



**GOOD
MIRRORS
ARE NOT
CHEAP**

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/concept

Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap is a curatorial project discussing ideas of self-perception, representation, desire and nostalgia through the work of five Bulgarian artists.

It is the product of a specific time and space; the offspring of an early summer encounter with the city of Sofia, an incomplete summing-up of the exchanges I –curator in residency who never before travelled to Bulgaria [1]– had with people, topics and places within this geography. Mainly, it is a conversation between myself and the artists I invited to collaborate –and the many more I met on the way–, a mutual mirroring of sorts, but also an open dialogue between us and the suggestions composing the scattered conceptual background of our common endeavour.

* arrival

The project borrows its title from the namesake Audre Lorde's poem, dated 1970. The poem is one sharp example of Lorde's commitment in inspiring Black wo/men to respond radically, disruptively to the misrepresentation forced on them by White-dominated mainstream culture. Opposing to the very possibility of delegating representation of self to others, stopping the hand of the dishonest glassmaker, Black communities and individuals can finally get rid of the faulty mirror as well as of the interiorised, distorted reflection.

Bringing Lorde to Sofia was a spontaneous exercise. I carried the poem with me, I read it again one night and heard it resonating throughout my meetings with the city the next day. But the focus shifted, the poet's words now faintly framing the generational struggle of a pretty enclosed artistic milieu. Young practitioners engaged in diverse attempts to break the mirror, or maybe reject its existence altogether.

* flirtation

When talking with and about a younger generation of Bulgarian artists, those who either were born after the fall of Berlin's wall or spent just a short moment of their childhood in socialist times, many possible objects of enquiry can come to mind. It might maybe be appealing to talk about the shift from communist utopia to capitalist realism, from internationalism to globalisation, or about the effects of EU freedom of movement or of low cost flights hitting Bulgarian airports. And how all of this transformed the artistic scene of the country and the lives of those inhabiting it. These surely were issues filling up my luggage, and many of these topics popped up in conversations I had during my stay. However, I was eventually more fascinated by different kinds of recurring 'obsessions', which I was recognising in the work of some of the artists I got in deeper connection with. I would call it a certain sense of *undirected desire*, a never-ending flirtation with professionalism, with a certain extent of theoretical depth, or with the mechanisms governing the art world on the larger European scale. Neither here nor there; I discovered a group of artists who move in absolute independency, only marginally interweaved in an ideological fabric they ironically dismiss. A generation taking back accountability for their own representation. A group/non-group of artists denying glassmakers [like, possibly, myself] the very chance of producing a mirror fitting their own image.

I use the term 'flirtation'. Flirting can be a pretty solipsistic activity. Although requiring at least the responsive presence of somebody/ something else, flirtation is mostly a self-referred practice. We project a certain idea of ourselves on others, and the effect of this communication process is the temporary elation given by having made ourselves perceived the way we intended to. A flirtatious-being embodies their own desire, turning themselves into both subject and object at once. The kind of flirtation I met in Sofia was maybe the antidote, or the more immediate reaction to *тЪга* [tuga], that ungraspable nostalgic feeling described by writer Georgi Gospodinov as "[the] longing for something that hasn't happened... a sudden realization that life is slipping away and that certain things will never happen to you, for a whole list of reasons—personal, geographical, political" [2]. A compliant sorrow in which visions of personal and collective, past and future collide, a diluted sentiment that has deep roots in the way Bulgaria dealt with its complex history, mostly by measure of erasure and negation.

* less space, but more time

When I first arrived in Sofia I visited museums on the hunt of the tangible legacy of what I straightforwardly associated with the country, namely Ottoman domination and socialist past. It took little time to understand that most of this material heritage is not displayed in curated public institutions, but rather requires a more accurate archaeological research in order to be found. Official representation of history in Sofia often resembles a palimpsest, in which every layer hides the previous, to leave only one unified superficial image to cover up the intricacy underneath.

Later on, I read about self-colonialism, as illustrated by Bulgarian scholar Alexander Kiossev:

“The concept of self-colonising can be used for cultures having succumbed to the cultural power of Europe and the West without having been invaded and turned into colonies in actual fact. Historical circumstances transformed them into an extracolonial ‘periphery’, lateral viewers who have not been directly affected either by important colonial conflicts or by the techniques of colonial rule. The same circumstances however put them in a situation where they had to recognize self-evidently foreign cultural supremacy and voluntarily absorb the basic values and categories of colonial Europe. The result might be named “hegemony without domination.” [3]

In an attempt to overcome marginalisation, to escape the ‘periphery’ label, the relicts of those stories within history that did not fit a polished representation of Bulgaria as Western and European have been put aside, turned into footnotes to the fabricated central narrative of what the country was/is –or should be. A historically reiterated biased self-mirroring, which produced a distorted reflection loaded with stereotypes of supposed inferiority and lacking.

Without ambition of carrying this suggestion in any further depth, I would like to imagine the role the domestic, the private, the intimate might have played in this much broader game of identity definition. In a social context in which the purely local has been perceived as somewhat sub-standard, compared to the Western model, going back to the everyday as object of interest and research is an exercise of resistance. In a long-lasting tradition of self-colonialism, elevating the familiar to artistic material, looking back to subjectivity as a territory to dig and explore, can mean to escape the mirror as well as the faulty reflection emanating from it.

Writing about the most poignant difference she could find between Western and Eastern European art scenes, in the late times of socialist governments, Slovenian curator Zdenka Badovinac states that in the West the artists had *more space*, but in the East they had *more time* [4]. The former comes from availability of economical resources,

something that was the plain result of belonging into a capitalist system of production, the latter, on the contrary, was somehow a benefit artists cut out for themselves, by adopting a different rhythm of time –which included margins for laziness, and emptiness even (!). Whether this auto-determination of [commonly perceived as] immutable parameters might still be possible today, in turbo-capitalist Wizz Air times for Bulgaria, is something to explore through the new works of the artists giving body and shape to this project, each of them with their specific vision and unique (self-)reflection.

–Chiara Cartuccia

[1] This wants to be more than a prosaic auto-biographic detail, as many of the suggestions I will try to depict in the rest of the text probably stem for my lack of better knowledge about the city, the country, its histories and culture. I believe it is necessary to frame my gaze then, as I remain just a tiny bit more than a (art) tourist who had the good chance to meet the right people.

[2] From the article ‘The Bulgarian Sadness of Georgi Gospodinov’, published in *The New Yorker* online on April 17, 2015

[3] Alexander Kiossev, ‘The Self-Colonizing Metaphor’ , 2010

[4] ‘How Do We Work? Collectivity as an Aesthetic Gesture’ in Zdenka Badovinac, *Comradeship. Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe*, Ed. Independent Curators International, 2019

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