

REVIEW

By

Assoc. Prof. DSc Boyan Manchev

New Bulgarian University

On the dissertation work for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"
on the subject:

ARTISTIC AND LIFE EXPERIENCE OF CAROL RAMA AND LIKA YANKO – TWO CASES OF 20th CENTURY ARTISTS IN EUROPE

PhD Candidate: **Eva-Maria Ivanova**

Institute of Art Studies – BAS

Supervisor: Prof. Irina Genova

Academic Discipline *Art Studies and Fine Arts*

Professional direction 8.1 *Arts Theory*

Biographical data

Eva-Maria Ivanova was born in 1991 in Sofia. She graduated from the bachelor's degree program "Art Studies and Art Management" in 2017 and the master's degree program "Comparative Art Studies" in 2019 at New Bulgarian University. She is a PhD student at the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences with a supervisor Prof. Irina Genova in the period 2021-2024.

Her research interests are in the field of art of the second half of the 20th century and in particular the work of women artists from Europe and North America. She has published nine scientific articles and is actively involved in the scientific life of the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Dissertation analysis

The main body of the dissertation is 338 pages, and the appended album is 106 pages (total of 444 pages). The thesis consists of an introduction, two parts, each divided into three chapters with several subheadings, a conclusion, and a bibliography. The bibliography includes 230 titles in Bulgarian, English, Italian, French and German and contains monographs, dictionaries, studies, journal and newspaper articles, archival material, and Internet sources. The album presents documentary and artistic material and includes about 220 images.

My review will include 6 sections corresponding to the main aspects of the dissertation proposed to our attention (subject, problems and issues, context, structure, methodology, analysis of artistic material), based on which I will formulate my evaluation of the dissertation and my conclusion.

1. Subject of the study

The subject of the dissertation is significant, original, and innovative for Bulgarian art studies. The thesis sets out to explore in a comparative perspective the work of Lika Yanko and Carol Rama – two female artists with an iconoclastic attitude who became legendary at the end of the last century and yet their work remains understudied. This task is formulated in a specific and significant perspective, namely, in the words of the dissertation, in terms of "examining the construction and validation of the biographical images of the two artists in relation to their life experiences. The work of Lika Yanko and the work of Carol Rama are not considered simply as 'exceptions to the rule' but as representative of more general, but perhaps not yet fully understood, trends in art history" (p. 8).

It is imperative to immediately highlight the fact that this is a completely undeveloped field not only in Bulgarian, but also in world art studies. Neither the work of Lika Yanko nor that of Karol Rama has been studied in a comparative context, let alone a transnational one. The choice of the topic and, even more, the outlined research attitude and tasks set an original perspective for the dissertation, but it is also a serious challenge for a young scholar entering uncharted, uncharted territory. As I will demonstrate in my review, the PhD student has met this challenge brilliantly, presenting us with a study that is not only beneficial for Bulgarian but also for European art history.

2. Research problems and questions

The dissertation combines or rather synthesizes three main research tasks, responding to three significant research problems:

(a) the study and elucidation of the as yet unresolved life and creative history of the two artists;

b) the exploration of the structures and unconscious stereotypes through which biographical images and conceptions of creativity are formed;

c) the derivation of the principles of the artistic poetics of the two women artists that would also allow their inscription in the history of twentieth-century art, without presupposing a historical schema of belonging to a particular group, school or tendency.

The issues are significant, and the researcher's questions are entirely responsive to contemporary trends in art history.

3. Research context

The context in which the subject of the dissertation is introduced is wide-ranging and complex. It is obviously complex due to the complexity of the subject matter and its complex cultural, historical, and political context. But its complexity is also since the work of Rama and Yanko is only now becoming the object of focused research interest, and therefore Eva-Maria Ivanova's work must deal with a number of obstacles such as the absence of documentation, the need for further research, and the need to contextualize and interpret the observed phenomena.

I will note here the comprehensiveness of the empirical research carried out on the available literature and archives, as well as the purposeful attempt to expand them. All available sources on the two artists have been studied, as well as a vast amount of material relating to the cultural context and art of the era. It should be emphasized that it is not only a matter of mechanical collection, but also of classification, systematization and interpretation of the information studied. The dissertation also testifies to an extremely high level of mastery of the history of Bulgarian and European art of the 20th century, as well as the context of the artists' creative activity. Working with the context is not only introductory, but also broadens the context itself. For example, for the first time, Lika Yanko's work is placed in relation to other arts, and in doing so, important discoveries are made concerning her collaboration with prominent artists of the era, such as the film director Binka Zhelyazkova, the musicians Dora and Stoika Milanovi, and the composer Vasil

Kazandjiev. Similarly, the context of Carol Rama's work has been expanded to include unexpected connections not noted in biographical studies of Carol Rama, again revealing creative relationships and parallels unexplored or not brought into research focus, such as those with Man Ray, Louise Bourgeois, Cy Twombly, and Andy Warhol.

4. Structure of the dissertation

The thesis is divided into two symmetrical parts, the first of which is dedicated to Lika Yanko and the second to Carol Rama. Each part is divided into three chapters, which also have an analogous function in each part. Each of the two parts of the work comprises three chapters, and each of the chapters has a distinct function and task, which in turn determine a different methodology and principles of exposition. This structure of the study is both logical and original. It is an expression of an 'emancipated' research approach: it avoids the need for extensive contextual comparisons and negotiations, allowing the research to enter directly into specific situations, retaining the potential for comparative and typological build-up. In the words of E.-M. Ivaniva: "This mirroring structure allows for the sequential exposition of each of the two cases central to the dissertation, without direct references to the parallel case being made at any cost at any stage of the exposition; the connections can also remain at an implicit level as they are suggested by the structure itself. This avoids continuous references and the burdening of the structure of the work" (p. 14).

The original research strategy allows for the drawing of motivated parallels between the corresponding in orientation three chapters of each of the two parts, which in turn allows for the autonomous unfolding of the material in each part. Each chapter of the two parts is based on a system of building on and incorporating the previous one, which allows the research to achieve a multilayered scope of the research object, while keeping clear the direction and tasks of each part. The exposition itself is clear, coherent, comprehensive, and systematic.

I will present the six chapters of the work in three groups, based on the possibility of parallel reading.

I will define the **first chapters** of both parts as *reconstructive*. They concern a comprehensive study of all available information on the biography of the two artists. A reconstruction of the biographies of the women artists has been carried out by reaching back to the primary sources, which allows for the identification of erroneous information (and in several cases its uncritical reproduction – see in this respect, eloquent and curious examples related to the virtuoso research of details from the

biographies of women artists, often involving elements of reconstruction and even self-mystification, including in relation to their birth dates - see pp. 55-56) and thanks to this – to reconstruct the actual situation. To this end, several interviews have also been conducted, which shed new light on a few significant issues related to Lika Yanko's biography and artistic path. The interviews were conducted based on the sociological model of biographical research; their methodology is reflected on p. 10-11.

Even though the work, especially in the case of Lika Yanko, is seriously hampered by the absence of an archive (or its inaccessibility), the comprehensiveness of the research in this respect is exemplary. All available literature and archives, including film and digital archives, have been examined (and several sources previously unknown or unmentioned upon in the existing research literature have been identified). The information has been treated neutrally and reconstructed very carefully, with alternative possibilities of interpretation discussed, unknown facts identified, and inaccuracies and errors exposed. The evidence in this respect is compelling.

The reconstructions of the biographies and artistic development of the two women artists in chapters one and four are the most comprehensive, the most coherent and certainly the most credible biographical reconstructions of the life paths of the two women artists. This fact constitutes a significant contribution to Bulgarian and Italian art history. The appendix "Synthesis of the main data on the life of Lika Yanko" gives the clearest and most neutral appearance to the research carried out. In this way, Eva-Maria Ivanova's dissertation provides a solid foundation for further research into the work of Lika Yanko and Carol Rama. The reconstructive work carried out allows building on the established empirical basis of the dissertation - both developing it with directions conditioned by the newly established facts and with new, reasoned interpretations. This second research task is accomplished in the second chapters of the first and second parts of the study.

The **second chapters** of the two parts are entitled in parallel "Artistic Context, Environment and Formation. The Artist's Studio". The build-up in these chapters follows a different methodology that also corresponds to their different tasks. Firstly, the established information is interpreted, a condition for establishing a more adequate and multidimensional image of the life experience and lifeworld of women artists. Key concepts in this respect are the notions of life and artistic experience. Here the main task is no longer the retrieval of facts and their retelling, but their interpretative organization, the grasping of their structuring processes and their making sense of them. Eva-Maria Ivanova's aim here is to explore the ways in which historical narrative itself operates – always based on conscious and unconscious

choices, on selection and combination, that is, on successive strategies of inclusion, exclusion and skimming of certain facts (often due to the absence of information or the refusal to search for it).

The third chapters of the two parts are devoted to the interpretation of the poetics of each of the two artists. These chapters in turn build on the interpretation carried out at the level of poetics. The visual poetics of Lika Yanko and Carol Rama is examined both through its relationship to life experience, as its extension or its transformative and reflexive expression, and as an autonomous entity that forms its own laws that cannot be entirely motivated by biographical determinism.

The main motifs, images, and tendencies structuring the women artists' work are examined, making it possible to draw out certain trends in them, to delineate trends and periods, and to create an overall autonomous image of the women artists' poetics. Particularly impressive are the developments in the broader context of art history of the last century. The parallels and typological similarities established between the work of the two women artists help to further clarify their place in the history of contemporary art, without starting from presupposed schemes and ready-made definitions. Particularly noteworthy is the analysis of the living and creative space of the two artists - their studio apartments, which Ivanova convincingly and insightfully presents as an extension of the poetics of each of the two artists and as a laboratory in which their life experiences are reworked as poetics.

5. Research methodology

I will pay special attention to the methodology of the research insofar as it is the supporting structure of this complex work, providing a solid foundation for its full and successful deployment and implementation. This methodology is complex. The dissertation formulates its direction broadly as follows. Krauss), phenomenology and sociology of creativity, as well as philosophical concepts such as life experience, liminal experience, and artistic experience, originating in the pragmatist (Dewey) and existentialist tradition (Jaspers, Bataille), which became influential in the era of structuralism (Foucault) and contemporary art respectively. It should be stressed that Eva-Maria Ivanova does not abuse the use of theoretical models. Methodological tools are used as sophisticated tools adequate to the complex object of analysis. The work clearly demonstrates that its author has mastered various research registers - a kind of methodological polyphony that reveals new and promising research opportunities for modern and contemporary Bulgarian and European art.

Particularly significant for the research is the methodological paradigm of Svetlana Alpers, which gave Ivanova a tool for theoretical argumentation of the bold

and original research hypothesis, according to which art historical research, especially in terms of the biographical perspective and the relationship of biographical facts with creativity, have the tendency to construct a kind of narrative which, even if it is based on well-established empirical facts, begins to produce its own quasi-reality, that is, a research fiction that gradually runs the risk of establishing itself as a stereotyped or clichéd image, which in turn imposes itself as a prism for understanding the personal characteristics and work of a particular artist. The author describes the stakes of this perspective of her research as follows (taking up the theme of the "trace" identified by Angel Angelov and Irina Genova): 'I will use the theme of the "trace" and the construction of the narrative of art history as a starting point to try to show how a particular narrative of an artist(s) is created in contemporary art history. I will give an example of how some traces become visible and others remain invisible, that is, I will try to illustrate how the traces, the facts through which the narrative is constructed, are selected. ' (c. 166)

The described research attitude leads to the unfolding of a significant metahistorical reflexive layer. The research includes both a meta critical and a metahistorical dimension, the development of which, in themselves, are impressive achievements for a young researcher. In conclusion, I would define Eva-Maria Ivanova's method as a combination of phenomenological and metahistorical approaches, insofar as it reflects on the construction of the historical narrative itself - or the very grounding of historical research on narrative structures. The described innovative contemporary methodology is adequate to the current trends in the theory and history of art – a necessary but rare quality in young researchers in our country. Thus Eva-Maria Ivanova continues one of the significant lines of contemporary Bulgarian art history, fitting into the world trends in the theory and history of art.

6. Analysis of artistic material

It is necessary to place special emphasis on the dissertation's work with artistic material and specific works. She shows a particular sensitivity to the concrete image, has a strong art historical intuition, can investigate the details, and this quality leads her to several, often unexpected, discoveries. Chapters three and six include a number of remarkable analyses of specific works and visual motifs (e.g. of the image of the fish and sea creatures, including connections with works by Paul Klee, of the crown of Orpheus and Neptune, of the connection with plastic motifs in depictions of deities from the mythology of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, of astrological symbolism, of collage techniques – in Lika Yanko, and of the connections of motifs from the work of Carol Rama with that of Man Ray or Louise Bourgeois, etc.), leading to

convincing generalizations about the visual poetics of each of the two artists as a whole.

The specific analyses present Lika Yanko's work in a new light, complicating the context of its reception, revealing unexplored and unexpected connections (e.g. the links with plastic models from ancient cult practices or the work of artists such as Picasso and Klee) and highlighting unexplored aspects of her poetics (e.g. the influence of Western pop culture models, including pop art, collage and other avant-garde techniques that bridge her poetics with the aleatoric musical compositions of Vasil Kazandjiev, for example). In this respect, the analysis of Lika Yanko's collaboration with Binka Zhelyazkova within her film *Their Last Word* stands out. It is not only contributory for the art-historical discovery made, but also testifies to the doctoral student's competent work in the field of other visual arts, in particular cinema.

Dissertation evaluation and conclusion

In conclusion, I will focus on the elements of Eva-Maria Ivanova's dissertation that motivate my high evaluation.

First, the thesis is based on a magnificently formulated research object. The study is not limited to the comparative perspective, and the comparative orientation is used to formulate and justify critical, historical, and typological hypotheses. The dissertation is an exemplary testimony of maximum research effort rather than an attempt to achieve a maximum goal with minimum effort.

Secondly, to accomplish the goals of her research, the author has examined a vast amount of material – essentially all available information and current research, making contributory discoveries. Moreover, she has also mastered complex methodological paradigms in the field of contemporary art theory and history, and even sociology and philosophy, the use of which goes far beyond mechanical application and helps to accomplish a multilayered and multidimensional, yet homogeneous study.

In this regard, I would like to place special emphasis on the empathy shown towards the research subject (probably a necessary condition of any research, but far from noticeable in any dissertation), which does not obscure the objectivity of the research. This attitude is a result of the academic ethos of the research, directed against easy sensationalist approaches (creating clichés to sell the personality of the artist as a commodity, thus effacing his real personality).

The dissertation combines rigor, thoroughness, academic correctness with originality and innovation.

The work is also characterized by a rich expression and a well-mastered, elegant style. The language is clear, even if at times it is unavoidably complex; one is impressed by the complexity of the scholarly apparatus, although perhaps scholarly forms, self-serving foreignisms, etc. have been deliberately avoided - a quality which, I regret to say, is far from being a shared advantage with several successfully defended doctoral dissertations. Eva-Maria Ivanova is also an engaging narrator: the biographical research and interpretations have high prose qualities.

My only recommendations concern precisely minor stylistic and technical details in view of the forthcoming publication of the thesis. It seems to me that in places long and complex sentences could be simplified or even split in two. I understand the rationale for the few lengthy footnotes, which aim to lighten the main body of the text; however, an alternative solution could have been sought when the text was published.

- The overall layout of the work is of the highest scholarly standards.

- The abstract meets all the requirements and represents an excellent synthesis of the thesis.

- The contributions are precisely formulated, although they could undoubtedly be expanded (the nature of the difficulty in this case is understandable). I consider it imperative to add at least the fact that unexplored or unknown works by both artists have been identified.

- The enclosed album is a remarkable research tool, executed at a highly professional level. With its precision and creative research intuition, it can be an example for younger researchers.

- The publications are further testimony that we have before us a formed young scholar. They set a research line and create expectations for further research.

CONCLUSION: An original, impressively developed, contributory scientific work has been brought to our attention. The contributions of the work are obvious - a number of facts have been revealed and studied for the first time; the approach, methodology and interpretations are original and innovative for Bulgarian art history; the work allows to go beyond the usual limitations of the cultural context and contributes to the correlation of the history of Bulgarian art from the second half of the Bulgarian century with its contemporary trends in European art. The dissertation

fully fulfils, and I can say with conviction - exceeds (here this expression, which has turned into a kind of curt academic template by inertia, is perfectly appropriate) - the requirements for the award of the scientific and educational degree of doctor: not only to reproduce, but also to produce new knowledge.

The thesis itself is ready for publication as a monograph, and I therefore recommend that it proceed to publication.

Based on the summary presented, I confidently formulate the highest opinion on the dissertation “Artistic and Life Experience in Carol Rama and Lika Yanko – Two Cases of 20th Century Women Artists in Europe” and call upon the esteemed scientific jury to award Eva-Maria Ivanova the educational and academic degree of Doctor.