

INSTITUTE OF ART STUDIES, BAS



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

ABSTRACT

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Subject, aims and purposes of the study

The subject of this dissertation is the oeuvre of two women artists who lived and worked in the same era but in completely different cultural and historical conditions – the Italian artist Carol Rama (1918-2015) and the Bulgarian artist Lika Yanko (1928-2001). Despite the obvious differences, many parallels can be established between the work and biographical path of the two artists. Similar circumstances in their life and artistic experiences in one way or another determined their peculiar artistic styles and lifestyles, which, at least in the years of their most active creativity, were regarded as poor taste. For this reason, both artists are represented in the art history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries rather as “exceptions”, not fitting into the established art historical narrative.

The interest in the work of Carol Rama and Lika Yanko over the last decade suggests that it needs to be considered in a broader research context that helps to establish it in twentieth-century art history, while also attempting to make sense of it in relation to the trends for which the artists themselves are representative. Moreover, despite several serious studies of Lika Yanko's work, no comprehensive analysis has yet been made of the relationship of Yanko's work to broader trends in European art. Neither has the question of Lika Yanko's work been raised in the perspective of “feminist’s studies” (specific themes, biographical path, poetics). Similar observations apply to the work of Carol Rama, which has generally been seen as an exception to general trends. Although she has been studied by feminist author(s) such as Lea Vergine, Edoardo Sanguinetti, Beatrice Preciado, Jennifer Griffiths, among others, comparisons with the work of other female artists could be complemented, or at least extended, for a deeper understanding of her position and poetics. A detailed comparison would reveal many common characteristics, especially in terms of the biographical narratives and self-representation of the artists, but also in terms of the singularity of their poetics. From this point of view, the attempt at an extended comparative study between the

work of Carol Rama and Lika Yanko is undoubtedly challenging, but its stakes are the enrichment of knowledge about both artists, as well as about certain trends in the art of the period. The perspective of the study thus outlined is justified not only because of the undeniable importance of the two artists for the history of European and Bulgarian art, but also because their cases can be seen as representative of more general artistic trends. Therefore, I find it fruitful to broaden the comparative perspective by linking it to the context of the work and biographical path of other significant women artists, and artists of the era (Louise Bourgeois, Georgia O'Keeffe, Yayoi Kusama, Niki de Saint Phalle, Eva Hesse, Paul Klee, Jean Dubuffet, Asger Jorn, Cy Twombly, Bernard Schulze, etc.), both in Italian (Lisetta Carmi, Marisa Merz), in Bulgarian and regional contexts (Vera Nedkova, Daria Vasilyanska), and considered more broadly in European and global contexts.

On this basis, the main aims and objectives of the study can be outlined. The first research task is to examine 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 examined not simply as 'exceptions to the rule' but as representative of more general, but perhaps not yet fully understood, trends in art history. In this perspective, the work of both artists is analysed in relation to the changing place and role of women artists in the context of significant trends and processes in both European and recent Bulgarian art. The next main task of the study is to examine the work of Lika Yanko and Carol Rama in a broader regional, European and global context. A third task is to develop the hypothesis of the proximity between Rama's and Yanko's work in terms of visual poetics. In this regard, I also propose a number of parallels with the work of other artists, and artists of the period, a proposal supported by extensive analyses of artistic trends and works. The comparative perspective does not exhaust the aims of the research and the methods used to achieve them, although it is without doubt the basis of the research methodology. Building on the comparative foundation, the dissertation also explores artistic processes from a cultural-historical, typological and visual-poetic perspective.

Research methodology

This dissertation examines the work of Carol Rama and Lika Yanko from a comparative-typological, cultural-historical and visual-poetic perspective. Juxtaposing the cases of Carol Rama and Lika Yanko in such perspectives could contribute to clarifying both the construction of stereotypical biographical images in contemporary art history and the creation of myths of distinctiveness and originality that suspend the possibility of a historical narrative, even if it is a “post-historical” one.

The aim of the comparative approach is to highlight similarities and differences of biographical experience, its processing and corresponding poetics, as well as to offer an analysis of the type of woman artist in the modern era in terms of her creative experience, her social and cultural environment, possible resistances against it, the dynamics of cultural relations, and related trends in poetics. The comparative perspective in this case becomes a touchstone for the exploration of more general trends, which are identified by continuing the parallel with the figure and work of the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois, and also with the works of artists from other eras and spheres of art (e.g. the film director Binka Zhelyazkova or the composer Vasil Kazandjiev).

In this perspective, the concepts of life experience and boundary experience acquire central importance. The notion of “life experience” in this case should be understood in the sense of not only the biographical characteristics of the artists, but also their specific “artistic experience”. The very notion of ‘life experience’ has been used in the field of existential philosophy and phenomenology, for example under the influence of Edmund Husserl and José Ortega y Gasset. The concept was also developed by the American philosopher John Dewey, who in turn coined the term “artistic experience” in his book *Art as Experience* (1934), which has had a significant impact on contemporary art criticism. John Dewey distinguished between “experience” in general and (unique, specific) “*experience*” (*an experience*). According to him, the artist creates not just a work, but an *experience* that is itself the object of aesthetic experience. That is, aesthetic experience is

not possible without artistic experience, and artistic experience without life experience. The use of the terms *life experience*, *artistic experience* and *liminal experience*¹ in the present study was motivated by the need to structure its conception in the absence of clear biographical accounts of the two artists that would have allowed a direct move to an analysis of their work.

For this reason, the dissertation discusses the problems of biographical narratives (in Chapters One and Two of Part One and Chapters One and Two of Part Two, respectively), also drawing on elements of the sociological method of biographical research². The method of biographical research is flexible and dynamic – it uses different types of sources in an attempt to construct a biographical narrative that is not only responsive to 'known facts', but is based on documented factuality, as well as sociological field research methods that allow one to reach objective information, namely interviews, recollections, video recordings, interpretation of intersecting “living” documents, i.e. memories, narratives, collective memory, individual spaces of

¹ The concept of “liminal experience” is associated with extreme existential situations and conditions, such as those encountered in Carol Rama’s biographical story and in that of Lika Yanko – Rama survives the suicide of her father and the hospitalization of her mother in a psychiatric clinic, while Yanko falls from a high place as a child and breaks her back, which is due to the physical complications she struggles with all her life. The notion was developed by Karl Jaspers (*Grenzsituation*) and Georges Bataille (*expérience limite*) in the first half of the twentieth century but came to prominence thanks to the writings of Michel Foucault in the second half of the twentieth century (see Martin Jay. *The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault*. – *Constellations*, no. 2, 1995, pp. 155-74).

² On this issue, see the following studies: Iwaylo Znepolski (ed.). *Това е моето минало. Спомени, дневници, свидетелства (1944 - 1989)*[*Tova e moeto minalo. Spomeni, dnevnitsi, svidetelstva (1944 – 1989)*]. Published by the Institute for Studies of the Recent Past, Sofia: Open Society and CIELA, 2010; Teodora Karamelska. Биографичният анализ на етническата идентичност между опита, спомена и разказа [Биографичният анализ на етническата идентичност между опита, спомена и разказа]. – *Sociological Problems*, no. 3-4, Sofia, 2009, pp. 200-229; Krasimira Daskalova (ed.) and others. *Техните собствени гласове – интервюта по усна история* [*Tehnite sobstveni glasove – intervuyuta po ustna istoriya*]. Sofia: Polis, 2003.

the artists' experiences, which are also inscribed in their cultural context, but also respond to the desire to get as close as possible to the artists' experiences, to their personal interpretation of their individual situations. Moreover, biographical research is characterized by the desire to maintain distance when dealing with memories and narratives that might alter the facts due to the distance in time. The methodology makes use of the terms “life experience” and “artistic experience”, which conceptualize the research, incorporating them into art historical analysis for the purpose of interpreting artistic phenomena, thus allowing for the consideration of biographical and artistic experience in a parallel perspective, through intersecting motifs, while avoiding the danger of falling into the “trap” of the psychoanalytic method, which in turn prevents an emancipatory analysis of creativity, applying only interpretations based on trauma and therefore on the impossibility of overcoming it. The dissertation aims to refute the aforementioned impossibility of overcoming biographical trauma, arguing that biographical particularities are, on the contrary, a potential field for the expression of particular artistic poetics and explorations, from which follows a kind of overcoming in the form of the reworking of life experience into artistic experience. The described methodology allows not only the emancipation of the narrative of the lives of women artists from the established biographical images related to the treatment of women and, in particular, women artists of the era of their active creativity, but also from the contemporary way of constructing a biographical image in contemporary art history, often tending towards unsubstantiated and unsustainable claims.

The attempt to reconstruct the life experiences of women artists is inscribed in an art historical perspective through the mediation of critical views on art history and in particular art historical narrative developed by Svetlana Alpers in her study *Is Art History?* (1977)³, and by Arthur Danto in *Approaching the End of Art* (1987) and *Three Decades After the End of Art*

³ Svetlana Alpers. “Is Art History?” – *Daedalus*, vol. 106, no. 3, 1977, pp. 1–13. [JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024490>. Accessed 15 May 2024].

(1997)⁴. Alpers identifies the symptomatic shift in the focus of art historical research to certain contextual circumstances and details of the works. This well-established critical tendency in art criticism is also relevant today in the case of examining the biography and work of Lika Yanko and Carol Rama.

The analysis carried out in the first chapters of each of the two parts of the thesis provides an opportunity for a broader and deeper comparison of the poetics of the two artists, which is carried out in the third chapters of each of the two parts of the study (i.e. the third chapters of Parts One and Two). In these, the work of the artists, and in particular their visual poetics, is examined using contemporary art historical methods. Of particular relevance to the study are Rosalind Krauss's *Bachelors* (1999), and her collaborative work with Yves-Alain Bois, *Formless. A User's Guide* (1997), in which they offer a comprehensive scheme for historicizing art. The scheme in question allows for the analysis and comparison of artists/poets without necessarily taking into account historical narratives and artistic movements. Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, along with contemporaries such as Georges Didi-Uberman, Daniel Arasse and Hal Foster, continue the tradition of the iconology of Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, but enriched with cultural theory, philosophy, political and intellectual history. This system is implicit in the present study, with Krauss and Bois' method inspiring the framework of Rama and Yanko's study of visual poetics, focusing on artistic and conceptual features that do not fall into a particular historical or artistic movement, nor are they confined to a specific time frame. Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois have not explicitly dealt with Carol Rama and apparently also with Lika Yanko, but they have

⁴ Both texts by Arthur Danto are available in Bulgarian in: Irina Genova, Angel Angelov (editors). *Traces of Art [Sledistorii na izkustvoto]*. Sofia: Sfragida Foundation, 2001. See also Arthur C. Danto. *The State of the Art*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987 and Arthur C. Danto. "Three Decades after the End of Art". In: *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, CA: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 21–39.

largely established a basis that allows the analysis and interpretation of the cases considered in the study.

Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of two parts with three chapters. Each of the two parts is dedicated to one of the two female artists who are the subject of this research. Each of the two parts is based on the attempt to reach authentic sources, to systematize for information and on this basis to reconstruct not only the biographical narrative but also the formation of the poetics and its relation to life experience. The structure of the two parts is built on the same principles: after presenting the current situation of research and the constructed image of the artist, it proceeds to a detailed study of the cultural and intellectual context related to the formation of the poetics of women artists; each of the two parts ends with a chapter devoted to the analysis of the poetics of the respective artist, the analysis including comparative and typological elements.

The similarity in the construction of the parts is intended to highlight the comparative dimension of the study, drawing parallels and connections between elements of the biographical experience, cultural context and work of the two artists. This approach also allows for some unexpected similarities to crystallize (for example, the similar dynamics in the fate of the two artists, as well as the formation and development of their poetics, which at certain stages include similar parameters – abstract elements, collages, an interest in materials not proper to traditional painting, and the more general tendency of reimagining personal space as a kind of work).

This mirrored structure allows for the sequential presentation of each of the two cases central to the thesis, without direct references to the parallel case being made at every stage of the presentation; the connections can 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. At the

same time, dividing the study into two parts also allows for the relatively autonomous exploration of the two cases central to the thesis.

The first chapters of each of the two parts introduce the historical and political context by examining the conditions, formation, experiences, and work of women artists, with a view to the role of women in the visual arts of the twentieth century, particularly in the avant-garde movements.

The second chapters are devoted to the attempt to reconstruct the biographical narratives of the two artists, which in both cases face serious difficulties due to lack of documentation, lack of research in the decades prior to the 1990s, and also due to the peculiarities of the perception of the two artists in their local circles.

The third chapters of the two parts, devoted to the analysis of the visual poetics of the two artists, offer analyses of certain trends and specific works in their oeuvre. By visual poetics I mean the totality of visual characteristics (material, stylistic and technical). Poetics encompasses not only the characteristics of an individual work but is related to more general and purposeful artistic – compositional, thematic, stylistic – explorations as well as meaningful influences. The specific analyses are also the basis for the comparison of their poetics, the focus of the study being the question of common searches, inclinations, themes, and imaginative proximity. A comparative analysis is made of the position ‘assigned’ to Yanko and Rama in the major art movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (of whether they are included in them, when, and if not, whether it is common for them to be conceived as 'exceptions' or whether this is an accident).

PART ONE: LIKA YANKO

FIRST CHAPTER

Lika Yanko: Life Experience and the Construction of the Biographical Narrative

The first chapter of Part I presents the state of research on Lika Yanko, as well as the formation of her biographical image and the idea of her work. The chapter is devoted to identifying and exploring the problems posed to the research process in an attempt to construct a more comprehensive and clear biographical narrative, as well as to highlight the gaps in perception and knowledge about Lika Yanko. Trends in the art historical narrative and in the media representation of the artist that are significant in creating the public's perception are examined.

Lika Yanko is undoubtedly one of the most famous Bulgarian artists today. At the same time, her name has been sidelined from the official art scene for decades, which inevitably reflects on her image today – she is both famous and unknown. Although her most active years coincided with one of the most dynamic periods in the history of new Bulgarian art, Lika Yanko did not participate in the General Art Exhibitions organized by the Union of Bulgarian Artists, nor did she have any solo exhibitions. In fact, her first solo exhibition was organized in 1967, but was taken down shortly after its opening. Little is known about this exhibition. The only sources of information about it are oral accounts and memories of witnesses or “indirect” witnesses who learned about the exhibition from acquaintances and friends, as well as several interviews with Lika Yanko conducted in the late 1990s. It remains unclear under what circumstances the exhibition was taken down, what were the works on display that caused the premature closure and whether there actually were any; where are and is there any archival footage of the opening, is there any press coverage of the event, etc. The case of the exhibition is symptomatic – it identifies a case study essential to the work on the legacy of Lika Yanko.

The data on Lika Yanko's life and work, especially before the early 1990s, are scarce and incomplete, which in turn makes it difficult to present them in detail (and probably credibly) by referring to legitimate sources, documents and testimonies. Little has been written about the artist, and very little is known about her personal life and artistic biography. Moreover, there is no detailed comprehensive documentation of her works; only those in state galleries are documented and discoverable today. A direct consequence of the lack of documentation and traces of Yanko's public activity is the fact that the contemporary perception of the artist has become frozen in the perpetuation of an often unconsciously infantilizing and naïve image of a semi-self-mobile artist. In various articles in the press, and even in studies devoted to her, authors emphasize descriptions of the artist herself and her work as “unskilled”, “childlike”, “innocent”, the work of an “almost invalid”, and other epithets. The result of the emphasis on similar epithets by different authors is the creation of a stereotype that is surprisingly persistent – without such a description, a text on Lika Yanko seems impossible to write. This tendency is due to several circumstances, which are discussed in Chapter One.

Of course, the situation that the attempt to clarify the biographical and creative path of Lika Yanko faces today is not a precedent. Its structural dimensions introduce a more general situation, especially with regard to the work of women artists of the last century, even the most prominent among them. Many of them have received belated recognition, which is why, even in an era of focused research interest in their work, documentation is often scarce, and has not been the object of interest and therefore preservation and archiving. It is this situation that determines one of the main directions and therefore tasks of this text: to point out the parallels between Carol Rama and Lika Yanko, two artists between whom there is seemingly little in common. A comparative perspective would help to bring out the fundamental similarities behind the contextual and historical differences, and thus stimulate going into depth of the situation described. On the basis of this particular comparison, I will try to offer a more general view of the position of women in the art world of the twentieth century, and more specifically in the second half of the twentieth

century, an era when many transformations and attempts to reverse the tendency to neglect the participation of women artists in the artistic processes of the era were taking place. In the course of the analysis, I will also insist on the fact that contemporary attempts to compensate for these tendencies turn out to be “double bottomed” and instead of actually correcting lacks by incorporating them, a double exclusion – exclusion from exclusion - is obtained, and this practice also directly applies to Lika Yanko, alongside a number of her contemporaries beyond the Bulgarian context.

Starting from this situation and the awareness of the need to overcome it, which would be a condition for the further development of research on the work of Lika Yanko, the first chapter of the study sets itself the task of examining first of all all the known details of both the context of the artist's formation and the known data on her life and work, in an attempt to reconstruct a comprehensive biographical and artistic image. Therefore, in spite of the obstacles, I have tried to present facts and information gathered from various sources, stressing once again that her biography could not claim to be exhaustive, since research tasks are confronted with problems whose resolution is often limited by circumstances beyond the control of the researchers themselves. Due to the aforementioned difficulties, the reconstruction of her life and artistic experience makes use of methods from the fields of anthropology and sociology, which, I hope, could yield fruitful results in the attempt to compile a more detailed picture of her life and work. Also, I aim to bring out some characteristics of Lika Yanko's work, and my main focus will be on the stakes of her art, whose full potential could only be revealed by placing them in a broader cultural and artistic context.

SECOND CHAPTER

Artistic context, environment and formation. The artist's studio

The second chapter of the dissertation is devoted to the attempt to reconstruct the biographical experience, social and cultural environment, influences and formation of Lika Yanko's work. The reconstruction sheds new light on the contextualization of the biographical experience and the artist's work, allowing its conception not so much as a marginal and peripheral phenomenon, but as central to certain trends in Bulgarian art and adequate to trends in European painting. For this purpose, details of the artist's biography and work have been refined and the collections of state and municipal galleries have been exhaustively studied with a view to analysing works that are insufficiently known or completely unknown.

Although the most active years of Lika Yanko's work - the period from the early 1960s until her death - coincide with one of the most dynamic periods in the history of Bulgarian art, the artist remains aloof from the art scene and information about her is based mostly on oral testimonies. Due to the fact that she was not a member of the Union of Bulgarian Artists⁵, she remained de facto completely excluded from the history of Bulgarian art, at least until the beginning of this century. Apart from not participating in general art exhibitions (with minor exceptions⁶ before the ill-fated first solo exhibition), the artist has no archive, little has been written about her, and very little is known about her personal life. Nor is there any significant data on the formation of her artistic experience, her works and her work in general - for large stretches of time it is not clear, or

⁵ Actually, it is possible that after the unfortunate exhibition she was not de jure excluded from the Union of Bulgarian Artists (I am not aware of such a document), but that her membership was de facto “deactivated”, so to speak, ignored, and therefore “reactivated” or rehabilitated after 1981.

⁶ According to Dimitar Avramov's text, these are the participations in the Women's Exhibition (1960), the First Youth Exhibition (1961), the General Art Exhibition (1962), and the Exhibition of Sofia Artists (1965). See Dimitar Avramov. *Лука Янко [Lika Yanko]*. Photography by Atanas Kanchev, AYA, Sofia, 2001.

at least there is no document that confirms specific activity, what Lika Yanko did and how she sustained herself, for example from the period after her first exhibition closed until 1973.

The biographical image of Lika Yanko is constructed against the backdrop of a dynamic transformation of the perception of the position of women in society in the decades of her creative realization. In the years before official holidays were introduced (they were only introduced in the late 1960s), the image of the so-called socialist woman contrasted strongly with the image of Lika Yanko. The woman in the decade of the 1950s, at the beginning of which Lika Yanko graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts, was a worker, mother and housewife who was physically hardy and worked on a par with her husband. Lika Yanko clearly does not fit into this established and “circulated” image of women, although the decades of the 1960s and 1970s saw forms of emancipation in Bulgaria that allowed women to feel freer about various aspects of their personal and professional lives⁷. However, the traditional family and the traditional image of women are generally better perceived and, of course, are encouraged by the state. In this sense, Lika Yanko, like Carol Rama, falls out of the conventional picture for several reasons - she does not have a steady state job, but she is also not a housewife, she does not marry, she does not have children, and she does not establish herself in society through a partner or husband. On the other hand, although she has physical handicaps (as is well known, as a child the artist suffered a very serious spinal fracture), as her career developed she actually supported her entire family (her sister, mother and brother), which also meant serious physical labour, which painting is. This fact places her de facto in the traditional “patriarchal” role of “head of the family”, who is also financially responsible, thus overturning structural stereotypes of “male” and “female” roles. Thus seen, Lika

⁷ The professional realization of women came to the fore precisely in the 1960s, when the so-called “loosening” of the socialist dogma was discussed. This aspect of the social and political context is beyond the scope of this paper, but in the main body of the dissertation I refer to several studies that deal with these issues or contain direct and/or indirect evidence of the change described above.

Yanko leads an unconventional life in terms of socially accepted patterns. At the same time, it is probable that Lika Yanko manages to lead such an “unconventional” life, which does not conform to traditionally accepted patterns, thanks also to the shaping cultural environment, which also adopts new cultural and social patterns. In this period, the process of emancipation of women in Bulgarian society is visible, as they become intellectualized, empowered and assert their position. This process parallels the processes in some of the leading European cultures, as well as some American states, and in many cases it occurs earlier and is more progressive than similar processes in the West: Bulgaria is one of the countries that gave women the right to art education at the earliest – women were educated at the Drawing School from the first years of its foundation, and after a protest by Elisaveta Konsolova-Vazova, women were also given access to the evening nude drawing.

The dearth and lack of information described in the thesis, of a robust biographical narrative and of an emancipated interpretation of Lika Yanko's work, contribute to her de facto exclusion becoming entrenched, thus becoming again, as in the use of the artist's descriptions of the ‘childish’ and the ‘innocent’, a means of creating a stable image that hardly corresponds entirely to reality. Thus, Lika Yanko’s absence from the established narrative of the history of Bulgarian fine art becomes more and more significant – the representation of the artist, which is mostly sustained within the described paradigms, excludes her repeatedly, leaving her to stand “on the sidelines” as a phenomenon that cannot actually be included. Five decades after the dramatic beginning of her career with the removal of her exhibition, Lika Yanko continues to stand as a “patch” and not to be included as an equal and active participant in the narrative of recent Bulgarian art as one of its undoubtedly most significant figures. It is this state of the historical narrative of her work that gives rise to the extensive comparison made with the very similar case of Carol Rama, who has been treated in a similar way by historians – both in terms of her presence in the historical narrative and in relation to the way in which she has been defined and her work interpreted.

THIRD CHAPTER

Artistic experience and visual poetics

The third chapter of the first part of the dissertation examines Lika Yanko's poetics in the context of the era, including European and world trends with which Lika Yanko undoubtedly comes into relation. The chapter focuses on the poetic dimensions of Lika Yanko's work, exploring both its visual characteristics – the images that excite the artist and which she repeats, develops as series or into characters that take on different hierarchical dimensions in different works – and its technical characteristics – the creation of images through texture, experimentation with materials and techniques. Thus, the chapter highlights both the sustained artistic dimensions of Lika Yanko's work and the particularities of her material poetics, her original technical style that reworks her individual experience into an artistic experience with an original signature. Last but not least, the chapter presents and systematizes Yanko's “personal” mythology.

In general, Lika Yanko's work is characterized by figurative imagery, which she develops technically by adding volumetric objects to the pictorial image. This tendency was adequate to the Western European context of the era, where art forms were enriched, new avant-gardes appeared, new art forms were established – muralism, happenings, performance, neo-expressionism, new figuration, abstractionism, etc. – and probably this turned out to be one of the reasons for her parallel obscurity. Lika Yanko works very much in sync with the evolving trends, developing the images that excite her, and some of them have excited her almost obsessively throughout her artistic career. Such images are, for example, the image of fish, fishermen with their nets, and images of marine animals, which she often or almost always interprets fantastically. This is also how she distinguishes herself from the general picture of Bulgarian art – Yanko sticks to the fantastic world she builds herself and lets the interpretations of her work in the world she actually lives in float between the understood and the misunderstood.

The chapter is divided into three subparts – “Poetics I”, “Poetics II” and “Poetics III”.

POETICS I

The first subsection, “Poetics I”, is devoted to an exploration of Lika Yanko's “personal” mythology – mythological and fantastical motifs in the world she created, inhabited by deities and creatures that have a significant presence and systematic representation throughout the artist's career. It is hypothesized that the source of inspiration was not only Greek mythology, but also the mythologies of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, among others.

In the most active period of her work, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, Lika Yanko created a multitude of paintings and drawings in which a common enigmatic motif is present. These are group portraits of fishermen, boats, fish, but also of other sea inhabitants, unreal creatures (“Fishing” [1977]), which she called “inhabitants of the sea” (“Inhabitants of the Sea” [1968], “Inhabitants of the Sea” [1976]), often associated with the figure of the sea god Neptune. In fact, it could be argued that the sea and aquatic creatures are a predominant theme in her works of this period. However, it is not clear whether the inhabitants of the sea are anthropomorphic or zoomorphic creatures, or some metamorphic hybrid. They evoke associations with figures from ancient Greek and ancient Roman mythology (especially around the stimulation of the development of cultural studies in the field of Thracology in the 1960s and 1970s), but also with currents in mid-twentieth-century painting, associated with the interest in developing ‘new mythologies’, perhaps often inspired by archaic and traditional cultural models, developed by artists such as Max Ernst, Jean Dubuffet and the CoBrA art group, for example, and in particular the work of Asger Jorn.

POETICS II

First of all, this subsection deals with the collage method of Lika Yanko. The artist has applied a collage structure in her works since the beginning of her artistic career – at the Academy of Art, as evidenced by the words of the artist herself: *“I was a student to prof. Ilia Petrov. He left me free to create, even though I didn't work very academically, but he didn't mind. For example, on a white canvas for an outline I put pebbles, and here for hair I also put some (...) twine, and this one has almost no paint, and so... more expressive, so I keep the canvas.”* Lika Yanko's words are from the documentary by filmmaker Galina Kraveva, dedicated to the artist, *Buy a Hope. The Artist Lika Yanko* (1984), in which she describes her method of working – the use of pebbles and possibly twine ropes. Although her words refer to the time of the filming of the film, i.e. she demonstrates her way of working by being in front of a canvas she was working on in that period (the mid-1980s), the artist speaks both of the present and of the past, claiming that she worked in a similar way in her student years, that she experimented freely. Observing her early landscapes, we see that she “collages”/fragments the image, whether she does so through outright fragments – a piece of hill, a piece of nature – or she does so at the level of perception, which leads us to believe that the fragment itself, the very action that creates the fragment in Lika Yanko, is rather creative-intuitive and the result of years of experimentation and cultivated attitude.

The line of analysis is continued by examining the themes and persistent motifs in Lika Yanko's work, as well as the connections “woven” into her work that significantly influence her poetics. First and foremost, we are concerned with the work of Pablo Picasso, which will be linked here to the lineage of zodiac painting through a not-so-familiar work by Yanko. And through the theme of water and water dwellers and myths, to the work of Paul Klee. Both connections are

undeniable and some of them have already been noted by researchers⁸ or spoken of by Yanko herself. Placed in the broader context of the study of her poetics, they reveal important trends in her poetics, but also help situate her in the context of contemporary world art and its history.

Visual connections can be made not only with Picasso's work, but also with that of Paul Klee or with that of Victor Brauner and Enrico Baj, and also with Jean Dubuffet and Max Ernst, contemporaries of Lika Yanko, with whom she shares common visual characteristics both in terms of the development of the image and the use of materials, and in terms of colours and their purposeful impact – for example, we might note the combinations of bright colours such as red, orange and cyclamen, inherent in both Klee and Baj, and in Yanko (e.g. Lika Yanko's work *Pletena Village* (1965), Paul Klee's *Temple Gardens* (1920) and Enrico Baj's *do it BAJ yourself* (1968), fig. 40, 41). We can also consider various geometric overlays and allocations of space characteristic of Paul Klee and Yanko, and also consider the technical aspect in the construction of the background imagery between Lika Yanko, Jean Dubuffet and Max Ernst. For this reason, I dwell more extensively on the visual parallels between Lika Yanko's work and that of Paul Klee, trying to prove that they are by no means coincidental.

⁸ See Kremena Zotova. *В света на Лука Янко* [*V sveta na Lika Yanko*]. National library “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”, Sofia, 2004; Lilia Dinova. “Въобразението е велик морал (интервю с художничката Лика Янко)” [“Vaobrazhenieto e velik moral (intervyu s hudozhnichkata Lika Yanko)”]. – *Народно земеделско знаме* [*Narodno zemedelsko zname*], no. 22, 11-17 June 1999, Sofia, с. 10; Dimitar Avramov. *Лука Янко* [*Lika Yanko*], op. cit.

POETICS III

The subject of this final chapter of the part is probably the most monumental work of the artist Lika Yanko, which reaches us through the film by Binka Zhelyazkova *The Last Word* (1973). For the making of this film, Lika Yanko painted the walls and ceiling of a cell in Vratsa prison. The cell is large, with whitewashed walls, and the artist's murals fill almost the entire space. In it we see Lika Yanko's distinctive style, as well as motifs typical of her work, but we also see new introductions in terms of technique and subject matter. This is probably due to the collaboration between Lika Yanko and Binka Zhelyazkova, to their common search with regard to the tasks and poetics of the film. Their collaboration has not been the subject of independent research; in fact, neither the texts on Lika Yanko's work nor those that discuss Binka Zhelyazkova's film mention Lika Yanko's artistic participation. Hence, neither the work as an independent object, part of Lika Yanko's overall oeuvre, nor its relation to the film have been explored so far.

PART TWO: CAROL RAMA

The second part of the work, symmetrically divided into three chapters (“Carol Rama: Life Experience and the Construction of Biographical Narrative”, “Artistic Context, Environment and Formation. The Artist's Studio”, and “Life Experience and Visual Poetics”) presents an extensive study in comparative perspective of the work of the Italian artist Carol Rama. Based on the parallel – explicit or implicit – with the chapter on Lika Yanko, the chapter on Carol Rama is internally structured around an extended comparison with the personality and work of the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois. This internal juxtaposition allows for the elucidation of Carole Rama's pivotal place through comparisons with the established art historical narrative of one of today's most influential female artists of the last century. The second part of the thesis will thus be based on a double comparative optic, that is, the internal comparison with Bourgeois's work and, central to the study, the comparison with Lika Yanko's biographical narrative and poetics.

FIRST CHAPTER

Carol Rama: Life Experience and the Construction of Biographical Narrative

Insofar as one of the most persistently foregrounded (and thus trivialised as a stereotype) features of the artist is her solitude and “reclusion”, her detachment from her contemporary artistic tendencies (in this respect the situation of the critique situation again particularly close to that of Lika Yanko in the Bulgarian milieu), the first chapter offers an attempt to analyse the perception of the artist and her representation by art historians and the media. An attempt is made to analyse the circumstances that make it difficult to present her biographical image and its clear and full-blooded picture. The art historical conditions are examined by introducing the theses of Svetlana

Alpers from her study *Is Art History?* (1977) that structure the contemporary art historical narrative. On this basis, extensive research has also been carried out in the archives of several periodicals (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, and partly *Il Manifesto*) in an attempt to reconstruct both data on Carol Rama's artistic life and her contributions, and the biographical narrative and its representation by cultural journalists of some of the most widely read Italian periodicals.

Carol Rama's artistic activity spanned more than seven decades and was fully realized in Turin, where she was born in 1918 and where she died in 2015. As an artist who worked exclusively in her hometown, and who had a significant place in the cultural and artistic milieu, being a prominent representative of the avant-garde culture and art in Turin, Carol Rama has been described at times as an “icon” of the city and of the Italian avant-garde of the twentieth century, at others as completely unknown, aloof, scandalous, marginal, uneducated, unfit, and a number of other epithets. It is perhaps paradoxical that even today Carol Rama is presented much more through the epithets that dismiss her, even if the text is meant to introduce us to her positive biographical and artistic image. Examples of this tendency in her presentation are to be found above all in the Italian and American press (e.g. *Corriere della Sera*, *New York Times*).

In fact, the canonization of Carol Rama's image and her becoming an iconic artist is a trend that continues to develop in the present moment, but which began recently – more precisely, it began in the early years of the new millennium but became most prominent after her death. Rama remained virtually unknown in Italy until the 1980s, and her affirmation was made possible after the realization of two specific exhibitions in Milan curated by Lea Vergine, who remains Rama's first and most important researcher to this day. The two exhibitions obviously left their significant traces. Vergine's efforts, as well as the consistent efforts of gallerists such as Giancarlo Salzano or Luciano Anselmino (among others), helped to ensure that from the 1980s onwards there was more research on Carol Rama's work, and more exhibitions of her work. The watershed year for Carol

Rama's popularity, though, was 2003, the year Rama received the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement, which definitively reversed the trend – her “marginal and obscure fame” turned into a propulsive (because it happened through several key events), internationally established popularity.

As is clear, the decades preceding the 1980s were decades in which Carol Rama received little attention from art criticism and art history, nor from the institutions that directly influence an artist's popularity within the country (in this case Italy) and beyond. The biographical narrative of Carol Rama suffers from a lack of documentation, which is why it is only beginning to become clearer today, when the accumulation of research on her is now more significant. Nevertheless, basic facts of her professional biography are under-explained. On the one hand, these are facts relating mainly to her first exhibition, held in 1945, about which only oral testimonies are available. This first exhibition is an integral part of the biographical presentation of Carol Rama⁹; at the same time, it is also a means of giving a 'cult' character to Rama's work and image: the exhibition is 'concealed' behind a veil of obscurity that easily raises the public's interest, mainly related to its 'criminalization' (the exhibition, according to the testimonies of Rama and her friends¹⁰, was taken down and seized by the police before the opening). It is this element of her biography that takes on a speculative character, as it is used to give “added value” to her work. In other words, it is used as a sensationalism which, under the guise of political correctness, justifies the neglect of the artist. This gesture could probably also be superfluous if Carol Rama's work were placed in the context of its undeniable significance. On the other hand, it is an undeniable fact that the decades following the beginning of Rama's artistic career, from 1945 to about 1980, are not well documented; there is no coherent information about either the exhibitions or the repurchases of her works, or about

⁹ See, e.g., the published biography of the artist on the website of Carol Rama Archive: [<https://archiviocarolrama.org/carol-rama/>].

¹⁰ See e.g. the 2003 documentary «*Carol Rama. Di più, ancora di più*», directed by Simone Pierini.

her activities in general – the only undeniable evidence of them are the works from these years. Nor are there any facts concerning her personal biography – her relationships with her friends, the form of their interactions, and generally her place in the context of the various cultural spheres, particularly the artistic culture of her time – these relationships are unproven, and largely unknown, and are only beginning to be clarified today. This phenomenon is also largely due to media inertia (especially the Italian and American press), where she continues to be represented through headlines seeking sensationalism and reducing the content of articles to malicious speculation about the tragic events of her life.

Excluded from art history or historical exception

Since documentation of Carol Rama's work is scarce, we judge her professional biography mostly from her accounts in interviews conducted after the 1980s and, of course, from research on her up to the present day, with the artist's late retrospectives again usually being the main source of information, and with the facts often diverging. As in the case of Lika Yanko, the biographical account of Carol Rama obviously suffers from the described lack of documentation. Information about her is in a chaotic state, relayed through press articles that are often reprinted (without the original source being traceable) or used as sources of information for each other, sometimes containing significant errors; also, their content continues to be reduced to a few basic facts that come to the fore in almost every published article. On the other hand, images of works in the electronic space multiply daily, and sales of Rama's works increase, but the most significant increase we can observe is in their prices. Rama's own photographs are few, and obviously most that are reproduced, or rather copied uncritically, on the internet have mostly appeared since the

opening of her home as a studio museum, which happened at the end of 2019¹¹. Since that moment, her home has been open to the public, and the first visits, of course made by journalists, have made it possible to capture and distribute some of her photographs from the walls of her home. In this sense, we would like to point out that the research on her is ongoing, and to a large extent it is still of a primary nature, since basic data are lacking, such as when exactly her first exhibition took place (it is known to have been in 1945¹²) and what exactly happened to the works, which were apparently taken down and possibly seized by the police on charges of “obscenity” before the opening¹³. Obviously, we are faced with a mythologized fact, and it is difficult if not impossible to prove both its historical veracity and its specific parameters¹⁴. Oral evidence is available for the exhibition in question. Most evidence of this type is known through the accounts of her friends or through the accounts of Rama herself in the few interviews or films that have been made. Nor should we underestimate the possibility that even in what Rama herself said decades later there may be discrepancies. This confronts both researchers and the public with difficulties in forming a biographical image of her.

¹¹ The House-studio of Carol Rama was acquired by the Fondazione Sardi per l’Arte and the Carol Rama Archive, between 2018-2019 and opened to the public on 5th of November 2019.

¹² See her biography on the official Carol Rama Archive website [<https://archiviocarolrama.org/carol-rama/>]. A claim about this exhibition can be found in almost every published article about the artist in almost every type of media (catalogues, newspapers, magazines, electronic publications) without being able to trace the original source of the information. Carol Rama's own account of the exhibition can be heard in the documentary «*Carol Rama. Di più, ancora di più*». The mythologizing of the information about this first exhibition is commented in the text of the thesis.

¹³ See Teresa Grandas. *The Rest Can Go to Hell. Other Possible Tales of Carol Rama and Turin*. In: Anne Dressen, Teresa Grandas, Beatriz Preciado (eds.). *The Passion According to Carol Rama, Barcelona*. pp. 50-51; and Mara Folini, Franco Masoero, Alexandra Wetzel, *Carol Rama. Oltre l’opera grafica*. Ascona, 2013.

¹⁴ See Teresa Grandas. *The Rest Can Go to Hell. Other Possible Tales of Carol Rama and Turin*, op. cit.

SECOND CHAPTER

Artistic context, environment and formation. The artist's studio

The task of this chapter is to attempt to dispel the clichés established in the main text of the thesis through which the artist's biography and work are viewed. Moreover, the case of Carol Rama is a symptom, rather than an exception, of the way in which the biographical image of the artist(s) is structured in the history of contemporary art. The usual biographical account of the artist insists on presenting her as reclusive, eccentric, scandalous, heretical, marginalized, an outsider, and a number of other epithets. An image consistently enforced through articles about her in the press, whose headlines habitually seek sensationalism, and whose content rarely goes beyond a brief account of the artist's life, which is limited to the tragic facts related to the plight of her mother and father, which are widely exploited precisely through the device of sensationalism, working as a key to her “scandalous” work. This mode of representation, which affirms her “scandalous” profile, is reflected through headlines in the press. In these cases, the legitimation of the artist only becomes possible through the harrowing periods of her life, something that is difficult for readers to imagine, and with whom she had intimate relationships. In fact, the articles in question are not based on documentary research; all the data are either borrowed from private testimonies and anecdotes or represent “embellished” (if not entirely fictional) stories by journalists in the Italian press. Another “legitimizing key” to her work is the insistence on official exclusion by official criticism in the dominant public and private media (as is probably the case with media such as *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, and *Il Manifesto*); paradoxically, such insistence is often precisely in the pages of these same media, as if seeking to compensate for their own practice of silence. If decades ago, the media in question did not feature articles about Rama, nowadays they aim to demonstrate their tolerance and openness, insisting to the public on her exclusion and turning the fact of the elderly artist's history of exclusion into a sentimental sensation. A careful examination of the known facts of Carol Rama's life reveals a completely opposite biographical image to the one described so far.

Border Creativity – Women Artists on the Border

Even an open-minded look would find many similarities between two of the most remarkable female artists of the twentieth century – the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois and the Italian artist, the subject of this dissertation, Carol Rama. These similarities are surprising, but only at first glance. Why? A closer look would allow us to discover a number of similarities between their life experiences as well as between their work. It is clear from their dedicated research that the two artists did not know each other and probably did not suspect the existence of their contemporaries, hence the connections between their poetics cannot be attributed to direct influence or impact. However, at a later stage, in the last decades of their artistic careers, the two artists are mentioned in a common context and even considered side by side in three exhibitions dedicated to them. This chapter therefore aims to put into comparative perspective the work of two of the most remarkable female artists of the last century. This approach is not an end in itself – it will be used as a basis for an attempt to pose a more general research question related to the mechanisms not only of recognition of artists, but also of the formation of the narrative of contemporary art, especially with regard to the presence of women artists in it. Bourgeois and Rama will be presented here through similar biographical episodes in order to show that the treatment of the two women artists, the result of the resistance of local cultural circles on the one hand and the process of women's emancipation on the other, led to their belated recognition on the world art scene and, respectively, to their subsequent emergence as significant, if not among the most significant, women artists of the twentieth century. The “phenomenon” of late discovery and integration into the narrative of contemporary art history, particularly characteristic of women in art, in Louise Bourgeois and Carol Rama is most likely related primarily to the radicality of their art. We can identify a number of similarities between certain elements in their biographical narratives, whose common characteristic is their transformation from life experience into artistic experience, their transformation into artistic images. On the basis of the comparison between the

life and work of Louise Bourgeois and Carol Rama, the chapter “Border Creativity – Women Artists on the Border” (whose lineage is continued in the following, third chapter) sets itself two main tasks: exploring the mechanisms of cultural exclusion/inclusion of women artists in the specific two cases examined (and subsequently referred to other similar cases), and examining the specificity of the relationship between (border) artistic experience¹⁵ and border visual poetics.

Women artists' studios: life experience and material poetics

This subchapter introduces Carol Rama's studio dwelling in juxtaposition with Louise Bourgeois's dwelling, also a studio. Their homes have been converted into museums, that is, preserved spaces that bear witness to the life and work of each of the two artists, which are currently open to the public. Both homes can be seen as works of art, which is the starting point of the research devoted to them in this subchapter. Also, in relation to the hypothetical suggestion that lived experience, which includes the private space that is the home, has a relationship to artistic experience, this subchapter occupies a significant place.

In relation to the described proposal, the sub-chapter asks the following questions: does the space inhabited by an artist represent value by its material characteristics? When does a dwelling become a space of public significance, carrying cultural, educational or scientific value? Is the fact that a home is used as a studio, in the case of a female artist(s), sufficient for it to acquire value

¹⁵ The American philosopher John Dewey introduced the concept of *an experience* in his book *Art as Experience* (1934), which had an impact on contemporary art history. The concept is parallel to those introduced by Karl Jaspers (*Grenzsituation*) and Georges Bataille (*expérience limite*), which are established in English as “liminal experience”, and refer to extreme existential situations and states. The concept became established thanks to the writings of Michel Foucault in the second half of the twentieth century. (See Martin Jay. “The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault”. – *Constellations*, no. 2, 1995, pp. 155-74).

carrying meaning/different meanings and cultural memory? What do we care about in such a dwelling – the splatters of paint on the floor, the place where the paints are stored, the palette, the artist's workbench or personal belongings, her kitchen, her bed, her clothes and memories? What are the items that are transformed after the artist's death from personal possessions to museum objects? Is this transformation automatic or is it a process due to the work, opinion and actions of certain specialists?

THIRD CHAPTER

Artistic experience and visual poetics

The third chapter of the second part of the dissertation is devoted to Carol Rama's visual poetics. As in Part One of the dissertation, comparative analyses between the visual characteristics of Carol Rama's work and that of other artists are made in Part Two, and these comparisons are already developed in Chapter One of Part Two, and continued in Chapters Two and Three in dedicated subparts or subchapters (such as the comparisons with Man Ray, Pablo Picasso or Auguste Rodin). The line of comparative study with the work of Louise Bourgeois, begun in the previous Chapter Two, is continued. The juxtaposition between the biographical and artistic experiences of the two artists allows the argumentation of one of the main hypotheses of the thesis, namely the relationship between biographical experience and material poetics. Comparative analyses of multiple works are made, and the latter are examined from technical and material perspectives. Emphasis is placed on material aspects such as the use of textiles, bronze, the combination of fabrics, the combination of colours, the suggestion sought, which often turns out to be close or, respectively, the works are subject to close and complementary interpretations. Attention is paid to the representation of the body in both artists, subject to a number of transformations. Regardless of the medium in which they are executed, works that represent fragmented bodies (torsos, arms, heads) or represent the body as an organ (female breasts, tongues, phalluses) occupy a significant, and one could say central, place in the work of both artists. This aspect is analysed both in terms of the circumstances that gave rise to it and from a theoretical point of view, through the introduction of interpretative devices that allow for the interpretation of the suggestion sought and the intersections of the juxtaposed works. These serial works are also examined through the texts of Rosalind Krauss (who devotes a chapter of her book *Bachelors* to Louise Bourgeois and the themes outlined above) and other scholars. Thus, through the mediation of Rosalind Krauss's analysis, the work of Auguste Rodin is also brought into a comparative

perspective by discussing the visual points of contact between the three artists, Carol Rama, Louise Bourgeois and Auguste Rodin.

CONCLUSION

This study presented a comparative analysis of the life and artistic experiences of the artists Carol Rama and Lika Yanko. Their life and artistic experiences were examined from the perspective of their position as women artists. The dissertation attempted to access authentic sources, systematize the information, and on this basis reconstruct not only the biographical narrative, but also the formation of the poetics and the relationship of the life experience of the two women artists to their artistic experience. This experience was contrasted with the reproduction of clichés about the women artists' image and work in the historical narrative.

My research interest in the artists Lika Yanko and Carol Rama developed out of my successive engagements with women artists working in the twentieth century, particularly avant-garde artists whose most active period was in the decades of the 1960s-1980s. Engaging with these women artists (including Frida Kahlo, Yayoi Kusama, Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning, and others) confirmed my intuition, which developed into a research hypothesis, that there are parallels between biographical accounts of women artists, often related to the difficulty of establishing a stable narrative, and that there are surprising similarities between their artistic characteristics and creative experiments. Many of the biographies of these women artists, most celebrated today, remain incomplete despite the many studies and exhibitions devoted to them in recent decades. Engagement with Lika Yanko and Carol Rama in particular has raised a number of questions about aspects of their biography and work that, despite dedicated research in recent years, remain shrouded in a research fog. For this reason, in my research I have sought to clarify the circumstances that gave rise to this problem in the first place, which in turn has brought to the fore the treatment of women artists and the perception of their personalities and work consistently constructed by researchers and the media. Despite the obvious differences between the cultural and

political contexts of the two women artists, I found a number of parallels between them that, in the course of the research, proved to be much more than expected.

The task of this dissertation was to identify the circumstances and reasons that impede the accumulation of research knowledge about the women artists who are its focus. After familiarizing myself with contextual studies, but also with the state of research on Carol Rama and Lika Yanko, it became clear that they are not sufficient to present multidimensional and “full-blooded” biographical images of the two artists that can claim to be comprehensive or factual based on documents. For this reason, it was necessary to introduce additional research methods borrowed from the field of sociology, which helped to clarify some biographical facts. In the case of Lika Yanko, for whom there are in fact almost no documents that attest to her artistic activity before 1990, the accounts of people who have preserved direct memories of her are instrumental in establishing the biography and artistic development of the artist. Similarly, the reconstruction of Carol Rama's biography was based on the small amount of interviews and video footage shot with her, as well as on the accounts of her acquaintances and friends, gallerists and researchers who preserved a vivid memory, even if it was from the last years of the artist's life.

With this research process in mind, the first chapters of each of the two parts of the thesis attempted to reconstruct the life experiences, social environments, influences and cultural formation of the women artists' work. The study shed new light on the way it was contextualized and conceived not so much as a peripheral phenomenon, but as central to certain trends in Bulgarian and Italian art, and adequate to trends in European painting of the same era.

In the first part of the thesis, “Artistic and Life Experience in Carol Rama and Lika Yanko – Two Cases of Women Artists in Twentieth-Century Europe”, all available sources on Lika Yanko's life and work were examined. On the basis of the information researched, interviews were conducted, clarifying unknown facts about her life and about her work. Details of the artist's biography and work were refined and a comprehensive reconstruction of her biography was made.

The holdings of a number of state regional galleries were examined, with the extensive research of Lika Yanko's works in the holdings of the National Gallery being the focus of the study. Familiarity with the collections in question made it possible to identify and trace major trends in the development of the artist's work. In this way, characteristic elements of her poetics that could be considered as a system were also highlighted. Lika Yanko's connections with the musicians Stoyka Milanova, Dora Milanova and Vasil Kazandjiev were identified and studied for the first time. Extensive research was done on the artist's collaboration with the film director Binka Zhelyazkova, which had not been the subject of research before.

Lika Yanko's poetics was set in the context of the era, both of Bulgarian painting and of European and world trends. Influences on Lika Yanko's 'idiosyncratic' poetics from Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee to the mythology and cultures of the Ancient East were explored, highlighting persistent elements of her poetics, her original technical style and materials, as well as the dimensions of her personal mythology and the reworking of her individual experience.

In the second part of the thesis, "Artistic and Life Experience in Carol Rama and Lika Yanko – Two Cases of Women Artists in Twentieth-Century Europe", a detailed study of Carol Rama's biography was carried out, which, despite the many studies devoted to her work, remains largely obscure and unsettled. Significant biographical episodes were examined, on the basis of which a reconstruction of the biography was proposed, placing the artist in a new research perspective. Patterns of the establishment of a patterned image of the artist were analysed. In the course of the research, a comparison was made with the biography of Louise Bourgeois, parallel to the comparison with Lika Yanko. On this basis, an extensive comparative study of the life and artistic experience of Lika Yanko and that of the Italian artist Carol Rama, who has similar biographical characteristics, as well as a history of reception and clichéd perception, was proposed. The complication of the comparative perspective has allowed the identification of similar trends, on the basis of which hypotheses have been formulated in a broader European context regarding

women artists and the transformation of their position and role. The aim of the comparison was not only to highlight similarities and differences of life experience, its processing and corresponding poetics, but also to provide a structural analysis of the type of woman artist in the second half of the last century.

The comparative analysis between the work of the two artists has allowed similarities to come to the fore, such as the creation of individual ‘mythological’ motifs whose images and protagonists appear throughout the artistic careers of both artists. Similarities were also identified between the technical devices and stylistic dimensions of the work of the two female artists – in terms of materials and techniques that possess similar experimental orientations. Similarities were also identified between certain imagery, suggestions and more general material characteristics of visual poetics. Researching the collections of state and regional galleries in Bulgaria, where I had the opportunity to see many unfamiliar works by Lika Yanko, confirmed this theoretical intuition. Also, the discovery of Lika Yanko's participation in Binka Zhelyazkova's film *The Last Word* contributed a lot to the clarification of her technical abilities and views, as well as her attitude towards the political situation in the era of her active creativity.

The original hypothesis of the study was confirmed, often supported by unexpected facts. On the one hand, the often surprising similarities in terms of the difficulties faced by biographical research were acknowledged, and on the other hand, additional parallels between the visual characteristics of Carol Rama's work and that of Lika Yanko were revealed, which both confirmed and went beyond the initial assumptions.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE THESIS

1. On the basis of a study of all available sources on the life and work of Lika Yanko, as well as interviews conducted to clarify unknown facts from her life and work, details of her biography and work are refined and a reconstruction of her life path is made.

2. Lika Yanko's relations with the musicians Stoyka Milanova and Dora Milanova, Vasil Kazandjiev have been established and studied for the first time; an extensive study of the artist's collaboration with the film director Binka Zhelyazkova, which had not been the subject of research, has been made.

3. The poetics of Lika Yanko is set in the context of the era, both of Bulgarian painting and of European and world trends; the persistent elements of her poetics, of her original technical style and materials, and of the dimensions of her personal mythology are examined.

4. A detailed study and reconstruction of Carol Rama's biography is carried out, placing the artist in a new research perspective.

5. An extensive comparative study of the life and artistic experiences of Lika Yanko and Carol Rama is carried out, through which similar transformations of the position and role of women artists in Europe are established.

6. Similar patterns of the construction of the biographical narrative of women artists in the twentieth century are identified and analysed. These patterns are critically interpreted and a number of circumstances determining the structuring of the contemporary art historical narrative are analysed.

List of publications on the dissertation topic

1. “Carol Rama and the Pleasure of the Image” [„Karol Rama i udovolstviето na obraza“]. – *Следва* [Sledva], no. 41, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, 2020, pp. 90-99.
2. “Carol Rama’s ‘Salon’ in the Context of Italian Culture in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century” [„Salonat“ na Karol Rama v konteksta na italianskata kultura prez vtorata polovina na XX vek“]. In: Marina Koleva (ed.). *Art and Context*, Proceedings of the VII Youth Scientific Conference 3-4 June, Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia 2021, p. 146-169.
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