I don't really have a place to show it in? Depending on the context and the content of my pieces, sometimes I could exhibit in an unconventional space, but most of the time I don't want to show in a place that is not a dedicated art space.



Darko Aleksovski *One Hour Alone Second*  
in a series of Performative Works with Sergio Valenzuela, 2014

## Your work has used many different media and practices. How do these different practices fit together into one practice-in-the-round?

DA: For example, when I want to do a performance, I want to be isolated from painting let's say, but then of course I can't...I can't just stop doing one thing for another. When I make a performance, I am concentrated on it, to stop the interference of different discourses.

I really admire the notion of constantly "destroying" previous work, then re-inventing yourself from nothing, is really similar to what I want to do with my art. Actually, it is a great strategy for adapting to contemporary cultural conditions in Macedonia. You don't need actual money to produce something; I would like to push forward my work with performance, but to do a very different type of performance in the future.

Really, one thing influences everything; you cannot escape accumulated visual knowledge.

## How do you find living in Veles, and working in Skopje? Does it affect the way that you work?

DA: I never really miss being here (Skopje). I have friends and relatives who also work here. When I was a student I studied here, and went home at weekends. Then, I had the idea that living in Skopje would enable me to make more work; then, when I distanced myself from the art scene in Skopje, I became really critical of what was going on here. In Veles, it is possible to have some kind of critical distance, to see where art is going, and where I want my own work to go as part of that. Probably it's not ideal as a long term solution, but for the moment it is good to have a reality check, and to really think through what is going on for a few months.

## You mentioned that you had become critical of the art scene in Skopje. Could you expand upon that some more?

DA: I suppose the critique has developed from many different events. My main issue is that art has become indistinguishable from activism. It is not that I want a formalistic art; I do want to engage people and to make them think, but I fear that activist art has become a routine for artists here. I would like to transfer a different kind of energy, and idealism, through art.

I see a real division here. If you are an artist, and thinking differently, you have to go out and protest, be an activist, be a part of certain small groups of people; it all seems a bit of an empty spectacle, like Skopje 2014 itself.

I don't see the point in insisting on activism. Art is one thing, Activism another; of course they can influence one another, but they are two separate activities within one society. Both worlds have a different type of structure, different conditions and rules, and are both aimed at different results. This merging of art and activism is difficult to explain.

Art is not about taking sides for me. That is not to say that I am not political; however, I would like to be political in a different way.

## Developing on from this, what would you see as the role of contemporary art in Macedonia?

DA: Honestly, I don't know. It is difficult to formulate. At the moment there are two broad roles; you can be with the ruling party, who will give you money to produce Baroque art; or, you can be a starving activist-artist. I am sure there is a third option somewhere else, but I am not clear what it is.

However, giving up art, however you see it, is not an option. Our role is to fight all the time to keep some level of activity going, push ourselves against the conditions and to fight for our own spaces.





Born Skopje, 1985. Multimedia artist: photographer, painter, jeweller, curator. Studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje and the Faculty of Design and multimedia at FON University, Skopje. Works with Casorio Contemporary Art Museum in Naples, curating a travelling exhibition of international art. Lives and works in Skopje and internationally.

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## Alma Idrizi

*Alma Idrizi, The Saint, 2014 (opposite page)*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

AI: I can remember my father drawing when I was a child, and some of the drawings that he made. Unfortunately, my parents did not go to art school. But I admired the talent that they had.

As a child I was focused on going to music school, and becoming a pianist. Of course, this did not happen. I was twelve or thirteen when a teacher of mine recognised that I had some talent and wanted me to participate in a school children's competition. I came first in this, and after that I was strongly encouraged by teachers to enrol in Art High School. The problem that I had, was that my parents were not really in favour of this, as they did not see how I could have a future with art in Macedonia. It was hard to convince them that this was the right choice.

Nowadays, of course, they are happy with my choice. However, many young people face the situation that I did. They want to go to art school, but because either of family finances or the state of politics in the country, they give up.

## What are your memories of your art education? How do you look back on it now?

AI: Initially I had some difficulty. You see, I had studied up until then in Albanian, and teaching at Art High School is in Macedonian, so I had to firstly become confident in Macedonian. This is one of the barriers to art high school. Once that barrier was crossed, I found my time there to be very important. From this point of view I made the right decision.

There, we started with drawing then moved onto painting, although we were exposed to the technicalities of many different types of art. The professors gave us every chance to try all different kinds of expressing ourselves through art, which is the most important thing, at that stage.

I continued with painting at the Art Academy, but found university studies much different to my work at high school. There I found it much harder to develop my practical skills, the focus was elsewhere. I find practical development of new skills most important. But, at the end, the diploma you receive is not so important, but how you have developed personally as an artist during the studies. I took a break for some years before finishing my diploma, and worked elsewhere.

Subsequently, my practice has expanded well beyond painting, after I took a Masters degree in multimedia design. After being exposed to video production, photography and animation, I found this very useful in expanding the range of my practice. Now, I would say I am a conceptual artist, and a jeweller. My jewellery practice is a way to connect new audiences with contemporary art. When people buy my jewellery, they walk around wearing a little sculpture of mine.

In addition to jewellery, I also exhibit conceptual photographs. This allows me to express a revolt against tradition, culture and the borders that people put up within themselves. Although many colleagues try to express themselves in a liberal and modern way, broader Balkan society is still very stuck in tradition, and in traditional culture.

## Could you explain what you mean by “conceptual photography”?

AI: For me it means that the idea is the most important thing in the photograph. In representing my ideas in this way, perhaps it is easier for the audience to accept them. My photographs also have a strong performative element; of performance in front of the cameras.

My photographs deal with the conflict between tradition and modernity. Whilst a small number of women in Macedonia have the appearance of being “modern”, or independent, society still expects from them that they eventually will marry, have children, and concentrate on the family and home rather than on developing a career. Women in Macedonia have to deal with this conflict every day; whether to follow the wishes that they have for their own lives, or whether to conform to society's expectations.

This is a really important conflict to me. I realise too that it is not just me, but just a way of living that people all around me have.

## Can you expand a little on this idea of a “mixed media” approach to art and how it has shaped your practice?

AI: Everything that I do is a part of me, of my personality. Maybe this is difficult for a viewer to see, but still I find different ways of expressing myself all the time. If I find it difficult to fulfil an idea in jewellery, then I will turn to try and realise it in photography or



painting. All means of expression are equally important to me. I find this way of working interesting, exciting and provocative.

### What has the reaction been from local audiences, to your work?

AI: I had a break for three or four years as I said. When I started to make paintings again, they were very different to the ones that I had done before. This surprised the audience but still they accepted the new work very well. When I started to make photographs, the audience found my ideas much stronger than they had been in painting, which encouraged me to continue.

I started jewellery three years ago, and understood that through this medium I could reach out to new audiences who don't care so much about art, and who don't really go to art exhibitions. Through jewellery I can bring them closer to art. I see from my website, that people who come looking for jewellery also take the time to look at my paintings and photographs; this is a very nice way to encourage new people to be more interested in art.



Alma Idrizi, *The Martyr*, 2014 (above)  
Alma Idrizi, *The Virgin*, 2014 (opposite page)





## **It seems that Albanian artists are much under-represented in the contemporary art scene in Macedonia. Do you agree?**

AI: Yes, this is true. This is a direct result of politics in Macedonia and the borders that are erected by politicians between us, and in our understanding of this. I would not say it is the fault solely of politicians; it is the fault also of us as artists. Politics currently drives what happens in our country and more people are interested to engage with that, than with art. However, I see artists also as political activists, not just as artists.

In terms of government itself, the revolt against tradition and patriarchy that I express in my art is the main thing that needs to be focused on, and changed. Our current generation of politicians reinforce these traditions. The ways that we grow, and the way that we all make decisions, are made within this traditional cultural framework.

In terms of Skopje 2014, well really, we have to say that it is an awful project. It is a way of building up a false history dominated by guns, soldiers, war and conflict. Children are really beginning to be influenced by this. For me, we need much more of an understanding of contemporary society and how we go to where we are.

## **Tell us something about your involvement in curatorial projects, particularly your work with Casoria Contemporary Art Museum in Naples, and Antonio Manfredi.**

AI: It all started with an idea to bring the art works from the Casoria Contemporary Art Museum, to the audience that cannot afford to go to Italy and visit. This museum has a large, good quality collection. It was also an excellent opportunity for local artist to make connections with galleries and institutes from overseas. The project started in February 2015, in Skopje and in Gostivar, and it is planned that we will visit Turkey, Croatia, Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In this travelling exhibition, we exhibit strong international artist from all around the world. This is a way to bring art to the people and to help them to engage with it as they want to.

## **How was the project received in Gostivar?**

AI: This really was very different to what people can normally see in Gostivar and to begin with, they were a little sceptical. However in the end, the exhibition was enjoyed, and artists came to it. Skopje audiences were perhaps more open to this kind of show. In Tirana, we made a concept for an exhibition focusing on female artists, for March the 8th; the opening was very well attended. It's experimental wherever we are; in Thessaloniki, we exhibited art works in an open space, on the old walls of the city, and thus were able to reach people who would never go to a gallery. It's another way of bringing people closer to art.

## **Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia, and what are the reasons for your answer?**

AI: I am pretty optimistic. As we all know, the art scene was kind of silenced for a while, yet many new things are now happening. In this time, there are many new projects and art festivals such as Paratissima, and a lot of new exhibitions related not only to art but also to music and theatre are beginning. I feel that art in Macedonia is becoming stronger, and I am very happy to see that. It is very important for Macedonian society to be connected to art, and to be nourished by it.

I would also say that there are two sides to everything in Macedonian art. There is the problem of isolation, and the fact that the Skopje 2014 scheme dominates the government's views on art. Their eyes are closed to the real art scene here in Macedonia. From this, we can say that there are two types of artist; artists who are known here, and artists who actually work.

Skopje 2014 has woken up artists, to the extent that they are working more. This is related to the project that I am curating presently. The government must be much more open to real art, and to how that is organised. Examples can be found in Kosova and Albania, artists are given real opportunities and have a much stronger foundation on which to base their exhibitions, and have much stronger art colonies that give much better opportunities for artists to make new connections with one another.





Ana Ivanovska, *Let's Take A Ride on the Magic Carpet*, 2014.  
Acrylic Paint and Sponge. Dimensions Variable.



Born Skopje, 1982. Graduated from the Painting department of the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of St. Cyril and St. Methodius, Skopje, 2006. Member of DLUM (Association of Macedonian Artists); ART I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T 2009-11; MOMI, 2012-present. Ana has exhibited widely in Europe and in New York City. She lives and works in Skopje as a visual artist, and art teacher.

[www.saatchiart.com/ana8020](http://www.saatchiart.com/ana8020)

## Ana Ivanovska



## What are your earliest memories of art?

AI: I think I always wanted to draw and paint as a child. I loved arts from a very early age. At school, I was entered for art competitions, which encouraged me to believe in my own abilities. Then I entered the High School for Applied Arts in Skopje, after being strongly encouraged to study somewhere else!

## How do you look back on your arts education now?

AI: I was lucky to have good teachers at art high school; the staff pushed us hard and opened up our creativity. We were a really good year I think, as all fourteen of us got into the painting department at the faculty. This was quite a close group of friends, and many of them were later involved in setting up the Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T. We have been working together now for seventeen years! Maja Kirovska was a year above us.

My time at the faculty of Fine Arts was the best period of my life; we were the first group of students to study under Blagoje Manevski. He was very enthusiastic and arranged a lot for us to help us develop. He is also a really good artist, so I had a very positive experience there. After I finished with painting, I studied at the pedagogical faculty, and took some sculpture classes; then until 2011 I did a masters in painting with Blagoja again.

## It's interesting that you mention painting, as the work of yours that I have seen is not painting; it's much more installation. Can you tell us something about the relationship between painting and installation?

AI: I enjoy painting, but I also started to include other elements in my paintings; I included sand and sandpaper in my graduate show; then, I don't really know how, I started to work in installation. I started to make installations that are full of colour. I enjoy exploring different materials, and combining them. I feel free, and still go back to painting from time to time. I don't want to be limited by the rectangular shape of the canvas; for me, there shouldn't be limitations on the creativity of the artist. However, I think I still enjoy painting the most.

## So, would you still describe yourself as a painter?

AI: I don't want to characterize myself; I'm an artist. Maybe I will use different materials, or something more contemporary like new technologies, in the future. The ideas are the most important, and they will choose their own material.

## So, you had a long career at the faculty. When did you start exhibiting, was it with ART I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T?

AI: I was exhibiting first when I was in high school, we had a joint show of frescoes and mosaics with our professors. Then there were some shows at the faculty before the Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T happened. I also had my first solo exhibition in 2007.

## I see. So, tell us something of your time working with Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T and MOMI.

AI: I was one of the founders of AI; a lot of us had been spending time together and trying to talk through what we had to do, to set it up. We found a perfect building with a lot of rooms in late summer of 2009. It was very interesting, as it was a really specific place where it was possible to have regular exhibitions. There was a voting structure to oversee big decisions; there were many group and solo exhibitions there, and also some performances. Fifteen people were involved at the beginning, and the group was added to as time went on. It really was an interesting period of development.

In this group we were independent; we didn't have to apply for money through the Ministry of Culture; as we organized everything by ourselves, we could exhibit whenever we wanted.

MOMI is different in that we don't have a specific space, and we have had eleven shows around the region.



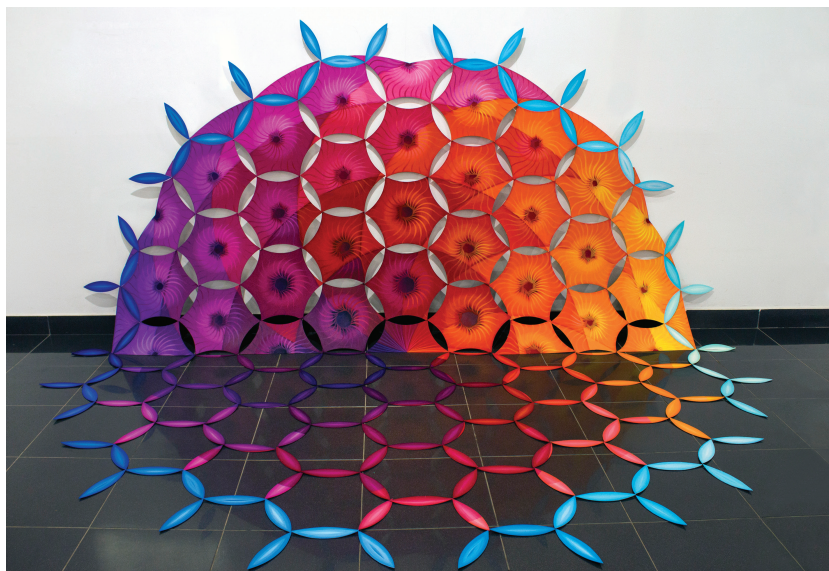
**Let's go onto your work, specifically.  
Your work is very geometric and abstract.  
When did your interests in abstraction start?**

AI: My interests started at the academy; as a student I did some paintings that were like abstract expressionism, then later I began to focus more on geometry; on sacred geometry, and the interconnectedness of nature. I am more interested in the metaphysical world, than in the everyday world. I am more interested in the things that we cannot see. This is more of a spiritual thing, rather than a religious thing; I am interested in mythology, astronomy, and astronomical symbols; the eternal cycles of death, life and birth.

**What is the audience response to your work?**

AI: This is important as here we really miss some kind of critical feedback. There is a group of people that comes to all of my exhibitions and events and bring their own interpretations to my work. I always take care to explain the symbolic meanings of my work in the catalogue. People tend to come because they enjoy seeing something new and interesting. However, the audience for contemporary art in Macedonia is very small, mainly other artists and art critics, also friends. Beyond this, not so many people. During Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T., more people came as it was a new group, and people wanted to see what was going on. As a group, somehow you are stronger, than you are practicing as an individual.

Ana Ivanovska, *Celebrating Infinity*, 2014.  
300cm x 300cm. Acrylic colours on canvas



Ana Ivanovska, *Taboo*, 2013.  
50 x 35cm. Mixed Media





**You have worked in series quite a lot: is there a particular line of reasoning behind this?**

AI: My first installations were about birth; not just human birth, but also cosmic birth. I suppose I like to work and develop the same themes with different materials. I find that this is a good way of pushing my limits; to work with different materials, and in different contexts.

Also, choosing the space really has an impact on how my work is seen. I am quite careful about this, measuring and photographing the space thoroughly and working out how my work will be shown and seen. I then decide how I am going to transform the space with my installation, how to put the viewer inside my works, and how to communicate with them.

I am thinking about work all the time; sometimes I take inspiration from old works in storage, and re-work them in a new way, in a different context. I sketch continuously, too. But I don't really know how my new installation works will look, until I begin to work things out in the gallery space. I enjoy working on a big scale and improvising in response to different spaces.

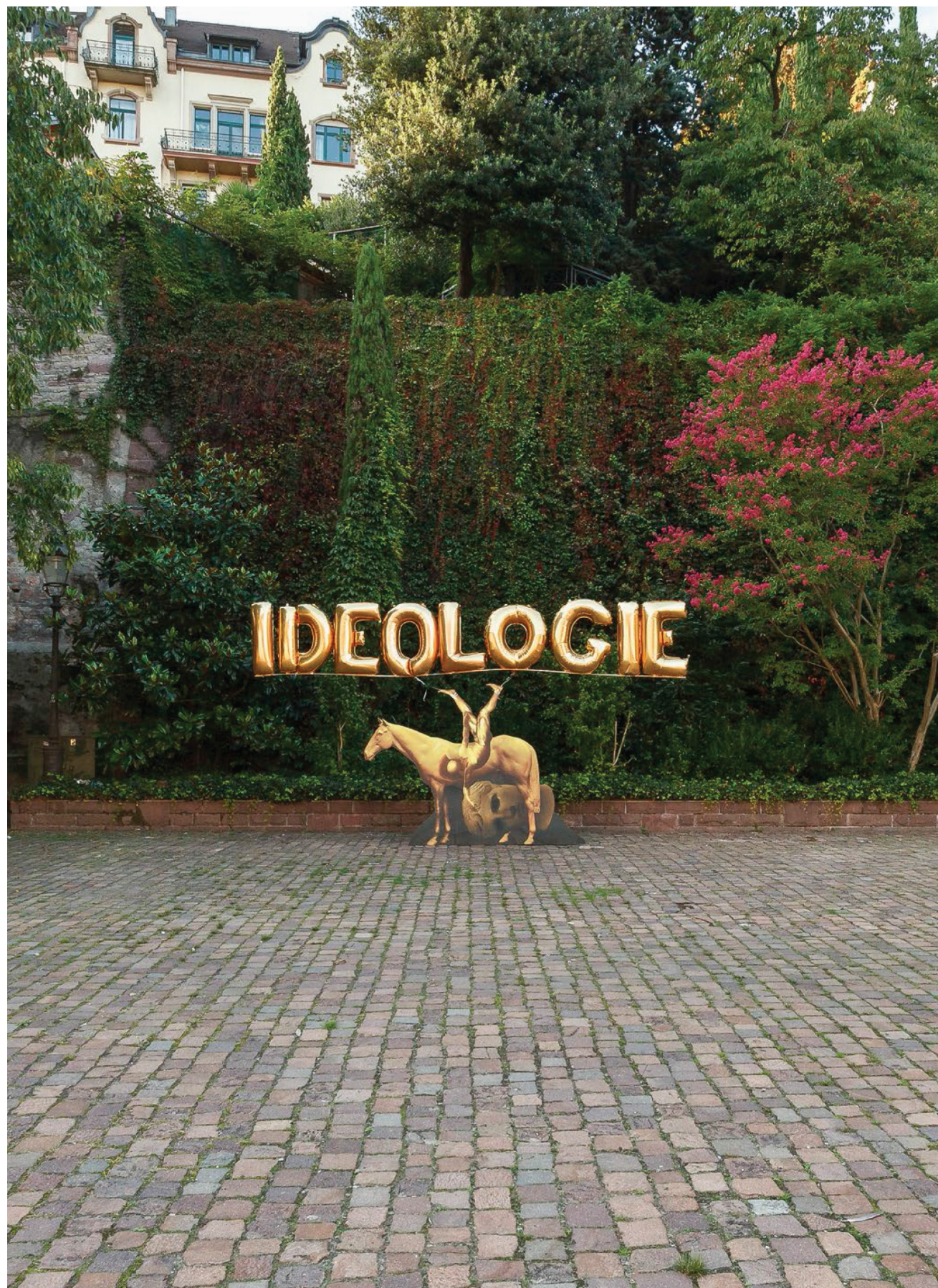
**We've mentioned already that there is a very limited market for art in Macedonia. How can you survive as an artist, making these kind of large scale objects?**

AI: Simply, we survive by working other jobs! (laughs). I have worked in galleries, in printing houses, as a graphic designer, and also I had a spell painting frescoes for the church. Now, I have a status as an independent artist from the Ministry of Culture. I think I am going to start working with children, and running children's art workshops. We all have to do something to survive. I wish it could be different, but it is not. There have been periods where my job has left very little time for my art practice, particularly in the period when I was painting frescoes. That was an interesting job, but it had no influence on my painting practice.

**Are you optimistic, or pessimistic, about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia?**

AI: I always try to be optimistic about everything. I have travelled quite a lot, seen a lot of galleries elsewhere, and see that a lot of our art runs parallel to developments elsewhere in Europe. I see a lot of positives about artistic development here, for such a small country; I believe that we have a lot of potential for the future.





Gjorgje Jovanovik, *Hip Hip Hurray*, 2014. (detail) Installation, Baden-Baden, Germany.



Born 1980, Skopje. Graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Skopje, 2003. Winner, DENES award, 2009. Member of Sviračinja since 2006; member of Kooperacija, 2012-15. Has exhibited widely in Europe, and in the USA; completed residencies in Albania, Austria, France, Switzerland, Turkey, and the USA. Gjorgje is an artist who works in many media, including painting, drawing, cartoons, performance, radio, video art and site-specific installation. Lives and works in Skopje.

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## Gjorgje Jovanovik



## What are your earliest memories of art?

GJ: I come from an artistic family. My father was a sculptor, so somehow art was part of my everyday life. I have always loved art since I was a small child; it is like a calling, and I have always had the feeling that I wanted to work in art. I am lucky to come from an artistic family, as you grow up surrounded by artists and know the scene very well.

As a child I met many artists who shaped modern Macedonian art; the likes of Dimitar Kondovski who was a hero from my childhood, also Dragutin Avramovski Gute, one of the first informel painters in Macedonia and an interesting graphic artist. I never actually met him but he was a close friend of my father's and I heard a lot about him. There was also Dimitar Todorovski, whose famous Mečkin Kamen monument in Kruševo told the story of the Ilinden uprising and the battle between Macedonians and the Ottomans, and the founding of the first Balkan republic there, in 1903. I also helped my father a lot in the studio when I was a small boy, and looking at the materials that he used. But I became an artist not because of my father, but because I really wanted to do it myself. I really knew I was going to be an artists, it was a decision I made at a very early age.

## How do you look back on your art education and what did you take from it?

GJ: I had a very classical art education. I went through the different stages at art high school in Skopje. There is only one in the city, founded at the end of the Second World War, the art high school of applied arts. I started there in the sculpture department, but at this stage I was still not sure what medium I was most interested in. At High School I mainly drew and made paintings. The normal thing, then, was to go into the painting department when I went to the Academy, somehow I found that painting was much more interesting, at that time. I was much more involved in painting, than in sculpture.

The Faculty is quite a strange environment. Along with many colleagues, I have much better memories of my High School years. The years between thirteen and seventeen are of course amongst the most interesting for many people.

At the academy, many faculty members were much more interesting artists, than they were professors. These years were interesting, but I had a long standing interest in Surrealism and Dada from my high school days, and somehow I felt that the classical education system

at the Academy was a bit oppressive. I didn't feel that I had the freedom to work on the things that I wanted to.

Whilst at high school one learns technical skills and competences, and the professors are more focused on technique, at the Academy there really was a lack of theoretical subjects and studies, and a lack of deep and informed discussion about contemporary art. My feeling is that they are not really sure of their ideas in running the Faculty. They start out in a really classical way, focusing on still life and drawing from the nude, and there are not too many innovations in the curriculum.

However, one of my professors was Simon Šemov, one of the first postmodernists in Macedonia, and in Yugoslavia. He made many actions and events, and was one of the first to try and step outside of this classical framework, and to open up other topics and problems for us to work on.

## One of the most important themes in your work is public space, and the idea of a common public spacer; could you develop this idea a little?

GJ: Yes, this came quite naturally as a topic for me, the spaces that we all inhabit and where we live. I had a strong feeling since my High School days that I wanted to go beyond the dominant classical way of presenting art works; it's not only about presentation, but also to display a good understanding of the topic. I was always curious to express my thoughts and feelings in many different ways. Perhaps as an urban dweller and an artist I have a responsibility to discuss these topics.

## But in Whistling Buildings, I always thought that you were talking more about public indifference...

GJ: I suppose I always try to have multiple layers of meaning in my works.

In Whistling Buildings, these are abandoned places, connected with the processes of privatization, and the bad ways in which capitalism here has operated; a wild capitalism, operating without regulation. I guess these buildings are the subject of this corrupt and bizarre privatisation, and this work is a scream against these processes.



I also wanted to point out that people here are not so aware of these important things; who owns property, how they are sold, and also the way in which citizens are not informed about many important topics; maybe artists can help in sensitizing the audience and making them aware of this information, by putting it in the public domain.

**How about the actions that you have been doing recently, with regard to the Trees that were destroyed in the middle of Skopje, is this a continuation of what you were doing in Whistling Buildings, or something different?**

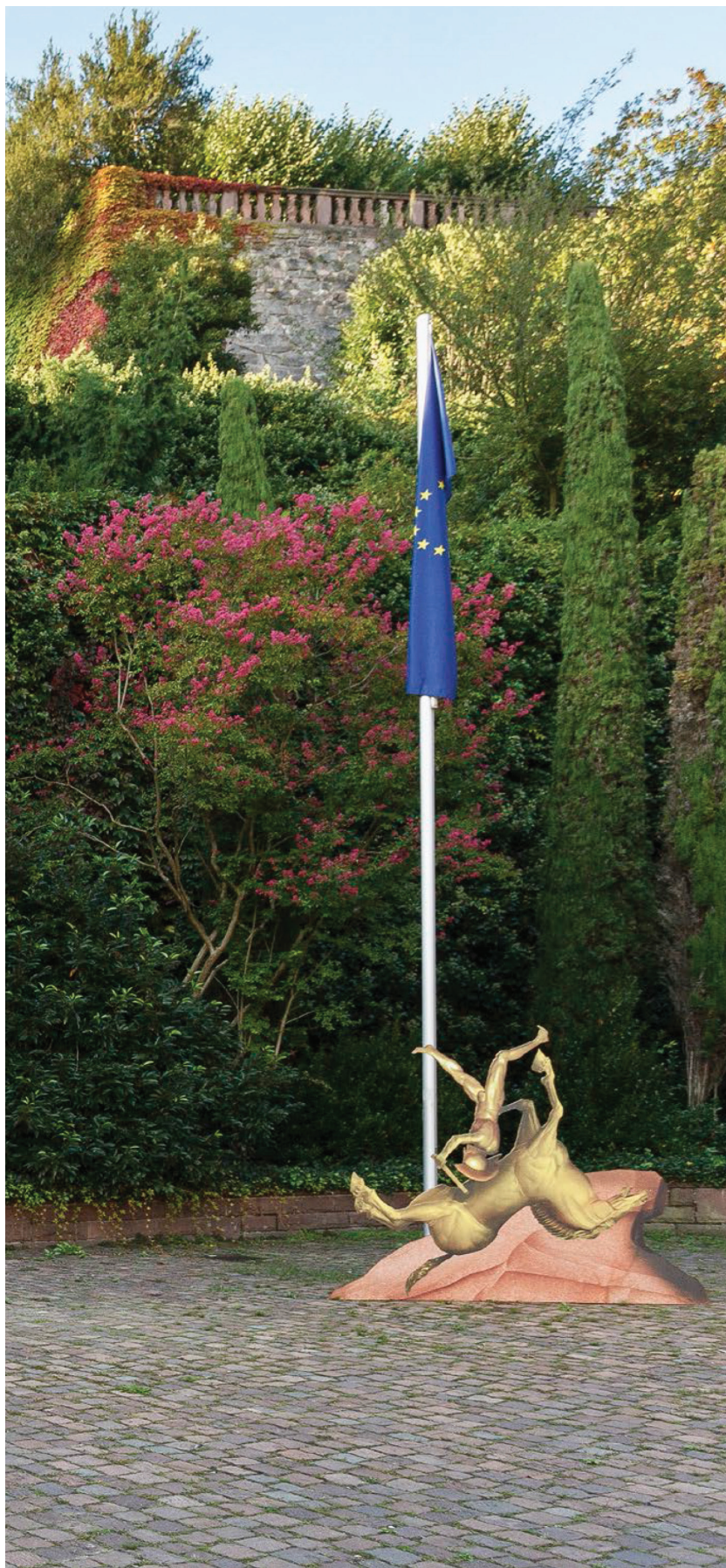
GJ: No, this was a project that involved more people; Filip Jovanovski, Nikola Pisarev from the Centre for Contemporary Art; somehow it is a generational reaction against the devastation of public space, but also of all the heritage that we have in Skopje and wider Macedonia. This is a problem that will continue around the country and we will try to intervene in different social problems, in different ways.

In Macedonia we haven't really developed a space for public debate, we have lost the ability for a democratic exchange of opinions, which did exist ten years ago. It's about the responsibility of the artist to talk about important things. I have no idea why the government is cutting down so many trees in the city centre. Skopje is a city which sits in a valley, we need a lot of green spaces and trees; we are one of the most polluted cities in the region. I am not sure why they are doing it, whether it is from some sort of spite or revenge. It makes no sense. It really is sad.



Gjorgje Jovanovik, *Silent Night*, 2014.  
Installation of 63 drawings & objects, Dimensions variable.





Gjorgje Jovanovik, *Hip Hip Hurray*, 2014 (detail). Installation, Baden-Baden, Germany.

We are moving now onto the relationship between art and social activism. I wonder if we could look at your project *Hip Hip Hurray* made in 2014, and to discuss it a little bit more, particularly in terms of the mocking approach it took towards Skopje 2014.

GJ: I was invited for a group exhibition in Baden-Baden. I really wanted to talk about this Skopje 2014 project that preoccupies so many people here. This project is really stupid, and derives from a very regressive idea. The Ministry claims to support “living culture”, but instead of actually doing that, we can see a huge disparity between the money that they spend on Skopje 2014 and related projects, and spending on other cultural projects.

So, I decided to subvert Skopje 2014, making a satirical response to it, as it really is stupid and has no meaning at all. I made two monuments, which were placed in public space, in the centre of Baden-Baden. In the first piece, I turned the horse upside down, and the warrior is sticking his sword into the horse’s belly. Perhaps this is how these ideas will all end!

Following all the protests earlier this year, many people now have the feeling that this era in culture and politics will come to an end.

I also made another object for this show, it is also an equestrian statue, where the horseman is started to float away, attached to a balloon, with the word Ideology there, to an unknown destination. These sculptures were continuations of work I do on a daily basis for the okno.mk web portal, where my colleagues and I are doing photomontages on a daily basis, under the name of Sviracinja. One of the main topics of this series is Skopje 2014. We have made many different parodies; sometimes we use familiar images from the history of art, turning them around and putting local politicians in the setting of a neoclassical painting. We have also put all our artists and architects, involved in Skopje 2014, into an Impressionist painting, together with our Prime Minister who is shown with an antique warrior shield.



## **So obviously you have been very involved in the critical response to Skopje 2014. How do you see all of that ending?**

GJ: Well, I am not one of those who think that the buildings should be destroyed, I am against destruction. It is really a very tricky question. One group of people are one hundred percent convinced that if this government goes, we should destroy or remove what they have done in the name of Skopje 2014. I am much more interested in re-arranging these monuments; this sort of intervention will be much more interesting. However, it will be a long, drawn-out process; there are so many other problems here that must be addressed. Cultural questions, unfortunately, always come at the end. There are so many problems of economics, politics, and agriculture that must also be solved. Honestly, I don't have a clear picture of what to do with the Skopje 2014 monuments, as they are problematic, for all of us.

Of course there are parallel narratives of the institutions that were devastated during the process of making Skopje 2014. But it is a complicated and difficult story and I am reluctant to stray too much into the territory of history, as it is such a difficult subject.

## **I wanted to ask you now about working collectively in this context; what have you learned from doing that?**

GJ: It's an amazing experience. It's why I mentioned Sviracinja, as I have always sought to work collectively alongside developing my own individual practice. It really is an amazing experience to work with others and to grow and develop with them; I have been working in this way since the end of my studies. Maybe even it is the response of a generation to what is going on.

I have also started working on Radio 103, one of the most independent radio channels in Macedonia; it's interesting, as it is an independent channel operating from the premises of the national TV building. With Sviracinja we tried to do some late night radio collage, playing live music, focusing on marginal and little known artists and musicians. We also did some performative works; a combination of performance and music. It's like a Surrealist radio show. It really is a lively development of collage, in different media.

Kooperacija was not only a generational response, but a response of the art scene itself to the situation we found ourselves in. It gathered

different generations of artists who were deeply dissatisfied with the Macedonian art world in general. We decided to make guerrilla, pop up exhibitions, but also solo shows, talks and presentations. It became a really significant and important initiative regionally. We discussed matters that many artists in ex-Yugoslav countries are facing; lack of money, lack of opportunities, closed institutions.

One of the greatest things about working in a group is learning, and we learned a lot of different things; about the organization of exhibitions, a lot about the technical side, about exchange and discussion of ideas; we learned a great deal about patience, and about respecting differing opinions and positions. It was almost like learning in a school, out of school.

## **What was the response around the region to the shows of Kooperacija?**

GJ: Kooperacija grew really intensively and in a good way. Our third show involved twenty or more artists. The shows had really good response here and elsewhere. Things have changed quite rapidly in Macedonia in the last six months. We are talking about some things now that people were previously reluctant to talk about.

However, in April 2012, when we did our first show, Skopje really seemed to be a city of zombies. People were really afraid and tense, and couldn't find the courage to talk about everyday oppressions, both on the local level and on the level of the state. The appearance of Kooperacija was a way to preserve the communication, not only amongst the art scene, but amongst the people. That's why these exhibitions turned into social gatherings; two or three hundred people would come for the opening, which is an amazing number by our standards. Our openings went on and on, people came for the show and stayed there, not wanting to leave; it became a gathering point, where people were surrounded by good friends and would talk about things in a way that maybe they had forgotten in the years previously, being surrounded by everyday problems.



**So do you think Kooperacija grew an audience for contemporary art in Skopje, and where are they now? What is the audience for contemporary art in Macedonia?**

GJ: I don't think I would say that we grew an audience. Of course there is always an audience for contemporary art; those involved directly, such as curators, artists, students and musicians, but also urban people who want to find out more about what is going on. It is really hard to say that Kooperacija produced an audience or public, but we did succeed in helping to keep some kind of audience for contemporary art alive, to try and maintain the local audience's curiosity.

**I suppose this is a strategy specific to the wider Balkans, to maintain parallel or grassroots institutions, as the official cultural institutions don't really work...**

GJ: That's true, but I think it really is a very complicated question. So much culture in former Yugoslavia was produced by official institutions, not developed from culture outside those institutions; the counter-culture. Maybe not so much here, other than initiatives like Grupa ZERO in the eighties; I am thinking more of SKC in Belgrade in the seventies, the Group of Six in Zagreb, the links between OHO, NSK, Laibach and the people involved in the SKUC gallery in Ljubljana.

Somehow, it has come about that there is the need of a parallel story based on the grassroots. It's a political thing of course. For more than ten years, the independent culture scene here is the engine of contemporary art. All of the small organisations involved are making around ninety percent of the content.

For the institutions, there is a problem of education, the lack of a clear forward plan, and the imposition of managers who are not from the field of art; the putting forward of a party member, rather than a professional, really is a problem. This stops the emergence of an interesting and relevant, lively programme.

**We have talked quite a lot about culture and politics, and institutions. The other issue I'd like to discuss is that you are an artist who has worked with stories from other ethnicities in Macedonia; could you say something more about that?**

GJ: Of course, I have no problem to work with people from any ethnic background; I have close friends and colleagues in the Albanian community. I just don't recognise these barriers. With friends of many different backgrounds I worked on an interesting project called Nationless, connecting Macedonians, Greeks, Serbs, Kosovars and Albanians.

I also have experience of working with Albanian colleagues in a residency in Tirana, in 2013. I was there for about a month and a half, never having been to Albania, as I knew many more people from Kosovo. I wanted to learn more about the nation, whose people form the biggest ethnic minority here. We tried to connect this ancient form of singing, which has its roots in Greek culture, and to combine it with lyrics discussing what's happening today. We collaborated with an interesting young activist and poet who wrote a text about the problems arising from the neoliberal system in Albania. Once again, really interesting things come from collaborative projects; connecting different musicians, singers and writers.

**Choirs have been important in your recent work have they not?**

GJ: Yes, that's true. Collaborative choirs have been a strong theme in my work and I want to continue with these works not only in Macedonia but in other countries in the region. I have worked with the choir of the Belgrade group SKART; the work with them talked much more about the Serbian context.

I am interested in collectives too, like Chto Delat, and Tellervo Kalleinen's Choir of Complaints. I helped the choir Raspeani Skopjeani by performing, and editing their videos.



**I wanted to ask about the relationship between your work and social media culture; it's been a really noticeable direction in your work for five years or so now.**

GJ: There is one project called It's Complicated, which deals with one of the most remarkable phenomena here, which is facebook. Facebook in the last year was one of the few media where people were free to express themselves. On facebook, people were speaking out and organizing on important social questions and initiatives. The final result of all this activity, however, is still frames.

I made white paintings in response, to try to take these debates out of the virtual world, and to re-enact them in the real world, as some kind of document of the turbulence and the intensity of events in recent times. I think this is the work that has dealt most directly with social media that I have made. Other than, of course, the collages I am making on a daily basis for the okno portal.

**Where do you see contemporary art going in Macedonia, in the next few years?**

GJ: It's really hard to say. I have the feeling that the scene is getting smaller, and the audience for contemporary art is getting smaller. This is not just a Macedonian problem, it is happening everywhere. I felt it too elsewhere in Europe, and in the USA.

I have the feeling that contemporary art is becoming like a secret society with a small number of devotees; people who try to think through culture and communicate through it. I suppose that's why I don't have a clear picture of where we are all going. There are a smaller number of younger people trying to express themselves through art.

This is why it is really important to have initiatives such as Kooperacija, or things like Kula that was established recently by graduate students from the faculty; independent institutions have a stronger and stronger role in the region.

In these chaotic times it really is hard to measure what is happening and where everything will go. In more organized society you have some parameters by which you can measure cultural activity; here it is not the case and it's harder to have a good overview. Visual art really is a subculture here.

In other fields of the arts, such as music or the theatre, we also have a problem that they are just producing things for amusement; we don't have plays that problematize social problems or themes. Macedonian theatre was once very strong, in Yugoslav times and also in the first fifteen years of independence, but not so much now. Nowadays, the most interesting theatrical productions are produced in the alternative scene. One or two independent theatre companies started, but unfortunately they couldn't survive for long. The young actors and directors have worked out that it is the only way to involve yourself in some relevant questions.





Born Bitola, 1979. Studied Architecture. Multimedia artist, curator and political activist. Founder and organiser of AKTO festival, Bitola, 2006 – present. Member of Kooperacija, 2012-15. Lives and works in Skopje.

## Filip Jovanovski

*Filip Jovanovski, The Cabinet of Professor Vladimir Velickovski: 24 Allegories to Explain the World, 2011. Installation, 9th Biennial of Young Macedonian Artists, Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje, October 2011. (opposite page)*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

FJ: I have several early memories, connected with my grandmother's house in Bitola. She had a large tapestry hanging on her bedroom, with the design of it based on Monet, or Pissarro, one of the impressionist painters. I was encouraged to draw in akvarel when I was small; recently I found a very early akvarel of mine from that time, in the house of one of my grandparents' friends- it was very hard to find it!

I can also remember seeing Picasso's Head of a Bull in Jansson's book on the History of Art. As a child of course I only had emotional impressions if it, I couldn't derive any meaning from the image. But it was a powerful early impression of what art might be; later on, I was inspired much more by the likes of Alfred Jarry, Dada and so on.

## What do you remember of your art education, and how has it shaped you subsequently? How do you think of it now?

FJ: My art education was very broadly based; I began by studying architecture. At the end of my second year, in which I was instructed in a very classical, traditional way, I decided to do art. I realised that, even if I was going to quit architecture and turn to art, that somehow the basics of architecture were very important. In the end I stuck with architecture, as it is such an interdisciplinary subject. Architecture is not so much about individual buildings, which are simply the product of the environment and the society that produces them. I began to think more of cities, of space, and of architectural processes.

I spent quite a bit of time drawing during my architectural studies; the importance of this process helped me later when I turned to art. I was in a real dilemma about sticking with architecture or turning to fine art, but I kept on with architecture. Somehow at that time it was more concrete; there were all these links to modernist movements in art, too, such as Bauhaus, the relationship between architecture and the beginnings of video art, and so on.

Whilst studying architecture, I made a lot of connections with people studying at the Academy of Dramatic Arts. At the end of my second year, I formed an informal artistic group, the "Faculty of Things that Can't be Learned". It was a kind of parallel university for things that were not taught there that started in October 2001 in Nebojša Vilić's Gallery Mesto space. From that time, I was more interested

in performing arts, visual arts and activism. In Zagreb in 2002, we did a performance called *Protesting Against Yourself*, turning the methodologies of protests against ourselves. From this point on, I was closely involved in the performing and fine arts. A few years later, around 2005, I was involved in building and designing sets for the theatre.

## There's quite an interesting relationship in the history of Macedonian art between contemporary art and theatre design..I am thinking of someone like Branko Kostovski, Vasilije Popovic- Cico, who made whole careers from his work with theatre design, having started out at Fine Art Academies...

FJ: Hm yes; I was really interested by the theatre in Bitola, which is one of the best in Macedonia. It was important to me whilst growing up, and I still take something of a theatrical approach to installation and art making. Through theatre and involvement in the broader art world, I learned a lot about approaches to producing art, and also to how the event itself is made. Theatre approaches were also influential when I was first active on the alternative arts scene in Skopje ten years or so ago, through some pilot projects, parties and the music scene here. It has also been influential in my personal practice; perhaps it influences the projects that I curate, with research and methodology relying more on my architectural background.

## It's the tenth anniversary of the AKTO festival of contemporary arts in Bitola. Can you tell us something of how it came about, and how it has developed?

FJ: There is an irony here. It is our tenth anniversary, and we have not received a single denar from the municipality, which shows how things have changed in the production of culture, in regard to independent contemporary culture. In the past 10 years during the cultural policy of this government. I am afraid the socio-political context we are in works against the success of initiatives such as AKTO. My efforts and my practice at present are pushed in the defining of contemporary culture and practice against the dominant political powers. I do not think contemporary art should be separate from these efforts. This opposes popular culture that has been supported



in the last nine to ten years; unthinking popular culture that does not represent or develop anything; culture that is supposed somehow to be related to national issues.

It looks very small, compared to how it was five years ago; partly due to the budget, but also because of a change in our strategy. We used to expend a lot of social capital, provide some paid work for sixty people and work with a hundred volunteers; now it is more focused, it is a small and precisely developed festival focusing on certain issues; it is the only way for our festival to be relevant or alive. The government ignored these efforts and deliberately do not support us; particularly when you compare us with a national festival of culture, which has a budget of half a million euros. I still believe in our projects and our work however, and we will keep going. I do not want to give it up.

### How is the contemporary culture scene in Bitola...how does it function in comparison to Skopje?

FJ: Nowadays I am mainly active in Skopje and I am not in Bitola as much as I used to be. However, in the late eighties and early nineties, there was a strong underground scene in Bitola, with strong scenes in theatre, music and painting, who went on to play significant roles in the Macedonian art world in the 1990s. Theatre in particular drove the cultural world in Bitola, and audiences there are very well educated and informed.

We can't really talk of independent cultural scenes outside of Skopje and Bitola. There is, of course, also a more traditional art world focused on painting, the kind of artists that are members of DLUM. I suppose the audience for culture is a little divided, and that more traditional cultural strategies are still going, and attract their own audiences. Overall, Bitola is very traditional in terms of art, but the city does have great potential; certainly compared to cities outside of Skopje, where there is no contemporary art scene.

I am trying to make art in this gap between the positions of the contemporary, and the traditional. The general problem in Macedonian culture is lack of continuity, not so much a question of money, but a lack of cultural strategy. If we had just one event every week in terms of contemporary culture, just one, then we could really grow an audience for contemporary culture; we could have related activities which would help with this. This is the problem with AKTO; events once a year is not enough to sustain the audience.



Discussion at the 10th AKTO Festival, Bitola, August 2015.  
Filip Jovanovski third from the right; curator Ivana Vaseva fourth from the left.

This year with AKTO, where Ivana (Vaseva) is the main curator, we have three groups of activities. Based around the concept of memories and futures. The first is collecting an archive of memories; the second strand is a process of reflection on those memories; the third idea is a participatory project, where we will work with volunteers, to complete a survey trying to understand the position and role of art in Bitola. We involve the audience, in this way, like participants in the exhibition, to go out of the frame of only professional artists being involved in the exhibition, and the idea that only professional artists can produce art and culture.

In contrast, the VMRO-controlled municipality have big budgets and are strong culturally; these cultural budgets act as transmitters of power. As a result, in these circumstances, there are no real conditions for new grassroots movements to grow, in small communities, at least not for addressing relevant contemporary questions. However, I remain optimistic; when we strengthen the position of civil society, this can act as a distributor of power to help develop a local nucleus of cultural actors. This is why I still work in Bitola. I still feel we can change something, and to have quality cultural events outside of Skopje.



**How would you see yourself now; as primarily a political activist, as primarily an artist, working in the studio?**

**What is the relationship between art and activism in contemporary Macedonia?**

FJ: The position of the contemporary artist today is a very important question not just for me, but generally. We can't now just talk of an artist working in the studio. The process of producing art has changed. In my practice, the equivalent of working in the studio, is working in the street with subjects, and in the relations between them. I use my experience of organising to refresh and develop the work. The line is very thin between art, activism and organisation as a curator, and this can be a trap for many. Visual language does not define an artist, it must be said; I am very conscious of using visual language in activism.

The difference between the artist and activist is one of approach to the work. The difference lies in knowing how to use form, and the artistic process of research, use of symbols, and different dynamics in the preparation of work.

However, it's inspiring for me to step back from the position of being a professional "artist". The artist can't be divided from what is going on in society. I feel that my work and efforts are needed in organising these protests against the government. This is a political way of acting; my political position is connected to wider social relations, between the people and the government; this is a political way of acting in this society. At the same time I don't want to see art as a separate profession or craft. For me acknowledging both is a very strong and pure position to take. Contemporary artists should deal with all these questions through our knowledge of visual art, and use art to create stronger social relations. For example, using my work based on the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje to show particular social relations that define a particular context. This is a different approach to many traditional painters, and Professors at the Academy, who strongly suggest that politics and art cannot be related; they do not understand that something like a landscape painting can also be politically informed and engaged.

It's easy for people to pigeonhole you as a person. You cannot understand the role of an artist if you don't know what the wider role of the artist is, in society.

**So I suppose that leads me to ask, why be an artist in contemporary Macedonia, when so many problems require solutions in the political sphere?**

**What specific approach can art bring to solving these problems?**

FJ: I suppose this leads on from the previous answer; it's true to say I am more focused on the political situation at present. How can one make art after the revelation of the "bombs"? I suppose the question also focuses on the role of cultural workers in this society. They need to find a way to conceiving of society, and to be part of the systems of production that have been altered so much by the current government; something like Skopje 2014 which is presented as totally representative of Macedonian culture, when it is not. The current government, represented by VMRO and coalition parties, have created a rupture between the creative arts and reality, which is a tragedy. They have isolated art and culture from real processes. Many cultural workers think it is not their job to address the conditions we all face, only respond to government propaganda, and to implement decisions in their professional life in response.

It's a personal dilemma for me, too. I have skills in art and culture; how should I use these in times such as these, why make art in these circumstances? We have to focus on how to make events that are relevant to conditions in society; at present we cannot connect with, or keep producing, works that are disconnected from the social context.

**What did you learn from your involvement in Kooperacija?**

FJ: Well, Ivana Vaseva and I recently got an award for research in visual arts from AICA; the topic is "collective action as a political, not just a technical decision".

It's a very important subject for me as I am involved in a lot of collectives; any decision to work collectively, is a political decision. Kooperacija was one such collective. It was formed by five local artists, three and a half years ago, as a political intervention in the local cultural scene and dynamics; in opposition to institutional ignorance of contemporary culture.

*Filip Jovanovski, I Love the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Loves Me, 2013/14. Installation, Parallel Universe: Five Contemporary Artists from Macedonia, duplex 100m2, Sarajevo, February 2014. (following two pages)*



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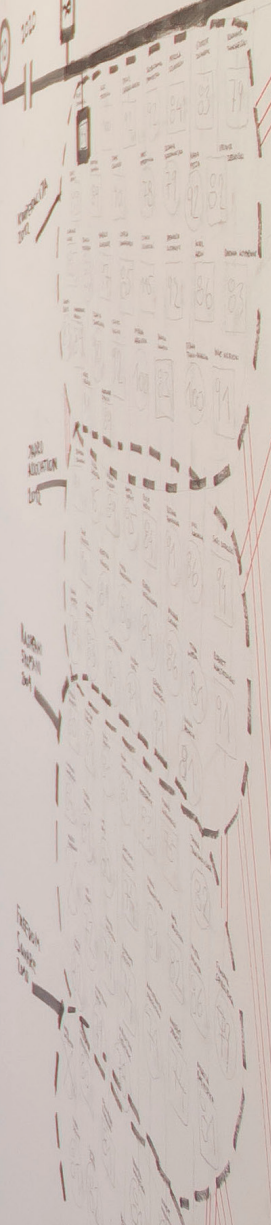
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For me it was a very good experience, as we showed the potential of collective work; we also learned a lot about the process of learning collectively, and about one another. It's a pity Kooperacija couldn't find the motivation to stay together. But in these years we made around twenty events, self-financed, including exhibitions abroad; Kooperacija showed that it is possible to work collectively and meaningfully; there is broader awareness of collective work in contemporary art here. Kooperacija was influential for some student groups that have formed in its wake.

If in the future we decide to make another collective organisation, we will know how the collective should look, and how it should work. Kooperacija was an important organisation in the producing of culture, and used a self-organising, consciously political, grassroots approach. For me the decision to work collectively is, first and foremost, a political one. That should be the primary motivation.

The aim of this government, is to divide collective gatherings of citizens in different spheres; to divide them from the real context. Collective work shows another, democratic way of organising culture; everyone has the right to work critically, and to make critical art.

The isolation of art that deals with issues in society, the transformation of the function of art function into decoration, is the most dangerous development in contemporary Macedonian society for me.

### **In terms of the works produced for Skopje 2014, what do you think should happen to them?**

FJ: It's a very important question. Really, I am not sure. The main characteristic of this government is that they try to erase history in a brutal way, like vandals. The erasure of history does not solve problems in democratic societies. If we destroy the monuments, we will be like them.

I think the policy should be a combination; maybe the monuments should be abandoned, and allowed to go back to nature. More broadly, we need to create a democratic context for discussion as to what happens; to invest in the education system, and to educate people on what happened here in Yugoslav times, and about different ideas from European culture; if we do that, over time, then the conditions that helped to create Skopje 2014 will not recur. Skopje 2014 should be altered over time using democratic tools. The shame of this time, and what happened in this time, should not be forgotten by future generations; we are partly to blame for all that has happened here.

Skopje 2014 has done great damage to our society and our country, in terms of the networks of patronage and criminality that underpin it. It is very hard work to challenge these networks. Processes in society should be developed to create a more sustainable culture, to understand our modernist heritage so that no one in the future will try to erase it.

### **Macedonian art has a very low profile internationally compared to countries such as Serbia or Bosnia-Herzegovina. Why do you think this is?**

FJ: I think we are very closed, even on the level of cultural institutions. We are focused on survival in our own context at present. Institutions are not working, and are totally isolated; further, there is no investment in education. It's hard to recognise interest in our scene and to grow it; we try to do this through the existing scene, but it is not enough.

Kosovo, in the last two biennials, had German curators, and lots of money; there are mechanisms there to promote art, but somehow culture is not treated in such a sophisticated way here. We are not seeing how the art world outside of Macedonia works and how it could be turned to our advantage. When we go to the biennials, we are just going there; we are not really engaging with the mechanisms of the international art world.

Conditions for artists and cultural workers here are sadly very poor. There still is some insurance for independent artists, a law much the same from Yugoslav times, but there is no equivalent status for the curator. If you apply to the Ministry of Culture for funding, the maximum they will give for an exhibition is five hundred euros, which obviously is not enough budget for producing contemporary art work. The knowledge of making professional exhibitions, the ideas, the process, the vital role of the curator, are not really understood here, even if the quality of the art that is made here is not so bad.

The solution? We need to try to build the infrastructure for art collectively, and to fight for the position of contemporary art in society. In Macedonia, artistic positions are usually conceived of individually, and we are not so used to working on the basis of solidarity, or for the benefit of the wider art scene. This, of course, is a broader problem of neoliberalism.



**Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia, and what are the reasons for your answer?**

FJ: On the one hand, I can see that the capacity for contemporary art is growing, and really working for and in the community. On the other hand, the system that has been developed by this government is so strong, and has done so much damage to our cultural system, that it will be a slow and hard task to reverse it.

I have a good feeling in the sense that we tried to make a difference through civic engagement, and to show that there are different ways of operating within this society. Only time will tell if we have learned from the last nine years.

I fear there is quite a chance that similar tragedies will repeat themselves in future; that maybe in the future conditions will not exist to try and make a change. But there have been positive experiences from this period of our history.

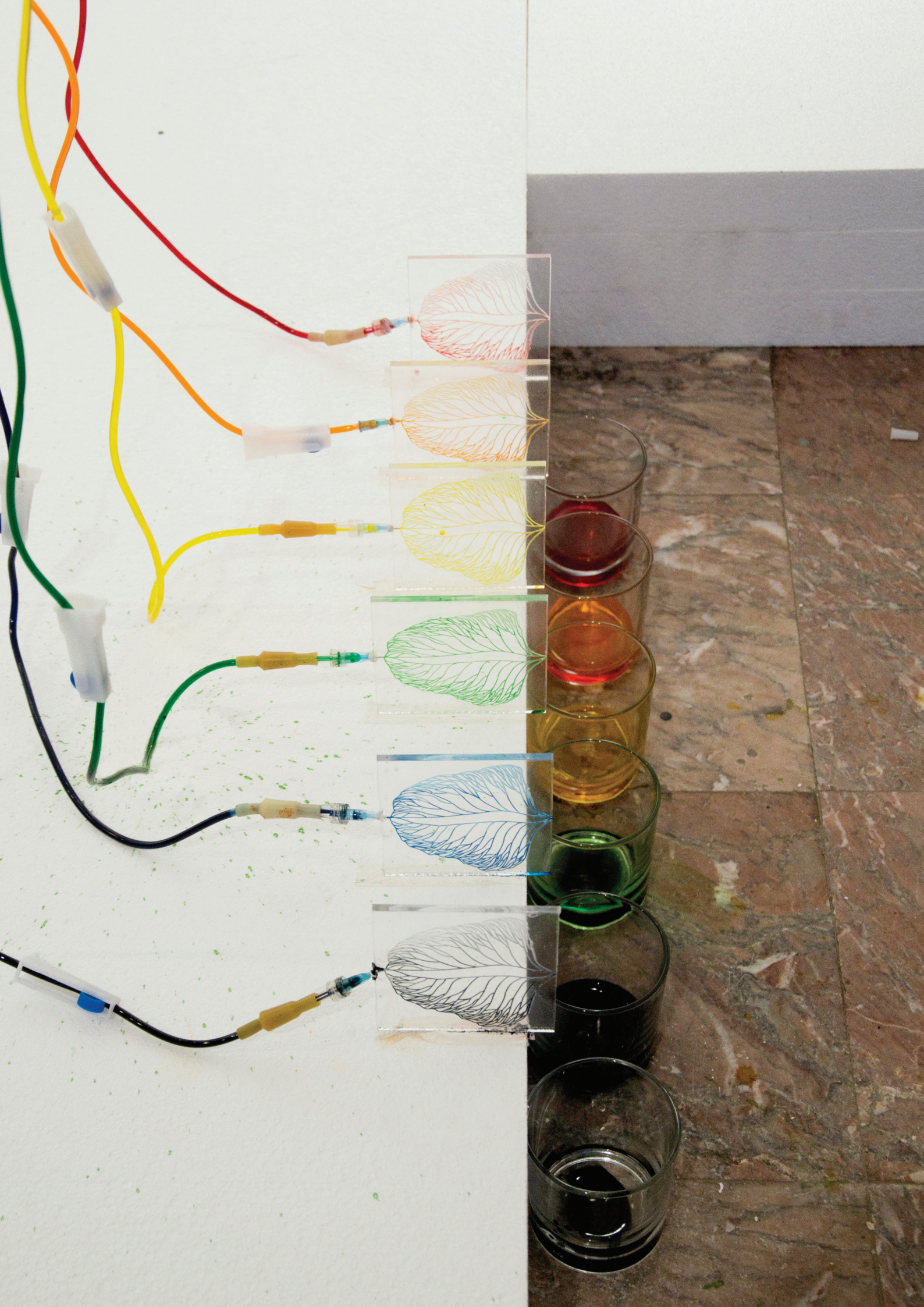
Look, art and culture is not so much of a priority at the moment, at least not until the next elections. The changes we need to make focus on bottom-up initiatives; if we compare our situation to Croatia's, for example, they seemed to fight a lot more for independent culture and to change the laws to establish a position in society for the independent cultural scene.

This is the kind of thing that we should be doing here, to change the laws to distribute power through the use of public money, and how the money should be used to build a more democratic society in which civil society plays a full part. Who exerts power, how it is used, should be key questions for artists; we need a paradigm change away from personal interest.



Filip Jovanovski, *Don't Stare so Romantically*, 2011.  
Photographic Installation.





Born Skopje, 1982. Graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje in 2007, from the Graphic Arts department, and finished a Masters in Painting in 2011 at the same faculty. Founder member of ARTI.N.S.T.I.T.U.T. (2009-11) and MOMI (2011-present). Works across artistic disciplines and media. Has exhibited widely in Europe, Asia and America.

[www.majakirovska.com](http://www.majakirovska.com)

## Maja Kirovska

*Maja Kirovska, Temperature Circulation Gravitation, 2012. (detail) Mixed media installation. (Opposite Page)*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

MK: My earliest memories are from kindergarten; my mother said that I was drawing, before I was walking. Drawing was the thing that I most wanted to do as a child. I really felt that art was my calling from the beginning. A funny thing from when I was very young, was that I was in the same class at kindergarten as Velimir Zernovski; I always felt that he drew better than me, and I liked his drawings better.

I chose to go to general high school rather than Art High School, as I felt then that it was too early to specialise. It was hard for me to study science, but I do feel that the knowledge I gained about sciences- physics, biology, chemistry- have helped with my installations that I do now. I have strong visual memories from this period.

I decided to stay in Skopje to study fine arts, as I enjoy living here, and feel at home here. I didn't really think of going to study abroad. The faculty of fine arts has four departments; sculpture, painting, pedagogy and graphic arts, and I finished graphic arts first of all, which I studied alongside graphic design and fashion design.

## What did you think of your art education?

MK: I don't know; I had some luck. I met some good friends there and I studied with professors who had more of a contemporary outlook. My professor Kostadin Tanchev – Dinka, who I had studied under, retired after the fourth year of studies, before my graduation, but in this period I gained a wider knowledge in graphic arts and graphic design. In 2007 I continued my education with postgraduate studies at the painting department, under the mentorship of Blagoja Manevski. Manevski has a contemporary outlook and opened out new perspectives for the students, organized wider variety of lectures and presentations that we attended.

This was also a period where the internet was dial up, and very slow, so it was hard to find information about open calls, and broader information about what was going on in the art world. The internet was slow, and also very expensive.

After 2009, when we could travel without visas, and the internet became much faster here, things became much easier for us.

Before 2009, it was difficult to travel much, and most of my friends didn't travel either. But in 2009 there was a big biennial of young

artists from Europe and the Mediteranean, here in Skopje, and then we saw that our development was pretty similar to the objects that they presented. I can't say that the art of young Macedonians was inferior, in comparison.

At the same time as this biennial happened, we decided to open a new, alternative space in Skopje, as we lacked alternative spaces. Institutions didn't trust us so much because they thought we were young and inexperienced, and they were a little sceptical that we would be able to deliver the big projects that we had in mind. They suggested that we approach smaller galleries first.

We were lucky that Dalibor Trenčevski's brother worked for an estate agency, and Dalibor tasked him to find us a workable space in Skopje. We were ambitious, and had ideas for projects on a large scale; performances, installations and so on. Anyway, he found us a space in the summer of 2009, that had formerly been the Geological Institute. The institute had moved elsewhere and the space was stuck in a legal process. We rented the space, and formed a group.

People were a little doubtful, as everyone involved had to pay rent for the space; people who signed up for the project were from the painting department of the Faculty of Fine Arts, mostly Manevski's students. We opened out the opportunity to many artists of our generation and we opened the space with our first project; a performance called Let's Fuck Them with Purple. We decided to open the Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T. at the same time as the Biennial of Young Artists from Europe and Mediteranean (BJCEM), but this was a mistake. We had hoped that many foreign artists, who were in the city at the time, would come; but the audience was mainly local. From that point on, we made some projects there, on a monthly basis.

Our next project was called Attempt Zero, a group exhibition, which was a mixture of painting, sculpture and installation. This exhibition didn't have a particular theme. At around that time, many NGOs were working in Skopje, and funding projects, but only according to their specific interests; perhaps they were focusing on the effects of the conflict from 2001, social problems like minority rights, the long period of transition, the lack of integration of the individual into contemporary society, and matters such as these. We decided, however, not to be constrained by these particular issues, and we declared this in our first performance leaflet. We decided just to go ahead and present what we believed was important. Our focus was on expression; always there was a lot of colour, performances with loud music, and so on. Some said we were too visual and we didn't have any ideas; actually, to be visual was the idea. As the space we were in was an old building, we could transform it as we liked.



Looking back, there was a very good, unified spirit between us all in this space, although we were all doing very different things. Our works ended up being unifying in a way, as we were all working together constantly and spent a lot of time there.

We also decided that no single individual would be in charge of Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T.; we decided that everyone would be in charge, and that everyone would vote on decisions. In the end this became a problem, as everyone simply did what he liked anyway (laughs). The people involved were Dalibor Trenčevski, Angel Miov, Ana Ivanovska, Marija Sotirovska, Tatjana Ristovska, Kristina Hadzieva, Borce Bogoevski, Zorica Zafirovska, Hristina Zafirovska, Igor Kitanovski, Goran Boev, Marko Georgievski, Nikola Radulovikj, Vesna Veleska and myself. Other members joined us shortly afterwards, Blagojche Naumoski-Bane, Urosh Veljkovikj, Ladislav King (Blagoja Blaževski) and Daniel Petrovski. We also had many guest artists, participating in the events.

Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T. started in summer 2009, and it closed at the end of summer 2011. The legal process finished and the previous tenants lost the right to use the building. It was returned to ownership of the state. The old building was demolished and a new one built in its place.

### **What did you learn from the two years of the Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T.?**

MK: We learned that you don't need much to make art. We had the space, good will and with minimal resources you can make what you want. Also, collective spirit has a great power; when like-minded people gather in one space, they can make great things together.

We also learned the practicalities of making exhibitions and running a space; the good days and quiet days; how to make an event and promote it, and how to build and retain an audience.

### **Who came to your events? Lots of different visitors, or the same old faces?**

MK: You'll see the same people at most art events in the city; it is a small place and the same people always come to openings. However, we did also attract lots of younger people, interested in art and our exhibitions were always busy.

**I am picking up something from your work during this period that I think is still relevant to your practice now; it's almost a policy of yours not to comment on social issues or politics, but rather to engage with the imagination instead.  
Your stance is a very independent one I think.  
Does this date from Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T. or were those your views beforehand?**

MK: We gathered like-minded people in Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T. and this attitude connected us all. We wanted to express ourselves freely and without regard, as far as possible, to funding or budgetary issues. In that period the attempt by foundations to frame contemporary art was a problem; now there are no funds really, so it is not so much of a problem. The Ministry of Culture still provides small funds, that can cover part of your costs, but once they have done that, they don't interfere in your programme. Maybe some other artists have different experiences than me, of course.

### **How influential do you think Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T. was, looking back?**

MK: I think it showed a way of doing things creatively; the idea was that whoever wished to join and to show their work, could join, as long as they shared in the costs. Our idea was that everyone who has creative wishes or ideas could join us; we also had a lot of guests; if they didn't have money to share the costs, still we shared the opportunity with them. We really had a lot of creativity and creative ideas in that moment, and we were young enough and strong enough to make them.

### **How do you see conditions for artists in Macedonia, and how do you survive?**

MK: Actually, it's hard to sell what we make. You can't live from occasional sales. All of us work at other jobs; fortunately for many, these jobs are related to art. People work at teaching, in applied arts, in design- these jobs enable us to survive. It is not so hard to find this kind of job here. At the moment, I am an assistant professor at the faculty of art and design at the European University. I really



enjoy teaching, and the students I am teaching have influenced me also; it is very noble work to work with young people; it's a pleasure to work with them, especially when you achieve good results. For example, the last work I showed, at Paratissima Art Fair in June, was developed out of some ideas I had whilst teaching design and photography. The work used typography from poster design, book covers and so on.

The work *Everything is Not Rosy* was done in cyan and magenta, two key colours in the printing spectrum; the two texts in the work are overlapping and transparent; the blue and pink filters help to separate the two moods in this work.

**You are very active in the art scene. What sort of response does your work have, around Macedonia?**

MK: Many people recognise that I am doing a lot of work and exhibitions and are interested to come and see it, because they know they will see something new. People of all ages understand and appreciate my work. My pieces are very visual, as we have said; maybe if my work was more conceptual in emphasis, people wouldn't understand it so much. Maybe they still don't, but they still want to see it anyway.

**So, what have the major preoccupations in your work been over the last year?**

MK: My ideas are more general, and have roots in philosophical trends. However, I have the feeling that art should be more connected with reality. My works are not connected to the political situation, but they have a general approach related to life. I suppose I want to talk about problems that we all face that we can understand wherever it is shown; I try to address problems on a universal level.

In the past I was interested in the ideas of Plato and the ancient philosophical thought about the connection between beauty and proportion; however, I moved beyond this as I felt this was rather out of date. I know people enjoy seeing beautiful things, so did I, and I based my art on observations, of structures in nature. But gradually I moved away from reading philosophy, and my art that was rooted in observations of nature and recurring patterns; crystals, natural geometry and so on.



Maja Kirovska, *Universal Order*, 2009. (detail) Site-specific, mixed media installation. Museum of Macedonia, 2009.

Maja Kirovska, *Sisyphus! Where is the Exit?*, Site-Specific video installation, 2011 (following page left)  
Maja Kirovska, *Temperature Circulation Gravitation*, 2012. (detail) Mixed media installation. (following page right)







**Your work is very focused on body issues, for example your piece *Temperature, Circulation, Gravitation* that you showed first in 2012.**

**Can you say some more about that?**

MK: These works are inspired by things I remembered from studying biology and chemistry; perhaps some ideas on natural patterns and natural equilibrium, and how that can be disturbed. I always wondered why we seem to care more about animals, than plants. I decided to make the work that you mention, to reflect the idea of an organism; dripping red liquid that looked like blood, onto toilet paper. It was inspired by the action of capillary that plants have, that brings them food and oxygen; this system has so much in common with animals systems. We should consider what is conscious, unconscious; how we make decisions what to care about and classify, and what not to care about.

At the end of 2014 I started a new project, which started with the exhibition titled *Clean Room*; I put together art works of mine that had something in common, namely the element of chance. For example, there were some prints that were made from a destroyed hard drive; it was a painful experience that many of my digital works were lost; some were recovered, some were corrupted beyond saving. But it's interesting, when you open corrupted files on Photoshop, each time they open; they open in a different way. So, I made a series of prints from these corrupted files. There were thirty-six prints in total, and the series was called *Variation on a Glitch*.

**Tell us something about MOMI, the group that you are currently involved in.**

MK: This started in 2012; there are the seven women who were involved in the Art I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T. group. When you are in a bigger group you have to accommodate lots of different interests. We decided to continue as a group in 2012. We function quite well through group discussions on the internet. We decided that we didn't need a space we would work together; we work from home, where some of us have studios. Actually, I don't really need a studio, as a lot of my work is digital, and the rest of it can be assembled on site from smaller parts that I make at home. We have decided that it is better to move around different spaces, so that new and unfamiliar spaces challenge the ideas that you already have. Sometimes it is better to choose the space according to your idea.

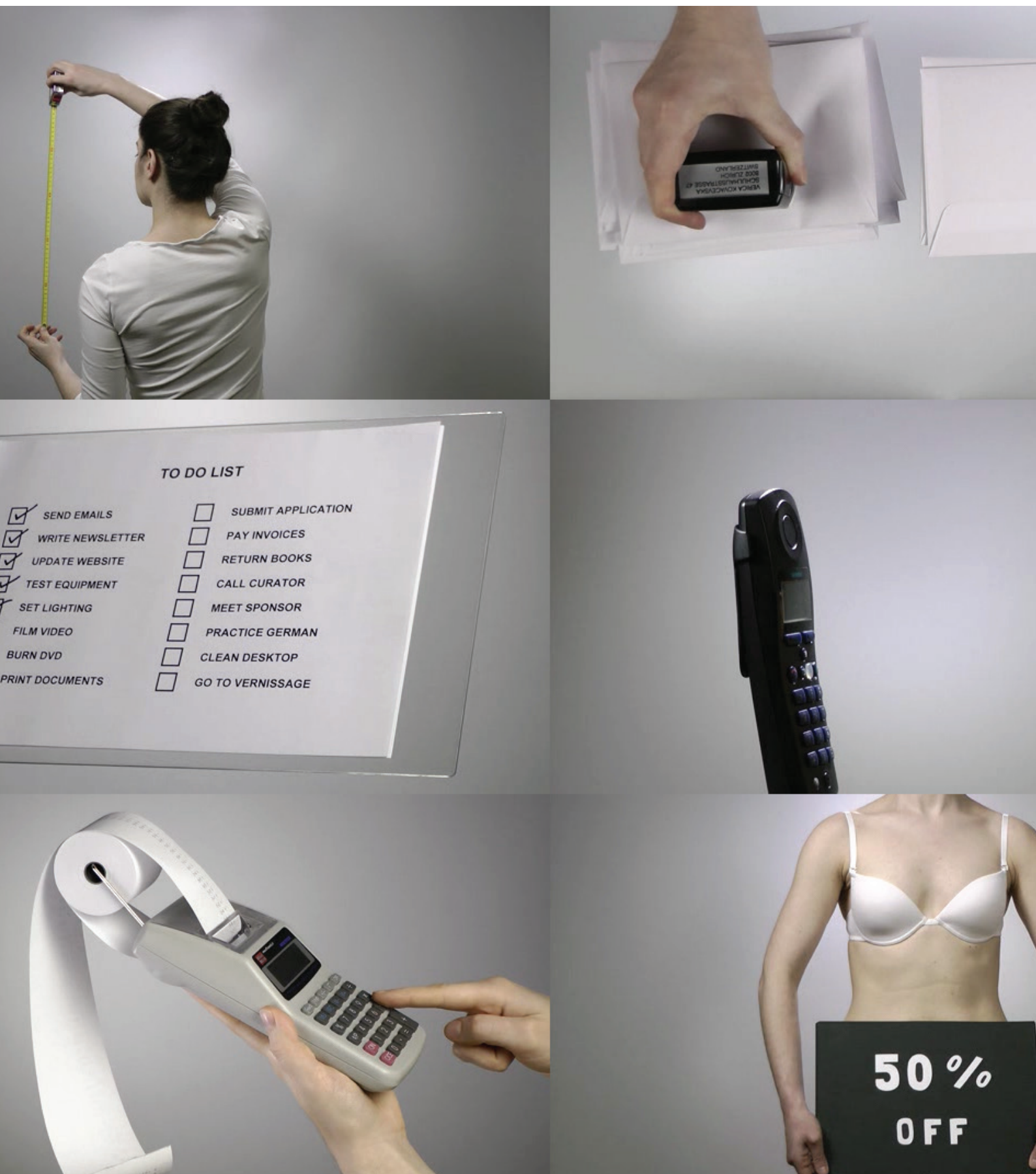
The name MOMI is an older Macedonian word for girls, which is not really in use any more; we chose this name pretty quickly. It's a bit of a joke, as it makes us sound like some kind of big international museum.

MOMI is an ongoing project; we have had ten shows so far, not just in Macedonia but in Croatia, Bulgaria and Serbia; we have plans also for 2016.

**Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia?**

MK: It's in my nature to be optimistic. I can see things developing here. I look forward to a time when artists can live from their art, rather than just doing it through enthusiasm, or love. My idea is to live here in Macedonia and to travel abroad as much as I can. It is possible to do a lot of things from here, and it is particularly helpful to do group work. Many of my friends have realised their ideas through group work. Group work is such a positive experience. When people with the same aim and energies gather, they really have the strength to achieve something. We have to keep believing that we have the strength to change things.





Verica Kovacevska, *The Artist*, 2013, video still (detail)



Born Skopje, 1982. Graduated in Visual Art with Theatre and Performing Arts from the University of Plymouth, England., 2004; completed MPhil in Arts, Culture and Education at the University of Cambridge, England, 2007. Has exhibited widely in Europe in the last decade. Lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland.

[www.kovacevska.net](http://www.kovacevska.net)

## Verica Kovačevska



## What are your earliest memories of art?

VK: I started drawing very early on. I drew everything that I saw.

Then I went to school and I stopped drawing. My interest shifted to literature. For a long time, I was not interested in art. However, when I was in high school, our art teacher introduced us to contemporary art<sup>1</sup>. Suddenly art became more than just a visual thing, it was also intellectual. There was a challenge to it, and a newly found freedom. I remember being so excited about it.

## What do you remember of your art education and how do you view it now? Is what you learned during your art education relevant / important?

VK: I did my art education in England. I completed a double degree program in BA Visual Arts with Theatre and Performance, and later did an MPhil in Arts and Education.

This interdisciplinary education allowed me to have a broad perspective on art, while at the same time focusing more closely on performance art.

After all, performance art is by definition fluid. It borrows elements from other arts disciplines – from fine art to theatre, and from dance to new media. It constantly reinvents itself; it challenges us to question what performance is, or rather where performance ends and something else begins. To me this was very interesting and some of my early works dealt with these issues.

Overall, however, everything I learned during my education was very useful. Not just the theory, but many practical things too, like research, writing, time management, documentation, developing the right methodology, etc. These are all important skills to have as an artist.

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1. The name of the teacher is Slobodanka Stevčeska, a prominent Macedonian artist who is part of the art group OPA. The high school art program was part of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (the equivalent of British A levels). It offered a different art curriculum than a regular high school.

## You worked closely with Bojan Ivanov and Mala Galerija, and had a live exhibition in Bradford that was also presented in Skopje. How important was this project for your development and what do you remember of it?

VK: The Skopje/Bradford work remains one of my favourite exhibitions, probably because it was one of the more ambitious ones.

I should explain it briefly. The exhibition was called Colour Caller: Live and Recorded. During the opening, the audience in Mala Galerija was asked to choose one of four colours displayed on a screen. This triggered a sound that was transmitted live to me. I was located in Bradford – Skopje's twin city. The sounds were then interpreted by me as directions for a walking performance in Bradford. My position in the city during Colour Caller was fed back live to the audience via GPS/Google Maps. The performance was documented by video and later screened again in Mala Galerija.

I worked closely with Bojan Ivanov and Maja Cankulovska-Mihajlovska, who was the curator of the project. As I was physically absent from the gallery, I had to rely on them to ensure that everything ran smoothly – from technology and audience participation to the complex video documentation. It was very nerve-wrecking, as a lot of things could have gone wrong. Luckily it went better than expected. The audience was very involved: they had their own interpretation of the work. Some guided me through the city with a lot of thought, others wanted to draw something on the map by using my movement. There was also a discussion on the role of technology in our lives, the aspect of surveillance, the relationship between performer and audience. These questions are all raised in the work, among other things<sup>2</sup>.

This experience helped me to further develop The Walking Project of which Colour Caller was a part<sup>3</sup>.

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2. For more information on Colour Caller visit: <http://www.kovacevska.net/documents/Bibliography.pdf>, pp. 58-62.

3. For more information on The Walking Project visit: [www.thewalkingproject.net](http://www.thewalkingproject.net).



**Macedonia, culturally, is perhaps more isolated than neighbouring states such as Kosovo or Serbia... How would you account for this?**

VK: I think there are very good artists working in Macedonia. However, Macedonia is currently facing a multitude of challenges which also affects the art scene. As a consequence, Macedonia is to some extent currently in a more introverted phase, making international exchanges less of a priority. Also, unlike in other places, there is no strong support system in place for the art scene, adding further obstacles to being part of an international network. Much of it also has to do with a lack of funds, also from international supporters, and therefore much depends on the personal initiative of the artists and curators.

**How easy is it to keep in touch with developments in Macedonian art from Switzerland? How much is known about contemporary art from the region?**

VK: I keep up with things through friends and social media and I also stay in touch with people when I visit Macedonia.

There was a lot of interest in the region a few years ago. Art from the Balkans was promoted through several festivals here, and there was an exchange with artists and curators organised by Pro Helvetia. However, the focus (intentionally or not) has since shifted more towards Serbia, Croatia, and Kosovo. It is probably fair to say that most people in Switzerland have not seen much contemporary art from Macedonia.

**What are you working on right now?**

VK: Currently I am finishing a project about the prefabricated houses in Skopje that were built after the big earthquake in 1963. The project is a bit of a departure from my other works, at least in the presentation. But I think it is an important story to tell. These houses are slowly but surely disappearing. And they are such an important part of our history.



Verica Kovacevska, Studio no. 4, installation, 2008.  
Photo: Roman Richers.

As all of them have long surpassed their intended ten-year lifespan, they have become a kind of a phenomenon. A unique, but authorless architecture, they have shaped our city and the lives of three generations of people, including mine.

**Are you optimistic, or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia?**

VK: I remain cautiously optimistic, as I believe the country has great potential, but to fully develop it, certain things would first need to change. One such area is art education which often is still very traditional, focusing on classical subjects with little, if any, attention given to the contemporary art of the last decades. This obviously also has an impact on the audience and their expectations.

Another area concerns structural changes that would be helpful, including an increased independence of cultural institutions from politics, a broader funding basis that does not rely exclusively on state funding, ideally the emergence of an art market, greater exchange first with the region and then also the rest of the world.





*Doroti Pačkova, Untitled, 2014/15.  
Acrylic on Paper.*



Doroti is a painter, photographer and activist.  
She lives and works in Skopje.

## Doroti Pačkova



## What are your earliest memories of art?

DP: The earliest memories I have are from my childhood; I really want to spend time painting and with art. I was also a real storyteller. I kept colouring books for special occasions and would stay under the table colouring in whilst adult talk was going on. I would cut shapes out of the books, coloured in, and decorate the adult's shoes. Soon they would rise from the table and be pleasantly surprised...

I had a very strong imagination as a child. My room was like my own kingdom, and there I was allowed to paint, decorate, re-paint as I wanted; I did this continuously, crowding my walls with colourful adventures. I remember travelling by bus from the other end of town to some private art classes, and later falling asleep with my face glued to the page of an art book, the waking up carefully, so as not to damage the book.

## How do you remember your art education?

DP: From an early age, I knew that I was going to be an artist. I attended art high school and from there went to the art academy.

Really, art high school was my life when I was there. I learned so much during those years. I learned a lot of essential technical skills, but also about myself, the world, freedom, friendships, and the limits of power. I was concentrating on painting both at high school, and at the academy.

I am afraid that when I went to the art academy, I had the first big disappointment of my life. Perhaps I had too big an expectation of the academy. Whilst working in the most beautiful studio that the academy has, I felt dulled and uninspired. After many conflicts and disputes, after four or five years I decided that I didn't need a college degree and left; I felt that I was wasting my time studying with people from whom it was not possible to learn. Somehow I felt like I did not belong there. Pedagogically, it really sucks, and it is the only art academy in the country.

At the same time as all this, I was undergoing some profound changes to my life that have shaped me into the kind of artist that I am today, and the set of interests that I plan to develop further.

Eventually, after four years absence, I finally finished the academy ten years after first enrolling. Beyond that, I began to study gender studies at Masters level. This is a new area of study for me and it has really captivated me in a special way. I still have an incredible desire to learn and I really enjoy learning in different areas.

## What are the main preoccupations in your painting?

DP: Any form of art for me is a source and a stimulant for the imagination. Making art is a kind of self-actualisation and release.

I don't draw or paint too carefully; for me painting is more a kind of action. I see my paintings as kind of psychograph, as a record of how I was feeling at a certain moment in time, that I can re-visit later. For me painting is an act of freedom, as a breaking through of certain types of constraint.

I feel that my paintings give a platform to reflect on the events of our time in a visual way; to invent, create and re-structure the events and preoccupations of life in a new artistic language; the creation of new selves, and environments, through art. In this way, the viewers of my work have the possibility to experience these images in their own way, to have a view into my consciousness, according to their own mental and spiritual state; in this way, vibrant possibilities for mental and spiritual interconnectedness, are opened up.

## You are involved in political activism, particularly around the issue of the position of single mothers in Macedonian society. How has this affected your art practice?

DP: Art and activism take many forms and are frequently intertwined. Art is the practice of an independent individual. Political awareness, calls for speaking out as an individual, which requires something of the artistic impulse. The public disclosure of individual attitudes requires the same commitment as the creative. It requires awareness of the role of the individual in society, and enflames the need for activism. There is not a strictly defined border between art and politics.



## How exactly has the experience of being a single mother influenced your creativity?

DP: I would say that my creative impulses led me to the position of being a single mother; the experience of motherhood, of being the only adult in our family, made me aware of my own capabilities and what I could achieve through mutli-tasking. It made me appreciate more my intellectual and emotional capacities. Being around a child all the time perhaps brought me closer to this pure source of life and the sheer joy of seeing the world through a child's eyes. It makes me enjoy life in a different way, being confronted with the puzzles that parenthood brings.

In the struggle for a dignified life as a single mother, I decided to initiate a self help group for single parent families. We needed some structure to confront the issues faced by single parents, to be constructive citizens and to work tirelessly to try and meet some of the needs that single parent families have.

I am sorry to say that single mothers in Macedonia, presently, are in the positions of victims; they really are oppressed both by patriarchy, and by the country's institutions and politicians who simply do not work at all for them. I am afraid that the problem also comes from other mothers, and other women who are encouraged to have a very traditional view of the family, and family roles, by political discourse.

## In your opinion, how has the Skopje 2014 programme affected the Macedonian art world, and wider society?

DP: Skopje 2014 is proof that the visual appearance of a city is a product of the hierarchies setting the framework of a society. Skopje 2014 is an excellent example of the hollowing out of democracy in the twenty first century, starting from the multiple failures in the origins of the project; the lack of prior public competition and scrutiny for the designs; the blocking of the Constitutional Court, and citizen attempts to stop the construction early.

The positioning of the elements of Skopje 2014 is strictly centralised, and speaks of a single centre of power, autocracy and totalitarian impulses that underpin the whole scheme. The occupation and privatisation of public space, without public consultation, is a facet of the violent chauvinism that every citizen in Macedonia currently experiences.

The sculptures, facades and decorative elements are all so tasteless, and so poorly made. They testify to the priorities of those responsible. They are made of such cheap and impermanent materials; gypsum board, Styrofoam, inexpensive metals, fake gold and velvet; all of this screams that the creators are aiming for quick investment and short term economic benefit- this is their only interest. The priority of this government is to make money and impress everyone with their stature and importance.

This is all happening at a time when we have a significant number of socially disadvantaged citizens; we have discriminatory and exclusionary policies aimed at women; institutionalised misogyny. These are examples of the problems faced by all citizens, the gradual erosion of our human rights, the pressing down of oppressive policies on the life of our city.

My grandfather was an architect after the earthquake, in July 1963; I grew up with the stories of how this city was built from virtually nothing. But, in modernist times, the planners really knew what they were doing. These people today have no idea what they are doing. The one clear thing from Skopje 2014 is that, as a scheme, it cannot be considered art; all it has created is an inexhaustible confusion.

## Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the prospects for contemporary art in Macedonia?

DP: Contemporary artists in Macedonia today, are undoubtedly subject to frustration, repression and totalitarianism. They feel keenly disappointment and weariness in having to fight the same battles all the time; this makes artists feel low, and weakens their personal creativity. I feel affinity with others who use creativity to oppose every act of repression and restriction of our freedoms. With some reluctance, this means taking more of an independent path, to be brave enough to express this independent attitude, ready to take direct, meaningful action in this situation to be ready both for the possibility of victory, and of defeat.

In this pressured atmosphere some very good things are being made. We have to find a way to continue on this path; to find a way of making high quality art, not things like Skopje 2014. We don't have so many options at present, but we are finding ways to carry on.

To live and to create in Macedonia today is the greatest act of rebellion, and of course proof of the power of creativity, and our ability to extract the maximum output from minimal resources.





*Nada Prlja, Subversion to Red (detail), 2013, installation, calvert 22, London.*



Born Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1971. Moved to Skopje 1981. Graduated from the Faculty of Fine Art specializing in printmaking. Masters level study at the Royal College of Art, London. Multimedia, installation, site-specific art; based in London, 1998-2014. Since 2014, Director of the Serious Interests Agency, Skopje whilst continuing art practice. Lives and works in Skopje.

[www.seriousinterests.co.uk](http://www.seriousinterests.co.uk)  
[www.facebook.com/seriousinterestsagency](https://www.facebook.com/seriousinterestsagency)

## Nada Prlja



## What are your earliest memories of art?

NP: This is a question that people don't often ask. I have always had the notion to be an artist, since I can remember. My grandmother was an artist, who graduated from the academy in Belgrade in the 1940s; she graduated at the end of the war. Unfortunately she died quite young; somehow art allows me to be closer to her as a person.

I drew a lot when I was small, I was always attracted to that. I had a dilemma when I finished elementary school, whether to go to the art high school, or to continue along the path of a broad education. It was quite difficult to persuade my mother that I should go to the art high school here in Skopje; as it did not then have a great reputation. People thought of it as a place where talented people who did not want to learn went. Art High School really helped me to develop as an artist in the practical and technical sense. There, I ended up concentrating on printmaking.

It was quite a classical high school; in our first two years we learned all different ways of working creatively; then in my final two years I concentrated on printmaking and drawing, and all related processes. I also had some very good tutors who were passionate about their profession, and pointed out to us the need to work hard and to persevere, if we wanted to make a career as an artist.

After this I entered the Fine Art Academy, continuing in printmaking. My year was quite a strong and active group; it included people who are still recognized as artists, such as Oliver Musovik, Slavica Janešlieva, and some others.

I continued to experiment, and my work began to develop in the direction of site specificity, and installation. My first exhibition was in 1996 or 1997, in a really interesting space, the Centre for Physical Rehabilitation. This was one of the first exhibitions not held in a traditional gallery space, in Skopje. I really loved this space, and the old fashioned healing techniques that were used. At the time, my brother had broken his arm really badly and was threatened with the possibility of his right hand no longer functioning. This incident, and this space, shaped my first show.

The installation was called Walking on Water, by Dr. Kneipp. This doctor was a nineteenth century physician who developed a technique that helped a lot of people. There were pools of cold and hot water, with some nightgowns placed in them; at the end there was a huge metal bath, and an animated projection of photographs of the place. It was really like a Lars von Trier movie, or something. This really was the start of my career, in this sombre, gloomy and un-

sual space. This exhibition, completed before I had even graduated, really taught me a lot about how to look at spaces, how the artist works with space and communicates with the audience.

The exhibition clearly made an impression as people still reference it when they write about my work today.

## How did the audience respond to this work? What feedback did you receive?

NP: You know, it was really varied. Some people in the arts loved the work; it was unusual at the time for Macedonia. I was helped a lot by the Soros centre as there were still aspects of the exhibition process that I was confused about. For some visitors who did not come from an arts background, it was a bit confusing; they expected something more traditional. In general, the exhibition had a great response, but it certainly shaped the way in which I worked within the arts and with different audiences. For my graduation show, I returned to printmaking, and curators who had enjoyed the installation at the Centre for Physical Rehabilitation asked why I hadn't continued to work in that way. However, I simply didn't want to take the risk with my graduation show, as by that time I had already been accepted to do an M. Phil degree at the Royal College of Arts in London.

## We have talked a little about the audiences for contemporary art.

### How would you say that the audiences for contemporary art at the end of the nineties in Macedonia, differed from the audiences that engage with contemporary art in the present time?

NP: In general I think that the nineties were a positive time in the arts in Macedonia. There was a little funding, from Soros, and from the Ministry of Culture. They say that there is a new generation every ten years or so; I was very much inspired by Zaneta Vangeli and the work of Grupa Zero, and also of Suzana Milevska as a curator.

Suzana was then a curator of printmaking at the City Museum in Skopje, and she invited us to make exhibitions there; this was an interesting starting point for many of us. I would say that the nineties were a fruitful time. I left in 1998, so I don't really know how



things were in the early years of the new century. Now, in 2015, the state of contemporary art seems quite worrying. So many artists are abandoning art as they feel very isolated and see no way of making a career in the arts. It's not such a happy scene, it seems quite depressing; there's not a lot of faith that something can happen with the arts.

**So, let's talk about your time in London, from 1998-2014; this is a significant time to spend abroad. Why did you move to London, and how did you find the city when you first moved there?**

NP: Well, I wanted to go to the RCA to continue with my art education. I felt that I had huge gaps in my knowledge of contemporary art. In Macedonia I had learned all the techniques I needed, but I really felt there was a gap in knowing how to work as an artist, how to present and explain my work and to contextualize it fully. I also moved to London for personal reasons.

Before moving to London, I had actually taken part in the Video Positive show in Liverpool, I think at the end of 1997; at that time I looked at a lot of different art schools. I chose the RCA as I felt there was enough freedom to approach your creativity in the way that you want to. I wanted to work on how to think about exhibition spaces, about the development of technology, thinking about exhibiting strategies for public art, and so on.

I moved to London full time in 1998; at a round this time my son was born. This was really challenging, being in a different city, struggling with language; as a result it took me a while to finish my M.Phil. Doing this type of research was something completely new to me, and a much longer, more structured piece of writing than I had ever done in Macedonia. As an artist, I always describe my work as site, space or condition-specific; it takes me quite a while to construct the context that my work can be shown in. I became really interested in theory at this stage.

When my studies were finished, I started to become really active again, around 2003 or 2004. I have to say that my career as an artist really started in the UK, as I had only had two exhibitions before leaving Macedonia.

**What theorists had you become interested in during this time, and are they still influential now?**

NP: Not really...around the time I was thinking about something similar to instagram, maybe I should have continued with that! I was interested in making a kind of social network for art. Back then mobile phones and the Internet were so different and seemed to open out new spaces for art. However, this developed more into thinking about my identity. I had moved around so much, from Sarajevo to Skopje and then to London; I wanted to think about how art could be moved between different mediums and how we experience different spaces, and how to communicate in those spaces.

It was defined by a show that I was invited to participate in, by curators associated with the B&B collective. These curators, Sophie Hope and Sarah Carrington, invited me to think about the relationship between the UK and the former Yugoslavia, whether it was possible to start a new series of fresh relationships, after hearing for so many years about the Balkans, and war. This was a starting point for me to really think carefully about where I came from; what it meant to be a migrant, to move from place to place; especially in my own circumstances, where I have to find a specific scenario in which to present my work. There was always a certain setting that I looked for to create an artwork.

**You do have an interesting background; born in Sarajevo, grew up here, then spent a lot of time in the UK: what do you consider yourself? Bosnian? Yugoslav? Macedonian?**

NP: probably I consider myself a citizen of Europe, as it is where I have exhibited the most.

I don't feel that I belong to any specific country. I lived in Sarajevo for almost as long as I lived in London and in Macedonia. Creatively, I think of Macedonia as my country; I was educated here, and I was very connected to the art scene here. As far as Sarajevo goes, I remember the area I grew up in, but I wouldn't describe myself as Bosnian; I spent all my time as a kid, in Sarajevo. I was also shaped creatively by the time that I spent in London; I spent a lot of time with politically and socially engaged artists, many from the ex-Yugoslav context. The practical side of my work really was shaped by this time in London.



Many artists here are pessimistic about the future of the arts in the Balkan context, but, having lived in London, I always feel that it is possible to be resilient, and to survive as an artist, if you look at it from different angles.

### Could you tell us maybe about two important works from this period in London, that you still look back on?

NP: OK, so the first I have already started to speak about, it was called the Advanced Science of Morphology that saw most flags of ex-Yugoslav countries, replacing EU flags at Marble Arch. It was a work questioning the idea of union, and questioning the possible existence of nations. It mainly asked questions about the union of Yugoslavia, the different attitudes, habits and circumstances and how it all worked, or didn't work; perhaps suggesting how people in the EU could learn from the ways in which Yugoslavia had broken apart.

We toured this piece to different venues, and it received a particularly turbulent response in Zagreb. We were accused of wanting to erase something that the Croats had been fighting for, in the Balkan war. Although it was a simple project, we took it to many different places, and I could make a whole book of the different responses received. This project shows us that many questions and problems lie unresolved after those wars, and that it is still a potent thing to ask questions based on the conflict.

The last work made before moving back to Skopje was called Subversion to Red; a work done after a work made in Berlin called Peace Wall. This was a work linked to what I knew from here, and reflecting back to socialist times. This work focused on what could be gained from old Marxist theories, replayed as a positive in contemporary times; to turn over the theories of Marxism and see what applicability they have in our time.

The first part of this project was really experimental. I invited artists to respond to some old socialist speeches. The first came from the film WR: Mysteries of the Organism (1971) by Dušan Makevejev; it was a speech by the actress Milena Dravić, on how people should behave in the socialist society that was being built at the time.

The second was a speech from quite a famous Želimir Žilnik film, Early Works from 1969. In this there is a very well known speech set during the 1968 student revolt in Belgrade. I asked London based artists to find a way to react to those two speeches; I always feel that if you take something from the past, you have to find a way to shift

it into the contemporary. The results in the video really were interesting; in the second video, the girls reading the speech from Early Works by painting it completely red. Alongside this video, we had a discussion between four UK based Marxist or Left theorists, whose work I really appreciate; David Beech, Hannah Black, Gail Day and Mark Fisher. We had a discussion where the speakers had to address five sets of topics, with the moderator Vlad Moreau writing and over writing on the table; by the end of the discussion we had a new art work which reflected the discussion and had the possibility of development or re-development of the work. There was also really strong public engagement with the discussion, on social housing, gender, social production and consumption.

It was a great experience, and if I did not have so many obligations and things to do here, I would like to produce a guidebook, based on this project and the discussions, which would take it forward as a means to begin discussion from a left perspective on these topics. I loved the varied ways of seeing and discussing the works that I have made, and to engage really deeply with the issues that were raised by them.

### The next big question then; after building a career in London, why did you come back to Skopje recently, and how did you find the city when you came?

NP: I never really left Skopje completely, even though I spent most of my time in London. I always had the feeling that I would come back. When I came back it was due to a number of reasons; some personal; also, some curators encouraged me to come back here, that it was somehow more interesting for me to be here rather than in London.

Somehow I feel really engaged with the problems that are facing us all here. It is important for me. I feel that in Skopje, I am familiar with these issues, and this familiarity is something that I was looking for. However, there was a huge gap in my experience of here, nearly twenty years. In fact, it seemed that when I came back, I encountered a new city; Time had not stopped, and although I know a lot of people here, there were many things that I had not been aware of, having been away for such a long time.

I suppose there is a mixture of things that encouraged me to come back.



I felt there was a gap. There are still opportunities for artists here, but people are really tired of constantly looking for money to fund their projects. They feel that the eyes of the art world are looking elsewhere, and are no longer looking in our direction, as they were at the beginning of this century. People are tired of constantly striving, and probably feel that it maybe is time to start anew. However, I still feel that there is an opportunity for development; probably it is the reason that I have engaged with so many activities here; I felt that it would be great if the scene could be expanded much more.

So, it was a combination of things, but also possibilities which may be don't seem so obvious to some of the people; there are so many opportunities within this scene which can seem quite closed compared to some other scenes in the Balkans.



Nada Prlja, *Advanced Science of Morphology*, site-specific installation, Marble Arch, London, 2006.

## That's an interesting observation. Can you say a little more?

NP: It seemed to me that, let's say artists from Bosnia or Kosovo are much more active and working together more closely; that if the art scene works together, it can become stronger. When you meet people active in art, they will tell you that the scene here doesn't exist, but there really is a potential for things to happen if we look at it in a new way. For example the opening of this new space, or helping to curate the Paratissima exhibition at the Macedonian cultural centre, was examples of interesting ways to develop the art scene.

## This is quite an optimistic view. What new opportunities do you see opening up in the Macedonian context?

NP: Well, here we have quite a difficult situation with our national cultural institutions. I think the real possibilities lie in creating parallel art spaces; for example initiatives like here at the Serious Interests Agency, Kooperacija; initiatives like these are really significant to the development of any art scene. Perhaps there can be renewed efforts to make things happen at NGO level; the work done by Press to Exit, for example, all help to make a scene stronger.

I think it's also really important to work with younger artists, and to help them develop. I wanted to get an overview of what is happening with younger artists in Skopje, through my involvement in Paratissima. It seems to me that developing a commercial scene is much more important for younger artists. I don't see any concrete ideas on how to achieve that yet, but there are many different ways in which this could be developed. It would be great if our cultural institutions could become stronger, too, but whilst they are not smaller, parallel initiatives can be a real driving force for change.

All of these things, taken together, will be difficult to achieve, but whilst we still have some potential, we should all really push. There is absolutely no reason why Macedonian art could not be as well developed as art in Kosovo, for example, but it will require support and effort from all involved in the cultural scene. Everyone has to work hard, together, if we are to realize our potential.



## Let's focus on your initiative called "Serious Interests Agency": tell us how it came about, and how you see it developing.

NP: Serious Interests Agency started by chance. I was looking for a studio and came to see this space we are sitting in; it was great, as it had been occupied by an artist before, and was quite unusual for Skopje in terms of its interior. It was too big and expensive, seemingly, but we decided to try and work with it anyway, to try and attract a new public for art in the city; both myself and my partner, Daniel Serafimovski, who is an architect, are interested to make a contemporary space that is rooted in and reflective of Skopje.

We don't have any funding for this; everything is done on a voluntary basis. I put a lot of time into developing the website, into working on all the behind the scenes task in a gallery. Because of the lack of funding, we have decided to give a platform to local artists, architects and curators.

The link with other countries, however, is really important. Many artists do not have the resources to travel, so we are trying to bring people here, to meet the local scene and to engage with them. We are trying to establish a residency space and we hope to be able to attract people, to find ways of being creative, and being consistent and clear as to our interests. We will also be interested in exhibition projects that are in line with our own agenda; to try to develop a quality programme, made to the best standards, to show what is possible to achieve within an institution.

## What about maintaining your own art practice, when you are devoting so much time to building SIA?

NP: I can find time for my own practice, but at the moment it is really hard. Before coming back, I found it hard to really reflect on what was going on in Macedonia; I divided my life in London so that I could find three days a week for practice; now, I have about two hours a week for my own work. This is because of things such as Paratissima, other exhibition projects, all of which took a huge amount of time. Still, I see these activities as a different creative input into developing the scene in the city.

Actually, I am working on the development of two projects that are really important to me at present. The first is called While Waiting

for Better Times. This is a series of ink sketches that I do whilst my mind is in neutral and I am watching TV at home. I find myself glued to television news so that I can better understand what is going on in Macedonia. Therefore, I started this drawing project to capture the appearances of people on television. I am planning to extend this project to Greek television as well; it is really Balkan-focused, and tries to turn the negative energies and fears from our political situation in this part of the world into a positive. I post the images from this series, from time to time, on facebook, which allows viewers to see the situation in a different way to the relentless flow of news.

My second project relates to my childhood, and when I first moved to Skopje. The main post office was built, in a very brutalist manner, in the late 1960s. In the building, was a very beautiful series of murals painted by Borko Lazeski, who was one of the best-established artists in socialist times. In 2013, a fire destroyed the interior of the Post Office; I somehow had the idea to clean the damaged interior, to see it something like a museum space.

Of course, there is no word of this building being brought back into public use. The curator Ana Frangovska invited me to make a public work as part of Skopsko Leto. The exhibition was called Urban Stories. My idea was to paint at least part of Lazeski's mural, to reclaim a memory and to encourage people to think more about the lost artwork, and the space in which it had been; this space is now closed off completely.

The Post Office space had meant a lot to me, as it was the space where we had kept in touch by letter with family members in Sarajevo; it was a very important space for many others in Skopje, too. So, this replica of Borko Lazeski's painting, on large scale plasterboard, was a symbolic gesture on this closed space, and a veiled comment on Skopje 2014 and buildings from older times that are just left in obscurity. I hope to continue with this project, and that one day that Post office space will be brought back into use.



## Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future for contemporary art in Macedonia?

NP: Probably, I have appeared quite positive throughout this interview. There is potential for our art to return to the status it enjoyed at the turn of the century. For this to happen, we need to look at two things.

Firstly, we must look again at art education. For our art to develop, we must reform the curriculum at the Fine Art Academy, to help emerging artists. On a larger scale, it is impossible to know what will happen with our cultural institutions. I really think that focusing on smaller initiatives that I have discussed today will help; in my opinion the future of contemporary art lies there, rather than in national institutions. The museum of contemporary art has an amazing collection, gathered since 1963, and that collection offers so many pointers to developing the Macedonian scene. But there is a huge amount of work to do, for all of us.

There are all kinds of other initiatives that would help the scene to develop. But it is important not to come up with the same old answers, but to look at our situation as it is, and to try to find new perspectives. I am positive, with the hope that many people will take the chance to help develop. If we do not, things will stay as they are.



Nada Prlja, NP, site-specific installation, Skopje, 2007.





Obsessive Possessive Aggression (OPA), Project which is not a Project, 2003-12.  
Photos: John Grzinich



OPA (Obsessive Possessive Aggression) was founded in 2001 by the visual artists Slobodanka Stevceska (born 1971, Skopje, Macedonia) and Denis Saraginovski (born 1971, Skopje, Macedonia). Both of them studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Skopje, and have exhibited widely in Europe, as well as in the USA. OPA was a co-founding member of the Kooperacija Initiative (2012-2015).

[www.o-p-a.org](http://www.o-p-a.org)

## Obsessive Possessive Aggression (OPA)

Obsessive Possessive Aggression (OPA), Selfie 2013, 2013.  
Digital Print on canvas, 44 x 65 cms



## What are your earliest memories of art?

Denis: I have at least two answers to this question. The first one is very simple: I really cannot recall, ... perhaps since I know for myself... The second answer would be based on my understanding of art that the ephemeral is a great part of it. So every time when I start creating something new, it seems to me that over and over I rediscover art again.

Dana: Considering art, my earliest memories are connected with drawing and painting, which I don't consider being art necessarily... or in each case. So, art came later in my life, in terms of the understanding of it; but something connected with art, which is not art by strict definitions, somewhere there, in between, art happened. I cannot point out one specific moment when I met art for the first time in my life. Later, in the faculty, we had various situations, where you learn different techniques and you learn about art. What's more important is that, after I graduated, I forced myself to forget what I learned at the Faculty, in order to make art.

Denis: I could say, from the position of an author, there are times when you think you have made art, but later you realize you had missed something. The skilled knowledge of technique is just a part of it, but not crucial; there should always be a quest of pushing further.

Dana: Exactly! You can paint something that is not art, but a mere decoration. Today you can make art by eating,... by making food, although neither eating nor making food in itself are art.

## Can you tell us something about how you started to collaborate together?

Dana: We started in 2001, having met before at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje. We were totally different in terms of ideas and interests at that time. I was much more interested in people like Joseph Kosuth and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whereas Denis was making video art with a well trained approach. That was totally different from what I was doing at that time! So, during our long conversations we felt that we should make something together, as an experiment. At first we were both a bit suspicious about the collaboration but, when we started, we realized that we had very similar positions and ideas about what our future art would look like.

That period after the Faculty was a critical spell as we were trying to find ourselves. We found out that we had similar dissents from the art school, and from the local art scene, but also similar positions on why we wanted to make the art that we do. Catching Odekam (in front of the Macedonian Parliament in September 2001) was the point at which we came up with "OPA" and found that we wanted to continue our collaboration. And, project by project, that position has been determined.

Denis: More or less that was the context in which we started to experiment and develop our ideas. It was exciting...

Dana: At that time, as individual artists, we had already several projects that actually brought us more disappointments than pleasure. I had a solo show; the opening happened, there were polite congratulations on the night, and I received neither feedback nor any communication about it afterwards. I was frustrated, I felt like giving up art. In that time I understood that for me it is essential to establish communication through art; it's the thing that keeps us all together. To make art without any communication, what is the point? To just produce nice objects?

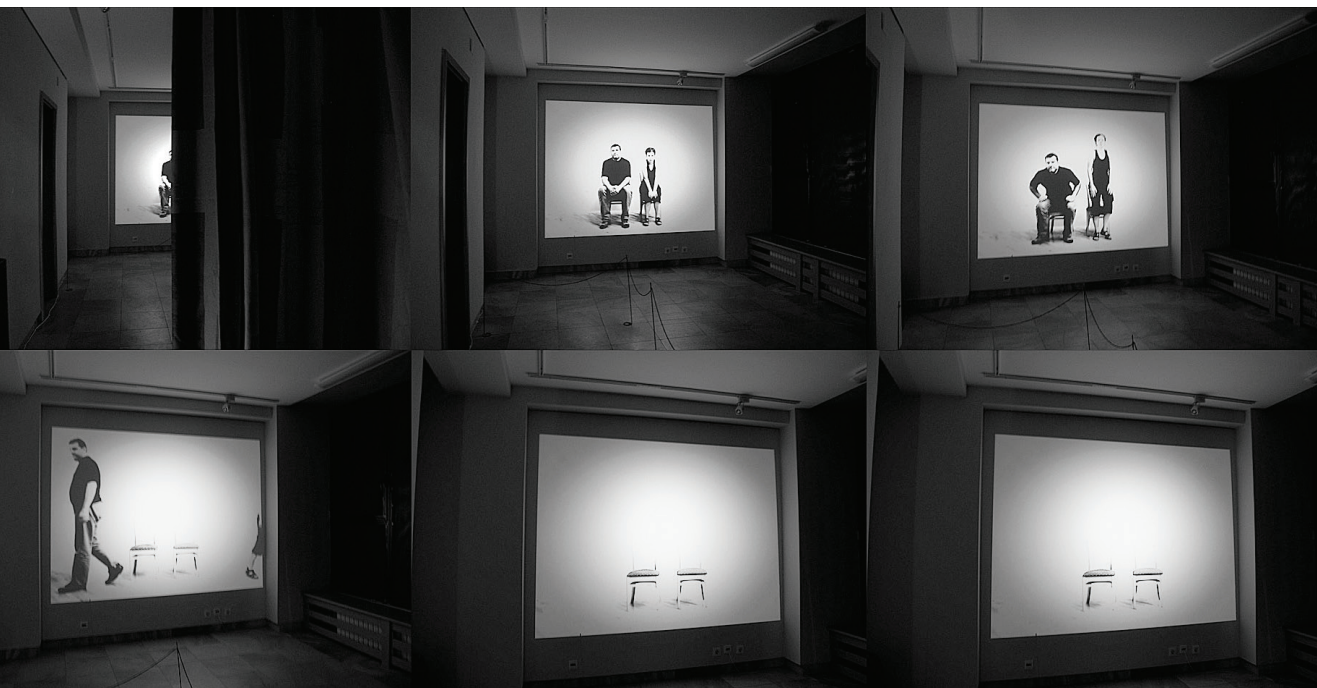
So, coming back to the subject of our collaboration, what I have found interesting and valuable in it, is our frank approach towards the other; we both found ways to say what we wanted to say, even on very sensitive matters, without fear of upsetting the other; we learned how to argue, constructively, which is maybe the best part of our collaboration.

Denis: We have been working like that ever since. We each have different ideas, put them on the table, and try to elaborate them. We have productive discussions and arguments about each idea. I think, in that way we come much easier to the essence of our work. But I have to admit that sometimes it's still difficult to understand each other and to articulate well.

Dana: Maybe the most difficult time, but the most adventurously beautiful too, was in the period when we travelled a lot. Those were among our first projects. For example, when we were in Estonia (DDevice, 2003), we were under pressure to make something of which we would be fully satisfied and at the same time respecting the deadline we had. We had disagreements, time passed, and there was still tension associated with the project. A few hours before the opening, we still had important decisions and editing adjustments to make.

Adding to that, we travelled there in an old Citroen 2CV, which was breaking down frequently; added to that was the huge and unpleasant administrative work to obtain all the necessary visas for





*Obsessive Possessive Aggression (OPA), Bollocks for Everyone!, 2010, Installation view, Mala Galerija, Skopje.*

our next travels. That period was something of running away from Macedonia. We had already canceled our flat, have taken with us only the essential things and sold everything else, quit our jobs and didn't know when we would come back. There was also a constant lack of money, and no clear idea of a way forward. It was difficult, but we learned a lot from that.

**Now that we have mentioned travelling abroad, would you agree that being “nomadic” is key to the condition of the contemporary artist?**

Denis: I believe that for small and isolated countries such as Macedonia it is very important. It is crucial for the artists, but it is important for the local communities as well. The experiences and the exchange made by such travels certainly cannot be compared with what you get in a hermetically closed environment. What is also interesting is the fact that when you are abroad, it is easier to see what appears to matter at home, actually looks like. The distance can help us to understand things better. From abroad, it is easier to make better selections as to what is important, and what is not.

**Macedonian contemporary art is relatively little known compared with contemporary art from other countries in the region. What do you think the reasons are for this?**

Dana: There is one big rule, great art names appear in wealthy and powerful countries. So, having powerless institutions and zero art market results in what we have now. But let's speak about the things that we are both witnesses of. In such conditions, a fragile hope and opportunities emerge, for example, when some outside money comes to the field of culture. Such a case was two decades ago, and a bit latter, with the money influx via international foundations and NGOs. However, when this money came to Macedonia, it was used to support only a small circle of artists; many other still didn't have opportunity to show their work in public, to be an active part of the art scene or, more importantly, to make significant connections. Links with foreign curators were kept in this limited circle, along with information and open calls. Now, I believe, we are still facing the consequences of that.



In general, opportunism, clientelism and servility are more valued and beneficial than openness and solidarity. On the other hand, having a community with a tiny number of artists, leads to a weak competition - a thing that otherwise could be stimulating. We become comfortable in our positions, and the challenge that could push us towards developing or getting better, is missing.

Denis: It's complex. In order to have recognized national art, you need the whole art system with all its complexity to be functioning. So, one of the main reasons is the condition of the cultural institutions: their constant decline since the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, resulting today in tedious buildings without neither content nor audience. I would agree with what Dana said in regard to the NGO sector. At one point, in the middle of the nineties, it seemed to be a move forward, but it turned out that it was a period of starting on a bad road on which the next NGO's would continue, with few exceptions.

**You were part of the KOOPERACIJA grouping from 2012 until very recently. Can you tell us something of your experiences of working in this context?**

Denis: KOOPERACIJA was very timely, as it was silent, in terms of art, that period. Regarding the people involved, it had been well timed as well. Surely, the political situation had pushed all of us to self organize. I believe "Skopje 2014" also contributed to it; it made us angry and ready for this kind of cooperation. In contrast to that, there had been some nice, but unsuccessful attempts in the past. About fifteen years ago, we were very close to make some kind of an open art syndicate, together with several people like Sašo Talevski and with the one of the rare art philanthropists, Ratka Ilievska Lale, who unfortunately passed away prematurely. Having these kinds of failed attempts, we were a bit vigilant regarding KOOPERACIJA. But, in very short time, we all became aware that we had joint goals and positions.

Dana: As Denis said, when we started with KOOPERACIJA, not very much had been happening in Skopje or Macedonia more broadly. Our art institutions were making such anaemic exhibitions, burdened by their bureaucracy, inertia and political interference. And most of the so-called independent cultural centers have been already closed. When KOOPERACIJA started, it gathered quite a large number of people around its activities. It functioned as a kind of generator, full of energy, friendship and solidarity. That was a re-

ally nice period as we learnt a lot from each other. It is the kind of solidarity that you do not normally see in Macedonian society.

KOOPERACIJA was a nice experiment, it was a big school, it was fresh breeze in Macedonian cultural life, it was a good example and model, it opened many questions on the art scene, it said many things loudly... Many things have been produced in a short period of time, many ideas generated.

Later there were different ideas on which way KOOPERACIJA should develop; whether as a more closed group with a much more solid agenda or in an open platform, where many things would flow, sometimes even contradictory to each other. There were even ideas to transform it into a formal, legally constituted body.

**The audience for contemporary art in Macedonia is very small. Now that KOOPERACIJA has finished, where has the large audience that came to your events gone?**

Denis: KOOPERACIJA had a diverse audience, coming from different small communities and having particular expectations. There were cultural workers, art professionals, a lot of fellow artists, students...

Dana: A big number of that audience is part of the political protests at present. These protests, until the recent agreement brokered by the EU, consumed a lot of time and energy for many people associated with KOOPERACIJA. In the circumstances that we have just lived through, we all had to reconsider the ways of our further activities. Many things have been truly changed.

Denis: For all of us, this time is very intense, and consumes a lot of energy. It has become difficult to determine in which way to continue.

Dana: When the Macedonian opposition leader started releasing the wiretapped "bombs" and presented publicly those materials, everything we suspected that was happening in our country, was shown to be true. As artists we often play with critique, irony and parody, but in this period, somehow, this way of working lost its significance and intensity. We all saw how bad things have become, and what is really happening today in Macedonia.





*Obsessive Possessive Aggression (OPA), Eternal Body, 2013. Video Installation.*



**What has the relationship been between the contemporary art scene, and the protests we have seen in Macedonia in 2015?  
Or the relationship between contemporary art and politics?**

Dana: What we have done with KOOPERACIJA, and also organizations as Kula, AKSC..., is a kind of protest, because we are not interested to exhibit anymore in public institutions. We started to develop the contemporary arts scene by ourselves, in our own way. This way of doing something, parallel to institutions, in a proper and professional manner, as far as we were able, is a kind of protest. And a statement. KOOPERACIJA organized frequent events, debates and exhibitions that were in tight correlation with the current political happenings. And one important rule had been set: any artist that had participated in "Skopje 2014" could not take part in the KOOPERACIJA's activities.

But, 2015 is a kind of breakpoint. For the whole country. The things will either be changed or we enter into a firm dictatorship. So, a big question was imposed upon us: To what changes can art really contribute in a society in such a condition? In which way can art affects the society collapsing? Does art possesses tools for it? Does it have power for such a task? Do we leave the field of art so far away, that it would be better and more productive to choose more appropriate kind of activity in order to be more effective? Would be we satisfied with transforming our art into a design or aestheticization of a political battle? Those were the questions that challenged KOOPERACIJA's members. So, maybe we were not compact enough to survive such a challenge. Although we were all taking part as individuals in the political protests we couldn't see KOOPERACIJA assimilated as just a participant in a street protests nether as a point for aestheticizing the protests. We imagined KOOPERACIJA as a clever contribution to the political change. But when we didn't find the right way, that's when KOOPERACIJA fell apart.

**The counter to this, is the issue of censorship.  
Your own work has been subject to  
censorship by persons unknown.  
Would you like to comment on the operation  
of censorship in response to the kind of artistic  
strategy you have described?**

Dana: There had been censorship of art works in Macedonia before, so it was not a new thing. But this one (Solution, 2012), together with the last several cases, was done to public works and in an entirely aggressive way. That's why it attracted such a big public attention. The social media, facebook and the TV stations, helped a lot in terms of publicizing the case. You know, only one print was exhibited on a not so visible place, but few people noticed it, started to speak about it on social media and that was the spark for how it all started. Ten years ago, probably this would have passed unnoticed. Now, the journalists follow what's happening on social media and pick up stories from there. When they entered the fray, the work began to get coverage on mainstream news, and there was a big explosion about the case.

But this time, we had big support from the art community. KOOPERACIJA helped a lot as well. People commented openly, a big number loved the work but many were against it; the Church, the Mayor and the city authorities became involved. A huge debate happened; you could find it around, on forums, facebook and so forth.

**This must have been the first time that a piece  
of contemporary art had been central to  
public debate in Macedonia?**

Dana: No, there have been others. Igor Toshevski's public work, Atanas Botev's billboard, ... and I cannot count the "Skopje 2014" works as contemporary but, there has been a huge public debate about them. However, there is a reason why nowadays these kinds of art works attract bigger public attention. The general audience is different and the artists are sharper.

Let's take as an example our video Reality Macedonia which was made in 2003 and covered by the main news. It was a mock documentary, it was ironic, and it was a plausible piece; but although it was shown in prime time on a national TV, it passed by without too much comment. Comparing to Solution, it was more subtle and multilayered.

But, with Solution, we addressed something very current, political and sensitive and at the same time we chose specific aesthetic, a really bad and simple one, in the way of the mainstream commercial design you could often find in Macedonia, so that the general public could understand it. Thus, besides the content, the form was a fuel to the fire too.



Some of the reactions were that such piece would have been fine in a gallery, but should not be shown in public space; the fact that the work was on billboard, in a public street, was a problem for many. It was an interesting process anyway.

### Did you feel threatened at any point?

Denis: Maybe a little...some of the comments were rude; everything happened fast. At that time, the political situation was already tense, the society divided. Some people became aggressive in response to the artwork. It was difficult to predict what might happen. The aggression accelerated, as they have big support from higher up. When you discuss religion, it is problematic, as you appear to be attacking their beliefs.

Dana: When we were developing the project, we knew that it could have consequences. But, we didn't assume that the response would be so intense. It was good experience for us and for the further development of our art. We understood that we really touched something important. Sometimes you think art is not so important in this society, so it was a good feeling to have done something that opened up so many questions.

### In a way, this process that you went through mirrored the Skopje 2014 project, which created huge problems and really divided opinion...how was it to be on the other side of this debate?

Dana: The work was really about the manipulation, not so much about religion or the Church. Many people believed the story of the self-cleaning frescoes. We couldn't believe how visible the cleaning of the golden surfaces was; they cleaned only the places they could reach standing on a ladder; they didn't go higher. "Skopje 2014" is the same in a way, a big manipulation, a brainwash and systematic propaganda.



Obsessive Possessive Aggression (OPA), Solution, 2012. Digital Print, Billboard in Public Space.



## What would you say about Skopje 2014, and what should happen to it if the political climate will change?

Dana: “Skopje 2014” is such a big parody, an epic irony, so that as an artist you simply cannot compete. They always surprise us with something bigger and more insane than we expect.

Denis: Of course, the artists involved didn’t have intention to make parody as a creative act.

Dana: I was a kind of shocked that so many of our artists joined that project. I still cannot understand why they accepted the invitation to take part in it. OK, in a poor country everyone needs money, but I suppose you choose to be an artist not because your lifetime goal is money, but because you are interested in something else. Could you just imagine what would have happened if any Macedonian artist had not accepted the call? The Government would have had to import artists, and the project would fail in a short time.

Denis: You know, you cannot equate any commission by the private sector with these kinds of commissions by an authoritarian insane Government, where huge amount of public money is spent for political propaganda. This equation has been frequently used as an argument. The artists involved have big responsibility in supporting the rise of a authoritarian regime, a fact that I think have been misunderstood by them.

Dana: I am not sure if we could call it art at all, but the means and tools of art were used for manipulation and propaganda, and to influence young generations for years ahead. I hope that future governments will collect imaginative ideas in order to respond to “Skopje 2014” in a creative way; too much public money has been spent to just simply destroy it. But, I really hope it will not stay like it is...

Denis: We should paint the buildings black, or pink! And sell the monuments in pieces! ... Anyway some trace of the project should be kept as a reminder of a great madness of a totalitarian criminal regime.





*Grupa Zero murals, Galerija 7, Skopje, 1984*



Born Skopje, 1963. Graduated with Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Art Academy, Helsinki, Finland in 1988; MFA in sculpture, Faculty of Fine Arts, Skopje, 2011. Member of Grupa ZERO, 1985-90; of Initiative Kooperacija, 2012-15. Has participated in group and solo exhibitions across Europe and the United States, since 1990. Multi-media artist, specializing in sculpture and site-specific installation. Lives and works in Skopje, and internationally.

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## Igor Toševski

*Photo : Harald Schenker*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

IT: As a teenager, I did comics and designed posters. I was reading a lot by then, and two subjects in particular interested me: Pop Art, and revolutionary Russian art. Later, after the first few months at the Faculty of Fine Arts, I met Stankovski, Trajkovski, and Georgiev (Pepsi). They took me into their circle, and we started to communicate outside the space of the faculty. We were all seen as the “bad boys” because we didn’t really attend classes, instead spending our time in the tea shop Gallery Seven in Stara Carsija. It was then that I really started to understand art.

The owner (of the teashop) offered us his walls to paint them as we pleased. Each of us had his own segment. It soon became the hub of contemporary artists and intellectuals in Skopje in the middle 1980s. The music and philosophy faculties were close by, so the place became the “headquarters” of a budding arts scene. The scene seemed colourful to me, since I came from another background (I did not go to art high school). There were many people from different ethnic backgrounds - Turks, Albanians, Bosnians. Also, there was a real discrepancy, between people outside the institutions, and those associated with them. In those times, to me, the official artists were really quite boring. Ironically, later, they would become professors at the academy.

There was this punk attitude in the air. We broke a lot of rules. For instance, it was forbidden at the time for students at the faculty to exhibit publically. But we did murals in various public places; some of them still exist, at the Macedonian Cultural Centre, for example, and at the Turkish Primary school... This kind of work was post-modernism in its early stages; we were inspired very much by the Transavantgarde in Italy, and tried many different things; combining pop art with abstract painting and enformel. This was frowned upon by the mainstream artists. By then, I started working with found objects and ready-mades.

Later, I transferred to Finland, where my parents were living, and finished the remainder of art school. There, I saw contemporary art directly; works by Duchamp, Joseph Kosuth, Rauschenberg, a lot of Bruce Nauman, and Joseph Beuys; these all began to pull me into a conceptual direction.. Back home, in the Zero shows, I would use such objects in my paintings, and that’s how I began to make installations. These were the last Zero shows, in 1990 (Cologne, Institute of Eastern Art, and Shakti, in the Museum of Macedonia, Skopje).

When Yugoslavia fell apart, a new chapter began altogether but I continued with my research. I was fascinated by Beuys, by his

theories of social sculpture and Direct Democracy; I saw a possibility of interpreting this through my work while we were all going through this new democracy and the period of transition. So yes, it was all new for me, and I felt that art had an important role to play in the process.

This is when I started doing ongoing projects that I called “actions”; I would go to an empty factory space to do a performance, documenting the action; or an elaborate project where I would travel through several towns, visiting factories, working with rejected (faulty) objects and factory workers. This was the Dossier project.

I investigated certain objects in the city and the places where I had found them. Then I simply shifted them to other parts in the city, thus making a whole circle. The actual exhibition however, consisted strictly of documents and maps - no objects whatsoever.

Dossier was huge however, and opened up other doors. It opened the question of when and how art can be politically engaged. At that point, there wasn’t so much explicitly political art going on here. I became interested in the readymade - its context in a capitalist society and the surplus of things (objects).

I participated in a lot of group shows, including some curated by Suzana Milevska, who was of great help, and was one of the people who really understood context in contemporary art. There were shows like Words/ Objects / Acts in March 2000, or The Perfect Match, which was held in a shopping mall, and other public spaces. A bit later I began to work on Territories...

## Yes, that was in 2004, when Territories started

IT: The first show was in Točka gallery in Skopje; I did around twelve territories in Skopje. Exhibiting them unlocked something else, because I referred to something specific that people identified with - the division within the country; it was also about borderlines between art and non-art, between institutional and private space, etc. Technically it was simple, yet the message was quite direct and straight to the point.

*Igor Toševski, Territory, 2009, Plošad Makedonija, Skopje.*







**Before we get onto your later career, I wanted to go back and address the issue of group work. You worked with Zero from 85 to 90, and recently you worked in a group context with KOOPERACIJA.**

**Can you say more about group work, and how it shaped you as an artist?**

IT: Before Zero, actually, I was part of two other groups. The first was a bogus group, which I founded myself. I used to sign my work as Ink Laboratory, even though there was no such group. But some people did call and asked me if they could join. So it took on a life on its own. In the meantime, several artists, included me in a group called U.S.T.A This was really interesting, because I got to meet a lot of people quite older than me but who were exciting to work with. This was in the late seventies . I met Prokopiev, Milcho Manchevski, Aleksanadar Kondev, Hristo Petrevski... It was a crazy time.

I learned a lot from these experiences, and later from Zero and Kooperacija; I respect teamwork and collective work. Everything is shared as you come to a mutual agreement on something, as opposed to the individual discipline of the artist in the studio, which is a totally different experience. For me, it was the moment of the exchange of ideas, which is important and rewarding. You learn and see the benefit of giving, and how to leave your ego behind, which for some is hard or even impossible. In Zero for example, there was a specific group result; there was no real concept behind the murals, we just attacked the walls, as in an abstract expressionist painting. We started communicating through drawings and making something new... a great experience.

## And KOOPERACIJA?

IT: Kooperacija was something different, not really a group, more like an association, or an initiative. We started out by finding a space, but the search became our main strategy in the end. We learned quickly that we didn't have to confine ourselves to one specific space, and that we could spread out, and move around, and show our work in different places. We occupied empty space, offices, private apartments, laundries, and turned them into temporary galleries.

At the time we also realized that this kind of work demanded responsibility of each individual, like in any institutional organisation. For most of us, KOOPERACIJA functioned pretty well. The way we intro-

duced subject matter, developed areas that interested us as artists, as well as topics that (we thought) were important for a broader part of society. The way we dealt with these issues showed sound results.

Later on, we discovered that we weren't prepared for everything. One recurring discussion was whether we should organise ourselves as a legitimate NGO, or whether we should continue as a grassroots organisation; or whether KOOPERACIJA was becoming too elitist, or whether we were being too democratic... We didn't really curate the shows, and we didn't organise open calls in the strict sense: whoever's work we thought was interesting, we would exhibit it. We had no formal criteria in that area. Indeed, some important works were produced through KOOPERACIJA, and many shows became huge social events attracting a lot of people, so that was a great achievement in itself.

KOOPERACIJA certainly had an impact on later initiatives of younger people, and it also created a space for debate and the development of ideas in the field of art; not so much in theory, but rather focusing on issues like local problems within public space, the relationship between kitsch and populism, art and politics, etc.

In that context, the Re-identifications show was quite interesting. We invited a huge number of artists to participate, more than thirty, but we agreed not to reveal the identity of the artists. It functioned as an autonomous installation. It actually addressed how we view art today, with all those explanatory side-notes and so on; instead viewers were confronted with the actual work. The result was a real cacophony in a way, but the response was important. In fact, the response of the audience was more important than the work itself.

At the debate we organized later, Bojan Ivanov caused some panic when he quoted Duchamp: "I am not interested in art, I am interested in artists." He was pressed to explain this statement, and many people to this day still cannot accept it. They don't understand what it is about. People are used to seeing art as an artefact, as a material result; this materialisation for me is just a part of the whole process. The ideas behind that work are more important than the artworks, which often become a mere commodity. Ultimately, KOOPERACIJA was about the ideas behind the artworks, it was an exercise in institutional critique, and that was the whole point. We made shows outside institutions, but we did them really well.

Some exhibitions, like Boiling Point, where Irwin, Santiago Sierra and other important artists participated, were really important. You can imagine this show being done in the Museum of Contemporary Art with money and proper technical support. But we did it outside these institutions, without a dime. We showed that it is possible to make it work without compromising your principles and without money.



**By that stage KOOPERACIJA had a growing regional and international profile: it had become synonymous with contemporary art in Macedonia. That must have brought it's own responsibilities.**

IT: Yes, it got bigger than we expected, perhaps due to the tensions in Macedonia associated with this political madness. KOOPERACIJA insisted that no artists who had been involved in Skopje 2014 should be allowed to take part in any of our shows. We had a specific way or working, which got us too close, if you ask me, to what people wrongly perceived as activism. This is where problems began. Some members wanted to continue in this direction, most of us, luckily, didn't.

Art and activism can function together, but not always; even when they do, one of them loses (suffers). I believe art is about discovering new territory, it's about bulldozing where no one has been before, and if there is a path ahead, it's about putting road signs there. Sure, activists can continue on from there; but art will go on further, so it can discover other new fields. So it is a kind of avant-garde, yes. I hate that term, but I don't know any other way to describe it. Art has the capability to see much further.

Today, the whole perspective is totally changing, thanks to technology; art is political in many spheres of life. This aesthetic is present in politics, but politics is also present in art, in a wider context.

**I want to maybe consider these issues in the context of specific works. We have already mentioned Territories and Skopje 2014, and I'd like to talk about when those two projects clashed, and the issues of censorship that arose. Could you tell us what you remember about this, and what lessons you have drawn from it?**

IT: As I mentioned earlier, Territories derived from a specific context, one of division, and the demarcation of borders. In 2009, the problematical thing was the government's intention to build an Orthodox church in the square. A lot of people were either for or against the proposal, but soon it all just got blown out of proportion. I felt that this was the place and the moment to do another Territory (this time, in the shape of a Greek Cross).

The day it became public, Plostad Sloboda appeared, and started making accusations; they didn't know who was behind it; the media immediately labelled the work as a provocation, without bothering to understand the context in which it was made. Only at five in the afternoon, did the curator (Elena Viljanovska) explain that it is in fact a work of art. But by then the government had ordered its destruction. So, the "Yellow Cross" soon became the "Black Cross", which was wonderful if you ask me. It was an interesting moment; everyone, saw each another naked. And it was funny too, the way people tried to justify themselves afterwards.

Some people thought it was a protest against Skopje 2014. But Skopje 2014 was not even announced formally then. I had my say, but after that no one asked me anything about it ever again!

I wrote an open statement in the media,. At one point, I said: "today it's about a line, but tomorrow someone can actually get killed, as no one is asking the important questions". Indeed, two years later, a kid was killed very near that same spot for a very stupid reason. It's a crazy society that we live in..

**It's a little bit like interent trolling, you wound everyone up to such an extent that you provoked a real reaction from everybody...**

IT: If the work had been linked to any specific political agenda, it would have been vulnerable to manipulation and that would have been the end of it. However, Territories addresses a much broader question (subject matter) and on many more levels. In fact, I even think that this is the core problem with today's left wing activists here who insist on employing art in their activities, declaring them as performances, installations, etc. No wonder the people perceive them as being elitist, while their results are often pathetic.

But frankly I really didn't expect such a reaction. By then, I had already made thirty-eight territories, and never experienced such a reaction. I guess the whole context is important - it was a good time and place to do it.

What happened with OPA's billboard later in 2012, was similar. What pisses me off is that no one acknowledges that art is here to provoke discussion, not to be destroyed. Artists should (not be afraid to) address painful issues in society. But, when you destroy a work, it is like physically attacking the artist. Some critics asked them why they didn't make it in a gallery, where it would not have caused such an offence. For sure, in a gallery, no one would have said a word



about this work. But art spaces and public spaces are different contexts; people really don't want to talk about painful issues in public, and that is sad.

**But the fact that people are saying that perhaps shows the impotence of the gallery system in Macedonia...**

IT: Exactly. Their impotence was demonstrated through this "incident". Much work is focused in a closed space. When we turned offices and store-rooms into galleries, at one point, somebody was criticising this, saying that it was "just another gallery space". But this was not an institutional gallery! It was different, as we addressed the concerns about public space (like in our exhibition *Utopia / Dystopia*). It was about trying to get people to act freely and express themselves in public space; to show work in public and not to have art hiding away in closed spaces intended for politicians and the elite. This type of experience and work is a real battleground in contemporary art in general, and not just here.

**What has the response to your work in other countries been like?**

IT: Well, my first experience was with the show *After the Wall* in 1999. We met up with artists from Russia, Slovenia, and elsewhere. Even then, however, I had the impression that a new kind of wall was being built; this need to categorise people and put them in a drawer. I am used to being depicted in this way. People like to pigeonhole others according to certain phenomena: Eastern bloc, Balkans, Orthodox, whatever... It's a trap we have to grow out of.

I personally always try to start from the local context, and work from there. Yet, at some point, the work should transcend the local. Otherwise, it's hard to relate to it. This happened with *KOOPERACIJA* in Zagreb and Belgrade; a lot of explanation was necessary, as the works derived from a critique of a specific authoritarian regime. To some who are informed about the problems, this is understandable. It's always a problem for the artist, who shouldn't feel the need to have to explain every detail of the work.



*Igor Toševski, Love Undefined, Every Damn Moment, 2011. Mixed media installation.*





*Nikola Uzunovski, My Sunshine, Macedonia Pavillion, 53. Venice Bienale, Venice, 2009.  
Site specific installation, mixed materials including canvas and mirror*



Born Belgrade, 1979. Graduated from the Fine Art Academy in Napoli in 2003; Masters in Visual Arts Production from the Venice University Institute of Architecture, 2007. Has completed a wide range of environmental, installation and site-specific art. Represented Macedonia at the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009. Has exhibited extensively throughout Europe, particularly in Italy. Lives and works in Skopje and internationally.

[www.flgallery.com/nikola-uzunovski-home.html](http://www.flgallery.com/nikola-uzunovski-home.html)

## Nikola Uzunovski



## What are your earliest memories of art?

NU: I grew up in an artist's family. My father is an artist; he studied architecture, but then moved into contemporary art. My mother is an art historian, so we had a lot of works of art in the house, and books. I have been going to the museum and exhibitions of contemporary art for as long as I can remember. My father also began curating exhibitions in a space in Skopje's bazaar, which later became the Cifte Amman gallery; I have seen some very powerful shows there. I also remember really interesting exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, such as those by Tony Cragg, and Marina Abramović.

My father was also involved in set designs for the theatre and I learned a lot by watching how he prepared the designs then built the set, and made it ready for the theatre show.

## What do you remember of your art education?

NU: When I started studying art later, at the school of applied arts, I decided to study sculpture and industrial design. I really enjoy both art and design, and I am glad that I have a background in both subjects. In the end I concentrated on art, as really you can do whatever you want with it.

As a child I travelled often to Italy, and had many friends there, so after leaving the school of applied arts, I decided to study in Naples. This was a big cultural shock for me, as a result of the cultural differences. Naples is very specific, it is like its own closed universe. In Naples, the mafia rules the city, and the written law does not really apply; anything is possible there.. It is a chaotic environment; the city for me was more like a school than art school.

However, Naples also has a really nice contemporary art scene. It not only has good museums, but some interesting projects. When I was there, the prominent curator Achille Bonito Oliva made Naples metro line into a contemporary art museum, with works by many significant contemporary artists.

The education system was also a big shock. At the school of applied arts, study was purely technical, and I left without much of a clue as to what art actually was. This was a problem with the education system in the former Yugoslavia, where studies were of a more general nature. At elementary school, in addition to visual art, we had classes in literature, and music; the teaching there focused on

metaphor, and reading between the lines; such questions were never asked in art class. We were left to draw according to our own wishes, without any real discussion of what we were doing.

I remember in my first classes in Naples, the professors asking our opinion on what the artist may have meant in a particular work, which I have never considered before. In our art high school, there was just technical information; there was no discussion of the meaning of art, or its relationship to society, or of its potential connections to social change. In the context of Italy, eighteen year olds had already done conceptual work, and could elaborate the background of art works; this really was a surprise for me.

As I was very good technically, I worked a lot on the restoration of famous monuments in that time. Theoretically, however, I was far behind. When I began to understand that art has to understand and reflect contemporary society, I began to reflect on the different systems of cultural values, between Yugoslavia and Italy. I began to do some research on how our cultural values and assumptions are formed; this became a really interesting period of research for me. I travelled around a lot and saw as much as I could.

I went to Naples in 1998, so I was there around the time of the boom in Italian art at the turn of the century, when the country joined the Euro. The city changed completely around this time, in a few years, and contemporary art galleries were opening every week. I had an opportunity therefore to work with Gallery T293, which is now one of the best contemporary spaces in Naples. This was 2003, when I finished at the Academy.

## How did things develop after that?

NU: This was a busy time for me after leaving the Academy. I met many famous artists at a summer school; Richard Nonas, then Jimmy Durham; at this school I also met one of the most famous curators in Italy, Angela Vettesse, who is known for her work with young artists. At that time Angela was opening a new department at the University in Venice, for a Master's in Visual Art, which was opening up in Italy after the signing of the Bologna agreement.

This programme had a huge sponsorship from a local bank, and this enabled many of the biggest names from the Venice Biennale to come and teach there. For me it was like a dream come true; in our first year we had Claire Bishop, Olafur Eliasson, Antoni Muntadas from Spain, and it really was a remarkable experience. I studied there for three years and didn't want to leave, as it was so much fun.



At this time I was exhibiting myself in smaller biennales, in cities such as Bucharest. Achille Bonita invited me to take part in a show on a theme of “white”; I submitted some completely white photographs that I had taken around Europe. In this show were people like Luciano Fontana, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Joseph Kosuth, and me, who was thirty years younger. For three or four years I was exhibiting everywhere, doing a new show every two or three weeks, and travelling a lot.

During this period, I began to work in Scandinavia a lot. At first, I saw a project that invited artists to work in Lapland with the world’s best architects and artists; people like Anish Kapoor, Carsten Höller, Kiki Smith and so on, to work alongside figures from architecture such as Zaha Hadid. Young artists and architects had to respond to their designs. Again, when I went there, I was shocked by the cultural differences, to see how people live in such a place.

When in Lapland, I heard about villages that had only half an hour of daylight, in the winter. I shot a short film of a five-minute sunrise, reflecting on the relationship between the environment, and all of us. It was a hard project, as such days only happen a couple of times per year, and of course sometimes the sun is clouded over. I went to this place many times, and couldn’t quite get it right. During this process, I encountered some astrophysicists who explained some difficulties in my reasoning, owing to the lie of the land the placement of some hills. Lapland is very flat, but there were some hills in this region; I went to the top of one and could see, briefly, the sun, about two metres from the ground.

My grandfather was a pilot, and built the first microlight plane in Macedonia. From this I have always had an interest in aeronautical design. I had the vision of filling a balloon with a mirror, and bringing an artificial sunlight to people who had not seen it for months; to build a kind of radio controlled sun. Of course this never happened, but the idea was important to what followed.

I was lucky as around this time, sustainability was a really big theme, and one of the most googled words. In Sweden, all topics were routed through sustainability at universities. This was the year after Olafur Eliasson’s Weather Project at the Tate, which was one of the most visited exhibitions in history.

I started fundraising for this project in 2005, in the Nordic countries. I didn’t really have any luck there, but many more people in Italy were interested, and I used the money I raised to start the project. It was the start of crowd-sourced projects, as I didn’t want to make this alone; I wanted to build a group of people striving to realise this utopian idea. This became the third aspect of this project, working

towards short-term goals by realising the development of different stages of the projects, in successive gallery exhibitions.

We began with a theoretical show in Trieste, in Italy, which is a very important centre for research in astrophysics. I collaborated with professors from Oxford, Italy and Bosnia-Herzegovina. We began with a geometric drawing of the earth and the movements of the sun, as every day the sun’s rays change. For this show, we laid out a series of drawings and calculations; the whole thing looked like a NASA experiment, and was much commented on.

After this, I returned to Finland for a while, and received funding from other sources to continue development. This funding provided for the building of a prototype of a two-metre balloon, with a mirror fitted. We didn’t fly it, but we carried the model for some distances, to measure its visual and heat effects. Later, we began workshops with a university in Lapland, where we made the first flying models. Unfortunately we lost some prototypes, which flew away owing to cables snapping at extremely low temperatures, but this loss was just part of the process.

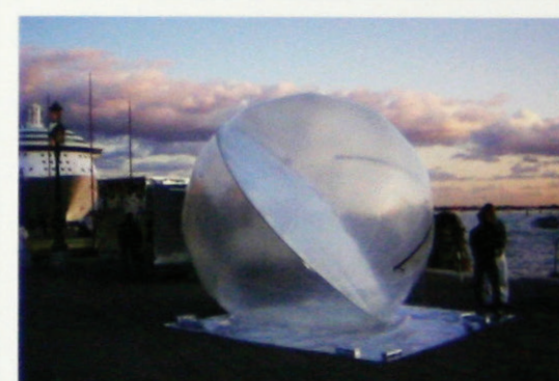
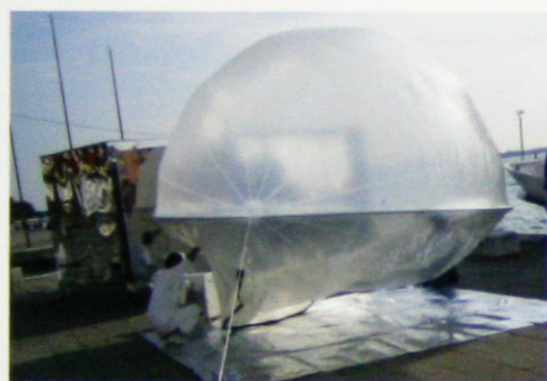
## **This project ended up being presented in Venice. Can you tell us something about that experience?**

NU: I wanted to present this project to Daniel Bierbohm, the curator of the 2009 biennale, for possible inclusion. I worked with Nebojša Vilić, who presented the idea to the Ministry of Culture, and the idea was selected to be the Macedonian participation.

However, there are problems with the Macedonian participation in the Venice Biennale. There is a real lack of money at our end. More than once the project was cancelled; in the end two projects were sent, with the budget halved between both of us. The budget for Venice is fifty thousand euros; what can you do there with just twenty five thousand? It’s a lot of money for ordinary people, but there it is nothing. We were a very last minute entry and more than once we really pushed up close against the Biennale’s deadlines.

Rents in Venice for the Biennale are very high, and we couldn’t afford to rent any good spaces. I decided instead to hire a shipping container as part of the solution. I wanted to make my balloon for the duration of the biennale, but this was impractical, as helium is fairly expensive. I flew the balloon, a four-metre prototype, just a few times, and in the times where it was grounded, I showed a video inside the shipping container, like some sci-fi movie.





Nikola Uzunovski, My Sunshine 2009, documentary material



The show itself experienced many problems; I had many sleepless nights because of them. It was a very difficult period in my life. However, the shipping container was well-placed, just in front of the Giardini, and the comments on the project were great. It was written about in over fifty magazines around the world.

I hoped that I would receive some further funding on the back of this exposure, to take the project further forward, but this did not materialise. I had a lot of exhibition invitations, but no offers of funding to push the project forward. There was no more money to work with, and unfortunately every step I wanted to take cost more than the previous one. Toshiba wanted to use it in a marketing campaign, but we couldn't agree the terms of a deal. The next step was a computer simulation of how it would work.

**It's fascinating to have such an insight into this project and to listen to you discussing it. It strikes me how influential Olafur Eliasson has been, but also the importance, in this context, of the sun as a national symbol of Macedonia...**

NU: Yes, you are right. Actually, that was how it was understood here at the Ministry; "you are building the sun, so you are advertising Macedonia". I suppose this aspect related to Macedonia is that I am trying to make a Utopia; we are exporting the sun to places that don't have it, whilst here in the south, we don't have money to eat. In Macedonia, also in Italy, the culture is to share everything; people are maybe a little more careful in the north of Europe. It's also a criticism of the lack of scientific development and capability to exploit our natural resources, here.

The project is still working away, and I am always trying to improve the concept. Recently I started a new project, when I was working in Thailand. There, too, they have too much sun, so I started trying to build an artificial cloud, to bring shade to the city. It was made from organic fabric, semi-transparent on the top so that the light can pass through. Inside there is a black sheet that absorbs heat and causes the cloud to life off the ground, so that it can be a sustainable, solar-powered project. I am thinking all the time how to make Utopian projects with small budgets.



Nikola Uzunovski Rain Cloud 2014/15.

**Utopia as a word is featuring heavily in our talk. Do you think a defining feature of your practice is this ability to realise your ideas with comparatively tiny budgets?**

NU: Well, sure. This makes a problem for the commercial galleries; either my projects are too small and low cost, or too vast for them to be able to support.

To go back to before the Sun project, I wanted, when I first left art school and started travelling, to grapple with the problem of how to make artworks that can be universally understood. I was really interested in the change in global cultures driven by the rise of the internet. Before the internet, culture was spread in only one direction; later, through radio or TV, cultural power became much more centralised. The internet, therefore, marked a big revolution, as culture became diffused and much more multi-dimensional. I remember that in 2006 or 2007, when Time magazine proposed their



annual person of the year, they put a mirror on the front cover; this reflected the growth in citizen journalism, blogging and youtube, and that we could all now, through the internet, become significant and influential.

In a connected society, we have to be more responsible. If we have the right to say something, we have to use that responsibility very carefully and to make a good contribution. These ideas underpinned a show I did called *A Change in the Air Changes Everything*. The idea in this exhibition related to the butterfly effect, and to global warming; that as individuals we are all changing things, even if we don't notice it immediately. At around the same time, I had a show in an old foundation in Venice. The piece was a small cake with matches; everyone who came to the show had to make a wish. I asked the visitors to focus on their most important wish, and also giving away some of the power of the artist to the visitor; the creation of artistic values comes here from the spectator. In the years after this show, I wanted to work with pieces that sort of presented your own experiences back to you, like Tino Segal's notion of art as an immaterial commodity.

## How often are you in Skopje, then?

NU: When I was working in the contemporary art world, I was so busy that I often came here only for a few days to see my family. But, after the economic crisis hit, finances were becoming difficult, so I decided to have a break for a while, to recuperate. I was here for about one year, and then in 2012 I began to work with Kooperacija.

## Now, tell me about your work with Kooperacija, as you brought a particular sensibility and set of experiences and skills to their group work.

NU: Well, firstly, I was really amazed by what was going on with Skopje 2014; I was friends of the architects who were beaten as part of the first protests against the project. I am good friends with Filip Jovanovski, and really respect his work with AKTO festival, which is one of the few decent contemporary art festivals here.

I thought of doing some big biennale here, as a counter to Skopje 2014. I have a friend in Colombia who has done a series of photographs of the houses of Colombian drug barons, so-called narcoarchitectura, which is all like Skopje 2014; Greek temples with

golden lions outside. I had some talks with Yane Calovski and with Filip, and I worked with Filip to curate part of that year's AKTO festival, in Bitola, focusing on political art, which I really enjoyed, and was quite pleased with.

Kooperacija was really good. There was a discussion of whether to make our own institution, or whether to make more public art, to take it to a wider audience. We saw that there were a lot of abandoned spaces around the city. Whilst there was no one willing to give us a space for a year, many would help us for a few days at a time, so this then was a practical solution for how we show our work. We started with a big enthusiasm for working in this way. I really appreciated the precision of Igor and OPA's work.

I suppose having to decide everything together was problematic; as I work internationally, I couldn't commit to being there to help all of the time. But I really appreciated the clarity and precision of OPA and Igor's contribution to Kooperacija.

Unfortunately, Macedonian culture has been in decline for over twenty years. I felt that Kooperacija offered a chance to address this, and as long as it did, I would do whatever I could to help. Unfortunately here, things are similar to how Southern Italy was; the mafia are very powerful. It's rather scary.

## The Skopje you grew up in as a child has vanished because of Skopje 2014. What are your feelings on that?

NU: Well, sure. The Skopje I knew was tied up with socialism and modernism, and was concentrated on shaping the future. When I was younger I really enjoyed these futuristic looks, I loved these buildings more than something made in older times. This stopped on independence, and then when things started to be re-built again, the economic crisis was not long behind, and Macedonia was much more isolated from the rest of Europe.

In terms of art, after spending so much time in Italy, it was difficult at first to find common grounds with friends who had stayed in Macedonia, who were still making paintings and sculpture. They were locked in these practices as they could not get a visa to travel and knowledge of what was going on elsewhere was limited. But now, with the internet, things are opening up a bit more and you can see the impact on the work of people like Gjorgje Jovanovik, for example.





Nikola Uzunovski, *Wishes Come True*, 2007/11. Installation, Lapland.

## Are you optimistic, or pessimistic about the future for contemporary art in Macedonia?

NU: The problem is that the art schools are very backward and old fashioned, and they are not giving students the education that they should. The schools need to change dramatically otherwise people will not be formed as artists; if people are not formed as artists, then there will be no art scene. Many art students who do pass through the art academy don't really consider contemporary art until they leave, and then it takes them around five years to develop further.

Things are a little easier with visa liberalisation, and there is the chance to see shows abroad. But, if they do not take the chance to see shows abroad as teenagers, probably they never will. It's really important to involve schools and high schools of art to follow more what's going on abroad. This is a vital missing link at present.

Without this improvement in education, there will only be a micro-art scene in the future. Only those who have experience or who study abroad will be able to develop; those who are unable to leave Macedonia, will not develop.

This is a problem in the global contemporary art world, however. It is also shrinking. I am not speaking of commercial art, as I am not really interested; it is more business than art. I am speaking of curated shows, and shows in alternative spaces. If there are protests in the street here, then contemporary artists really should be following it. But there is very little of this kind of art in Macedonia.

I am very sorry that Kooperacija has finished, and I would like to curate shows involving all of them in the future. Sadly, too, many artists and intellectuals have left to live and work abroad. Opportunities for artists who have lived and worked abroad, to teach here, are very limited indeed.

I want to keep working, to show that something can be done in Macedonia. If we cannot establish a school, we will set up some workshops around AKTO to provide a forum for debate and discussion as to what can be done in this context. People's attention is so focused on the fight against the corruption of Skopje 2014, and it really is difficult to get them to think about other things.





give  
na yuu

Zorica Zafirovska, Roma Boy Cardboard Collector, 2007. Pencil on paper.



Born 1982 in Skopje. Multimedia artist, socially engaged artist. Member of Art INSTITUT (2009-11) and the MOMI group since 2012. Winner of the DENES award, 2016. Lives & works in Skopje & in the North Sea, off the coast of Scotland.

[www.zoricazafir.wix.com/portfolio#!](http://www.zoricazafir.wix.com/portfolio#!)

## Zorica Zafirovska



## What are your earliest memories of art?

ZZ: Great question! I still do consider many different things as art.

My very first memory of art is Leonardo's embroidery of The Last Supper done by my mother and my late grandfather, there was only embroideries in my family house, but also in our friends', and wider family houses. These were very far from what I consider to be art today.

At a very young age I loved to copy illustrations in old story books and calendars. My mother really encouraged us to draw, and to use colour. Actually, I never had art books when growing up; I borrowed from one of my class-mates and school and university libraries; I watched documentaries and movies. The first time I bought art books, I was around eighteen or nineteen, and I had earned my own money by then.

Art has always been important to me, but as a teenager I didn't have a lot of confidence in myself. I went to law school instead of art high school or the academy, and that killed a lot of creative energy in me. I thought I would do more good for the world as a law practitioner then as an artist.

As a naïve fourteen year old, I lacked self-belief in my ability to be accepted in art high school, and then to the faculty. I had the innocent feeling that many things needed correcting in the world at that age, and that somehow going to law school would give me a better chance of doing it, and it also fitted in with my interests at the time. During this time I received my art education in a roundabout way, through short courses, exhibitions and free lectures.

After I finished with the law school, I realized that I had to change. I went to the Faculty of fine arts at the St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. Besides doing one still life for a half of a semester, we also did painting, sculpture and graphic art, which really helped me a lot as an artist.

Looking back, and having studied later at the pedagogical department of the Faculty of Fine Arts, I realised that perhaps the focus on painting all the time may have bored me at a younger age. Plus, there is so little information provided for students on the programme, and what and when you are studying, and how your course will develop over the years in Macedonian universities.

For a while, four years ago, I studied cultural studies at the Euro-Balkan Institute in Skopje, but the demands of my day job meant that I could not keep up with the course. I learned some quite important things there, and also at their summer university programmes.

## Your art is highly socially engaged, and deal with very difficult themes.

### Can you talk us through how these projects (on human trafficking, child begging) etc have come about, and developed?

ZZ: Most of the works I do are socially engaged. For me there is no other way. These issues deeply hurt and scar me. Uncertainty, poverty; at certain points in my life I have been close to these issues personally. I get really emotional about human suffering and this has stayed with me. I suppose that my works are a way of dealing with these feelings, because they are not far from my personal life.

Activism, seems more effective in raising these issues. Let's be honest, here in Macedonia the political system will not change, social politics neither. I have individually worked with Roma people over the years. I have visited their houses, many of them of Roma people living on the edge; for example, a single mother living on less than fifty euros per month social benefits, trying to raise five children in an abandoned and ruined house with no electricity or toilet. Art won't really help in this situation, and I don't as the artist have either the power or the energy to change this situation. On the streets, I have only once or twice seen social workers taking children into care, and that was in an extreme situation where it was minus twenty, in winter. Children die here, and nobody cares.

It's a similar story on the subject of human trafficking. I approached some organizations and was willing to volunteer my help, but they were not responsive. I suppose my art is a way of raising awareness of these issues. Macedonia as a society turns its face away from such problems. For most people here it's hard to survive, so they don't have time to care for others...but also we as a people can be very humane. But in general, yes, we don't really care too much.

Moving onto the photographs of Skopje children, these started around 2007. Around that time my sister got a Canon camera from my mother as a gift; I borrowed it, and went out, and started taking photos. This project kind of just happened, spontaneously. Most of these images concern a story about a girl who calls herself Valentina, who took me to the place where she lived. That's kind of how it all happened.



I should say that, since the age of about fourteen, I have been living in a neighbourhood where half the people are Macedonians, and half Roma. Poor schooling, and a lack of sexual education, means that many Roma quickly have children of their own. They cannot find any decent work, even if such a thing exists today in Macedonia, for lower class workers. Most Roma would really struggle to afford even a basic standard of living and that's why they end begging on the streets.

After these photographs, I must admit to having felt guilty. I suppose I feel guilty about what privileges I have, the job I have, the chance to live in a small decent home and perhaps to take a greater range of opportunities that come my way.

### What has been the audience reaction to your drawings and photographs?

ZZ: Actually, it has been very good. Usually, I never get any questions about the work. The local audience knows all about these issues, yet the images have provoked virtually no discussion. This for me completes a circuit of indifference; the indifference of the audience, and the indifference of the authorities to the problem. I have been asked why I bothered to make images of street children at my last exhibition, on the basis that they were everywhere outside of the gallery. It is maybe my way to institutionalise them.

### Tell us something of your involvement with Art INSTITUT and MOMI?

ZZ: Art INSTITUT was a great thing. We were totally independent; it was a gathering of one generation of artists, mostly painters. For me personally, it was great just to have a space. Most of us don't have a studio, or a space where we can work; it really is hard to find such a space, no matter that Skopje is full of almost abandoned public spaces. The local government will rather sell them to the urban mafia for profit. My first exhibition of wall drawings of street children was at Art INSTITUT.

In general, we were disorganised, and we were working in parallel on our own projects. But I felt free there, and not obliged to discuss my work; also, we had a space to show. It is very hard to find a gallery space to exhibit. I have been denied the chance to exhibit my work in many public spaces, and it is an interesting question as to why.

I suppose, after that, for me the idea of MOMI was to try and get together to think and works on social topics related to women. Like the middle aged ladies working long hours in places like Tinex for small wages or the women working in the textile industry. MOMI however do not really want to engage with social issues, whereas for me, I cannot work on topics that are not related to social or political issues. Perhaps we can work together to find a space between the two positions. When I think more broadly, there is the issue of patriarchy. We have religion back on our necks, and perhaps a loss of belief in the fight for equality between the sexes in Macedonian society.

MOMI and KOOPERACIJA started at the same time and KOOPERACIJA has disintegrated. Other members of MOMI are pushing the organization more than me. That is however carrying on for now, and hopefully we can all bring it to some better level.



Zorica Zafirovska, Valentina, 2007. Photograph



**What are the links between art and activism?  
Are there boundaries between art and  
activism in the contemporary Macedonian  
context?**

ZZ: There are, but there shouldn't be. I have always tried to say something more in my works. I have Goya in mind a lot at the moment, and his focus on social justice and broader social issues. For me, if you do not really believe in, or are passionate about what you are making, then it is not an honest piece of work.

Perhaps I feel myself a little bit of an outsider in contemporary art here. There is a little more interest in my work now...from the exhibition at Lauba in Zagreb, for example. I have the support of one or two people and the freedom to do what I want.

**Currently you divide your time between  
Skopje and your work in the North Sea.  
What impact does this working pattern have  
on your art?**

ZZ: My work contributes to my status as an outsider. I am continually jumping between the two; I often start a work and then forget about it for a long time. I have lived this life now for eight years and I have become used to it. Humans are very adaptable.

**Have you made work about your life in the  
North Sea?**

ZZ: I had a small show in Mala Galerija, some industrial-scape drawings and some small videos made of photographs. So yes I have exhibited something about it. However, it is forbidden to record on the oil-rig now. For a time, I had the approval of one of the managers who was very kind to let me take photographs, so I have made thousands of photos. Now it is much more difficult, as there are strict rules about safety and I'm not allowed to go in most of the areas outside of the accommodation on the rig.

I hope one day to be able to do something with the material that I have, maybe to make a video installation. At the beginning of my time in the North Sea I was very enthusiastic to make work about it, I knew I needed time and asked lots of questions; now I have kind



Zorica Zafirovska, *Drawing of a Street Child*,  
Temporary image at ART I.N.S.T.I.T.U.T, Skopje, 2009

of lost interest. The photos I've made became are a kind of escapism from my being, working and living there. It is hard to fight the patriarchy over there, is hard to be acknowledged even as existing there, far less being recognised.

**How do you see the future of contemporary  
art in Macedonia?  
Are you optimistic or pessimistic?**

ZZ: I'm optimistic, I do have hope, because of individuals in our art institutions and organisations, people who really put enormous effort in their work, people with great energy, are honestly engaged in creating art, but also in exploring, researching and sharing, and I am sure that others will follow.





*Ephemerki (Jasna Dimitrova & Dragana Zarevska), The Laid-Off Cosmonaut, 2014.  
Photograph*



Born Kratovo, 1985. Performance artist. Part of the duo Ephemerki with Jasna Dimitrovska since 2011. Singer under the name Telemama. Lives and works in Skopje.

## Dragana Zarevska



## What are your earliest memories of art?

DZ: I have two thematic lines; this is writing and illustrating stories as a child, but I didn't really know that this was art at the time. The other is a more painful memory.

I grew up in a small town in Eastern Macedonia called Kratovo. There was a film shooting, and I knew the movie director. I went to see the place where they were shooting, and intimated that one day I would like to be in movies myself. The director turned to me and said "I bet you have never seen a movie in your life". Somehow this really affected me, that maybe he said that because I came from such a small place.

Strangely, now, live art and performance makes me much happier than anything else.

## Tell me about your art education, and how you ended up in this position of enjoying live art more than anything else.

DZ: After finishing my film school studies in Sofia, I started working in the offices of Lokomotiva, here in Skopje. They were producing and organizing dance pieces by foreign performers. In the end I was invited to perform organized by the German choreographer Isabelle Schad; by the Swedish choreographer Anna Koch, and then later with Rebecca Chentinelle- that one was in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, in the Pontus Hulten library. This was a piece that was more of a live performance firstly, rather than strictly dance.

Alongside this, I was doing graphics with stories; then I wasn't doing my own performances; just performing with other people. And after that came Ephemerki.

## Tell me a little bit more about how Ephemerki formed.

DZ: I met with Jasna at a show in Skopje, which I did with another Swedish dancer, that was called 1985. We worked on it collaboratively. It was the year in which we were both born, and it just seems so dead historically. It was a mixed media show of graphics, paintings and applied art.

1984 is Orwellian, 1986 was Chernobyl...there was just nothing happening in 1985. We collected some objects and tried to give some relevancy and importance to that year. It was in CEKA gallery, which is closed now. Anyway, I met Jasna there and we decided to do something together, even although we are very different and have different interests. Jasna is very oriented towards engineering, robotics and new technologies; I am much more of an old fashioned poet. Jasna brings me up to date with contemporary stuff. So, we have a productive tension, and even although we are both different we think in a similar way. We work really productively together, almost like some cyborg; each of us brings different raw materials to the partnership.

## What do you think the significance of live or performance art is, in contemporary Macedonia? It has a low profile by comparison say with Serbia, or Bosnia-Herzegovina...

DZ: I still think it is exotic in our local context. There hasn't really been much research done, locally, into it. Even amongst artists there is some scepticism about it. It is still not well-respected here. I don't think we can accept ephemeral art works as something serious. Performances here are connected to some permanent objects, to things that can travel in time and space. Ephemeral performances are really under-estimated. I really wish the scene was striving more in this direction.

## I suppose, leading on from that, I should ask how aware you were of the work of other performers in the Macedonian context, such as Simon Uzunovski?

DZ: I don't really know Simon's work so well, but I am friends with his son Nikola and I really like and respect his work. In the practical sense, people are not hiring us so much to perform, as our work is so ephemeral, and it costs so much for us to travel for an ephemeral product. So this is difficult for us. Macedonian art is still really rooted in the object, and this is not so exciting for me. I suppose there is OPA, there is some ephemeral work there, connected to performance.

With Jasna, together we want to make objects that materialize words and concepts; like in the performance Lele for example, we wanted to give tangible form to such an abstract thing.



**So let's go on then to Lele, which was your first performance together as Ephemerki. Tell us how you planned it, how it was received, whether you plan to carry it forward in the future...**

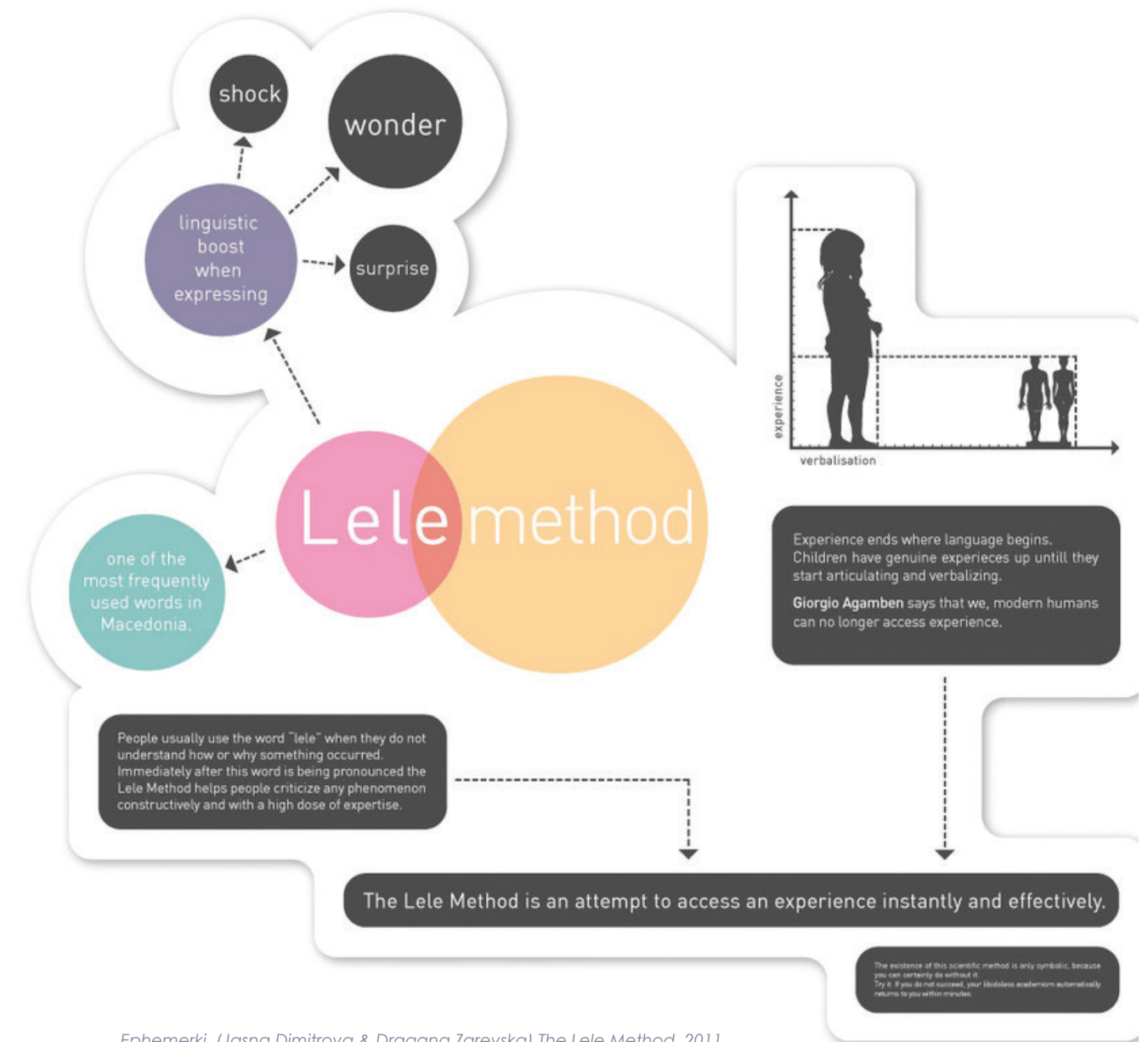
DZ: Ah look in the beginning it arose as a joke. Lele is a word that does mean anything, people use it to cover the gap when they are trying to think of another word. It is so over-used in the Macedonia context. We wanted to make this little word noticeable but visible; people use it in our language without noticing it, and we wanted to change that. We worked out a method, of why lele is used, and what is it for.

We made a method when we first presented the work at the AKTO festival in Bitola in 2011. We dressed like promotional girls selling some brand of juice, or something like that. We stood at the door to the gallery and didn't say anything else.

Actually at first people avoided us, as it seemed like we would charge them an entrance fee for the exhibition, or maybe try to sell them something that they didn't want. People were asking us where the toilet was, or was there something to eat. When we showed at Oktobarski salon, even people who knew us, avoided us, as they didn't recognize us in our promotional outfit.

We tried to present it as a brand; we had this stamp, which we had with us. We stamped them with the word, and immediately they got it, and understood our method. We were trying to give people direct access to their own experience, to something they didn't notice.

When we did it first in Bitola, people enjoyed it on the whole; people who knew us knew it was kind of a joke, and laughed at us, but we were yelled at, too. People also avoided us, who didn't want to pay a fee; particularly younger people, who have no money at all. So it was interesting to go through the experience of a brand promoter. It was relaxed in Skopje, where everyone knew us, and our last performance of it was in Belgrade. But, you know, it's so specific to the Macedonian context, it would be difficult for this to translate itself beyond our region.



*Ephemerki, (Jasna Dimitrova & Dragana Zarevska) The Lele Method, 2011*

**So do you have plans to make this again, or are you done with it?**

DZ: sure, we'll see for that. But, you know, it's so specific to the Macedonian context, it would be difficult for this to translate itself beyond our region.

After Lele came our project The Retrospective Exhibition of Jasna Dimitrovska and Dragana Zarevska, We only made it once, because you only make retrospective shows once in a century, when you are dead. Actually, we claimed to both be named after our grandmother, and to be from working class backgrounds, which is actually not true in real life. We wanted to give ourselves some integrity, relevancy and "artistic immunity". Aldo Milohnić, from the Peace Institute



in Ljubljana, has this concept of “artistic immunity” : you gain artistic immunity and then take benefits from it. I suppose in way, my grandfather having been at the academy provoked this.

The word “knee” in Macedonian is also a synonym for “generation”. We wrote in our catalogue that a particular piece was designed to provide the artist with an artificial “knee”, that could be placed wherever in the family past, in order to lie to yourself, and to the others as well; create a bogus and fictional account of your biography that is also believable.

**This is interesting, as it seems that a lot of your work is very critical towards the processes of art; not just in Macedonia, but in other places too. You're quite skeptical of the whole art world, aren't you?**

DZ: That's our field of activism I think, and important for our solo careers, too. I wouldn't feel competent to critique other aspects of society when there are so many problems in our own. There is so much hypocrisy associated with the “leftist” streams within contemporary art; the words of horizontal organization and social awareness are there, but not the practice, as far as I can see.

Our main purpose as artists is to do art; perhaps activism is an extra quality, but let it be humorous. Activism is usually so serious. We enjoy theory, and trying out new stuff, but we also want to show that theoretical frameworks haven't taken over our lives. I was speaking recently with Jasna about whether it is possible to be taken seriously as an artist without knowing about Deleuze and Guattari; people are so quick to criticize artists for a lack of theoretical literacy.

This brings us into another area of our interests; that is to say, the connection between theory and ordinary life. People don't read that much here, and they don't want to engage in theoretical discussion because they feel that they are stupid. We want to break that stigma, to illustrate theoretical concepts through normal visual material, such as the Unemployed Cosmonaut series.

Working class people, people who work on a farm, can understand this easily, without feeling stupid; we want to make all potential viewers feel engaged and involved in our work. It's very easy to isolate someone, and to make them feel stupid about art. We want to make art that is understandable, without being populist, which is a really difficult balance to strike.

**What is your view of the art world in Macedonia specifically? What works, or doesn't work here?**

DZ: In the very basic sense, my critique would be aimed at the lack of opportunity. That's why the scene doesn't work well, as everyone is battling for very few places. Artists are very few in number and there are many very bad interpersonal relations. Good relations between people improve the context in which everybody works.

For example, the Ministry of Culture finances Skopje 2014, and gives very little money to contemporary art. Everyone is fighting for some of this money, or fighting for some residency, or whatever. This basic selfishness damages our immediate context. In terms of content, it is very easy to be famous here, as the country is so small; the cosy feeling that results from this brings with it inertia. Few people go abroad to present work, because of this lack of motivation.

**So is this part of why the profile of Macedonian art internationally is so low?**

DZ: you have to realise that many people have already left the country, so our scene lacks human resources. Many creative people have left Macedonia in the last five to seven years; not just artists, but also many fashion designers, musicians; we have lost a lot of people. But, you know, maybe we are not radical enough. Maybe our art is just too lukewarm to attract sufficient interest from abroad.

**How does your work as a musician relate to your live art work? How does the one inform the other?**

DZ: I still don't think they are firmly connected, as I am quite new to music. I sing entirely in Macedonian; I sing about Skopje 2014, about the Prime Minister, about some battles I have in the world of performance, so I suppose that there are parallels there. Many people think that I write love songs, but actually, I am talking about the bad relations between the people and the city of Skopje, and the government; many of my songs also talk about architecture. So, I suppose I have separate identities in music and live art, but the practices are very interconnected thematically.



**What role has Skopje 2014 played in these bad relationships that we have been speaking about in the last couple of questions?  
What effect has it had on the art world?**

DZ: I don't know anyone who worked on Skopje 2014 personally, but I do know people who approve of it, which is also part of the process. Skopje 2014 has divided the art world in a very radical way. Some people approve of it ideologically, but some have approved of it because they feel the battle is over, and that the scheme is too far underway, to be reversed.

People attempt to blame themselves for what happened to us, but I don't think this is fair; much of this was done in an underhand way, trees were destroyed and projects developed under cover of night, when no one was around to object or take an interest in what was going on.

The whole scheme is totally out of control; how is it possible to resist? In Istanbul, the mass protests in 2011-12 saw masses of people on the street. Here, there is not such a mass; we are a much smaller country. The critical mass opposing this is small, and no one in government fears this. I also think, at this point, that everyone is too depressed and sad to do anything; every week people leave Macedonia for good. I really don't know how we will look in two or three years with this drain of our population.

**How are you able to survive in these circumstances?  
How can you be a performance artist or a musician in a society where there is no money for these things?**

DZ: It is very hard. We are not able to travel that much, yet it is fees from exhibitions and projects abroad that help us to live here. I have a small child so it is more difficult for me to travel presently. It really is difficult how to survive given the current situation in the ministry of culture. Even people who are awarded money are not able to survive on what the ministry pays out. Only travelling and performing in other countries really make a difference.

I don't know what to say about it: it would be nice to be able to get money locally, and have the choice as to whether to be a nomad or

not. But I'm afraid for me, this precariat reality is what I will live for a while more, until maybe I find a job in teaching, or something related to what I do.

I think most artists are part-time. The impact of this is that it impacts the quality of the work, as we lack time; the other effect is the knowledge that the work is largely unrealized, which generates a huge amount of passivity in artists to create further.

**OK- so let's look to the future. You are doing a new performance of Context v Discursor in Ljubljana in October.  
Can you say more about that performance and how you see it developing?**

DZ: The plan is to perform on stage dressed in S&M latex suits. We want to show how, if people don't speak as they should, they will be disciplined; either be thrown out of the context, or not be allowed to take part within the context.

Actually it will be a comedy performance. We will have a few generic objects on a table in front of us; stuff like a brick, a phone. We will show how language changes through these objects; how "art" discussion sounds like about such objects, and the difference with normal conversation. I suppose we are aiming to show the tension between the two worlds, and how language operates differently in each.

The piece alludes to Alien and Predator, and how artists and theorists are aggressive monsters, capturing part of this public discourse.

**But then art is thoroughly marginal here...how is it possible for artists or theorists to influence public discourse in this way?**

DZ: True, but when you are young and naïve, in terms of theory, and you misuse words and don't express yourself properly, if you don't appear to understand certain concepts, people will pick you up for it. The of course you will feel a bit hurt, and start to read, in order to be properly socialized within the art world. But, I think this can go too far; you can enter theory and to be totally taken over by it; ordinary life seems pale by comparison. It is difficult to communicate ideas simply anymore; art people are suspicious of simple ideas





*Ephemerki (Jasna Dimitrova & Dragana Zarevska), Context vs. Discursor, 2014/15.  
Photo: Zdravko Culic*

now. It would be nice to just have a day off theory once in a while! It feels a bit hurtful, maybe, that academic elites are so closed and not receptive to ordinary people; they are separate from them.

### **Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the prospects for contemporary art in Macedonia?**

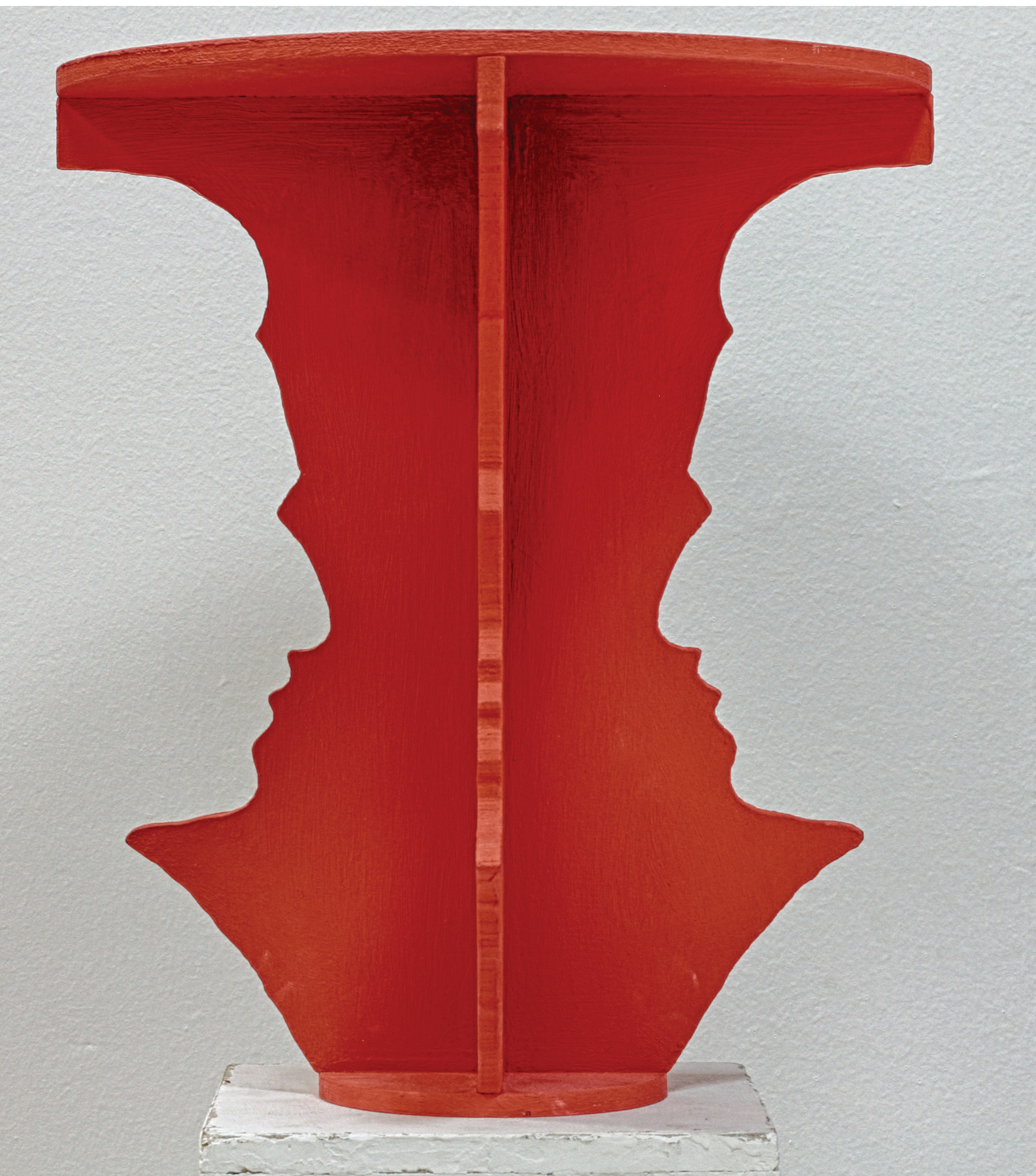
DZ: I will be optimistic if one condition is met; namely, that VMRO leaves office. But even if they leave power, maybe the damage is done here, too many people have left, and there is not enough finance to rebuild things quickly.

However, psychologically, many people will be relieved if VMRO leaves and as I have seen recently, there are many smart people studying in universities. The protests of the students at the beginning of 2015 show that they are neither stupid, nor brainwashed. I once thought that there was no hope for young people under this regime, but the student protests surprised me.

We need to cure the institutional metastasis that the regime has inflicted on us. People who have moved abroad will certainly consider coming back here if the government changes; maybe people who have gained experience abroad will come back, new spaces will open up, and things may get better. Many independent places closed in the last few years.

If I move, I will perform as a Macedonian artist; this in itself contributes to the scene, even if you do not live here.





Vladimir Jančevski, *Construction for a Classical Capital (Profiliation of Iconic Image in Dialectical Space)*, 2013, object (acrylic on mdf), 47 x 40 x 40 cm



Born 1984, Skopje. Vladimir is an independent researcher and research-oriented artist based in Skopje, working simultaneously in the field of contemporary art and visual studies. He graduated in Art History at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, and worked there as teaching assistant on courses in Modern and Contemporary Art (2009-2011, four semesters).

Since 2006 he has co-organized several group exhibitions, and also edited several publications. He is the author of more than thirty texts about contemporary visual artists (including Nikola Uzunovski, Igor Toshevski, Alban Muja, Sasho Dimoski, Obsessive Possessive Aggression, Vladimir Lukash, and Bojan Simovski). Vladimir was a member of KOOPERACIJA from 2012-15. He lives and works in Skopje.

## Vladimir Jančevski



## What are your earliest memories of art?

VJ: I first encountered art through reproductions in some encyclopaedias in my parents' library. I was very interested in the pictures in them, among them many reproductions of artworks from all styles and periods. I was immersed in art from an early age. Some of the encyclopaedias even ended up damaged from my activities: I was obsessed with cutting out and comparing, connecting similarities between the images, as a kind of basic art-historical comparative method. As a kid, I was known as a little guy who drew a lot, painted and made things from plaster. Certainly, important influence on me was the early encounter with the best examples of local art, various archaeological findings from the Neolithic period, and antiquity that can be seen in local museums, and especially the art of the Byzantine era.

When I was in primary school I continued my interest in world history and art, even ended as a student who was not only given the regular simple tasks of dealing with the basic visual elements, but was encouraged to read and learn more. Then in high school, I had two years worth of art history; I enjoyed learning not only about art, but also about visual culture, more broadly, to try to understand why people in different historical periods expressed themselves in the way that they did. At one point during my last year at high school, when I was writing an essay on Klee, I even considered going to the art academy.

However, at that time I was struck by the powerful turning points in art with Duchamp's ideas and the works of historical Avant-Garde, and was really surprised by their high status. Somehow I knew that the questions that I was interested in would not be addressed at the art academy, so instead in 2002 I enrolled in the Institute of Art History at the Faculty of Philosophy.

## Tell us something of your education as an art historian.

VJ: I was really interested in questions of how artworks are received and interpreted, the questions of the status of art, the relations between avant-garde tendencies in art with tendencies in literature that led to a very intensive interest in text and image relations; I discovered authors that are still important to me, such as Samuel Beckett. Not to mention the importance of the encounter with the works of artists from the 1960's on, like Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, Robert Morris and others. In fact, the first exhibition I curated

in 2006 was honouring Beckett's centenary with "Silence: Image" at the National Gallery's Multimedia center, and later earned my BA in Art History with a thesis titled "Between Image and Word: Samuel Beckett and Bruce Nauman". The Institute of Art History doesn't pose much of a challenge, especially not for someone that refuses to take things for granted and to be satisfied with simple reproduction of knowledge without questioning it; you are expected to learn facts, and to reproduce them well in exams, and that's it. There is not much concern about art theory and methodology, so mainly I continued with my previous interest in Modern and Contemporary art, but also Literature, Philosophy etc.

Even the Institute's library was not up to date, so since 2003 I started building my own library, becoming more and more immersed in the complexities of the field and by now I have collected about 2,500 books, mainly on Modern and Contemporary art, theory, visual culture, image theory, and public art, with carefully selected collections on artists like Marcel Duchamp, Dada and Surrealism, then Joseph Beuys, Robert Morris, Hans Haacke, Victor Burgin, Harun Farocki, Conceptual Art and Institutional Critique, The Russian Avant-Garde and the Non-conformists, but also by theorists like W.J.T. Mitchell, James Elkins, Hans Belting and many others. I was enthused by the possibilities of interdisciplinary research. I continued to ask new questions, to learn new things, and to connect these with the relevant issues of today.

I don't think that the institute functions as it should, mainly because there is no tries for more direct communication or integration with the other cultural institutions, and there is almost no exchange or participation in activities on a regional or international level.

## Is the Institute of Art History needed in Macedonia? How can an art historian function in this society?

VJ: From 2009 to 2011 I worked at the Institute as teaching assistant, and really enjoyed the work with the students, even though most of them were there to get a degree. And I can say that it is really a question of inertia. It seems that only few can acknowledge both the danger of neglect and the real potential of the acquired knowledge about art, art institutions and the wider visual field. If your question is about need, well that is very difficult to answer. What is an art historian in the Macedonian context? Is it just someone who graduated from the Institute? I don't think so. Probably one hundred or so students graduated from the Institute in the last ten



years or so, but few are doing art history or criticism now, not even engaged in any way with the art scene. Only a few are still writing introductory texts for the exhibition catalogues, but mainly without much enthusiasm. There are lots of improvisations and more and more impressionistic criticism that is even on a verge of nonsensical quasi-poetic hallucinations. There are less and less curators and professionals capable for inspirational theoretical work, and more and more cultural entrepreneurs and organizers of event, that are, more or less, meaningless. But it is pointless to complain; instead we have to look at the status of the profession, and to find out what makes it so problematic, in order to be able to continue with the work we think is important.

Art History as a discipline is in crisis, probably it always has been. I think it was a little different in Yugoslavia when there was a more centralised way of doing things, where art historians and critics had an identifiable job within a small section of society. Now, you can't expect the government to help in this society lost in time and space, neither one can rely on private donors. Of course it is possible to convince some publisher to print something, to produce a few hundred copies of a text that will be read by some colleagues, but not by anybody else. People are employed in these jobs in Macedonia; critics, curators, art historians, but are we just simulating the appearance of an art world? Who chooses these people for these positions, and with what result? Are there some criteria? There is no enough transparency and it seems that no one asks this question, and that is why the field is in a deeply marginal position.



Vladimir Jančevski, AN(A)THEM(A) 1 & 2, 2014. Video / Projection Loop

## Probably there are only twenty or thirty paid jobs for art historians in the whole country. How is it possible to use your skill set to survive?

VJ: In Macedonia, most things are done by few, and mainly out of enthusiasm for the field, based on the belief that it is really important. We are doing things that are important to us, but we also know that there is no system presently that will enable us to function with the full potential, or to be paid a salary for this work. We are victims of negative selection, and it is not a secret that some of the best students that came out of the Institute, even though they worked for some time as teaching assistants, as myself, are still outside the institutional frame. Even though since 2006 I collaborated, one way or another, with many of those institutions, mainly on my initiative, my application for employment in the Museum of Contemporary Art - Skopje was rejected twice, both in 2010 and later in 2014. And to be a freelance curator or art historian here, means that your basic existence is under threat.

Usually, we find ourselves in conflict with the institutional frame, and the way our institutions frame art and contemporaneity in such a lousy way. They are really very inert. So, from time to time we find ourselves criticising this system that simulates an art world, but basically is only part of the mechanisms of the status quo. There is a very strange but effective mechanism for keeping people outside of this system. I am not interested in being in a management or committee position that makes decisions on who will exhibit; we can pretend that our position has some kind of influence, but it doesn't. People in these positions have little knowledge of art theory, criticism, history or contemporary tendencies in art. At the end, discussions about art boil down to questions of taste, and a poor interpretation of artistic choices.

Of course I'm not saying that there should only be one interpretation of an artwork, far from it, but here it is difficult to even raise these kinds of discussions, and if they happen at all, more and more they tend to end on very ill informed quasi-argumentation and relativisation.



**What you are raising here is the parallel institution strategy; that, owing to the weakness or inertia of national institutions, artists have to invent their own...**

VJ: In fact, it is not surprising that the emergence of non-institutional practices is only one of the direct indicators that the art institutions are not in service of the artists and art professionals, and that is a direct expression of the discontent among active participants. The point is that institutions do not bother too much and often even rely on the work of others, because, mainly, with few exceptions, they are not capable to cope with really important issues that demand greater intellectual efforts. We have been discussing these issues for years, but for someone in a position of power in an institution, it is nonsense, probably, as long as they continue in maintaining their privileged position as decision-makers. It is enough I think to look at the government's biggest visual art project, which people call art; whether it is or not, is another question. The whole visual field is simply a tool to fix and maintain the power of ruling elites, which is nothing new: it's a very well known populist strategy.

The point here is that the marginal status of the critical artist, theorist, scholar, doesn't really matter in the minds of general population. Nevertheless, my hope is that, little by little, we will be able to somehow undermine such populist positions; sometimes, we might even be successful.

When you think about the role of the artist, or the writer, we can still confirm that these practices have some power to persuade. Those persuasion techniques and the knowledge of the visual field can be used to improve the positions of groups that are marginalised, or underprivileged.

Artists themselves are endangered in a way; the only way they can make a living is to use their skills in advertising, or in propaganda; a writer can make much more money writing a speech for a politician, than in publishing a new novel or play. And that is the real tragedy of the present situation. There are less and less ways of keeping your autonomy, and more and more your position boils down to a negative strategies of carefully selecting and rejecting any involvement in projects that are deeply or even slightly problematic from an ethical standpoint.

It is possible, of course, for an artist to make an exhibition in a national institution. It does not come with automatic support or recognition, however. But except of the opportunity to promote their work, they do not get anything in return. Even though art is almost

exclusively state sponsored, artist work without any fee. We really have never developed any kind of independent art market here, but considering the taste of the rich it is certainly not a big loss.

**I suppose we are beginning to talk about Skopje 2014 and the effects it has had on contemporary Macedonian art. What have you observed?**

VJ: I think that the effects are devastating, in many ways. It increased the imbalance between state-sponsored artists included in the project, and the rest, particularly those that are what Boris Groys calls a "comradeship of contemporaneity", politically aware and critical in their thinking about social and political reality. The artists involved in Skopje 2014 received huge fees for their work, and the work they presented is in fact conformist participation in an unthinkable ideological programme that is highly problematic. I would not engage in commenting on the quality of the work, because I think it is a mistake from the beginning to enter in this pre-modern discourse that unfortunately encompasses not only the social role of art, but is all about the return of the old meta-narratives of legitimization, as religion, nationhood and the nation state as the ultimate source of one's identity.

There are clear issues of ideology, aesthetics, and finance involved here: the whole scheme fixes the popular idea of what art is. It is like that project by the Russian-American artists Komar and Melamid; they produced a series of paintings that were decided by the results of polls. There were very similar results in different countries that showed the dominance of the pre-modernist notion of art. It was a very powerful project that showed, as when you see the paintings completed according to the polls, they were completely kitschy disasters. Even those who voted in the polls, were doubtful about the results when they saw them.

On Skopje 2014, some will disapprove of how much money has been spent, but I would guess that about two thirds would agree that the project was necessary, and that the new buildings and monuments are beautiful; the most terrible thing to hear is that many people that are supportive of the opposition parties find only the spending issues problematic, rather than the complete picture, that beside funding is about how it affects visually and the interdependence of aesthetics and politics.

This should be an object lesson in what it means to brutally conduct a so called democratic decision, for matters that are part of a



professional discourse. If you ask laymen how to conduct a surgical procedure, you will get a similar percentage of ‘casualties’ and non-sensical answers. It is clear that we are approaching times when democracy is undergoing strange turn into new forms of authoritarianism not only here, but in the wider context.

Politicians are manipulating these so called democratic processes very well. They have enough resources to convince people that Skopje 2014 is a good thing. They have mastered the art of public presentation with simple, but very effective imagery, counting on the lack of effort to decode on the part of the general population. This is another matter connected with the work of art historians, and people involved in interpretation. There are almost limitless ways of re-framing and re-interpreting facts and opinions; in that sense, our politicians are entering the art historian’s domain; there is a war of images, and a war of interpretations. We are forced to confront this kind of image making; we feel that elites are doing terrible things, and we must confront it, sometimes more directly and sometimes using different strategies we believe to be more effective in the long run.

### What will the legacy of Skopje 2014 be, do you think?

VJ: Skopje 2014 is one of the new wonders of unlimited stupidity, and at the same time, is a monument to the continuous disregard of the importance of the construction of culture by many so-called professionals, including, architects, urbanists, art historians, artists that were too comfortable in the period before this project started. It will certainly be one of the biggest lessons about the use of public space for political ends.

But there is also the question of who will learn from it, and what. It will depend on how the next government will re-frame and control visual discourse, and how this project will be treated. I do not believe that staging its destruction will bring any good, because any radical iconoclastic gesture usually gives legitimation of the power of the image. The opinions of marginal critics and theorists simply do not have enough reach in Macedonian society, and this really is problematic. The legacy of Skopje 2014 will depend in people’s willingness to invest in their critical abilities, and those of future generations, and whether they really want to deal with the possibilities of restructuring public space and if possible to continue thinking of how to defragment the devastated social field.

### In general, what do you think the links are between contemporary art practice and political activism, and how do you see one informing the other?

VJ: The goal of activism is to change society, directly. To realise that goal, there are many different tools for the activist. If they think they will achieve their goals through staging performances, or through visual design, then great. But they should be very careful what they are doing and how they conduct their agenda in the visual field. They should pay much more attention not to allow themselves to indulge in superficial spectacles that will eventually block all the possibilities for political action and be boiled down to an entertainment, underestimating the seriousness of the current situation. You will often hear this criticism that contemporary art is not direct, or not clear enough. But the problem of the so called activists is that they usually tend to overcome the supposed ineffectiveness of critical art, but they too are mainly functioning only in the symbolic field.

I tend to agree with Boris Groys, who wrote a text last year on the new situation and the dilemma of art activism, and its unavoidably paradoxical situation. He says that it is usually attacked from the art world, for not being art, and that is easy to put aside: in times of political turmoil, when stakes are high, whether it is art or not, is less important. But at the same time you have activists complaining about Government’s spectacle, only to end up countering it with another forms of media spectacle. A simulation of a revolution or a protest is certainly not a solution, if you do not force yourself to really get to the root of the problem. Activists become entangled in the artistic side of their acts, and don’t want to admit that it is not much different from critical contemporary art. And even worse: very often it is not only ineffective, but too shallow, or simply based on badly formulated and exaggerated messages, without offering any clear concepts of what will follow ‘the day after’.

In my opinion we can still influence people through verbal-visual constructions. Especially now, we should not underestimate the power of the image. I object more to activists who conduct what they call art performances, only to use it as a defence when they are asked to justify their acts. For me, this is the worst thing they can do, to further complicate the question of the art as sacred.

Many avant-garde artists in the past, tried to eliminate the boundaries between art and life. What is at stake when you call something art: is it market value, status, or what? We have some disagreements with older colleagues, in the naming of objects or actions as art. Really, I do not care much about this labelling at all if it is not



clear what it implies. Usually when you designate something as art, it is expected that it confers a special kind of aura, and asks for a special protection.

On the contrary, the critical artist who is really responsible would never do this, to demarcate himself from other citizens as more important. The point is to be aware of where you stand. I am not special as an art historian; I am not special when I exhibit something as an artist; I am not conferring special status when I call someone an artist. Not that there is no difference, but that difference should not result in exceptional status. Art always brings consequences and artists that insist on radical change should be ready to take responsibility about their actions, and not to act like some spoiled children. That why I respect some artists that do not hide themselves behind civil society.

By the way, why call someone an artist if only considering their political position, if not paying attention to the specific ways in which the artist does his work, his engagement with others and choices he make in the professional field, about especially the possibility to look at things from a different angle. And indeed sometimes it is indeed a very sharp angle, as I would like to say, and not only metaphorically, but referring to its real critical potential.

We should avoid talking about the surfaces of the problems here, but try to find out how all that happens around us, is built upon some underlying structures that remain unshattered. It is incredible how people set aside these problems and do not try to grapple with them seriously, especially younger artists, critics and self-proclaimed theorists, even though in my opinion the greatest challenge now, in a time of huge changes in the image culture and speeding up under the pressure of new technologies, is to stay focused and highly alert.

### **I wanted to ask specifically about your involvement in Kooperacija, and how you ended up exhibiting as an artist in your own right there...**

VJ: In April 2012, just as Kooperacija were starting out, Igor Toševski approached me. At that time I was busy organising lectures by the Russian artist Vitaly Komar at the MoCA-Skopje, and I couldn't attend their first exhibition. After their second show in May we really discussed in more details about their concept, and the perspectives of the initiative, considering the possible directions, the problems of the matizing contemporaneity through art. I was very interested in their positions, and the group's potential, and I definitely decided to join.

We all agreed on the need to organise some kind of platform for different profiles on the contemporary art scene, and to work together jointly. They initially expected that I would be responsible for theoretical justifications, and for organising discussions and lectures. But, during our conversations from the very start I tried to present my attitude toward the meeting points of art practice and theory and my interest in interdisciplinary research, trying to find a way to articulate problems through the relationship between the verbal and the visual.

In a way, this was good occasion to re-examine my current thinking through the work that I exhibited. I didn't feel at ease just writing about these things, even though I continued writing for other artist's projects. I thought that something could be clarified, or maybe to be defined more accurately if it is in a constant oscillation between making and thinking, keeping it open, or being a stage in a process-led project. I decided not to write a text, but as a start to make a simple gesture based on the Kooperacija logo; by folding it up, I formed the word Option. It was like a one word critique dedicated to the emerging platform, an object-statement that was later exhibited at "Where is everyone?". And indeed it was very interesting to participate in different challenging events, exhibitions and discussions that tackled many of the interconnected issues I was interested in.

Two years later, in June 2014 it led to the realization of my first solo project titled Anomalies: in-disciplinary aEsTHetIC constructions / Politics and Limits of Interpretation that dealt with various strategies of verbal-visual construction and destabilization of certain problematic images and narratives.

### **Was it liberating to find a platform where you were not just the in-house theorist, but a contributing member, as well?**

VJ: Definitely, it was a liberating experience. But, here in Macedonia, people have real problems with the boundaries of disciplines. Even experienced critics and art historians make some objections not on the basis of skill, but on the basis of an individual's 'professional' labelling based on a university degree, and that of course is not decisive for someone to be designated this or that. For me that was always very strange, because I am keen to think of someone's professional identity on the basis of their work, especially in the field of art, having in mind that not only the historical avant-garde, but almost all major artists in history were involved in some kind of theoretical work, or at least were fully aware about the consequences of their actions in the visual field. Not to mention what Con-





Vladimir Janchevski, *Anagramatica*, photo-intervention series, Skopje, 2013

ceptual artists did in that sense, and in again and again confirmed with the work of Allan Sekula, Victor Burgin, Harun Farocki or Hito Steyerl, working simultaneously in theory and practice, informing one with the other.

I was directly involved in the concept the exhibiting of works in the show *Personal Politics*; this was a show about the construction of identity, the role of the individual, and the personal responsibility in constructing a story about who s/he is, and in the different stories that the society constructs around in relation to the individual. For this show, besides an installation dedicated to the Serbian writer, critic and philosopher Radomir Konstantinović who passed away the previous year, I wore a black t-shirt with a white inscription. I added an “H” to the word artist (ARTHIST) with a footnote ‘misspelling intentional’. I knew that many would be surprised to see me ‘on the other side’, so tried to use the context of this exhibition, and hoped that it will be clear why that word was chosen and presented with this intentional misspelling. I tried to show that I could easily construct another category for myself, and to look after myself theoretically, if some defenders of the ‘disciplinary boundaries’ try to question the legitimacy of my practice.

I think it’s important for artists not to be afraid, if they don’t have the jargon, or the theoretical confidence; all they need to do is to show that the work they do is not done by chance; that they are aware of their political and artistic position. I’m not saying that art has to do with clarity, but even if you work in ambiguity and around difficulties of categorizing, it is surely better to show that you are aware of it, either by encoding it in the work, or by leaning on the context.

**It was very interesting for me to see how Kooperacija navigated the circumstances they found themselves in, and the decisions they made in response to them. Why did Kooperacija cease to operate just at the moment where their work seemed most relevant to the emerging political protests, in early summer 2015?**

VJ: I think we opened many questions, and through the works exhibited we showed that the visual field is indeed very complex, but also that art offers many different possibilities to consider many ongoing political struggles and the social reality more generally.



The point of all those exhibitions were to open more questions, and I really enjoyed working with the group, as they are different from the majority of artists working in Macedonia today. For me it was very important most of them really take care of defining the work and the critical themes, and pay much attention on where they exhibited and for whom, the background of the events, the political implications of their individual choices. That was really important. An artist cannot be political or critically engaged if does not pay attention to these details.

We were speaking of integrity and responsibility of the artist towards their role in society. Artists are not obliged to do political work or comment on the current situation, if art is just to be entertainment. Sometimes I have doubts about the marginal position of the artist, and their ability to overcome their marginal status by parasitically commenting on political events just to enter the spotlight. If such material is used only to make a sensation or a career-defining scandal, then I would be against that.

I am certainly not against any project that can turn a scandal into a vigorous debate that would take institutional power onto a terrain where it will be symbolically defeated, or at least where it could be shown clearly how elites misuse power and public trust. I am really supporting interventions, as for example Igor Toševski's cross-like Territory from 2009, or OPA's Solution, from 2012, that are not in any sense superficial attention seeking acts, something that I was trying to elaborate and defend in recent lectures and presentations.

**That's interesting, but, to focus on the end of Kooperacija, do you think it stopped because it was unable to transcend the marginal position of the critical artist, that it was better to be involved direct in politics?**

VJ: The marginality of the critical artists and their acts as deeply anomalous, especially in a society in disintegration comes as no surprise for someone who is attentive. At one point we felt that doing exhibitions just was not enough, and was not proper in the circumstances. We thought about and discussed a lot of finding different ways to continue our practice.

There were some problematic moments and minor misunderstandings and conflicts, of course. It was not so much however about the differences in the goals we had, but in how to deal with the situation and how to adjust the tactics with a long term strategy. Some of the members felt that Kooperacija was the most important thing at that

moment and trying to realize its full potential, whereas others were preoccupied in so many different initiatives that all the actual work was left to a very small core of members. Some did most of the work, and others just relied on that.

On another level, the platform was never intended to be a kind of homogenous art group. It was always intended to be open. Unfortunately, some of the artists did not realise the full potential of the platform; many saw it only as another occasion for exhibiting works, while most of the core member engaged in a real interchange, showing each other's work and discussing it that resulted in strengthening their readiness to constantly raise stakes. Many artists from the region and some international artists recognized the efforts and gave their support and participated in the exhibitions. But, unfortunately, for many reasons, it was impossible to continue without agreement on priorities.

For some of us it was of utmost importance not to reproduce any of the problematic relations in the system we openly criticize. There is no point in making only a slightly better version of the models that are fundamentally corrupted. In a way it was an internal conflict between a position that was oriented to more superficial issues masked in an empty revolutionary rhetoric and a more self-conscious and careful consideration of the dangers of reproducing the status-quo.

**If you look at Macedonian art history, there's an interesting repeating pattern; from groups like Mugri in the early fifties, who were mainly groups of friends who exhibited together, without really an agreed political or aesthetic platform.**

**It's a model that seems to repeat in post-Yugoslav Macedonia, not only with Kooperacija but also with groups like MOMI.**

**Is this a specific way of working in Macedonia, do you think, groups of opportunity rather than shared ideology?**

VJ: I think the generation of artists active in the early fifties were in a very different situation. In some way they were probably in a better position than we are now, and 'took advantage' of a more general acceptance of modern tendencies by the authorities in Socialist Yugoslavia, and they were even advised by higher political instances to join forces for practical reasons. They played art politics very well; conditions were much looser and more relaxed than those experi-



enced by dissidents in the Warsaw Pact countries. Anyway, artists and architects that participated in even though short-lived, were very important for the development of art and culture.

As for MOMI, I would only say that even though I'm familiar with some of their work, I really cannot say much about their agenda, or the reason why they decided to exhibit as an art group composed exclusively of women.

In the case of Kooperacija, the important thing was that we were not all friends before that project started. We didn't really know one another personally; I was familiar with their work, some of Igor and OPA's work, but before that we never had any direct contact or collaboration, mainly because we belonged to very different generations, myself being the youngest. But the times of trouble brought us together and now these are important new friendships, continuing our collaboration to this day.

Everything was very fast, and probably those three years was too short a period to build a long term strategy, but also we were not sure whether it is necessary to fix the rules of the game, and our future activities were constantly discussed. As a starting point what united us was the fact that what we all considered artistic, or democratic values was under attack, but not only that: we knew that new political reality and the cultural policies are little by little closing almost all doors for future development of critical thought. Even though sometimes radical discontinuity can be liberating, what we are facing is a rupture of a different order - very damaging and with dire consequences for the future.

The role we found ourselves concerning the artistic values of the recent past reminds me of an interesting remark about both Sartre and Beckett made by the Yugoslav philosopher Radomir Konstantinović, and about the debates between the two sets of ideas in Yugoslav thinking. He said that they used Sartrean engagement to defend Beckett's disengagement. This is relevant to us now when the modernist legacy is under attack, and even though we are not directly inspired by it, and sometimes criticizing some problematic remnants of the modernist elitism, we are still somehow obliged to defend them.

## Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia, and what is the reason for your answer?

VJ: Really, I'm not sure. Sometimes I am optimistic, and sometimes not. I carry on with my work, whatever the situation. It is most important not to accept any form of collaboration that will corrupt your integrity. There are chances for the current situation to change, but it really depends on the attitude of those who declare themselves to be different from the current government. There is an ongoing conflict between those who say that art should be less elitist and more engaged with the concerns of everyday life and really mean that, and those who seem just interested in careers, money and taking what they can from art projects, while shouting for the need for solidarity and joining forces. So, it is a difficult situation, and when you make some analysis, maybe it's possible to feel that the chances for positive change are slight, but it is still possible to find the way out.

But then, what does it mean to expect better? Does it mean, to be better paid, to be employed? There is a dualism between a readiness to continue, and the pessimism of a rational analysis of the available resources, and the mood amongst the opposition forces, and how they see the field of contemporary art. Do they really care more about it, and would they be ready to accept criticism from contemporary artists?

In the end, it's about the readiness of politicians and public officials to accept criticism without seeing it as a personal attack on them. But probably we are a society where people are just not ready to accept constructive criticism, and unfortunately, the vast majority is keen on finding the easiest way to realize their personal agendas, while proclaiming the importance of social justice, solidarity and 'common good'. Anyway, even though there are many reasons to give up altogether, also there are those rare, but gratifying moments that help you keep going.





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## Velimir Žernovski

*Velimir Žernovski, Distilled : Crucifixion 2014. Mixed Media, Variable dimensions. Installation at Lauba, Zagreb, in Essence of Existence curated by Ana Frangovska, June-August 2015. Photo: Jon Blackwood*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

VZ: Back to my childhood, near my parents' house in the centre of the city, in the building where Mala Stanica is right now, the professor and a theatre director Unkovski was developing a multimedia centre, together with some other people from the scene, and I was visiting this old and abandoned space nearly every day. Not that many things were happening in that time in the space, but I clearly remember one show placed there for quite a long time. I couldn't remember the name or the artists included, but somehow I remembered that future professor of art history years later, Nebojša Vilić, was included in this project.

So today I asked him if he knows something about this, and it turns out that he was curating this exhibition in Mala Stanica. The exhibition was called "Image Box" and it was open from the 16th December 1994 until 21st January 1995. This is important for my story since I went nearly every day, in my 6th grade, to this gallery, looking for hours at the installation made of videos, I was hiding actually in the gallery from my friends, my parents, it became somehow a safe place for me. So maybe I became involved in art through art education in school, but this exhibition is somehow my latest memory of a serious contact with contemporary art. Then I knew I was going to work on something connected to this magical thing, where with no reason at all you can take a space, and make it a magical place where children can hide, and dream of something bigger in life.

## How do you regard the state of art education in Macedonia and what changes would you make to it?

VZ: As the society changed in the period of the big transition in the Balkans the educational system went through some big and significant changes over too. I cannot talk of today's system from an inner position because I'm not involved in it, except for my latest master studies that I've been through in last year at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje. In my time as one can say, things were quite different, we were still a generation that was educated in the old system with some experimental programs from time to time, but the basic structure was still derived from the old socialist system.

When it comes to education in general term no matter where or in what conditions is practised I can easily say that I just don't trust it. For me it's always the side parts that are determining ones educational level. And by this side parts, I mean to refer to the close

collaboration with mentors, and what we are learning through life itself. To be always searching for new methods of working, and learning things outwith the system, is what makes us better scholars.

## How has Skopje 2014 affected the contemporary art scene (s) in Macedonia and with what consequences?

VZ: This one's a killer. This grotesque project is a simple manifestation of craziness and it should be analysed only from this point and no other. We still cannot get a clear distance from it, so that we can talk about it with cool heads but again, it is a phenomenological process that is going on and it's a manifestation of the craziness of power in its purest form. Of course it affected the art scene in the most bizarre way, as the project itself is the most bizarre thing that has happened in the middle of Europe in the 21th century, architecturally, socio-politically, or culturally speaking.



Velimir Žernovski, *Don't Be So Cruel*, 2015.  
Acrylic, permanent Marker, Glitter on Canvas





Velimir Zernovski, All Beauty Must Die!  
Curated by Slavcho Dimitrov, Skopje, 8 September 2013



**Contemporary art has been described, by some, as highly marginal in contemporary Macedonia; even as a subculture. Do you agree?**

VZ: If by saying marginalized we are talking about ignorant attitude by the official institutions towards contemporary art than I can agree with this. It is a very strange position of the state, but I cannot get to the core of the problem because I am not sure if we are talking of a politically structured position towards the contemporary scene in general, or if there is just an ignorance and misunderstanding of what this represents, and how it should be treated. It's a mystery and we are going to need a bigger elaboration of the problem so that we can come to some conclusions.

But still the art scene manages to find its own space and to react in a relevant way, in socio-political discourse. It is a huge battle, as we are constantly blocked from public funds, and left aside, but then again if the circumstances were different, we would be talking about different contexts and strategies.

**What are you working on right now?**

VZ: This is a very strange period for me, since I finished my long term Distilled series of projects where I was working a lot with notions of loss, melancholy and failure. I needed some space to rethink what can be the post product of all these materials that I have, but to be somehow framed in another context. But it's very hard as the world is getting crazier. There is the war in the Middle East and this terrible migrant crisis is going on.

It's so depressing and it's throwing me back to think on the most powerful emotions of it all, the same ones that I'm trying to abandon. But now I need to focus more on the global picture rather than personal one, and to think over the position of the individual in a context of humanity as a phenomenon. We failed again and we are going to fail more, so we are obliged to re think over and over about this circle of constant failure.

We need to create new strategies of dialogue, and to get back the principals of solidarity. We need to find a way to get more involved in what it is the basic human call, to get together and stand up for new values and new strategies of resistance. If art and cultural work in general can help in this fight, and we all have witnessed the power of art in times like this, then we are lucky.

**What strategies have contemporary artists adopted to survive in a cultural economy so starved of funds?**

VZ: There is no alternative, you just work with what you have or you simply leave the country and go to find some other context to work with.

**How would you account for the relative isolation of contemporary Macedonian art, in comparison to neighbouring countries such as Kosova, Serbia, Albania?**

VZ: I don't think anywhere else in the region is different from the Macedonian context. Maybe there is a much bigger scene in Belgrade, for example, so the public appearance is bigger, or there are some individual artists from Kosovo or Albania that are somehow out there in the world scene, but we cannot talk about some sustainable government approach towards contemporary art, or the live and progressive art scene. In my opinion politically speaking contemporary art is somehow perceived as an "enemy of the state" in the Balkans, and it doesn't comply with the dominant nationalistic discourses of the power centres in the region.

**Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia?**

VZ: Always pessimistic and always a fighter!!!





Hristina Ivanoska, *Intimate introspections: artist and/or society*, 2013  
Installation, Exhibition view KM-, Graz, 2013  
photo: Markus Krottendorfer, Courtesy the artist and Zak | Branicka



Born Skopje, 1974. Hristina completed a BFA (1997) and MFA (2013) at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Skopje. She is currently a PhD-in-Practice candidate at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. She works with objects, texts, drawings, video and installation, as an interdisciplinary and critical investigation into the experience of present-day social and political systems, and their relationship to theory and history. Hristina has exhibited widely across Europe and the USA, and together with Yane Calovski represented Macedonia at the Venice Biennale in 2015. She is a co-founder of the Press to Exit project space in Skopje. Lives and works in Skopje and Berlin.

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## Hristina Ivanoska

*Hristina Ivanoska portrait, 2015. Photo : Yane Calovski*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

HI: My family had no connections with art. I am the first artist in our family. I was always interested in expressing myself through drawing, from a young age.

My parents were engineers, although my mother was interested in fashion, and made things at home. My parents have always supported my work completely. Without them, probably I wouldn't be an artist.

I can remember, when I was aged around ten, visiting the studio of an artist in Skopje, as my mother wanted to buy one of her paintings. I was very taken by her studio space and interested in how she worked. This is an important memory; I can't really remember my first visit to a museum or gallery.

## You went through your art education in the 1990s, when the system really must have been in transition.

### Can you tell us something about your art education?

HI: Ah, the High School for Applied Art in Skopje was the best time in my life, and in my studies I really felt at home, being surrounded by people interested in art. I really loved that period, and enjoyed even classes in Chemistry and Physics. I met Yane there. Nothing was really difficult for me at the High School for Applied Art; we did a lot of practical work, and learned a lot of skills.

At the Faculty of Fine Arts, I really felt that something was missing within the structure. We had no conceptual development, of how to develop conceptual thinking; moreover, we were given no instruction on how to represent yourself, or explain the work you made. It was very old school; all of these missing subjects are critical for contemporary artists.

Only one professor, Stanko Pavleski, was interested in discussing how to conceptualise the work, or in discussing interesting contemporary artists, or artists relevant to a student's developing practice. I did an MA with him, later on.

I felt rather alone there, and tough to find a right approach to express myself in the way that I wanted to. I lost interest in painting.

Painting had been my major subjects in the last two years of my studies. My final work was rather sculptural. It was an installation made out of objects, with fabric and construction. It is interesting how I finished my studies because I didn't like sculpture that much, as a subject in the faculty. We were mainly working in clay which I did not find very stimulating.

When I think of my education today I think that I really missed serious challenges and guidance which I tried to achieve over the years through my practical work, collaborations and additional education.

## You have worked jointly on many projects with Yane Calovski. How easy is it to differentiate between maintaining an individual practice, alongside a dual practice? What is the relationship between the two?

HI: I would not say our collaborative work is of primary importance because our individual practices are equally important. We began to collaborate in 2000. Over the years this was happening from time to time, when we felt we could do something together. After a long break, in 2014, we started to collaborate again, and this became a very intense creative period. At the same time, we are continuing to work on our own individual practices.

The individual practice is very important for us. We like to be alone and go solely through the process of reading, thinking, conceptualizing, working and making, then to come together when it is necessary, and to share our thoughts and ideas. Also, given that we are a couple and a family, it is important to have the individual practice as an outlet.

Sometimes people ask, literally, who did what within our projects; but this for us is not important.. We created our own collaborative identity, and I can understand that it is difficult for people to understand how we do things together. What we try to do is to work with our similarities and differences and find subjects which are provocative for both of us. And to have a intense dialog until we realize that we are on a joint direction conceptually and visually.



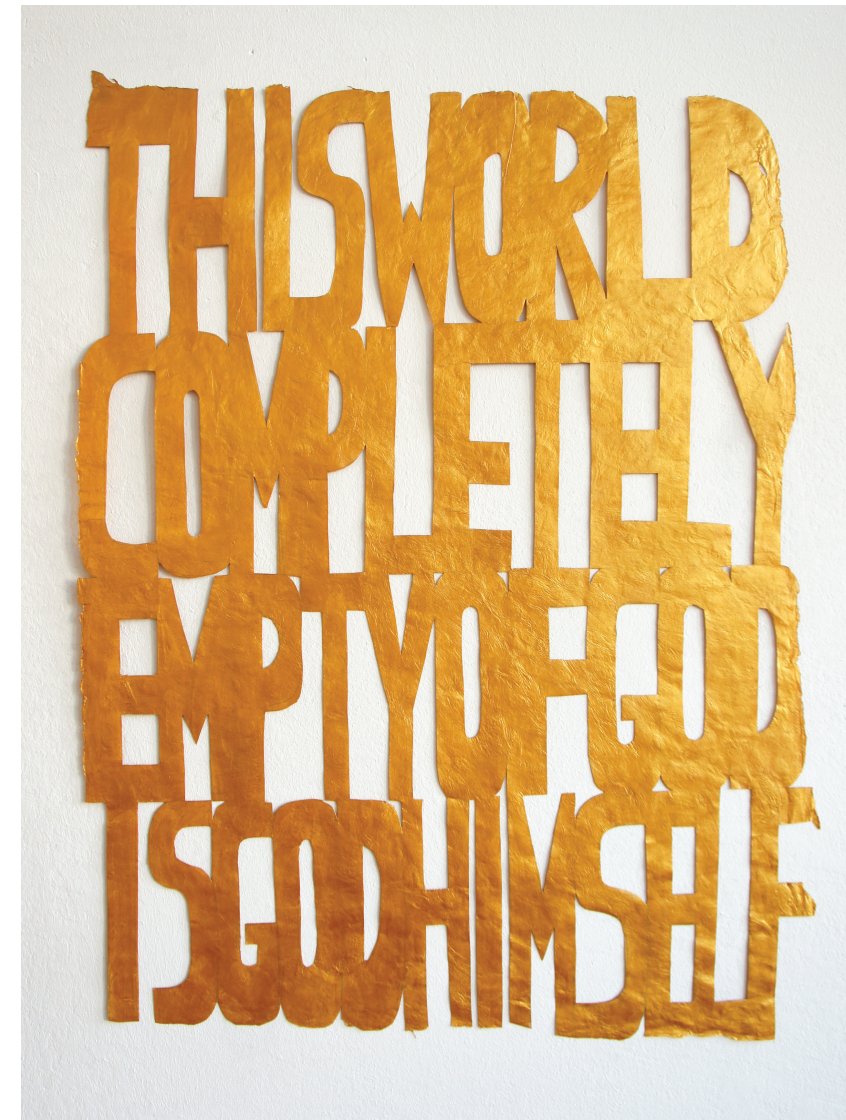
**The first work that I looked at closely is the Nature and Social Studies: Spiral Trip project you made alongside Yane in 2001/3. Something that underpins your work seems to be a real understanding of place, and where you come from. How influential was this early work to your development?**

HI: This was our second collaboration which was very ambitious and complex and somehow defined our artistic collaborative approach. Something that connects all our work is an understanding of history, re-reading of historical or art historical sources. Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty was of course key to this work. It was always interesting for both of us to go back to different sources, and to re-work our own individual interests, and decide what one can really use in a collaborative work. History and art history applied in the contemporary socio-political context are really important for us in developing an understanding of how we can function today.

**How does this relate to the "Antiquisation" currently developing as part of Skopje 2014? Is there a kind of odd parallel between that project's misuse of history, and your own careful re-presentation of historical sources in your collaborative work?**

HI: Personally I really feel ashamed of Skopje 2014.. Emotionally I found it really difficult to explain the mixed feelings that I have whenever I walk through the city centre today, as this is simply not the city that I grew up in. But, it's also interesting that this is the city centre where our son is growing up in now, and I am sure that we will have different understanding and perception of these changes in the future.

I suppose my feelings are similar to Skopje's earthquake generation, those who lived through that experience and can remember Skopje from before July 1963. I didn't know that Skopje, and for me talking about it was a little bit silly. Maybe my feelings are now the same as of those people. Those who does not have any personal history with the city and who become its inhabitants after 2009 cannot understand my frustrations and my anger.



Hristina Ivanoska, "Untitled (This world completely empty of God is God himself)", 2014 from the series La Misteriqué (The Path of Grace)  
Acrylic on hand made paper, 65 x 50 cm, Courtesy the artist and Zak | Branicka

Besides the emotional side there is an antidemocratic and criminal side of the project Skopje 2014. There was never an open public debate since this mega expensive project funded with state money was announced, and still the government and the state institutions are ignorant for any possible public discourse. In a country with very high percentage of unemployment and with one of the lowest average salaries in the region you invest millions of euros in buildings and monuments which some of them are illegally erected or over paid, suffocating the city center in style and manner which should never be part of the Macedonian identity. Authentic Macedonian architectural examples from the 70s or 80s, inspired by tradition and designed by local great architects, are now being covered by neo classical facades and ruined.



**There was a series of projects that you did related to the place of women in local history, such as the project called On Freedom and the Streets of Belgrade, and your interaction with the authorities in the Naming the Bridge: Rosa Plaveva and Nakie Bajram project. Could you tell us something about these projects and what you took from them?**

HI: The last research thing that I did related to this focus of mine was in 2007, with the project I did in Belgrade. Now I am returning back to these subjects, the marginalized and unknown women's history of resistance and emancipation in Macedonia as they are relevant to my Ph.D. research that I am doing at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna at the moment. It is also interesting to go back to the character of Rosa Plaveva (1873-1970), a social-democrat, fighter for women's rights and an activist, who was active in the first half of the 20th century, to reconstruct her life and to compare her strategies of resistance with our way of resisting or questioning certain issues in our society. For the visual presentation of my research I am using the form of the performance as a tool to confront with the topic.

Last year, I also started a collaborative project titled Museum of Women's Stories with Iskra Geshoska, Biljana Tanurovska Kjulavkovski and Violeta Kachakova. Our focus is the Pelagonia region which is located in the western part of Macedonia especially the three largest cities in this region: Bitola, Prilep and Kreshevo, researching how the women were organising themselves there on the political, social and cultural level in the pasts.

The subject is very interesting but it is really difficult to work with unsystematised and uncompleted resources of information. . Because I was responsible about the visual representation of the project I was not interested in doing a didactic exhibition, or anything like that; so I created a series of drawings using some of the sources to develop my own visual and conceptual language.. There is still huge potential in this subject, and I am really interested to go and dig further. I almost feel obliged to do it, like I owe it to our known and unknown ancestors.

They were not just uneducated housewives living isolated from the rest of the world. Just to give an example, during the II World War there are incredible stories of women's bravery, who were ready to leave their children behind at home, to go and fight for a greater cause than their immediate circumstances. It's important to uncover this, to focus on the specificities of this struggle here and locate it in a broader context.

**This is very interesting. I suppose this discussion of solidarity, mutual aid, and so on, puts me in mind of your project Stone Soup which deals with these issues, perhaps in a more light hearted way. What did you take from presenting this project in different places around the world, and did you discover any parallels?**

HI: One can find variations of the Stone Soup story all over Europe and North America. In Macedonia we have our own versions of this story; how a foreigner can be accepted by the locals by outsmarting them. But it is also a story of solidarity and understanding. Making this performance I wanted to engage the audience more, to feel involved in what I'm doing, and to be part of the production process.

I did this performance not only in Macedonia, but also in Sweden and Slovenia. During the preparation and cooking process different conversations are started. In this relaxed atmosphere, the different cultural backgrounds are bridged, and the foreigner becomes one of the locals.

**How would you account for the relative isolation, and low profile of contemporary Macedonian art abroad?**

HI: It's a complicated question, and there are several different reasons, I think.

Firstly, I have a feeling that we missed out on the appearance of important local curators and theorists in Macedonia; like the ones which appeared in many other ex-Yugoslav countries and did a lot for the development and the promotion of the local contemporary art scene in their countries and abroad.

Secondly, we really have no structure here that can support the development of artists on a longer term. The institutions are very weak, and the political appointment of directors who have no competence in art at all has made the institutions even weaker, even worse.

The result is that the artist is left to him/herself. You have to establish a profile for yourself, develop your own work and manage your promotion alone. This is very difficult to do from Macedonia. International curators, theorists, artists do come here, and are curious to find



out more about the art scene, and to learn how it works; we were really trying, through Press to Exit Project Space, the artists' initiative that we established together with Yane in 2004, to bring more people here. But without continual financial support and long term strategy, how is it possible to bring foreign colleagues for a presentations or contacts, and how can Macedonian art be represented abroad?

### How did you find the experience of Venice, and how do you see the future of that project?

HI: For this work titled *We are all in this Alone* presented on the 56. Venice Biennial as part of the Macedonian Pavilion in 2015, we had several different sources of information.

We were inspired by the remaining frescoes of the unknown painter from the church of Kurbinovo, from the twelfth century. The church was only re-discovered in the 1930s, by accident; it is a small church that looks like a house, near Lake Prespa. When the church was located the frescoes were already in a very bad condition. The zograf, or the master who painted the frescoes, created his/her own unique style, that is very difficult to link to the other churches in the region; for the art historian this is really difficult to incorporate the work into any trajectory of development.

There is something feminine in the expression; the figures are long and elegant; the fabric is dramatically rendered, it looks like it is being blown by a strong wind. We were playing with the idea that the artist might have been a woman, rather than a man, which would have been very difficult in that time. We were also thinking of this church as a laboratory of ideas, a place where younger generation of artists will follow the master in order to learn. It is also remarkable that a unique style could be developed in a Byzantine church which is very rigid, canonical and not prone to improvisations.

We created a link between this artist/zograf, and the position of the contemporary artist; the artist today is still curious, still collaborating with different people, working with them in an open way to create something new, different and inspiring.

During this research period I became very interested in Simone Weil. I stumbled across her writings by accident, whilst doing other research. I really appreciated her writings, and her personal way of dealing with religion, God and believe. Further, as a female, she was completely alone in this sense; she was very complex as a person and as a philosopher.



Hristina Ivanoska and Yane Calovski , *We are all in this alone*, 2015  
Installation, Macedonian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale  
Main object 316 x 444 x 350 cm, Courtesy the artists and Zak | Branicka



I also used Luce Irigaray's text *La Mysterique*, from her book *Speculum of the other Woman* which is completely different to her other texts, much more like poetry in prose. In it I found the feminine side of Simone Weil that I feel is lacking in her writings; her human/feminine love to God.

And then the final reference is the personal correspondence of the American artist Paul Thek. He was inspiration for Yane for many years and he discovered the letters in the archive of Daniel Marzona in Berlin.

Overall, I think we were interested to discuss faith in general, faith in art, the broader ideas of faith found in art, society, collaboration and production. For the book that we did, we invited eleven different authors to write very personal texts, on the subject of faith; we gave the writers collaborative drawings, in exchange. It was one way of exchanging different creative acts. I really liked this book that we did.

I loved being there, and the whole process, I loved working with Yane and a team of workers, many of whom were part of the Macedonian diaspora, who have lived in or around Venice for the last twenty years. I loved our opening, and many people we know from the art world came; it was very spontaneous. We were happy and proud with everyone there, and we receive very positive responses.

I really feel that we did as well as we could with the four months and the very limited budget at our disposal. We were very proud of the show, and of the work of Basak Senova, our curator.

### Are you optimistic, or pessimistic, about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia?

HI: I am not really bothering myself with what is going on in Macedonia. For the moment I am trying to concentrate on my work as an artist, after a decade of combining my artistic practice with other jobs. , Finally in the last years I am focused on trying to realise and express my potential.

I am trying to contribute as much as I can here.

Contemporary art will continue, it won't disappear. Simply, it will change in time. As an artist here you have to try to develop without much support in terms of funding, or in terms of institutions or infrastructure. Therefore, my only recommendation to others is that they do what they think is best, show it, and try to grow an audience around it; and, to invest in production and self-promotion. Only through motivation and investment can things begin to change.



Hristina Ivanoska and Yane Calovski, *Nature and Social Studies-Spiral Trip - drawing #1, 2001*  
Pencil and watercolor on paper, 71 x 105 cm, Courtesy the artists and Zak | Branicka





*Hristina Ivanoska and Yane Calovski installing We Are All in this Alone, Venice, 2015*



*Hristina Ivanoska and Yane Calovski, We are all in this alone, 2015  
Installation, Macedonian Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale  
Main object 316 x 444 x 350 cm : Installation view, Courtesy the artists and Zak | Branicka*





Yane Calovski, *Interlocutor*, 2011, Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje  
Photo: Robert Jankuloski



Born 1973, Skopje. Based in Skopje and Berlin, works internationally. Installation and site-specific art. Trained at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Bennington College, USA; postgraduate research studies at CCA Kitakyushu, Japan and Jan van Eyck Academy, Netherlands. Together with Hristina Ivanoska represented Macedonia at the Venice Biennale in 2015. Co-founder of the Press to Exit project space in Skopje.

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## Yane Calovski

Yane Calovski Portrait  
Photo: Hristina Ivanoska, 2014



## What are your earliest memories of art?

YC: I love this question. I do remember one thing that I always return to; it's a memory I have protected from forgetting, or changing; this is a memory I keep clear for myself. It's a memory not so much of art, but of doing something creative with my mother.

I was in first or second grade, and we were doing a drawing for a children's magazine called *Male Novine* from Novi Sad in Serbia. There was a children's drawing competition organised by the paper, and I asked my mother to help me draw the laboratory of Balthazar. I do remember the crazy excitement of something happening; whether it looked like Professor Balthazar's laboratory. We sent it out and it got second prize, which was a great thing, although the magazine never returned the drawing as we had expected. There was something very strange and true about this drawing. That's when I knew that I loved the process of making art, along with someone; I understood something really beyond explanation about myself, and the artistic process.

I also remember a show that really stayed with me; a show of Joseph Beuys' drawings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, this was in my first year as a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The immediacy and the lack of technique, the necessity of what needed to be communicated, abstracted and made understandable in the same time. I felt that I wanted to experience such necessity, urgency, reason for communicating an inner struggle that I later understood is always already a political act.

I also must mention the experience of working along fantastic artists at The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, for the entire duration of my art studies and beyond. I was heavily influenced working along artists who came to do commissions there such as Louise Bourgeois, Mona Hatoum, Jana Šterbak, Robert Gober, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Marina Abramović; I worked in the same room as them, observing what they were doing. I was in the vicinity of these productions and learned so much from them. The education I received in this time was really formative for me; observing the dedication required to realise an idea with a dedicated group of people; the real effort required to turn a vision into reality.



Yane Calovski, *Master Plan*, 2008  
Installation view Manifesta 7, Bolzano  
Photo: Yane Calovski, Courtesy the artist and Zak | Branicka



**You studied extensively abroad. How did this training affect your trajectory as an artist? Also, how does the education you received compare to the education artists receive domestically?**

YC: You know, I went into an unknown situation in the United States when I moved there in 1991 as an exchange student. A lot depended on me; I understood that I would have to work hard in order to put myself in a position to succeed, I always believed it is up to you as an individual to succeed that nobody will give you anything for free if you do not work hard and compete for it, and even more importantly, to be able to deal with rejection and hard criticism.

The political context of the time when I started my studies was heavy and uncertain - Yugoslavia had fallen apart by 1991, Macedonia declared independence in 1992. It was a time of tectonic changes beck home and I was far away trying to prove yourself to strangers, over and over again, facing up to potential poverty and trying to convince people that they should care about my work. I felt necessity to engage myself with a different, larger set of narratives, both personal and political.

One thing I took from my secondary art education in Macedonia, was that I was a good draughtsman, I had a good work ethic and understanding of myself as a young person; at the same time, I was eager to put that knowledge to use in developing into a contemporary artist that has something to say. I had to write a lot, to develop ideas, to really convince people that I would be worthy of scholarships. Through this process, I was able to put together writing and images that I felt were creative and honest; to understand the process of explaining myself, and understanding where I wanted to go; for me, this was one of the most valuable experience as a student in the US, both at PAFA and at Bennington.

The work I had developed there helped me to get my first exhibition opportunities in the States as well as Europe. Especially important was my first group exhibition at the Drawing Centre in New York, then the first collection purchase and subsequent group exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art where I showed drawings from the "The house and its imperfections" based on the undocumented building process of my family home in Skopje. Following my studio program at the CCA Kitakyushu I was invited to take part at Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana where I collaborated with Greek artist Nayia Fragouli and made a public project addressing the real-politic of the Macedonian-Greek dispute in context of wide range of cultural references- not only the name dispute. One learns so much from such

opportunities and I know that they all came about partially as a result of educational settings where one is encouraged to think of the big picture and challenge oneself with creating work that can be shown and considered in a professional art context.

During my studies I was in contact with Hristina Ivanoska and we would compare our education experiences. It was obvious that mine was faster paced and the opportunities I had were more challenging and ambitious than the ones Macedonian art students would have.

**How has your work been received in Macedonia?**

YC: I would like to say that every opportunity to show my work in Macedonia I have welcomed. There were times when I have felt misunderstood by institutions and not provided with required support and means to do the work justice. But this problem is not only mine, it is shared by many other artists. In Macedonia I have been active since 2001, following Manifesta in Ljubljana. I have always done my thing, too. In Macedonia I always felt that it is important to do you own thing and not give in to the idea that art needs to be shown and approved in the institutional frame. For me was important to think outside of the institutional frame and offer my vision of how we could be thinking and doing things on a smaller scale and with a critical attitude. I can say that the Press to Exit is one such result of my work and pursuit of critical discourse in artistic practice, my own but also of others, since only with a Most of my work hasn't been shown in Macedonia. I feel that the public knows me, but they don't really know me nor have seen enough of my artistic practice at full display; there are some ideas about what I am doing individually and in collaboration with Hristina, as well as with my engagements beyond the individual practice and in context of the socio-political issues facing the independent cultural production in the country, something I am very passionate about and I gladly invest my time to help as much as I can.



## You have a practice that has a global reach. Is being a “nomad” a necessary facet of being a contemporary artist?

YC: Yes and no. Depends how imaginative one is. I construct narratives out of many different histories; art histories, local histories that you can only understand if you spend time in a place. For me it has been important to travel and rethink what I know based on the new experiences I would have and the new knowledge I would collect. I am driven to learn more, to add to what I could say based on what I new I have understood. I believe in a open processes and generosity of the unknown. This strategy can be messy, both emotionally and productively, but I insist on staying alert and open as a person. Does that make me a nomad, I don't know, but I do a lot of work based on the specificities of different political geographies I visit and engage with.

On the other had, nomadism is also a state of mind. I relate to other histories, sometimes very personal histories, one example being that of the life and work of Paul Thek, an interest of mine since my school days. One of my earliest drawings that I find important is a small drawing that I made tracing the trajectory of his travels with my own. Over the years I have returned to him over and over again. By uncovering his history, somehow I can uncover more of my present, the dramatic twists and turns and the continuity of ones own narrative.

It's a process of learning and unlearning through physical but also mental movement; revisiting places and ideas and re-imagining them. I respond to situations and use accumulated knowledge over and over again, working ephemerally and exposing the stupidity of cleverness all in order to problematize what we think we know, and how we know it.

## Macedonian art is not so visible abroad, in comparison to art from similar Balkan countries. Why do you think this is?

YC: Ah, this is a complicated question and there are many reasons for the situation. I feel there really is a lack of imagination in approaching the question of how the art world here should function. We are really lacking in certain professional profiles. Our institutions have not really evolved since the 1990s, when there was an attempt, through the Open Society Foundation of Gorge Soros to create a new institutional context where art and culture will be placed

in center of social and political change in society. The brake –up of Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia in particular, created a big influx of international interest in the art from the region. In Macedonia specifically, the Centre for Contemporary Art looked like it would become the hub for contemporary artists and curators, but it did not quite work out in that way. However, I also think the institutions are as good as the artists they work with.

But this is only part of the problem. The artists that have emerged from here have a limited competitive imagination. This is quite complex to formulate. By this, I mean that artistic careers have to be managed properly, and steps have to be taken to realise ambitions to make work beyond this local context. Somehow, there have been very few artists in the last twenty years who have met this challenge. We have such very specific local problems, in politics, economics, society and culture, that it can be very difficult to translate the imaginations of our artists beyond Macedonia. Moreover, given this cultural specificity, it can be very difficult to curate contemporary Macedonian art outside of the country, in order to make connections with other audiences, but it is not impossible.

I think it is natural that, in whatever sphere you are active in, that you would want to test yourself against better competition. Art is a very competitive thing; always one tries to broaden the range of references in the work, to make the work more relevant and appealing to a wider audience. It is necessary to take yourself beyond the comfort zone, and to establish new dialogues elsewhere, in order to open yourself, as an artist, to what your work could become in the future, where it could be seen, and the language that would be necessary to develop.

It really stems from art education. The art academies here have not developed in an interesting way, and the one in Skopje has been resisting a shake up. The staff there are secure in their positions, they don't really face challenges in their work, and there are no opportunities for outsiders to come in with some fresh ideas. The opportunity for people to make a difference, in the academic context, is simply not there. Moreover, the opportunities for student artists to show, or for artists to talk to students about exhibiting practice, are non-existent.





Yane Calovski, *Something laid over something else*, 2016  
Installation view Bunkier Sztuki, Krakow. Collection The Bunkier Sztuki Collection, Krakow.

## Why has it not been possible, then, for an artist from Macedonia to bypass these fundamental problems?

YC: I suppose the only way is by establishing a name and presence for themselves as quickly as possible in the local context, and then to move on from there. We are a relatively small country, perpetually in transition and somehow I think a prevalent mentality of opting for comfort within the socio-political and cultural sphere then being a radical. You need to have balls.

I remember that I was invited to give a talk at the Centre for Extended Media in Rotterdam, in the context of the Lost Highway exhibition, some 10 years ago.

Mr rather tongue-in-cheek suggestion in the Q&A following my talk, and specifically on the same question you are asking me now, was that “maybe the war (in Macedonia) was not long enough”. Meaning that, the uncomfortable truth about who we are and where we live and what is going on with us and around us did not produce a shake up in the art production. It is my opinion to this day.

Somehow we are all still in the process of facing and challenging the socio-political, economic and cultural reality. I do believe however, that they are artists, writers, performers, musicians, capable of developing uncompromising work and that sooner rather than later we will see more international recognition of contemporary Macedonian art and culture.

## How do you reflect on the experience of Venice, and how do you look back on it now it has finished?

YC: Applying to the open call for projects for Venice for the national representation, Hristina Ivanoska and I, decided to submit a large installation titled “We are all in this alone”, a work that was already produced for an solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in October 2014. It was a serious decision for us considering the political context in Macedonia and the aspect of national representation which . We decided to engage with this process simple because we felt ready to show in context of the Venice biennial with full responsibility of what that means to collaborate with a Macedonian national arts organization and the Macedonian Ministry of Culture. The most important question first and foremost was to agree that if selected we would have a full creative freedom and that we would respect the public funds allocated for our participation.

Our production was international starting with the curator, Istanbul-based independent curator Basak Senova who also did an incredible producing job for the project. We needed someone who we really trusted to curate our work, as we needed to re-configure it spatially to the space in Arsenale and add addition conceptual and practical layers to the installation.

The reception of the work in Venice was overwhelming, many positive reviews, responses and invitations for new exhibitions and collaborations. But the most gratifying was seeing the audience react to the work, how it offered them the chance of enter a dialogue around the questions of politics of faith, intimacies and histories.

Ultimately, we really feel that we managed to pull a very difficult task considering that we had a limited time and budget and many practical obstacles and to do justice to the national resources that have been provided for the project.



## How would you assess the state of contemporary art in Macedonia?

YC: It is an interesting time. There is a sense of creativity and criticality in a time of significant socio-political clashes in the country. Many people are doing their best work right now. There is a sense of urgency and hope in the same time. I like what I am seeing now days as an attitude and understanding of art is, can be and what it should feel like.

While conditions for development in the field of contemporary art have really been degraded badly on a level of policy and support (no grants or other state subsidies for studios, exhibition facility and curatorial/editorial support for independent practitioners), there is still some hope that we are on the right path to challenge and ultimately change the system. The museums and the existing cultural institutions are stale and hardly produce any relevant exhibitions. I feel that all the interesting work is done underground and independently.

Finally, one cannot ignore what the recent civil protests (the so called ‘Colourful Revolution’) and what they have done in context of readdressing the understanding of artistic analogy in context of political protests and action.

If I dare to predict, I sense a brighter future for the contemporary art and cultural scene in Macedonia.



Yane Calovski, *To fold within as to hide* (Mastehouse Oskar Shlemmer), 2015  
Site-specific installation, Courtesy the artist, Zak | Branicka and Bauhaus Dessau Foundation





## Silentio Pathologia

*Silentio Pathologia, solo exhibition by Elpida Hadži-Vasilieva for the Macedonian Pavillion at the 55. Venice Bienale, 2013, curated by Ana Frangovska*



Curator at the National Gallery of Macedonia. Part of the curatorial team for Macedonian pavilions in Venice, including that of Elpida Hadži-Vasilieva (2013) and Hristina Ivanoska and Yane Calovski (2015). Has curated shows regionally and also in Germany, the Czech Republic and Azerbaijan. Lives and works in Skopje, and internationally.

[www.nationalgallery.mk](http://www.nationalgallery.mk)

## Ana Frangovska



## What are your earliest memories of art?

AF: This is an intriguing and interesting question. For me, since I am the daughter of a painter, Nove Frangovski, it seems like I have been involved in art all my life. Some of my first memories are about exhibitions of my father, or of the first permanent collection in the Museum of Contemporary Art, before it was removed owing to the bad conditions there. These exhibitions are the origin of my love for and dedication to art.

In the early nineties my father started an international art residency, or art colony, in a beautiful village in Western Macedonia called Galičnik. That's how it all started, playing the role of a girl in traditional Galičnik costume (I was just 12 years old) greeting the artist visitors with bread and salt. That's when I first got into contact with the middle generation of Macedonian artists; at that time, they were my Uncle Blagoja (Manevski), Uncle Shumka, (Jovan Šumkovski), uncle Dimitar (Manev), aunt Simonida (Filipova Kitanovska), Uncle Pepsi (Perica Georgievski), Uncle Dimce (Nikolov), Uncle Bedi (Ibrahim), and so on. Now they are very close friends of mine, of course. So, I was living with art and was really into it at that age, looking at it really closely.

## That's really interesting: it's quite a privileged insight into Macedonian art from an early stage in your life.

AF: It is, but it is not always a positive thing, let me say. Relations between people in a small country can be tricky, where everyone is fighting for his place, and these disagreements can be emphasized. However, I decided not to be an artist myself, but to do something related; to view art from a different position and aspect.

## Where did you study, and what?

AF: I studied Art History and Archaeology here in Skopje, graduating in the field of contemporary art. For my MA I have passed all the exams, and finished my thesis, but I haven't had the defence of the thesis yet. Hopefully I will finish in the very near future.

The course is very traditional, and since it was taken together with archaeology, it wasn't focused enough on one or other of the disciplines. It wasn't so satisfying as a result; anything you really needed

to focus on, you had to do it by yourself. I am not so pleased with my education! It was very difficult to get hold of contemporary books. The library didn't really have resources for this subject, I spent more time in the Museum of Contemporary Art, which had more information, particularly in relation to the collection, and Macedonian and Yugoslav art.

## When did you start curating? Art Historians and Curators are quite different beings, or course. How did it come about?

AF: It depends how you see it. Art Historians and Curators are very different beings of course, but by connecting the methods of the two you can combine the best aspects of both roles. I must return to the residency that my father started. It started in 1991, after Yugoslavia broke up. The first two years had just Macedonian guests, but from 1994 we started to invite international artists. By using the contacts of curators and historians at the Museum of Contemporary Art, we were able to make invitations.

From the age of fourteen to seventeen, at this festival, I was playing the role of translator; after the age of about seventeen, when I decided that I would be studying art history in the future, and knew that my life would be closely related to art, I began to involve myself directly in the organization of the residency. This helped me to understand the point and concept of being a curator, not just an art historian. So I was modeling myself in the manner of being an organizer; the art historian in me chose good and interesting artists, whilst the organizer in me made everything happen.

The term curator began to appear in Macedonia in the early to mid 1990s, with the opening of the SOROS centre and in addition to all the projects and activities that the curator Suzana Milevska was organizing. Their activities encouraged local artists to be very active. It was in this time that people began to try to understand what the term curator meant, trying to understand whether it was just a passing trendy term, or whether it was something more concrete to do with organization.



**So, this was in the 1990s in Macedonia.  
What do you think the term means here now,  
in 2015?**

AF: It has changed in the sense that more people understand the concept now, than did at that time. In terms of numbers and quantity, there are more curators, possibly in terms that they grasp more about curatorship. Overall, however, I still think people don't really know what being a curator is, or understand curatorship. The trade union for cultural workers is preparing a new agreement according to which we will be placed on a new level; the term curator is very low as they don't understand what it means. They probably think it means being a technician, or something like that. So from that I can take that people don't really understand the role or responsibilities of the curator.

**That's a very interesting insight.  
In terms of curators whose work interests you,  
either in Macedonia, or abroad, who would  
list as curators who influence your practice?**

AF: It's hard to say. In Macedonia I have to point out the work of Suzana Milevska. Also, the work of Sonia Abadziewa, who is of the older generation, but she was working as a curator before the term was really known here. She is still working as a curator and doing projects, even though she has retired from the Museum.

There is also Nebojša Vilić, Bojan Ivanov, and Zoran Petrovski who consistently raise interesting and critical questions. From foreign curators I would point out Hans Ulrich-Obrist, Harald Szeemann, Iara Boubovna, Okwui Enwezor, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, and Thelma Golden. These are a few of the people that come to my mind now, who have made an impact on my development as a curator.

**You've curated extensively abroad,  
where you have presented group shows of  
Macedonian art.  
How did you select these, and what has the  
response been from audiences abroad, who  
don't know Macedonian art so well?**

AF: I have been doing that since 2004, when I organized a group of 10 Macedonian artists to go on a residency in San Pedro, LA, USA where they have worked and produced artworks that were exhibited at the end. It was long time ago and I was just a kid. That was the first time when I understood that Balkan people are very often very successful, since by improvising they can come to their goal, over reaching obstacles that come up during the realization of a project. This is opposite to the Western protocol of going step by step, phase by phase and not being able to skip any of the stops. So, by overcoming all the barriers on the way, this show looked very good. Since then I made a lot of shows of Macedonian art abroad.

Between some of the recent events I should mention is a very interesting show in Vienna in 2013 named "Bread and Salt". The main aim was to show few points of a transitional society faced with many contradictions, such as socio-political discrepancies and gender issues. It was interesting how they approached the artists; how much they knew, or didn't know; they were intrigued with the show and with the concept. The topics and the works were perceived as very contemporary. They were talking very openly about the themes we presented and said they are still topical even in Austria, however modern and advanced such countries may seem.

It was the same in Prague in 2014. The local audience was very open to our exhibition in the cultural centre. The name of the show was Transfiguring, and we explored the word in many possible ways, mostly in the sense of being politically engaged. I asked the Czech curators openly for their opinion, of the concept, and of the artworks; in fact they said that the Macedonian context was similar, in that we are both living in a neo-liberal society; that the show demonstrated that our art scene here is contemporary, and quite close to what is going on in Prague.

I wanted to go there to discuss with art critics and curators what would be interesting to show. When working in institutions in Macedonia, shows are often not organized properly, but here it went well. Our ambassador in Prague said that we had organised a good show, and a nice event to mark twenty years of diplomatic relations between the two countries. I began to think of doing more research into what the audience wants to see, to show how artists deal with everyday life, what their points of view are, how they have adjusted to the new ways of working, are they rational talking about the everyday, and so forth.



**Is it frustrating as a curator, to work with an ever-changing cast of politicians who often don't know what they are talking about?**

AF: Again, really, it depends how you see it. If you view my work from the traditional Macedonian point of view, given that I am a woman, I finished art history at the university, and I am also a mother, I am very lucky to be active in the art world, and to be working full time. I have great enthusiasm and I am someone who won't give up; I feel lucky to have other work on the side to my job at the National Gallery of Macedonia. I am doing projects as a free-lance curator, I am still very active with the international residency in Galičnik, as a chief curator and organizer; with four friends, I run an NGO; we run exhibitions and events as well. We did a group show recently, talking about common ground and transitional issues, in Baku. The experience was interesting for us since the art scene in Baku is very traditional; and it was interesting implementing some new approaches and suggesting to them some different way of thinking. It was hard to break such well-established art systems. Now we are preparing the continuation of this project "In Search of a Common Ground 2" in Munich, Germany.

**Why do you think, historically, that Macedonian art has been a bit isolated- or maybe you don't agree? What do you think?**

AF: It is true that the Macedonian scene was a bit isolated in Yugoslav times; artists from Serbia or Croatia usually chaired art juries in those times, and it was rare for Macedonian artists to serve on such juries. Competition was very difficult in those times.

I think it is easier now, as there a lot of artists being produced in Macedonia, but just a few remain active, it is very easy to pick up artists as such a situation. In Yugoslav times, I have been told, there was a lot of discussion and mutual criticism, and no one was afraid of it; there are stories of the likes of Petar Mazev moving his works around, shortly before openings, in response to discussions. There were fractions but people then seem to have been much less afraid of criticism.

Nowadays, artists are not so open to critical discussion, and there is not enough discussion of art in contemporary times, between artists and art critics. This is a situation that we have been missing lately. Ten years ago it was different; we used to have quite a few talks and



*Utopia=No Place or Good Place; artists Igor Sekoski and Gjorgje Jovanovik. Mala Stanica, Skopje, October 2015. Curated by Ana Frangovska*

seminars, on the national level, with international guests, but now it does not really happen. Maybe we are still in this period of a vacuum space where we are supposed to grow up and flourish and learn from previous generations; but I am not sure why it is how it is.

Art criticism, writing about art, art journalism really has been dead lately. It was attributed to our general political situation, but also being tired of the general circumstances in which we work, being tired of the scene that we all live in. These factors are all overlapping and inter-related, so it is hard to isolate one reason why. Maybe we are not so powerful to change the way we work, and to be more active in the society where we all live.



This is a very interesting observation. I just wondered if the real power currently lies with actors not associated with cultural institutions, given that those institutions themselves find it very difficult to operate within this society. I am thinking of collectives, artists' groups, and so on...

AF: Well, definitely some collectives and activists would probably have an equilibrium with national institutions, which are those which have the wider recognition, unfortunately I may say. Probably you have seen that the NGO sector in Macedonia is not very powerful. From time to time, it is very active and present in the newspapers and then on the scene, followed by an equal period of quietness; there is even rivalry within the NGO sector, a rivalry that ruins a lot of initiatives.

The situation in the institutions is hard to explain. The issues have changed from the past, when institutions were the leading actors that formed the arts scene. I do see a switch in the situation by having NGO sector present, and working in a quality manner, situation to the work in institutions. Groups of artists, equivalent to today's NGOs, were powerful institutions working differently, producing a much smaller amount of art events, but of a much higher quality.

Now, we have more quantity, perhaps a lot more money, but very low production values and quality; a lot of the official art scene is being directed from the political parties or from other sources of power. Being a curator in a national institution, it is difficult to breathe freely, in many ways. Not just in terms of context or concept, but also financially, due to the money available. Being part of an institution here, you learn how to manage these pressures, and to live with not being happy all the time with the results. It also teaches you how to survive, and to make a lot of improvisations, which nowadays in the art world are very much welcomed. I think we need to have more freedom to express your own opinion, which can be difficult nowadays.

# Demoralized Idealism

Dijana Bogdanovska,  
Iskra Dimitrova,  
Mihaela Jovanovska,  
Maja Kirovska,  
Vera Kovacevska,  
Nada Prlja,  
Marija Sotirovska

The title of the proposed project is Demoralized Idealism and it addresses different aspects of our existential – social – political living. It can have many different notions – from personal unfulfilled ideals to generalised discourses which as focal points reflect the hidden blindness and being part of the crowd misled by delusions and promises. We are on the crossroad between the old and the new, we are obsessed with false ethics and morality, we feel political melancholy, and very often we choose procrastination as a decision or an answer...

Thus, my choice of female artists originates from this concept: Iskra Dimitrova, Nada Prlja, Vera Kovacevska, Marija Sotirovska, Maja Kirovska, Mihaela Jovanovska and Dijana Bogdanovska, they all address these issues in their artwork. The decision to select only female artists is based on the following notion: female artists have different approach to such general and engaged issues, they react with different sensibility and they criticize differently either by using the language of a "wounded lioness" or by having more courage to approach the problem directly, to analyse, to synthesize and to make symbiosis of several semiotics into one.

Curated by: Ana Frangovska



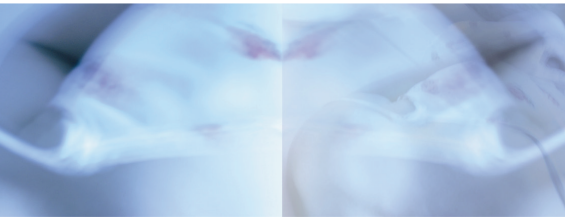
Dijana BOGDANOVSKA

Born 1984. In 2009 she graduated from the Ss. Cyril and Methodius at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Painting and course of conservation and restoration in class of Antoni Maznevski -Skopje. From 2012 she is following the Gender Studies at the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities-Skopje in the class of Katerina Kolozova. Solo exhibition: 2013-"Post human bones" Open Graphic Studio, Museum of the City of Skopje; Projects: 2012 -Coordinator, initiator, participant for the non institutional initiative „Space”, curated by Bojana Janeva Shemova.

Post-human bones 2013, installation and conceptual photos

Born in Skopje (1965). BA in Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, University "Kiril and Metodij" - Skopje (1988) and BFA in Sculpture, Faculty of Fine Arts, University "Kiril and Metodij" - Skopje (1990). Study trip in United States (1993). Carried out a number of solo multimedia projects and installations: Skopje, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1997 (Museum of Contemporary Art), 1998, 2000, 2006, Madison, USA, 1993, Visac, Yugoslavia, 1996, Rochdale, England, 1996, Zagreb, Croatia, 1996, Venezia, 1999, Tokyo, 2003 and Yokohama, Japan (Yokohama Art Museum), 2004. Her installations and projects were exhibited at the International Festival, Sofia (Bulgaria, 1994), 5th International Biennial, Maribor (Slovenia, 1996), Liquor amni - Macedonian and American women artists, Skopje (1996) and Providence (USA, 1997), Biennial of Contemporary Art, Selestat (France, 1997), Women artists between the Two Seas, The Saloniki (Greece, 1997), New Macedonian Art - Radiations, Skopje (1998) and Tokyo (2000), After the Wall, Stockholm (Moderna Museet, 1999), Brown Sugar, Nurnberg (Germany, 1999), Narcissism, Skopje (Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), Onufri, Tirana (Albania, 1999), Urban Gene, Tachikawa International Art Festival (Japan, 2002), Global Feminisms, New York (2007, Brooklyn Museum), Skopje, super(h)EROS (2007, National Gallery of Macedonia), Sarajevo and Sofia 2009, Venezia via MKCand Vienna 2009, Synesthesia (Austrian Parliament) and Gender CheCk (MUMOK - Museum Modemer Kunst Stiftung Ludwig). Artist in residence at Aomori Contemporary Art Center, Japan 2003.

Iskra DIMITROVA



"Plumbing (hot scent)", video installation, 2007, 1:30 min



"Lingering traces corded emotions", 2012, installation

Mihaela JOVANOVSKA

Born in 1984 in Skopje. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Skopje in 2010, with the prof. Jovan Shumkovski, department of Pedagogy with Painting. She has participated on the following exhibitions: 2012 - "Space", group exhibition, Skopje, alternative space; 2012 - "Cognoscence", solo exhibition, MC Gallery, New York; 2013 - "X Biennial of Youth artists", group exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Arts, Skopje.



**That's very interesting.  
The progressive EU view is that the countries  
of the Western Balkans will eventually  
reach the level of a France or a Germany;  
the pessimistic view is that one day these  
countries cultural levels will be much closer to  
where Macedonia is at present.  
What is your view on this, do you agree or  
disagree?**

AF: It's hard to form a view. The economic situation determines how culture will function, and the knowledge of how to spend the money available. Not just how to spend the money, but also to know how to promote and develop cultural mechanisms. We need to know not just how to make good exhibitions, with an interesting concept related to contemporary developments in society, but also to know how to promote the event, to engage PR people, to drive the audience to the museums to engage with it. Cultural management is on a very low level here, maybe if the capacity for cultural management changes, then the results will be better, and more satisfying for everyone.

**So, you see infrastructure change as the  
biggest challenge facing the Macedonian art  
world?**

AF: Sure. If we don't start with that, we don't have anything; everything else is just trying to survive. We need to address art education in primary schools, then we need to look again at how it is taught in middle and high schools; to learn students what art is, how to appreciate it, to bring more people to museums and galleries, and to turn around the facilities and programmes of these institutions. We need to make these programmes more conceptual, and orientated towards the broader trends of today's global arts scenes. For example, New Media at the faculty, if it is considered at all, is done only in a very basic way, and students who are interested in working in these media have to experiment by themselves, or even go abroad to finish their studies in a meaningful way.

Then we come to cultural policy, and the way politics is being implemented in cultural institutions. The directors of national or art institutions should not be coming from the political system. Institutions should be much more free to develop their own programmes, and to operate as they should.

For example, in the place where I work, there are fifty five to sixty employees, of whom thirteen are curators. For what? The situation is a little foggy. For example, we are given money by the ministry of culture to operate. The way they allocate money is not intelligent and they do not examine closely the concepts of the proposed programme. It is possible to make subversive actions, therefore. It can lead to absurd situations, where exhibitions are mounted, funded by the state, which are clearly critical of the state, and where the criticism is easily understandable.

**Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the  
future of contemporary art in Macedonia?  
What are the reasons for your answer?**

AF: If the political situation starts to change, if the cultural policy changes and changes are made to education...if we don't start these changes, the system will go around in circles; new forms of culture and new experiences will emerge if we have this switch, and then I will be optimistic about positive changes coming.

However, if these things do not change, and I can see the artists that are at present coming out of the Faculty of Fine Arts, then unfortunately, soon the situation will be catastrophic, and I can't give any predictions as to how it will develop.

For me, I think we need a big break. If we have another situation, then it will be possible to integrate a little more with contemporary art on a global level.





*Obsessive Possessive Aggression (OPA), Bollocks for Everyone!  
Installation shot, Mala Galerija, Skopje, 2010*



Born Skopje. Art Historian, Activist, Gallerist. Lives and Works in Skopje.

## Bojan Ivanov

*Bojan Ivanov speaking at a conference of AICA Macedonia, December 2014*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

BI: I can remember being very small and being sent away with a paper and pencil, so as not to bother my father, who would be writing. Of course at that age I had no idea about “drawing” or “art” as a separate activity.

Also, I can remember discovering the notion of art for the first time, through Andre Lefebvre’s book *The History of Painting*, from Cave Painting to the Abstract. I can still remember its cardboard cover and full leather bindings; its columns of text and series of thumbnail illustrations. The pictures drew my attention very quickly; scary pictures of the Devil tempting Jesus Christ, although I didn’t know who was who back then.

As I approached my teenage years, I began to notice how the chapters in this book were organised in an oppositional, dialectical structure. I discovered that this relied heavily on a Marxist approach to an explanation of social movements, especially in art. So I would say that this was my first deeper contact with the notion of art; an understanding of why art is so enjoyable, the motivations behind creativity, and so on. It shaped my approach to life in general, and to the trade of art; I always wanted to have things passing through both my head, and my hands. If I was interested in something, I had to try it.

Later on, I came across Ernst Gombrich’s *The Story of Art* that really was a defining moment. His was never a social history of art, but after this I started devouring everything I could find about art. Decades later, it moved me to co-author a book which I thought asked a very Gombrich-like question, called *Who is Teaching the Teacher?*

When I was studying, my mentor drove me to look at the work of Giulio Carlo Argan. His history of modern art was a seminal work for me, in that it confirmed my personal position; that art is not about a set of values or aspirations, but that art itself, and art history, are about a history of techniques, constantly evolving in socio-economic formations, with particular approaches to productive and expressive techniques.

## What are your memories of your art education, and how do you look back on it now?

BI: Well, it was almost a negative choice for me...at the age of eighteen, all that was open to me was the Faculty of Agriculture, or Art History...so you can see which way I went!

I enrolled in the Art History and Archaeology department in Skopje in 1976; this department had only existed for four years; art history had been taught, prior to that, as a subset of Modern History.

These were weird years in every respect; we were close to the generation of ’68, and higher education was changing dramatically. We all felt it.

The old ways were slowly falling away, and the old school professors were not well liked in this period. Baudrillard’s book *Simulacrum and Simulacra*, which was available in Macedonian translation, describes precisely what was going on in the university in Skopje in the 1970s. Baudrillard describes the conditions of knowledge precisely; a mixture of younger professors, absentee professors, and ad hoc initiatives. There was a real divide between older professors, teaching as though it was still the fifties, and younger members of staff trying to assert a contemporary approach to the subject and the transfer of knowledge.

Interestingly enough, I preferred the old school. The old tutors had what I needed. Ours was the first generation to witness, and take part in, modernisation and postmodernity as processes, as types of activity, rather than acquired habits. By then, people were losing interest in philosophy and turning to cultural theory; theory was the new philosophy in those days. French cultural theory was very important in this time, but it seemed to be a fad.

Somehow, I stood aside from this fad, and learned the trade of art history, and art criticism. I learned the trade of criticism from the literary critics. People like Frederic Jameson were more important to me in how I approached writing. On the other hand, a new generation of young, fashionable and popular critics emerged in Yugoslavia at the time, who were writing interesting texts; the likes of Ješa Denevri and Andrej Medved. These were very interesting times of rapid, deep socio-economic and cultural change. The post-war world was capsizing in the second half of the seventies, and many people of my generation still consider themselves victims of that turmoil. It’s an important moment for understanding what is still happening today.



## **Tell us something of how your career developed when your studies were over.**

BI: When I left university, I became really interested in art; before that I was just interested in the fun process of my education. Once outside, everything became more interesting. The art that I was interested in had a kind of “tuberculous beauty”; that final intense beauty, before death.

The Italian scene was heavily influential in Yugoslavia in the early 80s; the New Mannerists, the trans-avant-garde, all somehow turning around the name of Achille Bonita Olivia, and his notorious exhibition project in Rome at Gallery L’Attico, exhibiting the likes of Luciano Fabro. It was exciting, erotically charged art that appealed to all the senses; I was young then, and when you are young you accept this as some kind of self-actualisation.

In my early career as an art critic, I was publishing articles in daily newspapers, but also in quarterly magazines or annual periodicals, known around Yugoslavia as magazines of social and cultural issues. Almost every municipality had its own cultural magazine back then; such magazines were a great source of really strong counter-cultural formations; I am thinking of Gradište from Niš, Istra from Pula, Kulturni Život here in Skopje. The editors of these magazines were all from the ’68 generation, hence their focus. In Yugoslavia, such magazines were funded by the Socialist Alliance, a body that fulfilled a similar function to today’s cultural NGOs, which ensured proper funding for good quality cultural debate, without checking too closely what was being debated. It provided a platform for liberal-left ideas in the media.

## **So what was culture like in Skopje in the eighties? We have heard something in other interviews about counter-cultural practice, about elements of critique and the proposal of radical alternatives...**

BI: In visual art, such choices would manifest themselves in the choice of medium, and the type of practices that would be selected to produce visual experiences. The term “action” was unburdened with value; these types of “action” were the mainstay of counter-cultural activity, together with media such as comic books, photography and posters- all media which had appeared to be in decline! These were old industrial medias that were on the wane, but they were the focus of general expression of the younger generations then.

## **During this time you worked as a critic, but then later moved towards cultural institutions...?**

BI: Back then we still had the idea of full employment; after my military service I was employed in the institute of conservation. The job was hands-on; overseeing a team of painters, wood carvers and so on, and organising work groups in monasteries and monuments. I also worked as part of this job, in Galičnik, a mountainous nineteenth century village in the west of Macedonia. Of course I learned a lot from other colleagues at the Institute; in the winters, we would discuss contemporary art a lot.

Around 1984, there began to be a marked shift in the artistic situation; everything moved at a much faster pace. There was the emergence of a new type of art criticism; new art practices with very curatorial features in them, the likes of Vladimir Veličkovski here in Skopje, or a bit later, with the establishment of Sarajevo dokumenta under Jusuf Hadžifežović.

Veličkovski proposed a booklet and show on new tendencies in contemporary Macedonian art. The list of artists in that show, became a who’s who for the years to come, Igor Toševski was amongst them. This period really was a turning point. It was a very fertile, productive period, remembered now not so much for the art, but for the artists who were prominent.

Exhibitions somehow ceased to be an event that froze a moment in time; they turned into an art installation in themselves, signed by this new subject, bearing the name of the “curator”.

The curatorial idea began to dominate, at this time, over the ideas of the artist; art critics began to consider themselves as co-authors of a particular work; there was a blurring of competencies between the disciplines. This was problematic, but also very interesting; we know that in that time, art turned away from the object, towards process; because of that, the art scene turned into an event driven situation; where exhibitions became the events. By the late eighties, there were also small private spaces, outside of the formal network, of the Yugoslav context. I am thinking of Andrej Medved’s Obalni Galerija in Piran, Slovenia, which was an entry point for Italian art to the Yugoslav context.





Shadow of old Leninova street sign, Skopje, August 2015. Photo: Jon Blackwood

### Who were the audiences for contemporary art in Macedonia in the late eighties, and where have they all gone?

BI: I suppose this returns us to the idea of the generational divide, and the need to fulfil the expectations of one's parents, especially when it comes to the cultural context, which is not only social, but a field of class struggle.

The point was that these audiences, consisting of musicians, writers, applied artists and so on, have vanished because they are not feeling fully modernised; they regret the lack of an ordered system, which they interpreted as part of the process of modernisation. They feel the loss of this value-laden hierarchical structure. They are now just somewhere else; they are right that this is not their world, but they are wrong in refusing to participate. This is the silent majority of discontent; passive, depoliticised and a helping hand to what is reproducing itself in the field of politics currently. They are still here, and silent.

### So if many have lapsed into passivity and silence, who are the audiences for contemporary art in Macedonia in 2015?

BI: I spoke about this in an interview last November; there is a process of repopulating the middle class going on, which is not yet concluded. This is a very interesting situation. There is a lack of a market for culture, a lack of an institutional framework, to support contemporary art. There are few opportunities to buy contemporary art nowadays. Yet, nowadays, it appears that there is a professional audience interested in what's going on.

Whatever is going on in political terms, however, the most significant thing has been the erosion of the old middle class; only those who are connected to the artist would now go to an opening, or an event. This means that we have a very narrow audience for contemporary art with a loosely defined common professional, rather than cultural, interest. We have people interested in activism, connected to new social movements, mixing with stratas associated with theatre and advertising. Only through recent events have people seen that a wider audience base can be engaged.

### So, what about events such as those organised by bodies such as Art INSTITUT or Kooperacija, these attracted a much wider range of people, did they not?

BI: Yes, but these were audiences drawn from their generations and milieu; these events did not penetrate to a wider audience. These were events of a limited scope, but were very important as they showed the potential of collective commitment to younger artists. They dealt with questions of making art, living as an artist, and these were questions of deeper concerns to our society in general, not just to a narrow generational caucus.

### Let's move forward a little bit to mala galerija. How did this project start and develop, and with what results?

BI: It started in 2007, as a project to bury my friends as artists. It was a space for my friends from the mid eighties to make their final statements as artists! (laughs). They were of course very aware of their position in our times as teachers and as well-established, well-respected



artists. However the small tight space of mala galerija was a challenge for them to make their testamental statement.

Because this is a small, restricted field of artists, this process only took about two years, and five shows in total. After that I invited younger artists to put on shows, and to learn the trade in a hands-on manner. It turned out to be a difficult task for, despite many expressions of interest, few people actually came forward to put on a show. Instead of a dozen curators, we only had three or four, who pushed through a programme for as long as mala galerija ran as a space, until 2011-12. I never set up my own curatorial concept in this place, because I am still very suspicious about curating and curation.

### Why is that?

BI: From my point of view curation came about as a supplement to a kind of shallow art, and shallow artists, from the time of the mid eighties onwards. When you start producing what is beautiful, and not sublime, then you need someone to provide a concept of evaluation and meaning for what you are doing. These two things go hand in hand; it is my perception, and I am still a little reluctant to enter that relationship between an artist and an art critic under the rubric of “curatorship”.

### You are quite well known amongst artists in Skopje for saying that “I am no longer interested in art, but I am still very interested in artists”. Can you develop that thought for us a little bit?

BI: Somehow this is a local thing, not only through my own local experiences, but it was also connected with a situation that developed in Macedonian art since the turn of the century. It was decided by the position of being in between the periphery and semi-periphery; living through something known as a transition; an economic, cultural and spiritual transition, and the emergence of a world of new values, breaking with the values of the last century. This led to a disruptive re-arrangement of what had been seen as a coherent timeline of values in history, and art history.

That disruptive process brought about a total collapse of what had been present in visual culture and the arts until around ninety-eight. I won't go into linking this with the neoliberal drive to dis-



Bojan Ivanov

mantle social services, and to privatise public space; it was just a by-product of what was going on.

Regarding the scene that appeared at the beginning of this century; those artists who started revoking what was going on; the artists themselves were much more interesting as a vehicle of a certain sensibility, rather than the being interesting for the works that they were exhibiting.

They began to dismantle, in a convincing way, the presentation of utopian impulses; they ceased making art works, and started making situations that they would re-cycle and put forward in a completely different realm from market relations and institutional frameworks; shunning the interpretations of the critic. This really was a very interesting process.

So, when I say I am more interested in artists than in art, I meant to imply a new social dimension that artists themselves acquired, as agents opposed to structural tendencies around them. By this measure, the art-work itself became irrelevant or unwanted. What was interesting was the way they built actions and, in some cases, activism.

This is a working explanation for now!



## Could you assess the relationship between activism and contemporary art?

BI: Let's start with Skopje 2014, which is a bone of contention not only for a generation of artists, but for the entire artistic community, either as producers, or as victims of what was produced. I was at odds with my colleagues for a long time, as regards the meaning and effect of that particular project.

When they claim it is about aesthetics, I felt it was about proper legal procedures, when they were claiming it was about artistic competency and ethics, I was more interested in a political explanation for the motives behind this particular project.

At last, it became obvious that it was about economics, and not to be approached from any art professional standpoint. The project is not just ugly, it's not just about violent individual agencies affecting a whole city and stealing away public spaces from the citizens in order to re-populate them with silly monuments. There is a systemic drive to this, connected with the flow of financial capital, similar to the petrodollars of yesteryear.

Financial capital that is prevented from multiplying itself on the stock market, has to go for the ground rent. This may sound bizarre as an explanation, but I believe it is valid in 2015; very interestingly, it is connected to the opposition attempt to validate that particular capital, by proposing the re-organisation of infrastructure, building new streets and pedestrian crossings; this attempt will actually add value to the investment of Skopje 2014. The citizen protests beginning on 5th May 2015, opposed this validation attempt.

Speaking of Skopje 2014, there is the first divide; those who participated, and those who opposed it. In the opposition group, there is also a divide, on how to validate their opposition; to make it something more than a mere statement of resentment, or bitterness.

It appears that the question of activism, divided the group opposed to Skopje 2014 into two camps, on the basis that activism implies adhering to a political agenda expressed through a political party structure. Here, as virtually everywhere else, there is massive distrust of organised party politics, and even new political forces are the object of suspicion from large parts of society.

This, however, is just a superficial division; the notion of activism divided them on a much deeper level. Activists are old school liberals, putting themselves in front of their groups and promoting themselves in the public eye as prominent activists; others, who do not

buy this, approach social topics from collectivism and reaching consensus, setting aside personal vanity and striving for achievement. This is a strange and very interesting paradox.

## How do you explain the relative isolation of contemporary art from Macedonia, internationally?

BI: This is a very important topic. We can account for this problem in many different ways; it was not only cultural, but also economic and political; a multi layered isolation affecting the stability of our institutions. Many links were severed, many friendships were lost during the nineties, as it was really difficult to leave Macedonia, and very difficult to stay anywhere else for a long period. The flow of goods was interrupted, and it was always a special effort to secure regular communications with the outside world.

When it comes to neighbouring cultures, those relations were burdened with an additional layer of isolation; many issues were raised which acquired false historical dimensions.

In this context, the level of isolation of Macedonian artists was the same as all other aspects of social life; however, as I am close to many artists, I cannot say that this isolation was either total, or fatal for the art scene in general. When it comes to my friends and colleagues, they entered into a particular network of colleagues and institutions, maintaining these connections and getting to know some significant names and curators.

This isolation I think comes in part from the attempt to rebuild whatever was destroyed in the nineties, first, and then to show it outside of the country. One has to be sincere, there was nothing much to show until 2005; the art world was nearly flattened by the break up of Yugoslavia, and the fall out of what happened in the 1990s.



## Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia?

BI: It is difficult to see the emergence of a rigid framework husbanding things in a particular direction. However there is a cadre of people who have the choice of either giving up, or realising their goals, however misplaced they may turn out to be in a decade's time. What is certain is that further change is coming; however, the nature of the change is really difficult to predict.

I fear that there will simply be a reconstruction of an institutional framework; a reconstruction of austerity in terms of culture, and in terms of education; that act of reconstruction alone, will see the taming of whatever it is you find interesting in Macedonian art at present. This is not to say that radicalism will evaporate, or even that radicalism is interesting on its own, but it is very easy to shift attention from what really matters, and is visible in times of crisis, to the technicalities of the system, shifting attention away from the roots and symptoms of the crisis..

This really is a fear of mine that this "normality" will prevail. My hope is that tensions will persist, at least in the cultural sphere, and that will give further impetus to the causes that are presently adopted by the artists we are now talking about; these are the artists of dissent.

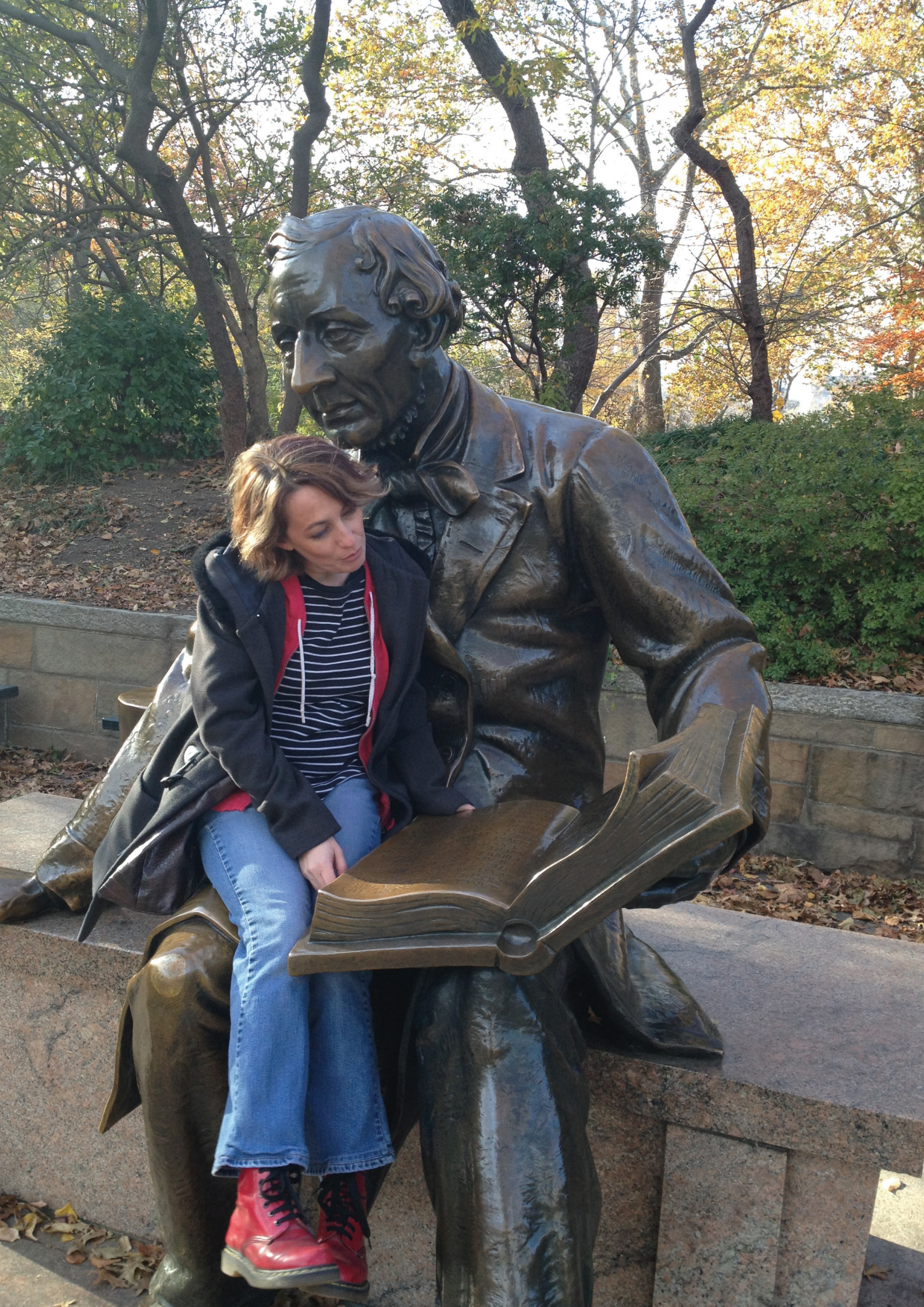
If that happens, the questions of current importance will resolve themselves, or will be replaced by new questions. I should strive to keep this ambiguity alive, to sharpen my colleagues' insight into what is to be done, and hopefully lending them just a little bit of Utopian impetus.

Utopia, after all, is a means that aims at developing, hopefully, the more complex society, that we all desire.

*Debate on contemporary culture in Macedonia, protest camp, Bulevar Ilinden, Skopje, 10 July 2015, chaired by Robert Alagozovski (centre). Bojan Ivanov is to Alagozovski's left; Filip Jovanovski can be seen on the extreme left of the platform. Photo: Jon Blackwood*







Born 1970, Skopje. Jasna Koteska is a full professor of Literature, Psychoanalysis and Gender Studies at the University of St. Cyril and St. Methodius, Skopje. She is the author of ten books, including *Communist Intimacy* (2008) and *The Freud Reader* (2013), and is currently working on a project entitled *Kafka, the Humourist*. Jasna writes a weekly column on Macedonian political affairs for the Macedonian-language edition of *Deutsche Welle*. Lives and works in Skopje.

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## Jasna Koteska



## What are your earliest memories of art?

JK: I have a twofold answer. On the one hand, I don't believe there exists such a thing as earliest memories for each individual. Even if one starts to honestly enumerate the earliest lyrics one remembers, or colors, or scents, it would still be a lie. Humanity has long memory, but humans don't. Freud has an article *On Screen Memories* and in it he says that earliest memories are always false.

When I positively claim I remember a given childhood scene, it is either a scene told and retold so many times by my parents, that I later adopted it as "my own" memory, or it is an event which took place in my adolescence, but I later "projected" it onto my earliest childhood, as on a screen, Freud says. We should not disregard his insights as psychoanalytical cynicism. The neurosciences of today offer multiple evidences that Freud was downright correct. Every time I remember a given episode from the past, neurosciences say, I am already erasing the previously existing memory, and forming a new one instead. The older the memory, the more twisted and re-worked it appears to be. What constitutes my past are the mosaic pieces, tesserae, with which I "decorate" my personal history in order to be able to say that I, too, am "complete", just like the rest of us. Which is a nice assemblage, but it has a little value regarding the truth of one's being. When people say "You can take away everything from me, but you cannot take away my childhood", it is not without a certain irony that one of the things which people never truly possess, might be precisely their own childhoods.

On the other hand, your question is crucial for any discussion about art. Humanity does have earliest memories of art, only, they are not individual. One of my favorite documentaries, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) by Werner Herzog, tells about the oldest human painted images yet discovered in the Chauvet cave, crafted some 32,000 years ago, twice as old as the Lascaux caves. The birth of art, I believe, is neatly connected to constituting a territory and then transcending it. Each territory is formed through lines, colors, and sounds -- precisely the three basic determinants of art in its pure state. However, the striking part of the film, for me, is that the painter left palm prints on the paintings, but on each prints the opposable thumb is missing. The most common artist of the Paleolithic is the one who has one or several fingers disfigured. One hypothesis says that young hunters were undergoing certain initiations, in which they were having their fingers cut off. But a second hypothesis says that if digits are missing, it is because it is a mythogram, it is meaningful; the artist is trying to tell us something; the artist wants to leave a testimony: everybody has five fingers, but I, the artist, must tell you that no perfect model exists; all that is complete is a lie.

The only perfect model of a human is a human who is disfigured, incomplete, without the possibility to point to her completed identity, deprived of the possibility to tell her personal history, etc., just like Freud tells us. In the Chauvet cave the oldest artistic signature in the world is stored; that signature teaches us that art becomes art only when it deliberately leaves the territory, leaves the finger cut off, leaves the cave. Art is about leaving a thought, a memory, a habit, a value, a friend, a lover, an object, a finger, a territory. Leaving is not a gesture of selfishness; on the contrary, it is a selfless act. Appropriation is selfish, leaving is on the side of transition rather than death, it is about being out of stasis, and the artistry of leaving is something we learn from the Earth. People don't know how to die because we rarely learn how to leave. Animals, on the other hand, seek a corner to die in, seeking a territory for death; they know when to leave places still hospitable, sites still livable.

Art is impossible without leaving. Take a look at Kafka, or Kierkegaard and their broken engagements. Or the colors in Van Gogh or Gauguin, the two greatest colorists: in their works, they employ color with greatest hesitation, Deleuze says, it took them years and years before being able to take on color, to consider themselves as worthy of color. Art is about leaving the known territory and going into the unknown, it goes with certain insanity; it is also a slow process of making a portrait of something one reaches for the first time. In the 19th century Van Gogh saw the starry nights as they were photographed only at the beginning of the 1930s by the first star trail photographers. Van Gogh was the first to leave the earthly gaze; with no technology and with a naked eye, to see for the first time the actual motions of stars in the night sky due to the rotation of the Earth. Recently I was amazed to learn to which extent the star trails of one of the greatest star trail photographers of today, Lincoln Harrison, resemble the Van Gogh's *Starry Nights* paintings and drawings. Great art precedes science, it paves a path towards the deeper knowledge, and it is always by means of leaving.

To your actual question, my earliest conscious memories of art would be, then, when I first learnt that once I would have to leave; when in something I recognized the biological reminder that there is an embedded necessity to depart.



## How does contemporary art function (or not) in contemporary Macedonian society?

JK: The contemporary and alternative art scene does exist, only it functions on the margins of Macedonian society, and in two main varieties: either as a private, tiny affair (artists working against the present moment, in the remoteness, in love with their own instruments, etc.), or as a politically engaged art, partly against the meanness of the Skopje 2014 project which put the Macedonian art scene under siege.

The real question is whether the contemporary art communicates with the world. I would say it does not, apart from few exceptions of great Macedonian artists, not necessary perceived as “national artists”. Genuine art is always universal. I believe small cultures are as capable of creating great art as big ones. That is, on condition that artist understands that a person is never born into a nation. As in Emerson: “By keeping house I go to a universal school”. Many of the greatest artworks have been born in agonistic battles with small or big cultures; Kafka is one example, a Prague Jew who spoke German, to which culture he automatically belonged to, the Austro-Hungarian, Jewish, or the German? Kafka used to work as a dismantler of ideologies, systems, values, languages and cultures; he worked as a dog that digs a hole, as a rat that makes a nest; his art is a document about the perpetual modes of exiles. Joyce, Beckett and many others left their native big cultures, and moved to others, where they were barely nomads. Every culture creates meaning when it pushes out of itself, when the tongue argues with the teeth, when eating argues with talking.

There is a certain mismatch between eating and creating, and the problem of the Macedonian art is that here we still produce art only when we devour. Our art is mostly made of “oh, mother”, “oh, home”, “oh, country”, it is all “la-la-la”, a horror of collective yelling and devouring. For the great art, one has to produce such an artwork that would compete with food, leave you hungry until five in the morning. It also goes for the art criticism, for judging the good vis a vis the best. We are a narrow culture in which we have been crushed like rocks on the canyon Matka, near Skopje. In such circumstances it is difficult to produce relevant art criticism, without it being read as a daily political confrontation. With the absence of a real market and critical mass, the art criticism in Macedonia is limited to a positive opinion, and the audience is automatically taught that the phrases like “excellent artwork” mean absolutely nothing. The Epic of Gilgamesh did not survive ages because it was glorified by a priest close to the king, but because it spoke about the problem of immortality, which concerns both the kings and the servants, both small and big cultures.

## What effect has the Skopje 2014 project had on the contemporary art scene?

JK: Skopje 2014 left a devastating ideological confusion, massive identity crisis, and nationalistic hysteria. On top of its suspected mass corruption, it also redefined the understanding of the artistic freedom, and it also resurrected the totalitarian image of an artist who is supposed to be a state servant and a poltroon. Let me explain this with a short story, *The Unknown Masterpiece* (1837) by Balzac. The painter Frenhofer spends 10 years painting and re-painting the portrait that will be “the most perfect representation of reality.” When Frenhofer finally allows his colleagues Poussin and Porbus to see his “masterpiece”, to their horror they see a violent storm of accidental forms and colors scattered over one another, which are void of any harmony or sense. The painter wrongly understands their astonishment, and says: “Ah, you didn’t expect such perfection”, but when he hears Poussin’s comment that “Maybe Frenhofer really discovered the truth, he changed the portrait so many times that nothing was left of it!” the painter kills himself.

If applied to the Macedonian context, the similar “identity suicide” was produced by Skopje 2014. When it was first announced back in 2010, the Project consisted of 20 buildings and 40 monuments estimated around 80 million euros. Five years later, the Project has 134 documented buildings, monuments, squares, fountains etc., and its price exceeds 600 million euros. The Macedonian Government acted as Balzac’s Frenhofer and by trying to tailor the “perfect description” of our state identity, it painted and re-painted the “ideal portrait” of the Macedonian identity so many times; that five years later, indeed, little is left of it. With the monuments to everyone and everything scattered over one another in a chaotic manner, void of any harmony or sense, the Skopje 2014 Project closely resembles Frenhofer’s megalomania as a specific artistic and financial madness of fictional fine-tuning of state “masterpiece”, which indeed resulted in a Balzacian identity suicide.

## Do you see a relationship between contemporary art, and politics, in Macedonia?

JK: Not only between art and politics, but also among state art, mass corruption and a specific human engineering needed for Skopje 2014 to be implemented. Here is a concrete example from May 2015, when in one and the same day, the government made two announcements: a) they are erecting a new baroque building for the Faculty of Computer Engineering; and b) they are launching a public campaign of



how Macedonians should take their pills! Here we not only talk about the super bizarre combination of computers and rococo, as a perfect illustration of Freud's definition of hysteria as the multitude of ideas which one cannot hold together and therefore develops hysteria. But we also see the immediate "remedy" for the hysteria by launching a governmental pill campaign. As ironic as this is, the Macedonians in fact do need those pills, those antibiotics, sedatives and antidepressants, to be able to swallow the whole ideological schism.

As vulgar and barbaric Skopje 2014 is, we should be careful not to miss its sublime political message. The project is not only a mixture of frivolous art and a brutal ideological and financial manipulation, it also sends specific uncanny message: "We, the Macedonians, are finally arriving home, in our proud capital as in our living room". The basic definition of uncanny is something which is both familiar, but at the same time, the reverse of the familiar. The most notorious image of uncanny—is an image of a doll! The doll is uncanny because it is inanimate, it is a doll, but at the same time, the basic desire of the child is for the doll to become a living being. When the doll fails to become alive, it becomes an uncanny object for the child. With the doll we most often associate the metaphor of the "ripped off eyes": the doll can have its eyes taken away, after the child symbolically "blinds" the doll by punishing it for not becoming alive. And vice versa, a person can be the one who "sees", has both eyes, yet is unable to really see. This is precisely what happened with Skopje 2014: the permutation of the toyish-alike Skopje 2014 project into the "living room of our proud nation", and vice versa, of the living nation which turns into a blind doll, has both eyes, yet is unable to really see.

And a wired synchronicity occurred in summer of 2015 when Banksy opened his Dismaland bemusement theme park, a freakish critique of today's frivolous theme parks. Many critically oriented Macedonians immediately saw it as an artistic comment on Skopje 2014, because some of Banksy's objects (the sculpture park, the museum, the panoramic wheel, marry-go-round, etc.) resemble the Skopje 2014. But the most uncanny part is that on the left side of Dismaland one can spot what appears to be a Macedonian flag cut in half! I doubt Banksy's intervention has anything to do with Skopje 2014, still it is a strong reminder that art sometimes indeed does mimic the reality, even unconsciously.



### What strategies do contemporary artists adopt to survive in a cultural economy so starved of funds?

JK: Here the biggest paradox resides. It is not that the public funds are missing, quite on contrary. The current government spent more public money on art funds than all post-communist Macedonian governments together. That is - except for the communist Macedonia. The present leadership is the closest approximation to the communist nomenclature. Both systems erased the previously existing culture and jump started the construction of the new world. That the communist system is incarnated today is not beyond the point, but is the point itself. Both systems are substantially the same; the shift from communist to nationalistic strategy is purely a shift of perspective. In both, the small cadre decides who is an adequate artist - the irony being that the leadership copies the communist solutions in the name of fighting against the communist heritage. When the financial documents of Skopje 2014, built under lack of transparency, finally surfaced in the mid-2015, the Macedonians were stunned to learn that most of the whooping 600 million euros



of tax payers' money were granted to three main authors and to five main contractors. The three main artists, previously unknown to public and with nonexistent art portfolios, build 22 of the largest objects, and shared 5 million euros. The top five contractors, with no experience in building classicist objects, built a total of 59 objects and shared 430 million euros.

Another such mammoth project is the translation of more than 2 million books into and from Macedonian costing few million euros, and performed in just few years. The project resulted in books being translated in a hurry, and when the Macedonia's guild of literary translators saw parts of them, they estimated that about 70 per cent of the books are not translated properly. The same goes for parts of Skopje 2014 objects, which are of extremely poor quality, with stunning improvisations, built of styrofoam fixed and plastered with paste cement in order for the objects to look like authentic constructions, which resulted in some of them already being in a process of decaying.

Macedonian cultural economy is centralized in much the same way it was during the communism when the state controlled projects were called "Five-Year Plans". In such situation, most of the independent Macedonian artists, who refused to obey and hand-kiss the government-dictated art, are applying to foreign art and NGO funds. Even when they are granted the funds, if their art is critical towards the state sponsored art, they face a possibility of being labeled by the pro-governmental media as the anti-Macedonian artists, traitors of the nation, western propagandists, etc. That in essence means they are considered "interior enemies" and "dissidents" - a procedure equal to that in communism.

**You have written a great deal about Yugoslav times and the negative impact of the actions of the Yugoslav state on your family. Do you see any legacy of Yugoslavism in contemporary art or broader creativity?**

JK: I was investigating the Yugoslav ideology because my father, who was a poet, was under secret state surveillance for 42 years out of his 69 years, and he belonged to the last group of political prisoners-artist in the former Yugoslavia. His police file, maintained under the code name "The Intimist", displays the principles on which the police strategy was built in communist Macedonia in the cultural sphere.

Yugoslavia is a complex story. It was perceived as Arcadia for the Western left-wingers: there were no free elections, but it was not a consumption-driven society, people traveled freely, they had access

to Western books and films, etc. During his 35-year-rule of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito never forbid the avantgarde, quite on contrary, the avantgarde was advocated as an official doctrine. But it was so even under Stalin, and in the harshest times of Soviet rule, when it was possible to work with different avantgarde expressions, and the avantgarde in communism almost always had a pluralist character. Yugoslav art left several grand works, some of them planetary important.

But, I was interested in the ideological relationship between the "soft" Yugoslav regime and the art scene. Intellectuals were most often state's servants and pecuniarily dependent on it: they were the extended hand of state powers, educated to support the professional and ethical codes of the Party. If you received recognition in communism, you knew that the recognition was worth nothing, that it was fake, but you also knew that there wasn't anything above or beyond this. It was the world without self-reflection. The art scene depended on those who were responsible for the cultural cashbox - the Party. This left a legacy of general submissive public attitude and subjugation, and an expectation that the state and its technocrats would dictate solutions. That is part of the reason why Skopje 2014 and the nationalistic ideology was implemented without much of a struggle! The official Macedonian ideology is today directed towards cutting off with the Yugoslav heritage in art. The communist legacy is revived mostly in the works of younger generations of artists, who never lived in Yugoslavia, and who use the Yugoslav themes to resist the nationalistic narrative, and who feel that something is wrong with cutting off the whole tradition in art. The most interesting part is that past and present systems are mirrored: what was back in communism a state art is today perceived as dissident art. And vice versa, what is today a desirable state art was back then a dissident art.

**Are you optimistic, or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia?**

JK: Art is probably about the only thing I am optimistic about, apart from science. We humans are incapable of creating just societies, and although we initially start off with relatively good intentions, things somehow get twisted along the way, and we always end up creating unfair systems.

Regarding the Macedonian art I think its problem is that most of it is produced for the craftsmanship purposes. Even back then. In all 45 years of communist Macedonia we did not manage to produce a single book which would be classically censored. Not in the sense of writing a dissident literature. We did not know how to produce art



which would “get out” of the network of neighbors’ eyes, not to mention the uncrowned ruler of my cultural cashbox.

Every fifth citizen of Macedonia in the early 1950s was illiterate, so it is no wonder that the artists were something of messiahs. Awaited with flowers by both the party leaders and by the neighbors who saved the best cabbages for souring under the counters. In the art textbooks the entry point was based according to the Biblical parable: “For many are invited, but few are chosen”. Only here it simply meant: being a literate person. The literate ones were the artists.

I have a friend from Moscow, the most brilliant mind I had ever seen. When she came to visit me in Skopje, ten years ago, she told me confused: “This is the best director in Macedonia, this is the best painter, you are all the best, but I don’t know you. Do you know how many people in Moscow, a city of 10 million, work with genius, avantgarde techniques and methods every day, they think about everything, yet they don’t think of themselves as the best in Russia, simply because there are tens of thousands just as great as they are, simple because there are too many people.” What I want to say is that art is also a hard work. And in Macedonia people are not used to work hard. There is a movie with Donald Sutherland Alex in Wonderland from 1970. The main character, Alex, is a crazy director, he had an instant success with his first movie, but has a creative block and cannot proceed with his second film. He goes to Italy to ask Fellini what is the secret of his inspiration, he finds Fellini, who plays himself in the movie, in a small gray room, dressed like a bureaucrat, next to an old lady, they are in a hurry with the movie editing, he wants to help the young director, but has no idea how. After several attempts, he apologizes that he is really tired, they have been working for 15 hours every day, he has no time, nor luxury to think about those big issues of inspiration, even if he wants to. The great art is also a hard work, and I am not sure if Macedonians are used to working hard.

Our postcommunism displays bad aging of whole generations, not just the artists, but they are more exposed. Deceived that they were coryphées of a culture, systematically manipulated by state elites, the internet made it clear they were largely insignificant not only for the global scene, but also for the regional as well. We should note that our past and present are not ideologically the happiest ones. There is a political tone which forms the artists’ rhythm and almost everyone owes their rhythm to the ideological trumpets.

But, we have already obtained the recipes from the global culture. If you want to be successful, try really hard. If you insist on being obscure, don’t complain that you are not understood. And if you are really talented, your art might contribute to a panhumane good. I watched Paul McCartney in an interview once, he said: “While we were making the music, we knew exactly that it was really, really good”. I believe you somehow know where you are standing while you are creating your art.





Studied history of art, Skopje. Senior curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje. Zoran has worked at the museum since the mid-1970s and was the director from 1993 to 2000.

[www.msuskopje.org.mk](http://www.msuskopje.org.mk)

## Zoran Petrovski

*photo: Andy Kennedy*

*View of Solidarity, An Unfinished Project, curated by Zoran Petrovski from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje, 2014*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

ZP: I think my earliest memories are actually to do with music. I grew up in the 1960s, and in my teenage years it seemed as though the rock music and counter-cultural scenes surrounded us. This was my era. I was particularly interested in Pop Art and also counter-cultural scenes in the UK and the USA; from the hippy movement, and the events of 1968; I was also interested in comic books, magazines and underground culture in general. Western culture was very influential for me, and still is; mentally I am orientated mostly towards the West.

I studied art history in Skopje, and right after my studies had finished, I was very lucky to get a job at the museum. There was a competition, and I was successful, starting employment here as an assistant curator. It was a linear, quick progression for me into the museum, which was the top position I could aim for at the time in Macedonia.

In Macedonia, there were some counter-cultural manifestations like the FOKUS youth magazine that lasted for a while, and it was influential for me. This of course was the socialist period, and also a period of liberal social movements within Yugoslavia as a whole. It seemed to me as a youngster that socialism wasn't so oppressive, to the extent that I should oppose the system; I suppose any opposition was felt in a cultural rather than a political way. Of course then I was close to the student movements in Yugoslavia, and was very interested in the films of Želimir Žilnik and Dušan Makavejev.

At the university the department for philosophy and aesthetics was very active and attracted a lot of students. There, we made many different so-called "actions"; we had come to university to study, but also to think about living in a different way. There were performances, theatre groups; Simon Uzunovski made some of his first performances in this time; it was a period of hope, enthusiasm and openness. We could also travel freely and I spent quite a time in London doing the things I had been dreaming of in High School; attending concerts, taking in the music scene, and so on. I had dreams of studying at Central St. Martins but our family didn't have the money for that.

## So what was your transition to work like after such an interesting period at university? It must have been hard.

ZP: Actually, the collective wasn't that strict. The museum employed around thirty members of staff and it was a very interesting group of people. The curatorial staff worked in a really connected way, and totally independently from the bureaucratic and political structures. Meetings with colleagues always featured very interesting discussions; we were all well informed about contemporary art, able to consult a very good library and enjoying excellent co-operation with Western Museums and galleries. My first job at the museum, actually, was to organise and take care of the library, and I became very well read in these first two years. We focused not only on the day-to-day tasks, but also our intellectual development.

Senior colleagues were very open to younger curators back then. They really supported our ideas and were interested in what we as a generation could bring to the museum. Initially this didn't show in the exhibitions of the time, but behind the scenes we did bring in new ways of thinking.

However, compared to other cultural scenes around Yugoslavia, particularly those of Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana, the scenes in Sarajevo, Skopje and Titograd (present-day Podgorica) were a little bit provincial in cultural terms. Personally, I was lucky. After working for around a year in the museum I was called for National Service to the Yugoslav People's Army. Soon after that was over, I made contact with the art historian and curator Ješa Denegri in Belgrade. He proved to be a real driving force in connecting people working in conceptual art, performance art and installation; Ješa's wife, Biljana, was also really important to these efforts.

They invited me to Belgrade several times to meetings of Yugoslav art critics, and the early to mid eighties were very exciting. It was a time of a multiplicity of polemics, different movements, and it was also a confusing time of rapid and radical change. It was a time when artists such as Raša Todosijević and Marina Abramović, who had been on the exciting margins of art in the 1970s, suddenly found themselves in the forefront of developments.

In the 1980s Ješa and Biljana really helped to build a very good, closely connected network of people, to strengthen cultural production on an all-Yugoslav basis. I was invited with two other curators- Gligor Stefanov and Aneta Svetieva- to participate in an important show of contemporary art in Sarajevo, in 1985. Around this time there was a burst of video art and new media shows. There was a



lot of travelling between different centres of activity in Yugoslavia. In 1984, I organized a large festival of video art in Skopje, which proved a huge success. Ješa, Bojana Pejić and many other directors of Yugoslav institutions came, as well as video and conceptual artists from around the country. The festival ran for four days and was very widely noticed.

### What was the impact of this work in Macedonia in the last years of Yugoslavia?

ZP: Well, for two or three years after that festival I was travelling to meetings all around Yugoslavia. We had two people from national television, Katica Trajkovska and Evgenija Dimitirijevska, working in the cultural department there, and they got interested in developing some ideas around video art. I spent a couple of years trying to build a working collaboration with Macedonian television; we wanted to support the production of video art. Unfortunately it never became a full collaboration, but Katica and Evgenija managed to develop a video workshop that had events both here and in Ohrid. They used the production facilities of the television station, and started to invite some well-connected artists, but unfortunately a structured programme of development proved difficult to organize. I wouldn't say all this work led to any immediate outcome, perhaps its effects were only felt much later, when the technologies for making video became much cheaper and more easily accessible for everyone.

### What were the broader developments at the museum during this period? How did it work?

ZP: I remember the important contributions of senior colleagues such as Sonia Abadziewa, the director, Viktorija Vaseva, and the emergence of curators such as Lilijana Nedelkovska and Miroslav Popović, who did a great job developing the dom mladih gallery. What I meant to say was that from around 1980 until maybe 1996, our working team here at the museum was growing and building mutual understanding very well. There was no influence from politicians, there were no enforced employments of people without qualifications; we had our own team with curators and colleagues who worked together to deliver really good results. Unfortunately, at the end of the 1980s, things really began to move in the wrong direction at the museum.

My own history is closely linked with that of the museum, I have sent my entire professional life trying to bring better standards to

the museum, and we brought it closer, in terms of its profile, and working methods, to the standards of Western institutions.

However, we really began to feel the influence of political structures here at the end of the 1980s. By 1989, we began to be subject to the exertion of political power, and the imposition of curators and art historians upon us. They came here and we really didn't know what to do with them; we became more of a social institution for politically connected people, than a museum. The recent disastrous history of the museum began in this period and sadly has continued until the present day. Governments since then have treated us in the same way.

It is so important that professional people are involved in the museum, who know and understand it; in Macedonia, currently, there are not so many people who are really interested in contemporary art, or who are well informed about it.



*View of Solidarity, An Unfinished Project, curated by Zoran Petrovski from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje, 2014. Jordan Grabul's sculpture Untitled in the foreground*



**We are moving onto the subject of curatorship now; what is the role of the curator in contemporary Macedonia? Whose work do you look to for new curatorial ideas?**

ZP: Well, back in the eighties, the idea of the curator, as we all understand it now, wasn't really present. Of course there were figures like Harald Szeemann who were and are still powerful. In the Yugoslav context, we looked to the likes of Ješa Denegri, Tomaž Brejc, and Andrej Medved.

For a while back then I was opposed to the very idea of a "curator". Up until that time the word "custodian" had been used, with the functions relating more to the keeping of a collection and guiding visitors to it; this very much limited our functions to the museum. Curators emerged around then as real power figures; I accept that in our time this is how the system works, but I really still am skeptical about the power aspect of the curatorial role, especially as it played out in the nineties and the early years of the twenty first century. For me, the idea of the curator, is someone who follows in the wake of art production and who works in service of it, rather than as someone who is equal to the artist. I want to understand what the artist is trying to do; if I have respect for an artist and their ideas, then I want to dedicate myself and to work for those ideas, not with them.

Look, I am from an older generation. I think I have a problem with the manipulative side of the curator. I understand that relations between the curator and the artist have changed over time, and that curators have become much more powerful. There were good sides to this process, such as the de-mythologising of the figure of the artist.

I understand the switch in the position of the artist and the curator, but it really appeared to me that curators took over for a period of time; they almost became like artists themselves, giving directions both to artists and to art. All the time they would produce exhibition concepts and fit artists into political and philosophical preconceptions. By the end of the nineties I really was uncomfortable with the direction of curatorship.

Nicolas Bourriaud's ideas of relational aesthetics became very influential for a period; the idea that art should be a kind of co-operation, as a means of blunting the commercial system, to try and somehow claim some kind of autonomy and independence for artistic activity. Of course it didn't work as these ideas were simply swallowed whole by that system. I really have a skeptical viewpoint towards many contemporary curators as they have internalized the role of serving commerce.



*Petre Nikoloski, Spaces 2, XXXIV, video installation, Venice Biennial, 1993.  
Curated by Zoran Petrovski*

I have also to be very self critical here. When I think retrospectively, there should have been a greater diversity of curatorial positions within the museum, such as the ones proposed by Suzana Milevska during her time working here.

Now, I don't think we really have curators in Macedonia. We are all curators these days, by default. Twenty years ago we had more defined curatorial positions, and could give some kind of critical frame to what was happening in Macedonia, as well as conceptualising the problems faced by artists. We did some curated shows here in the Museum back then, but never really ambitious ones. Until you asked this I have never really tried to summarise these developments and histories. I feel we certainly missed chances to work better and to deal with the art scene more effectively.



## Let's move on to the role that cultural institutions play in contemporary Macedonian society...

ZP: Recently, Nada Prlja asked me to make a show or an event in Serious Interests Agency, about the museum, and the position of the museum in the contemporary art world. I have been thinking a lot about this; I am critical of the museum in some ways. Because of its important position the museum should have worked much better than it did, and should have been more influential than it has been.

In the past, however, the Museum has been influential to the development of art in Macedonia. When I go back to the beginning of my career, the art community here was pretty provincial, and it still is nowadays. Maybe it is not as factionalised as it was in the 1980s, but in general it is very isolated and self-absorbed.

In the eighties, the museum was influential, working very hard to ensure its autonomy from politics, and also from certain artists who wanted to influence it in different directions. We tried to act as a filter, to ensure high quality production and art works, but were faced with interests from art that was merely provincial, dealing with local folklore or whatever. Somehow the museum never managed to overcome these competing influences; moreover, we didn't offer any alternative cultural models back then, dependent as we were on the internal politics of the museum and also financial dependence on the Ministry of Culture.

Consequently, we began to be pushed in the direction of becoming a social institution, one, which employs people to do jobs, and get paid for doing something no-one has asked for.

Cultural life in Macedonia is destined, somehow, to only have small periods where we can glimpse overcoming our structural problems and provinciality. This isolation is in our mind. We need a period of continuity over several years, of real dialogue between different figures in the art scene, where institutions, the academy, engage in a period of complete re-structuring. We need a really strong period of reform of our cultural scene, but also of our own mindsets.

## How likely is this to happen, and time soon?

ZP: Sadly, this will not happen anytime soon. Look at the political situation and how cultural policy has been formulated since our independence. We have such a long journey back from our really difficult position at present, of ideologically empty bureaucracy, where rulers meet the basic needs of a primitive political class. I don't see how it can develop in a different direction, soon. Globally, too things are difficult and we are on stony ground for a positive change in culture; we are living in a culture of total corruption.

On the surface, a few things have improved, such as bringing the collection out of storage after a few years. But the conditions for the collection to be shown properly, and to be understood and discussed, are not there, even if there has been some recent investment for it to be show in a bearable way. I suppose from this very basic point of view conditions in the museum itself are a little better. But this has been done without any discussion, or any idea of how we will exist properly in the future.

Issues such as the evaluation of contemporary art, how it should be shown, how it can be developed, are not the subject of any meaningful policy discussion or intervention.

Tourists now come here to see the permanent collection, but we don't make shows, we don't really engage in the contemporary art world, we don't think about art. Artists themselves are turned into individual institutions, like independent traders almost; this is an absurd formalization of the role of the artist in society. Consequently, none of the actors in the art world are very motivated, owing to this formalization of relations within the art world. There is no institutional profile within society, or direction of future travel. There has to be a much wider debate about the role of contemporary art, how it is seen and discussed, in this museum. Ultimately the power should reside with the people as to the future of culture, rather than any individual politician.



**What developments, or individual artists, that you have seen in the Macedonian context recently, have interested you or made you feel encouraged about the future?**

ZP: Well, to be a bit more positive and open minded, when Kooperacija appeared as a group of artists, trying to oppose the institutions and to offer a new model of being active as artists, I was very enthusiastic about this development. For a couple of years they really offered some new way of looking at things. As separate artists, I am interested in the likes of OPA and Yane Calovski.

Kooperacija, however, through an informal membership, brought a real freshness to the scene, and exposed the poverty of institutional working. But as I was saying, these initiatives need continuity, and unfortunately Kooperacija dissolved recently.

After their dissolution, speaking in general terms, we are now in a period of apathy; many artists now have turned their energies to political rather than artistic activism.

In our time, there are many interesting works of art criticizing or offering comment on the political situation. For sure, such work needs new curatorial articulation, and really needs strong support. I think we have to caution against cheap or easy approaches to such art; to make a label, put the publicity out there, before building up a big body of work; to do a show commenting generally on the situation, without exploring it in any depth. This is actually more damaging than doing nothing at all.

But the future direction is difficult to predict. We really need a critical art movement, from a broad base of critics, curators and artists working together. I don't know how this will emerge; there is a sort of amnesia, with links between artists and the institutions almost severed completely. There is also no support system for such a movement to emerge. We need a much better support system for such new and challenging work when it emerges. Part of that system is that relations between artists need to be much stronger again; because they are weak at present, it is possible to see our situation, as it is so connected to politics, as quite difficult. With Kooperacija the structure was perhaps too loose, and maybe it needed a better theoretical definition.

But then again, in some ways our scene is quite easy; it is a small community, we all know one another, and we are open to every new idea and initiative. I think sometimes we feel guilty for not participating more as individuals, for doing more. But we need more than just enthusiasm, if things are to get better.





Born 1984, Skopje. Freelance curator and art historian. Graduated in the History of Art from St. Cyril and St. Methodius University, Skopje, and studied on the de appel curatorial programme in the year 2011/12 at de appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam, Netherlands. Lives and Works in Skopje.

## Ivana Vaseva

*Opening of AKTO 10, Bitola, 14 August 2015. Curated by Ivana Vaseva.  
Photo: Keti Talevska*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

IV: I grew up on the outskirts of Skopje, in a place that I sometimes use in my practice as an inspiration. I have sharp memories of my entry into the educational system, which also made an impact on me. My mother read a lot and had a gift for drawing; I began to copy things myself from pictures; I really enjoyed art classes. In High School, I was really into literature, and thought of studying foreign languages. I decided firmly to study art history in my second year in high school, even although many people tried to discourage me, as jobs for art historians here are uncertain.

## So how did you come to be a curator from this background?

IV: Art Historians and curators approach things in a different way. These days I call myself a curator, rather than an art historian. We studied art history at university on a new curriculum, because at the time when I enrolled in university, the departments of art history and archaeology parted and became separate entities. This resulted in an “uncertain” curriculum for both faculties. This led to the situation that after 3 years concentrating on Byzantine and post-Byzantine art (at least it seems like that to me now), we came to the threshold of contemporary experiences of art. At this time, I started to work as a journalist and began to write art criticism. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the first curators started to call themselves like that, the word “Curator” had a real buzz around it, which it still sort of does, in this context.

Around that time, that was 2010, I met Yane Calovski and he invited me to a meeting and conference in Amsterdam. We were talking there and Yane challenged me with the question: What do you want to be? I really didn't know in that moment how to “define” myself; I was always working hard, but didn't really see how this work would develop.

In any case, there was a call from the de Appel arts centre, in Amsterdam, for a curatorial course; with Yane's encouragement and Biljana Tanurovska – Kjulavkovski's support I applied, and was accepted. As a curator and organiser I feel that I have ideas that I want to share and develop on my own, ideas that are explainable with actions, not only with words.

## So, to return to art writing quickly, how did you find the experience of art journalism here? You must have been one of the very few people who had a sustained interest in writing about art.

IV: I didn't write only columns; I wrote analytical and critical texts about the art context here, its own problematics and its connection to social issues; it wasn't always art criticism about solo and group exhibitions. My editor really was pushing me to write criticism, however. My first critical text was somehow welcomed, as people saw a need for it. After a while, however, this type of writing was not so stimulating. I began writing in 2007/8, and then returned to it again in 2012, after a break. My work appeared both in Vreme, and Dnevnik.

My general experience is that I somehow faced a lot with similar problems; repeating the same mantra, and writing the same thing in a different way because of the level of thinking about art, the quality of art production and the general institutional and non-institutional context; I felt that this contributed to the art scene, but not really to the needs of broader society. I realised that it was better for me to work with artists, to try to make deeper and more insightful conversations and projects with them, rather than just to write about it.

## Tell us something more about your art education, about the de Appel programme in Holland, and how it developed you as a curator, particularly in comparison to your studies in Macedonia..

IV: Studying in de Appel was almost like being in the army; we were all working towards one end, finishing, and making progress in our careers afterwards. We concentrated on networking and meeting people. We also had daily and monthly curriculums and we worked very hard; from nine am until ten in the evening. We produced a lot and grew together a lot; there is this curatorial mindset where you are always working.

We were like a big family; there were six of us, and we travelled a lot; to Belgrade, Athens, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Lyon, Istanbul. We were reflecting constantly on the huge budget cuts that the Dutch government made during my time there, slashing the arts budget by



fifty per cent. It was a period of major crisis, with many institutions faced with closure. I began to think about the idea of precarity a lot more, what it is and how it affects individuals and organizations especially compared to the situation in Macedonia. We were in Athens after a huge protest over the first budget cuts there; we were in Cairo two weeks after the revolution. I also began to obsessively think about the relationship between contemporary art and politics.

Anyway, we ended up making a big group exhibition there, many seminars and talks, and this really sharpened my mind and brought some ideas into focus. I think going abroad to study really helped in this way.

Macedonia is such a specific case, however. Sometimes it seems like we don't have ...anything here, when compared to that context. But still, there are things we can do here, even if the most mundane steps seem beset with so many problems, that provoke my curiosity.

**So, it is interesting that you came back to Macedonia after such an intense year at de Appel. I suspect many other people wouldn't have come back, but looked for a job somewhere else. What motivated you to come back home?**

IV: In my mind, from all these talks at de Appel on the relations between art and society; I decided that the Netherlands was not my country to fight for. This was a conscious decision. As well as the good things there, I also saw some problems without clear purpose like spending of big amounts of public money on projects that were not so well articulated. Also, when I was finishing in Amsterdam, Kooperacija formed, Jadro Association, there was a more visible and matured need of collectivity, and it seemed that in 2012 things were rolling in a positive way here, so it seemed a good time to come back. From time to time I am a bit sorry about this decision, especially when I see old friends from Amsterdam and seeing what they are doing now; naturally I sometimes think what might have been. But still, I feel I should be here, and I have a lot to be getting on with for now.

**I want to ask you specifically about curation - a couple of linked questions. What does curating actually mean in the Macedonian context, and how do you go about doing it here?**

IV: Curating here functions in a completely different art background and in different circumstances; maybe I should start by explaining the differences. Curatorship should have first an idea or a clear concept, and then connection with socio-political problems. Curators should try to not explain these things, but work with them. Every profession should think from this point of view; curating should work with artists, and art questions, but these must also be connected to society and how politics and human relations function. Curation should work with concrete ideas related to these problems, and reveal problems within these nexus of relations.

However, there is no concrete (or moulded) art framework or system in Macedonia, and there are no budgets for making an exhibition for example and everything to be paid, on a professional level I mean. That includes a decent way of applying for a grant, and then using the money to realise your project, produce a catalogue, and to facilitate related discussion and debate through public events. Here, you cannot work like that as a curator. For that reason I feel in the moment that I can only work in education, from the very beginnings of art careers, with young artists who really want to work. We then have the possibility to learn from one another, and to make something significant; to enter into clear and sharp conversations, and to help shape work from this process.

Honestly, there are people here that don't know what a commercial gallery is; or what an art fair is. Most people believe that artists work honestly, and don't actually earn any money from their art; this is a really old fashioned idea. However, I am not so interested in this commercial standpoint, or really to be part of the international system. I don't want to make Macedonia as a focus country of the international art world just for the sake of being that; I am not sure that this is our most important need. Firstly, we need to understand why art is made here, and why it is produced; the relationship between the history of art production and the history of the country.



There's two very strong notions held about art not just in Macedonia, but in the wider region, that I'd like to explore a little further. Firstly, the notion that "great" art cannot be political art; secondly, that art somehow exists on a higher plane, above money and economics. These are quite hard notions to challenge, as they are so deeply rooted, are they not?

IV: I myself wouldn't really have understood the situation had I not worked and studied abroad. People here don't really understand that there is a global art market, and an art industry, and that art develops side by side with this. There is a close relationship with the global economy. The works of certain artists, who are in a position to make what they like, also mutates the art market. People in Macedonia are not exposed to this.

Being political here, means being sympathetic to one of the two main parties, the party on power or the opposition; this polarisation means that students here are a little shy of talking about politics, or political commitment<sup>1</sup>. I am sure that affiliation to these big parties is part of the reason for feeling that art and politics do not go together. These feelings are probably a symptom of cultural isolation.

**Why do you think contemporary Macedonian art, in comparison to neighbouring countries, is so isolated?**

**Why does it not have the profile of contemporary art from, say Kosovo or Bosnia-Herzegovina?**

IV: Macedonia was formed as a state in the framework of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia tried to develop all the countries in the federation, but this development was from the information that I have uneven. What happened in Skopje in those times was an echo of what was happening mainly in Belgrade and then also in Zagreb and Ljubljana at the time.

I was researching on this topic in several occasions, one of them being the exhibition made in collaboration with Filip Jovanovski

1. Only months later, of course, major student protests erupted in Macedonia and motivated many previously silent citizens to protest at the way the country was being run.



05-13 June 2014, CAC Mobile Gallery, Skopje, *You made me so sad. Now, that doesn't have anything to do with you.*, group exhibition curated by Ivana Vaseva/ second appearance of the exhibition on AKTO 8 - Festival for contemporary arts in Bitola, Macedonia. Photo: Vanco Dzambaski

and Jovanka Popova titled SKOPJE: THE ULTIMATE GOLDEN COLLECTION OF PERSONAL MEMORIES 1960-2010, vol.1. We worked on different decades in the cultural history of Skopje, with two curators for each decade, in which they had lived. In the seventies section, we invited Miloš Kodžoman and Simon Uzunovski to select the works, because they were part of this informal gang/"collective" in that times. There was a clear orientation towards the Belgrade art scene in the events / gatherings they organised; there were artists participating on a regional level, it's true. I think maybe also we are quite a humble people, and maybe not so ambitious, which may be reflected in our art history.

I think the nineties were really explosive in the arts; there was a lot more money available to realise projects on a bigger scale. But unfortunately we never found a way to keep going after that period; that really was it. It still feels as though we have a lot of developing to do; we are still at an early stage.



**Let's focus specifically on the relationship between contemporary art and politics in the Macedonia of 2015?  
How would you calibrate it?**

IV: Well, one is compelled to ask what is contemporary here? The distinction between modern art and contemporary art is made here only to accentuate that we have finished with the style of older artists and now is the time for the contemporary. But to put it bluntly and not being ironic, this is in a way true -modern art here means the work produced by professors at the Academy, whereas contemporary art means work produced by artists under the age of forty five because of the freshness of ideas, and openness to novelties and new experiences.

But Contemporary Art is a dubious category here in comparison to discussions abroad. People have little grasp of ideological and practical pluralities, as the basis of the meaning of the term. If I were being critical, I would say there were about five contemporary artists in Macedonia; I am thinking of artists that have research as a basis of their practice.

For me, setting aside the problematic nature of the term “contemporary”, an artist is contemporary who is rooted in and understands the moment, and produces in it, with regards to what happened in the past. Practically, and theoretically, they are not stuck in the practice of making objects. Words and ideas are also part of the work, and the making of the work. Even if someone is painting, to be contemporary you have to engage with the specificity of this moment, of this hyper-visual, image-saturated culture. I think artists can and should be many things, other than artists. But, I always form my opinion from the work and the context, rather than from what I believe.

When I was in Israel, I met with many artists whose work was not related to their society at all. There, I realised that this lack of relation was a function of that society; they are critical as they consciously set these problematic issues aside, and tried to do something different. In Macedonia, this is not the case, as people are not fully aware of how politics, politicality and being political work here.

**So, specifically, what's the relationship between this type of critical art, and activism?**

IV: Skopje 2014 distorted the thought about art in Macedonian society and encouraged the activist approach. Every artist should be aware of their position in this society; every critical artist was challenged to react to the government's plans, and include these reactions in some level in their work. Clear and critical thinking was somehow shrunk in the face of Skopje 2014. And this governmental plan is not everything what is going on here; it's just one facet of the developments in contemporary society. i.e. it's only the most visible of all the criminal and anti human rights acts in the past 10 years, that also encompasses the art scene. Only a few projects reacted to it and spoke more broadly about how art functions in Macedonia.

A lot of “artists” who are artists, also include their activism as part of their career. That's fine, but if you don't produce relations, context, community, then this is just another representational form of art, and it is not engaging critically.

**You mentioned Kooperacija earlier, which was a very significant development in Macedonian art.  
How do you look back on that episode and what did you learn from it?**

IV: With Filip Jovanovski, I got an award from The International Association of Art Critics AICA - Macedonia, researching on communities or groups of artists not just as an organisational decision, but as an active political entity. Kooperacija is part of our focus here<sup>2</sup>.

I was really excited when Kooperacija formed; the group was really interesting, and it tied in with what I was reading at the time on group dynamics. I wasn't so closely involved with it; I can speak only from the vantage point of the spectator.

For me Kooperacija was important as it gave a space for artists to show their works; there are few possibilities in cultural institutions. I was able to follow their line of thinking and development.

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2. See Filip Jovanovski and Ivana Vaseva, “Collective Work as Political, not as Organizational Decision” <http://www.aica-macedonia.org.mk/wp/?p=715>





Opening of AKTO 10, Bitola, 14 August 2015.  
Curated by Ivana Vaseva. Photo: Keti Talevska

I feel that they didn't manage to produce a space that could create an intrusion and a potential rupture in the art system; they didn't crack it, but they copied how exhibitions were made in an institutional space. The core of the group was from different generations, and perhaps had different ideas on how exhibitions or talks and discussions can be made.

They introduced topics rather than tackling them I think, and it could have been developed more thoroughly. But still, I am sorry that it no longer exists, and I hope that it will re-appear in another form.

People here are keen to make things but are less experienced in working strategically, towards some kind of development plan. And that is really problematic too; What comes after the one-week exhibition? How does it grow, and function? What different terms of functioning can you propose? Everybody is enthusiastic in the beginning, but enthusiasm and willingness to co-operate cannot last; when people lose strength and interest, it dissolves and it shouldn't. The strength is to persist with the challenges, right?

### Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future for contemporary art in Macedonia?

IV: I don't really know; I go through waves of being optimistic, and pessimistic. At this moment, I am optimistic for the next two years. In this situation, one has to find people that are on the same level as you, and thinking about the same topics.

It's really tough here, but I have found a good group of people who share similar beliefs and ideas. I am committed to seeing through some projects that I have initiated. At the moment I am co-curating AKTO Festival for contemporary arts in Bitola. These projects make me hopeful for the future.





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## Nebojša Vilić

*Nebojša Vilić with Zoran Petrovski, 2015*



## What are your earliest memories of art?

NV: My mother's saying, since my earliest childhood: 'I am not a religious believer, but I like to go in the Byzantine churches for the cultural and historical monuments and heritage'. And we did, indeed, practice that saying.

## How do you regard the state of art education in Macedonia and what changes would you make to it?

NV: The state of art education, as any system of education, is a complex one and the changes, or even cuts, have to go deep, and back in the elementary schools. The social system that was introduced in Macedonia since 1991, and especially the latest 'reforms' tendentiously affirm the development of specialised workers for the market of labour, rather than the development of a broadly educated citizen that thinks. As far as art education goes, there are less and less classes in the elementary and secondary schools, and in some cases they are closed altogether.

Regarding the higher educational system, the weakest point is the implementation of the Bologna system or ECTS, that tends to unify and standardise the knowledge acquired, in numbers and percentages. This is a process of quantification, rather than measuring the quality of the knowledge imparted.

On the other hand the level of pre-academic knowledge, and the experiences of the student, as a result of the poor first two levels of the educational system, accompanied by an absolute lack of interest, brings students into a system which is wrongly structured.

It is not only the traditional conflict between the academia and free (liberal) art schools, regarding the curricula, it is even more complex than that. I mean in the sense of however much professors will try to implement new approaches to understanding art, there are simply not enough interested students to accept these changes.

To answer your question: the educational system is destroyed as much as the state is destroyed, by the cancelling of our former system of values, and their replacement by no new, or at least better, values. The old system has replaced by – chaos.

## How has Skopje 2014 affected the contemporary art scene (s) in Macedonia and with what consequences?

NV: Not that much as I expected, in terms of critical art production! The Project 'Skopje 2014' rigorously divided the art scene, but that was on a kind of personal and collegial level. There were some attempts to confront the art institutional system, and that was the major 'bright' side of the situation. Even these days, while protests are being organised every single day, I rarely meet and see artists on the street. But, not to be so rigorous, maybe the artists, and the processes of art production needs some time to ruminate upon these on-going developments.

## Contemporary art has been described, by some, as highly marginal in contemporary Macedonia; even as a subculture. Where does that leave writers and critics such as yourself?

NV: In a subterranean, underground position, of course! Nevertheless, the description of being 'highly marginal', I suppose, refers to the level or quantity of influence that art has to have, or has in fact, on the social and societal body. I partially agree, having in mind or wondering that wherever this kind of critical art has a bigger influence, especially in highly market-oriented art scenes or cultural-tourism driven cultural economies. The thinkers of art [I am tendentiously using this term instead of writers and critics, since many of us are thinking about art, but not many of us are writing on art], of course, are following the tendencies and appearances of art works and we are [or, at least, I am] trying to give some provisional shape of them in the wider or discursive field.

Periods of crises, I am deeply convinced, are situations for the purification of the body of terms and notions. The dilemma is always which way to take: to keep or to defend the already structured ones, that is going to maintain this newborn mess, or to try and to invent the new terms, and step into the field of risks. I found myself, personally, from time to time, on some crossroads, which is not a pleasant situation. But those are the moments where the new generation of thinkers is replacing the older one. I hope that I, as a member of the latter, will 'help' them to not make the same mistakes I did in the past.



## What strategies have contemporary artists adopted to survive in a cultural economy so starved of funds?

NV: They have several, but it is not up to me to provide the artists with them. As you can observe what huge funds did with the art and architecture through the 'Skopje 2014' project, you will understand that our artists do not know how to deal with huge budgets, since they are not used to them.

Since the very beginning of my career in the early 'eighties, I was living along with the artists, in the situation of a permanent lack of funds. And so it went, not because of our big and ambitious projects or ideas, but simply by being aware of the modesty of the budgets. Those conditions forced some artists to be more creative, to find or discover other technical solutions, to replace needed materials with accessible ones.

In my deepest understanding of the conditions of 'a cultural economy so starved of funds', it seems that as the funds are poorer, so that the art produced is more creative. We have a saying here: 'poor man – a devil full of life', meaning that the poor will always find a solution, not even making compromises with the original creative idea, but, just opposite: that poorness will create the solution.

In such cultural and factual circumstances, the artists have adopted different strategies, from self-financing to group work.

## Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of contemporary art in Macedonia?

NV: As a creative process, art will always be here, somewhere around. Neither my optimism nor pessimism will change or influence that. I understand your question in a way of my expectations: what do I expect of art in Macedonia? There were years from the beginning of this century, when I, not expected, but even asked from the artists for some specific art creativity, accorded with the societal conditions in which they are living. There were no responses to that.

Since then, I leave it to the artists themselves to 'read' and 'find' themselves in their own creative processes, that only they can find inspirational. As a consequence my optimism decreased. Therefore, there will always be some future, regardless of my expectations. It does not matter will it be what I would like to be or not. Any time has its own art, any art has own artists, any artists have their own generational critics. So, it seems that everything will be in order. In this manner, yes, I am optimistic.



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