

REVIEW

By Prof. Dr Galina Lardeva

On the dissertation work

of Natasha Mitkova Noeva - Institute of Art Studies (BAS),

on the subject – “Rakovski125 ” Gallery” - Institutional Centre of Art. History,
Organization, Exhibition Activity, Criticism (1940 - 1972),

Scientific specialty Art and Fine Arts, professional field 8.1. Art Theory

I. Data on the doctoral student

Natasha Noeva graduated from the National Academy of Art with a bachelor's degree in art studies in 2013 and a master's degree in 2015. Since 2018 she is a PhD student in Modern Bulgarian Art Research Group of the Institute of Art Studies (IAS). Natasha Noeva is extremely active in her research work with a wide range of specialized interests in the field of art studies. The focus of her work is Bulgarian art from the Liberation to the present day, as well as attempts to reconstruct the overall artistic process based on the study of gallery activity and the spaces belonging to it. Her dissertation is related to these studies.

Natasha Noeva has been well-received in the Institute of Art Studies and has participated in numerous research projects of the institute throughout her PhD studies. Over the past three years, the PhD student has developed papers for ten scientific conferences and forums. Over the same period, she has had over ten research texts published in some of the most significant specialized journals. She is also the author of several other texts that can be conventionally described as popular science, as well as several interviews with artists, including quite a few that appeared outside of her PhD period. Knowing that these works are not part of the dissertation work, Natasha Noeva has not included these texts in the biography accompanying her dissertation.

II. Dissertation Description

The present dissertation is an outstanding work in its scope, scale, and detailed insight. It consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and fifteen (including photographs) separate appendices. Although the work starts from the presentation of a single (however representative) case, it manages to identify a comprehensive picture of the artistic process in Bulgaria in the twentieth century, while connecting and confronting the conditions for the development of this process in two state formations different in their attitude to art: the Bulgarian Kingdom and the People's Republic of Bulgaria.

The thesis was written based on a lot of systematic archival research: hundreds, and perhaps over a thousand documents of all kinds (from the 1938 contract for the

purchase of Vasil Trankarov's property, used for the construction of the gallery, to the construction materials list, to the posters of the individual exhibitions) were researched, thought over and incorporated into Natasha Noeva's dense historical narrative.

In the **introduction**, the author makes the necessary qualifications about the scope, aims and methods of the research. Also, essential here is the sketching of the history of the concept of museum and its diachronic relations to notions of gallery. This relation constitutes one of the main constructs of the dissertation. As “the longest existing gallery in Bulgaria” (p. 8), the exhibition hall on “Rakovski 125” Street is linked to various institutional formations of Bulgarian artists. It was chosen as the focus of the study because - without having a museum character - it is undoubtedly representative of what has been happening in Bulgarian art for more than three decades, while at the same time being representative in terms of cultural policies.

The **first chapter** introduces us to the background of gallery work in Bulgaria since the first decade of the 20th century. A broad, dense, colorful panorama is presented, filled with many names, testimonies, and documents. The Trapkov Gallery (p. 25) is described in detail as a pioneer in gallery activity. It is noteworthy that the steady and very confident progress of the work traces not only the successful ventures such as the “COOP” and “Preslav” galleries, but also - even more so - the unfulfilled plans. A characteristic example in this respect is the Datsov Fund's attempt, related to the artist's father Goshka Datsov's wish to create a general gallery space in memory of his son (p. 34).

In addition, the author introduces various outside perspectives into her text: opinions of critics, observers, and later testimonies and analyses. Thus, the necessity of creating the gallery space, the focus of the dissertation, is skillfully and consistently suggested.

Particular attention in this preliminary to the focus stage is paid to the General Arts and Crafts Exhibition (November-December 1938 at the State Gallery on Alexander Nevsky Square - p. 43). Its significance as a gesture of institutional linking of more than one entity is rightly shown: the Academy, the National Museum, the institution of monarchical power through the patron of the exhibition, Queen Giovanna. Even the involvement of the Bulgarian State Railways is not omitted. This exhibition also becomes a nodal “preliminary” example in relation to the idea of linking art to everyday life and its applied potential - an idea, by the way, that links (for all their differences) the time of the 1930s and socialist ideology.

The **second chapter** is titled “Rakovski 125” Gallery in the transitional period between 1940 and 1947”. The narrative here focuses primarily on architectural, administrative, and organizational issues. The vicissitudes surrounding the purchase of the building on the eve of and during the Second World War are presented. Attention is paid to very minor details, for example the type of locks and sockets, and these details are incorporated into the integrity of architect Milko Bichev's architectural plan.

At the same time, however, here too we find essential traces of the overall character of the time and especially of the artistic process with its infrastructural networks and needs. As might be expected, the situation surrounding the opening of the gallery in the early 1940s is conveyed in detail - with the attempts at reconstruction, the press reviews, the accents, and priorities. Here falls the delineation of the moment with the rapid silence of this first stage in the gallery's existence. The bombing of Sofia during the Second World War and the gallery spaces affected, the protracted reconstruction, and the imposed transition to a new type of society are discussed in detail.

A particularly curious problem that this section poses is the transformation from the diversity of the Union of Artists' Societies in Bulgaria to the monolithic nature of the Union of Artists in Bulgaria, formed soon after 9th September 1944.

Chapter Three now proceeds to the gallery's exhibition activity (from 1940 to 1972), divided into eight separate paragraphs. The exposition of this part begins with a presentation of the nine exhibitions organized until 1944: four general exhibitions (including “Contemporary French Painting”, May-June 1940), four individual exhibitions and one posthumous exhibition of Pencho Georgiev. After Pencho Georgiev's exhibition in the spring of 1941, there is no record of further exhibitions. In fact, it is at a time like this that one can see how easily the memory of our cultural heritage reaches critical shoals: what can be found (in archives and in the press) reaches up to here. And it is also in reaching such shoals that one can see how valuable and profound such works are.

Of specific relevance to this section are the reviews of gallery life in the periodical press (p. 93): first during the initial brief existence of “125 Rakovski” (1940-1941), and subsequently after 1945. Without being specifically emphasized, this parallel is an extremely valuable middle ground in the work: the difference between the talk about the exhibitions, the differences, but often also the similarities, in attitudes, goals and overall receptive image of Bulgarian art.

One significant intermediate conclusion points out that “from 1947 to the end of the decade in the gallery on “Rakovski 125 Street”, foreign visiting exhibitions, documentary and historical exhibitions, and photo exhibitions were organized for purely propagandistic purposes” (p. 128). From there on, however, the study shows how art exhibitions still manage to be present alongside propaganda exhibitions, and to build on and stabilize their importance precisely in their context.

Alongside the abundant facts and the construction of a complexly presented image of the focal gallery, the individual curious connections identified are essential to the work. An example of such a connection is the reference of the so-called “Spring Exhibitions” to the “review of the fabrics for the spring-summer season in the establishments of light industry” (p. 156), an emphasis that unmistakably recalls the pre-war deployment of the General Arts and Crafts Exhibition.

Another significant highlight is the derivation of the notion of the “General Art Exhibition-machine” and the principles of its functioning (p. 176), as well as the gradually emerging counterpoint of individual exhibitions to this machinery.

However, working alongside this network is an unalterably unwritten guild agreement based on which the community's own rules and norms are patiently, gradually, and incrementally asserted. One important position of the work states that “free thinking, untutored by political ideologies, coexists with conformity, often opposes it, and sometimes the two extremes communicate with each other” (p. 193).

Important for the analysis of the context in which the gallery exists is section 3.8. “Rakovski 125” Gallery and other places of exposition in the 1960s” (pp. 213-215). It outlines an overview of the types of exhibition spaces in relation to their functionality and their complementarity as different, though not too broad, possibilities for their presence in the artistic process. This notion of a kind of alternative presence also leads to the logical conclusion of the analysis: the end was put here with the opening of the Union of Bulgarian Artist’s building at Shipka 6 at the end of 1972. The beginning of this new institution marked an important transition, which was symptomatic of the Union's increased needs and especially of the changed situation in which art resided. The gallery at “Rakovski 125” continued to exist, and sometimes the larger joint exhibitions were shared between the two buildings, but it ceased to function as a stand-alone institution generating the artistic life of the country.

At the end of the account, a few technical or editorial rather than substantive remarks: in the account of the founding of the UBA in 1944, with Nikolai Raynov as chairman, a later text (from 1953 at the earliest) is quoted in relation to the organization’s statutes, which already refers to the UBA (pp. 76-77) - the footnote indicates 'ibid', which probably means that the quoted fragment is simply edited 'here' in the wrong place. In one or two places there is unnecessary repetition, which stems primarily from the fact that first only a historical and architectural account is presented in the first two chapters, and then - when the exhibitions themselves are discussed in the third - the exposition returns to what has already been said. For example: “The Artists' Union cannot, by its own efforts, rebuild in its home on “Rakovski 125” Str. It sends letters to the responsible state and municipal institutions” (p. 118) [like p. 87].

III. Scientific contributions

- The focus on gallery spaces and the activities of an individual gallery as an institution, but also as a link between different institutions, is extremely rare, especially for the Bulgarian scientific landscape. Alongside this, the dissertation presents a diachronically developed portrait of the gallery on “125 Rakovski” Street, which goes through a complete overview and general typology of gallery work in Bulgaria almost throughout the twentieth century: with its main highlights of development and immediate tasks, but also with the moments of transformation.

- Without wasting unnecessary energy in theorizing, the dissertation sets out to organize its material to prove a contributory proposition: to show how, with its long history, the gallery space of “Rakovski 125” Str simultaneously collected, nurtured,

and produced the cultural history of Bulgaria” (p. 222). Rare are art historical works these days that deploy and achieve their goals with such clarity and consistency.

- This dissertation has gathered and organized into a comprehensive narrative an extraordinarily rich, diverse body of material, and material that until now has been difficult to access and scattered in various archives. The segment that has emerged from the arrangement of this work is itself an excellently developed and representative field of the landscape from which it is drawn. The work can thus be of use to specialists in various fields - not only art historians, but also historians, local historians, writers, and amateurs.

- To the contributions of the work must be added its exceptionally good execution in textual terms: for all the vast amount of information that the work employs at any given moment, the text reads easily, even engagingly. Here is also the place to note the precision in citing and using information in the thesis, the inclusion of different positions and points of view.

- A significant contribution is the kind of alternative history of Bulgarian art that the dissertation identifies (and not just in general terms). Clearly delineated in this history are moments of transformation and change - this is a fundamentally different look at the hitherto ideologically dominated tendencies of thawing.

If, up to this point, studies in the field of post-World War II art history have paid attention to the mechanisms of totalitarian power and the subjugation (or resistance, which is ultimately the same thing) of the artist, here an interesting and self-contained intra-guild history of the medium is mapped out.

- In relation to the above paragraph, the peculiar ideological resistance of Natasha Noeva's dissertation should be highlighted as a contribution. Without sidestepping the ideologically marked testimonies neither in the directives nor in the reviews, and without hiding those moments in the artists' biographies that testify to succumbing to ideological pressure, the researcher shows, that the antagonism between the "old" and the "new" world is present and relevant only in transitional moments, while outside of them the guild as a relatively closed system manages to self-organize, adjusting itself - of course - to the "big world" outside its borders. A characteristic example of this is the dominant role of the gallery, the focus of the study, in the plan of international cooperation (p. 72 ff.) - both before and after the coming of socialist rule, this priority remains unchanged, with the awareness of its presence and necessity invariably present.

- The appendices of the work are undoubtedly a contribution in their own right: alongside the valuable bibliography, the researcher applies a very dense (or perhaps complete!) chronology of exhibitions - both in the focal gallery and in other exhibition spaces, numerous documents, extensive photographic material, and interviews (Kalina Taseva, Valentin Starchev, Bisera Prakhova).

I conclude the enumeration of the contributions of Natasha Noeva's dissertation work with a wish and a recommendation that the study be published as soon as possible as an extremely valuable text for the history of Bulgarian fine art.

In **conclusion**. Based on the outstanding contributions of Natasha Mitkova Noeva's dissertation, I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award her the educational and scientific degree of doctor in the professional field 8.1. Theory of Arts, and I vote "for".

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