



Past Contested: The Museum of Socialist Art in Sofia

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Abstract

The museum of socialist art opened on the 19th of September 2011 in Sofia. Its establishment followed years of complaint from the side of a host of Bulgarian intellectuals and public figures bemoaning the absence of an adequate national institution dealing with the memory of the socialist period (Vukov 2008, Kazalarska 2011). Until then, this part of Bulgarian history was conspicuously absent from the permanent exhibits of national and regional history museums. Even the sites of former labour camps and prisons for political detainees have managed to escape from the global museumizing impulse of the late 20th and the early 21th centuries. As Nikolai Vukov ironically writes, the most prominent case of a museum of the socialist past was the house of the former communist leader Todor Zhivkov in his birthplace, the town of Pravets, which was maintained by the local people to commemorate Zhivkov's important role in recent Bulgarian history (Vukov 2009). Although the new museum of socialist art had become a source of controversies long before its opening, since its inauguration it has found itself at the epicentre of a virtual war waged not only on its contents, but also on its name, location, management, and legal status.

My paper attempts to trace these disputes, analyse the memory wars in which the museum of socialist art got enmeshed, and also place these debates in a larger European perspective. It will attempt to reflect on the questions and problems, which arise when art is used as a means to remember, narrate, and exhibit socialism. The paper is based on four in-depth interviews with the museum's director, the chief curator of the exhibition and her assistant, in December 2011 and June 2012, as well as press coverage of various issues concerning the museum, from 2010 to 2012. I have visited the museum five times, once in November 2011, twice in December 2011, once in March 2012, when a new exhibition was opened in its inner hall, and once during the Long Night of Museums in May 2012.

The museum's genesis

The idea for the museum's establishment dates back to January 2010 when the Bulgarian ministry of culture developed a *Provision about Leading Museums in the Capital* (Kontseptsiaa za vodeshti stolichni muzei, 2010), which was fully endorsed by the Council of Ministers on 10 February 2011. Discussed exclusively in the light of cultural heritage, the document recommended the foundation of a museum of totalitarian art, together with either the establishment or the relocation of three other museums, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the National Museum of Visual Arts, and the Museum of Sofia. The Provision emphasised the lack of a museum of the most recent history of the country, pointing out also that none of the “immovable” materials from that period was legally protected by a statute of cultural treasure. It stressed that Sofia was among the very few capitals of former socialist states, which lacked a museum dedicated to the period of totalitarianism. The document mentioned the possible place of such a museum – in one of the capital's districts, Durvenitsa, next to buildings that were property of the ministry of culture, and on the territory of the traffic police complex - all this provided that traffic police would be relocated to a new administrative building that was under construction at that time. The goal of such an initiative was to create a “museum environment where representative examples of art produced during our recent past will be exhibited.” The Provision mentioned that the exposition would consist of an open-air exhibition, in a park, to be joined, potentially, by an indoor exhibition. It underlined the apt selection of the location, namely outside the historical centre, in a place “not encumbered by another historical meaning, which will allow the impartial reception of the exhibition.”



Fig. 1: The museum building. Photograph by Rossitza Guentcheva

The museum opened on September 19th, 2011, officially as the museum of socialist art, at a sumptuous ceremony in the presence of the prime minister, the ministers of culture, of finance, of internal affairs, of defence, of regional development, and the mayor of Sofia. It consists of a statue garden of 7500 square meters and an indoor exhibition space of 550 square meters. There is also a small room adjacent to the museum shop where one can watch a 1-hour long film – a collage of excerpts from short documentaries produced during the socialist regime.

The statue garden features sculptures of prominent communist Bulgarian and world leaders (Lenin, Dzerzhinsky, Che Guevara, Georgi Dimitrov, Dimitur Blagoev, Todor Zhivkov, as well as his wife and daughter), but also anonymous sculptures - of workers, volunteers, guerrilla fighters, and sculptural compositions, dedicated to various events – *Republic*, *Requiem*, *Victory*, *Day First*, *Arrest*, *The Red Square*.



Fig. 2: Museum garden. Photograph by Rossitza Guentcheva

Almost all sculptures date back to the socialist period, yet there are sculptures made before 1944, such as *Head of a Worker* of Ivan Lazarov, made in 1937, and the bas-relief *The Third Class* of Ivan Funev, from 1935. The majority of the statues belong to the National Art Gallery and the Ministry of Culture, yet some municipalities have also sent statues, such as the municipalities of Sopot, Sliven, Dimitrograd, and Haskovo. Several months prior to the museum's opening, the chief curator sent out letters to all state museums and galleries in the country, asking them to identify materials for the future exhibition. Few came up with appropriate suggestions, while some made proposals for “sots-art curiosities” that were declined by the curatorial team – such as the collected works of Lenin, from bakelite and singing, or a portrait of Todor Zhivkov made of plastic beads, from the town of Tutrakan. Emblematic are two sculptures donated by industrial

enterprises – the first, *Composition*, was property of the military production plant in Sopot; the other – a statue of Vassil Kolarov - was donated by the Sofia branch of the Hyundai car company in November 2011.

One can safely say that the concept for the statues' arrangement belongs to the Bulgarian minister of culture, Vezhdi Rashidov, himself a sculptor. He not only pushed the idea for founding a museum of totalitarian art; he took an active part in bringing some of the sculptures from the province, travelling himself to pick them up and fetching them to Sofia. Then during the arrangement of the garden he was at the site practically every day, overseeing the work of the crane and the construction of the pedestals, as well as giving directions on how exactly the statues should be oriented. In the words of the museum staff, his vision was purely aesthetic, and - as the curatorial team further describes the process - he would try various positions and angles until finally reaching a satisfactory decision.¹

The indoor exposition – in a hall that was previously a workers' canteine - features works of prominent Bulgarian painters - in fact, belonging to the canon of Bulgarian artists in the 20th c., among whom Dechko Uzunov, Zlatiu Boiadzhiev, Tsanko Lavrenov, Nikola Taney, Bencho Obreshkov, Stoian Venev – all of them names that both ordinary people and art historians hardly associate with socialist art.



Fig. 3: Indoor exposition. Photograph by Rossitza Guentcheva

Again, the majority of the paintings are from the socialist period, yet there are paintings dating prior to 1944 – from the early 1940s, like *Milk Shop* of Ilia Beshkov (1942) or *The Bombardment of Sofia* of Tsanko Lavrenov (1944). The collection is representative neither of the art produced during the socialist regime, nor of the style defined as socialist realism. As the chief curator says, it is a representation of the socialist idea that goes beyond specific historical periods and artistic

styles. The exhibition, according to her, is a manifestation of the best in Bulgarian art in the second half of the 20th c. - it is pure art, of the highest quality that painters during the socialist period were able to produce.

The museum's reception

The reception of the museum of socialist art is complex and multilayered, marred by a myriad of controversies. The construction workers who hastily refurbished the building were the first to react to the museum's exhibition. In pictures they made for themselves and their families in June 2011, they showed some of the sculptures before arrangement, faces on the ground, fallen in strange poses, scattered around. Commenting on the photos, the construction workers complained chiefly of belated salaries and broken promises, but they also made jokes about the curious positions of the statues. This is one of the very few instances, which discloses how the public reflects on the socialist past through narrating local, current everyday problems, embedding the museum artefacts in personal stories and lives.

A central debate – one that preceded the opening of the museum – concerns its name and the abrupt but silent and furtive substitution of the notion of totalitarian art by socialist art, which took place in the summer of 2011. Journalist Hristo Hristov, who has been researching the files of the communist Secret Police and maintains a website on “decommunization” ([Durzhavna Sigurnost.com](http://DurzhavnaSigurnost.com)), insists that “totalitarian is the historically correct terminology.” “Socialist”, he continues, is a notion imposed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party that is the heir of the former communist party from before 1989, and was used by that party to explain the transition from capitalism to communism. Hristov's Internet site contains a disclaimer, stating that “it will put in brackets the word 'totalitarian' after the official name of the museum authorized by the Ministry of Culture, since it is the historically true notion defining the communist era - a practice adopted both by the European Parliament and the Bulgarian National Assembly (November 2009)” (desebg.com). Prof. Velislav Minekov, Chairman of the Control Commission of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, and son of one of the sculptors presented in the museum garden, states that substituting socialist for totalitarian is a dangerous act since it signifies a departure from the initial and officially approved concept for a museum of totalitarian art. This change has not been sanctioned by the Council of Ministers, he says, what makes it an initiative of an individual agent (“sole trader”), flagrantly bypassing the law (Minekov 2011). Asked why the museum is of socialist, and not of communist, art, the minister of culture responds that this should not matter, because this is one and the same ideology, namely the ideology of socialism – and even Jesus Christ himself propagated very similar ideas (Rashidov 2011).²

But perhaps at the core of the debate around the museum of socialist art is the content of the exhibition. It has been called disgraceful, lawlessness, absurdity, an example of ignorance, and even a joke. Prof. Velislav Minekov, who is among the most vocal critics of the new museum, stated that the selection of the sculptors and painters to be included in the exhibition revealed a desire for revenge on the part of the curators offended by these authors' modesty, workmanship and public recognition. In addition, the museum features artists who were persecuted and censored during the communist period for their “formalism” and propensity for “western influences” (like Alexander Zhendov, for example, or Nikola Tanev, who was once interred at the Kutsian labour camp). At the same time, the critique goes, the very censors, despots, and

party parasites among the artists active during communist times are missing. Thus marginal works with an overt political character stand side by side with valuable works which survived by chance and despite the pressure of the communist party. The curators were blamed also for including in the exposition sculptures and paintings of artists who are still alive, and who had not been asked whether they would agree to their works being placed in such a museum, despite the fact that they are the property of the National Art Gallery. They were summoned to look at foreign expertise in correctly representing socialism, namely the House of Terror in Budapest and the museums of occupation in the Baltic states. The critique concludes with the supposition that the real goal of the museum of socialist art is to postpone the foundation of an authentic museum of communism, by pushing this idea to the background.

The curatorial team was also accused of withholding their vision, not making it explicit, and not standing by it to defend it during the debate. In fact, except for the small labels indicating the author, the title, the year, and the owner of a particular artwork, there is no text in the museum (except for one tablet at the entrance produced by the PR division of the ministry of culture). Nor is there a brochure to explain what socialist art is and how the exhibition was constructed. Curator Svetlana Kuimdzhieva (2011), mounting a scathing critique against the absence of curatorial stance and the lack of responsibility for the exhibition, calls the museum “a museum of what?” and refers to it as “the so-called museum of socialist art”. Deploring the lack of clear definitions, artist Adriana Chernin (2011) puts the museum in quotation marks (i.e. “museum”), claiming that it is not a museum at all, and not even an exhibition. Defining it as farce and display of nonchalance, she pejoratively notes that it is about “the art of *that* time”.

Critical voices against the museum of socialist art came not only from journalists and people engaged in artistic production, but from the right-wing political parties in Bulgaria as well. Nikolai Vukov (2012) describes their protest, formulated in an official declaration against the museum's purported attempt to rewrite history and rehabilitate communism. It decried the lack of critical reflection on communism and appealed for presenting the authentic nature of totalitarianism that would document the pain of victims of violence and denounce the criminal nature of the regime. The declaration recommended adding photos of the communist terror as well as including other forms of artistic production - like music, poetry, theatre – or, alternatively, display everyday objects from the communist period.

Some participants in the debate focus on the legal status of the museum. The fact that it is a branch of the National Art Gallery – hence, not a separate museum in itself, in a legal sense - is seen by some people as an instrument of manipulation, so that if and when the museum becomes threatening to the political power it could be easily and quickly shut down. In fact, from a strictly legal point of view, the museum is not even a branch – it is a non-registered entity and the worst aspect of this undocumented status is the fact that the museum doesn't have its own budget for a second consecutive year. This transient and ephemeral character of the museum is often combined with criticism against the museum's location – namely outside the centre and major tourist routes, so that it becomes “hidden”, unattractive, and unreachable for the visitors. As the museum's detractors conclude, despite the establishment of the museum of socialist art, a museum of communism is still missing in Bulgaria.

Notwithstanding this vigorous public disapproval, the museum has its admirers and proponents, chiefly among ordinary citizens, but also among foreigners coming from a host of

countries, as the museum's book of opinions testifies. The book of opinions is in itself a curious institution – it is a ubiquitous pre-1989 practice, rarely to be found in other types of museums. The one in the museum of socialist art displays the predominant satisfaction of the viewers with the exhibition, who are overwhelmed with the beauty of Bulgarian art. The majority of the writers of book entries are convinced that “art is art, in spite of time” (29 September 2011), stating that “we are happy that the wonderful works of famous and talented Bulgarian artists are preserved and now accessible to everyone. We want more” (30 September 2011). These comments follow closely the minister of culture's vision of art as timeless; they even mention him explicitly, quoting his words and stances. Yet whilst the Bulgarian public might have been influenced by reading the press, citing the official position on the museum, which was widely advertised by the media, the reaction of foreigners is identical and it could hardly be the outcome of similar processes. “Beautiful idea to document the past”, reads an entry in the English language of September 29th, 2011. Comments in Russian, French, German, Croatian, Italian, and other languages disclose similar fascination with the exhibition. “Bravo! Thanks!”, wrote Robbie Drogheda from Ireland on 6 October 2011 and continued: “a very fantastic collection of artefacts, an important document of a dark past, reminding us all that to ignore the past is to repeat it.” Some of the visitors conceive of the museum as a history museum *per se*, narrating the story of the socialist regime. “What we saw in the museum, was indeed like that”, wrote T. Mirchev on 19 or 20 November 2011.³

A somewhat surprising positive attitude to the museum of socialist art is published in issue #4 of the *Piron* online journal, dedicated to the Museum (with a capital M) – unexpected, because the issue as a whole is quite critical of the recent museum policy of the Bulgarian ministry of culture. In an article entitled “A Museum against Irony” Raiko Baichev (2011) welcomes the opening of the museum of socialist art, which he perceives as a guardian protecting the socialist memorials from ironic interpretation. He distinguishes three stages in the memory of the socialist period – a first one, dominated by total rejection, black & white evaluations, and destruction of monuments in the 1990s, followed by a second phase of irony, relying on Kosturica-like caricature and satire. Now, says Raiko Baichev, we are on a third stage, when irony should be superseded, in the name of a relaxed, uncomplicated understanding, and the museum of socialist art is the instrument that will make the public cast off their propensity for judgement. While finding many of the statues and paintings “beautiful”, he recommends that the museum be expanded to include objects of everyday life under socialism, which could affect the visitor more strongly and deeply. What Sofia needs, he concludes, is not a museum of socialist art but a museum of socialism in general.

The museum in the context of Bulgarian research on socialist realism

Exhibiting art from the period of socialism as a way of reflecting on and representing the recent past is not a novel idea be it in Bulgaria or further abroad. Prior to the establishment of the museum of socialist art, there were special exhibitions dedicated to painting during socialism in Bulgaria, the difference being that none of them were permanent. In 2008 and 2009 for example, the current chief curator of the museum of socialist art made two separate exhibitions in the National Art Gallery, the first entitled “Paintings from an epoch”, and the second, “Images from the underground”. Both featured works owned by already dissolved institutions that had existed before 1989 – the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the Central Committee

of the Democratic Communist Youth Union [Komsomol], the Central Union of the Fatherland Front, etc. Symptomatically, the two exhibitions did not mention socialist art, but talked rather about the “pre-democratic past” and the “official art of two periods – the first, after 1944, is a period of drastic party administering, while the second, the period of mature socialism, imposes state and public control over culture”. The curatorial approach received high praise as “devoid both of nostalgia and of irony towards the Bulgarian visual experience from the time of socialism” (<http://www.glasove.com/obrazi-ot-podzemiето-1730>). Other temporary exhibitions focused on Bulgarian artists who had lived in the period of socialism, but worked in isolation, sometimes completely refusing to exhibit their paintings and not selling even a single work. The 2010 exhibition entitled “Art in isolation” - with Nikolai Ushtavaliiski as curator - set again in the National Art Gallery in Sofia - also abstained from defining socialist art, talking instead about “working away from the official line of artistic developments” (Kalcheva 2010).

This terminological quandary - which lies also at the heart of the most ardent critiques against the museum of socialist art at the moment - is chiefly due to the lack of sufficient research on artistic practice during socialism in Bulgaria. When discussing totalitarian art as specific for the art landscapes of Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and Stalinist Soviet Union, the Bulgarian scholar Chavdar Popov (2004: 23-4) emphasises the absence of interest among local art historians in elucidating the nature of socialist realism within Bulgarian arts. He singles out two books that deal – albeit partially - with problems of totalitarian art and both of them are not in the field of art history. They are respectively the work of a philosopher and a historian, each analyses the unification of artistic life in Hitler's Germany, the creation of specialised bodies regulating art and culture, the political mythology of totalitarianism, as well as the role of art as one of the most effective propaganda tools.⁴ This delay in addressing the specifics of socialist realism should come as no surprise since even Nazi art, as Chavdar Popov mentions, comes to the fore of scholarly inquiry only in 1970s Germany, when a new generation of art researchers locate their subject in the wider debate on the nature and character of fascism in general. Similar long-term disregard and forgetting cover Italian fascist art too, and the reasons are common – the persistent conviction that fascist art has no aesthetic value, that it is morally reprehensible to deal with even this facet of barbarian regimes, and that it does not form a coherent, homogeneous object worth of investigation (Popov 2004: 13-15).

Yet no matter how scanty, research on socialist realism in Bulgaria does exist and is most likely to expand in the near future as the memory of socialism is politicized, tending to be seen as an undisputed democratic credential on a global scale, and therefore, bestowing on former socialist regimes the duty – and not only the right – to remember. One of the first to reflect on art during socialism is cultural studies expert Dimitur Avramov, who – in a series of articles published between 1968-1992 - compares Bulgarian artistic and literary enterprises in the short 20th c., conceiving of them as engendered by the revolutionary changes in modern art of the 20th c. Although he seems to privilege literature as the most dynamic field where the relationship between culture and power is constantly evolving, he does reflect on socialist realism in a larger frame, positing a point of change in the early 1960s. He describes the Bulgarian intellectuals of that time as aware of the “oppressive, stifling and suffocating atmosphere of totalitarian ideology” of the previous decade, as longing for new endeavours and free expression, but equally

concerned whether a new dogma would not simply substitute the former one, requiring them only to repeat and illustrate directives imposed from above (Avramov 1993: 415).

In the recent years, it is again literary scholars who are the most vocal in pressing the reflection on socialist realism and its embeddedness in the culture of the Bulgarian socialist society. Plamen Doinov perceives of socialist realism not only as an aesthetic and artistic trend, but primarily as an institutional phenomenon, linked with the hierarchical connections between the state and the nationalised literary institutions. He sees it as a colonial experience whereby the Soviet artistic model is brought down on Bulgarian culture through a trajectory parallel to the direction of power influences emanating from Moscow and incorporated by Sofia. Doinov, however, acknowledges that socialist realism in Bulgaria has had “a certain practice pre-dating 1944, being popular under a different name – new artistic realism.” He also distinguishes specific traits of Bulgarian socialist realism and thus speaks of a local, household variant of socialist realism, quoting anthropologist Gerald Creed's notion of domesticated revolution [applied otherwise to the Bulgarian socialist countryside] (Doinov 2011, Doinov 2008, Nedelchev 2008). Doinov also distinguishes five phases of Bulgarian socialist realism, i.e. a phase of competition (1944-1948), normative socialist realism (1949-1956), debatable socialist realism (1957-1968/9), all-encompassing (omnivore) socialist realism (1970-1984/5), and the last one – the phase of mimicry and declining socialist realism (1985-1989).

Some Bulgarian art historians also put the dimensions of socialist realism in the focus of their research. Ruzha Marinska (2009) investigates the Union of Bulgarian Artists and the Joint Artistic Exhibitions it had organized between 1960-80s as a structure and conceives of it as “a Machine”, where all instruments of managing and controlling artistic life were concentrated. She points out that during the selection process there were practically no high quality paintings that would be rejected on political grounds. Ruzha Marinska explains this with pervasive auto-censorship that assured conformity with imposed directions and stylistics and concludes that the resulting artistic production did not constitute a canon but a silent pact between the system and the artist, which was rejected only by a handful of painters. Anzhela Daneva (2009) finds the first signs of a thaw in artistic life (what she calls “liberalisation”) after 1956 and in the early 1960s, with the appearance of an alternative visual language, consisting of more varied themes and subjects, and increased vitality, independence, and subjectivity. And last but not least, there comes the vision of socialist realism of Svilen Stefanov (2008), who claims that socialist realism continues well after 1989, in fact until the end of the 1990s. He sees a period of classic socialist realism only between 1948 and 1956 and assumes that what followed in the 1960s was “post-socialist realism”, which he defines as the artistic counterpart of a later, second phase of authoritarian art, when “diversity” became the official doctrine.

The museum in the European context

Though criticised and scorned by the Bulgarian public for its work, the museum of socialist art in Sofia has, at least implicitly, relied on some of the outcomes of local research on socialist realism. It displayed the idea that socialist realism's core lay in the late 1940s and early 1950s, asserting that it had predecessors prior to 1944 worth showing together in the framework of one single exhibition. But the museum – again implicitly and inadvertently – also follows some of the patterns that govern the process of exhibiting socialist realism outside of Bulgaria, despite

repeated accusations of not having a clue of how the socialist past is museumized in the rest of the former Eastern Bloc countries.

A Gallery of Socialist-realist Art in Zamoyski Palace and Museum in Kozłówka, near Lublin, in the south-eastern part of Poland, exhibits paintings and sculptures from the period of socialism. The Palace was used as a depository of the Polish ministry of culture during the socialist period where – since 1961 – a substantial collection of socialist realist paintings was housed. The socialist realist art was stored there after it was decided that because of its Stalinist and pure propaganda character it had become obsolete and no longer needed in a society where socialism was already successfully built. The gallery opened in 1994 and five years later went under the auspices of the local authorities of the province of Lublin. Its collection consists of paintings, plaster casts of sculptures as well as bronzes, posters, and graphic art. What is different from the Bulgarian museum of socialist art is the inclusion in the exhibition of objects the viewer would associate with socialism – like kitchen utensils, string of paper rolls, kitchen furniture, evoking a sense of nostalgia. The visitors also explore the exhibition accompanied by music – upon their entering songs from the socialist period start being played. The guidebook to the gallery comments on the “uncomfortable paradox” that some of the artists exhibited in the Palace are world famous, like for example sculptor and Holocaust survivor Alina Szapocznikow, thus capturing their stance at once as rejected in their quality of socialist artists and acclaimed as a source of national pride. The guidebook also flatly declares “the gallery shows clearly that totalitarian regimes of all kinds pose great danger to humanity”.⁵

The National Art Gallery in Vilnius, Lithuania, is another attempt to reflect on socialism through art, which could serve as a parallel to the museum of socialist art in Sofia. Housed in the building of the former Museum of Revolution of the Lithuanian SSR, the art gallery was established in 2001 and opened in 2010 as a branch of a national state museum, the Lithuanian Art Museum. The paintings and sculptures created during the socialist period are arranged in a manner emphasising the history of artistic styles. Socialist realist art is exhibited in the hall entitled “Art and ideology” and shows the struggle of artists trained in a different tradition to comply with the requirements of the new norm as well as their complex predicaments in abiding by it. Dedicated to “The Significant Form”, the next hall endeavours demonstrating the boundaries of experimentation with modernist painting during the Soviet regime. The visitor's path continues in the hall entitled “Between Myth and Reality” devoted to the generation of 1970s artists who abandoned both socialist realism and experimentation with form, painting instead everyday objects and fantasy worlds. The last hall, “The Limits of Reality” explores the uneasy process of negotiation between official canons and individual experimentation, exhibiting abstract and photo-realist works of art. In this way, the gallery's approach to socialist realism appears similar to the approach of the museum of socialist art in Sofia in that it regards art produced during socialism as valuable and of high quality, as worth exhibiting for its own sake. At the same time, it is much more intricate, in pledging to exhibit the nuances of artistic negotiations, the tensions between art and power, the influence of pre-WWII pictorial traditions on socialist realism as well as the contribution of Lithuanian artists-emigrants.⁶ As Egle Rindzeviciute points out, in Lithuania this vision of socialism proposed by professional museum experts and curators is warmly welcomed, after a host of amateur projects that surmised the period in the last two decades, placing the accent on trauma, deportations, violence, and terror.

Elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe one can observe other attempts to define socialism through art, like for instance the statue parks in Hungary (Memento Park in Budapest), Lithuania (Grutas Park, colloquially known as “Stalin World”) or Russia (Muzeon Park in Moscow, called also the “statue cemetery”). Dissociated from paintings, the dismantled socialist era sculptures are exhibited in the open air not as artistic products but as artefacts of a past epoch. Some of them stand on their pedestals, carefully arranged as in the museum of socialist art in Sofia, whilst others are either brought down to earth, on the grass, often below the eye-level of the visitor, or are simply thrown out there, left in their fallen form. The Muzeon Park in Moscow is an interesting example for it not only had recently acquired 300 statues of victims of communism (exhibited as a single group), but is building a collection of contemporary post-1991 sculpture, while also actively restoring the socialist realist statues. Pledging to make the park “a unique Art Park, internationally renowned ... and in harmony with Moscow's image of a European capital”, the Muzeon is making a move at re-infusing socialist realist sculpture with aesthetic and artistic value, thus taking it out of history and memory debates and returning it back to art (<http://www.muzeon.ru/muzeon>).

And to go beyond Central and Eastern Europe, a fresh initiative in conceptualising the relationship between art and power comes from the field of art history. David Elliott, at the behest of the Council of Europe, proposes an exhibition that would look at the development of art in Europe and globally after World War II. Entitled “A Question of Values: Art, Power, and Freedom in Europe and Beyond, 1939-2012”, this project builds on Elliott's former exhibition “Art and Power. Europe under the Dictators, 1930-1945”, which was among the most influential sources for the elaboration of the notion of totalitarian art in the 1990s.⁷ The new exhibition intends to focus on the “fundamental *similarities* between different states, cultures, viewpoints and perspectives during this time, even though these similarities were often expressed by adherence to conflicting positions within the same broad settlement of culture and power” (Elliott 2010). In it, art production from the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc will be compared to that of Western Europe, the USA, and China in a bid to demonstrate that the beginning of globalization has its roots in the impact of World War II. This would mean analysing the disputed past of socialist regimes within an entirely new framework - that of globalization and cultural mobility.

Conclusion

With the opening of the museum of socialist art in Sofia in the fall of 2011, the Bulgarian public was summoned to reflect at once on three different problems, on which there is no already established consensus nor any profound academic research to help deal with them. It was faced with the image of socialism represented in a new art museum in a moment when there was still insufficient tradition of historical writing on the socialist past, with discussing the nature of socialist realism in art, and with creating new museum environments that would speak to a global audience. Thinking about the socialist period through art has proven a volatile issue at a time when the public still oscillates between a vision of socialism as a regime of terror, violence, and suppression of freedom and its vision as a period during which ordinary everyday practices functioned as weapons of the weak in subverting the state's totalitarian impulse.

On the other hand, the Bulgarian audiences, already familiar with existing museums of socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, use these foreign images and representations in an

attempt to understand the nature of the socialist years in Bulgarian history and to give advice on how a genuine museum of communism should look like. Yet the attempt to import this outside knowledge is bound to trigger novel debates, so far non-existent among local historians and artists, i.e. the role of the Second World War and of the place of the communist party as vanguard in the fight against fascism, the role of the Holocaust and the memory thereof in the establishment of a tradition of remembering communism, as well as of the role of museums in contemporary society in general. After an initial phase of silence on communism in the early 1990s, and a subsequent explosion of endeavours to elucidate the character of socialist regimes in the former Eastern bloc, it now seems that an increasing number of museums and galleries in Central and Eastern Europe – and also elsewhere – move beyond reflection on the nature of communism, to concentrate instead on exhibiting the clashing interpretations and representations that have circulated in the last two decades. While the Bulgarian public still hesitates between a “totalitarian approach” to communism and an “everyday-life-objects approach” to it, European institutions of memory have begun exhibiting and representing the manner in which local versions of communism have been so far commemorated and museumized. While the participants in the Bulgarian memory wars quote already existing models as sources of emulation and imitation, the proponents of this new type of memory culture in Central and Eastern Europe are engaged in a completely different comparative endeavour. They begin looking away from purely national contexts, seeking comparative frameworks on a global scale, which could present communism and the memory thereof as part of global phenomena taking place in the second half of the Twentieth century.

Symptomatic for the memory wars going on in Bulgaria in relation to the museum of socialist art is the response of the museum staff to the devastating critiques it had provoked since the autumn of 2011. The chief curator has announced that the indoor exhibition could only be temporary because of the lack of space. In March 2012, the first exhibition of paintings was replaced with a new one clearly designed to counter the main attacks against the museum. This time it is on totalitarian art, defined as a dark period in the Bulgarian cultural sphere, between 1944-1953/6. A visitor unfamiliar with Bulgarian art history may hardly tell the difference, despite that this second exposition comes with a two-page brochure on totalitarian art, which costs 1 EUR and could be purchased in the museum shop. It seems that the main transformation has consisted in removing the paintings from the 1960-1980s and supplying almost nothing in terms of text and context. Rather than going supranational and global, the museum has taken a narrower perspective, further shrinking and curtailing its own initial vision, going deeper into the shadow of a contested past.

Notes

- ¹ My attempt to meet Vezhdi Rashidov and talk to him about his vision of the sculpture garden proved unsuccessful.
- ² More on the name of the museum on <http://www.monitor.bg/article?id=307426> (accessed 5 December 2012).
- ³ To be sure, critical opinions are not lacking among the visitors publicly sharing their opinion in the guest book. However, they are not numerous and are practically nonexistent. “Not a single critical word about the thousands victims of the communist labour camps. Nor about the Bulgarians repressed, jailed, and persecuted by the totalitarian regime. In this form, the museum is useless!”, wrote Vladi Georgiev, who had left a Facebook address of a page called “The communist crimes in Bulgaria after 9 September 1944”.
- ⁴ These are Zhelev (1982) and Krachunova (1999).
- ⁵ This paragraph follows Guichard-Marneur (2011).
- ⁶ This paragraph follows Rindzeviciute (2011).
- ⁷ For a review of “Art and Power”, shown in London, Barcelona & Berlin in 1995, see Lyttelton (1996); for a review of the exhibition's catalog, see Griffin (1996).

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