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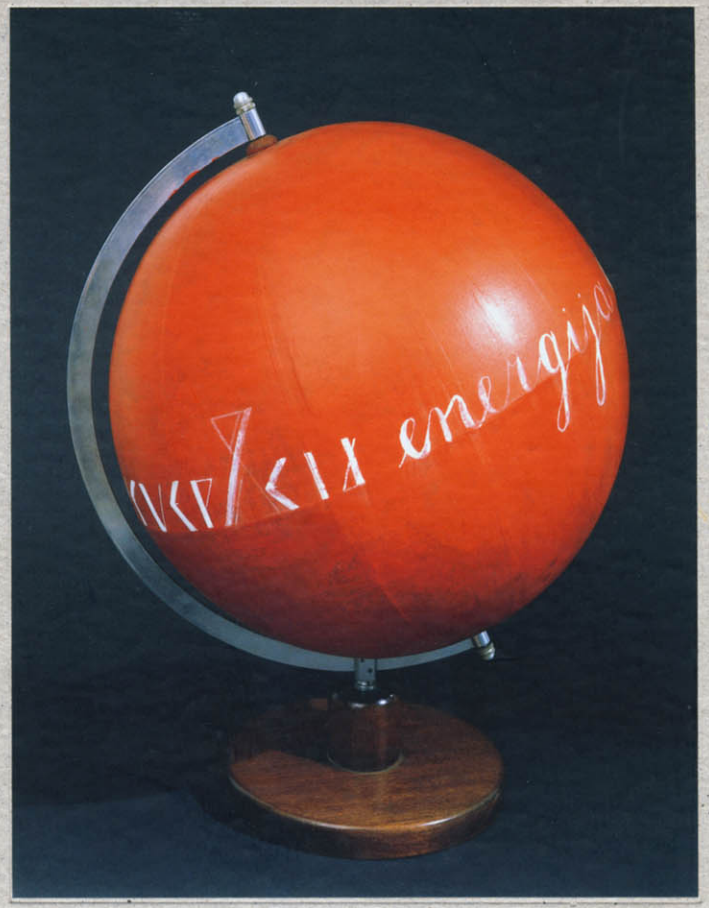
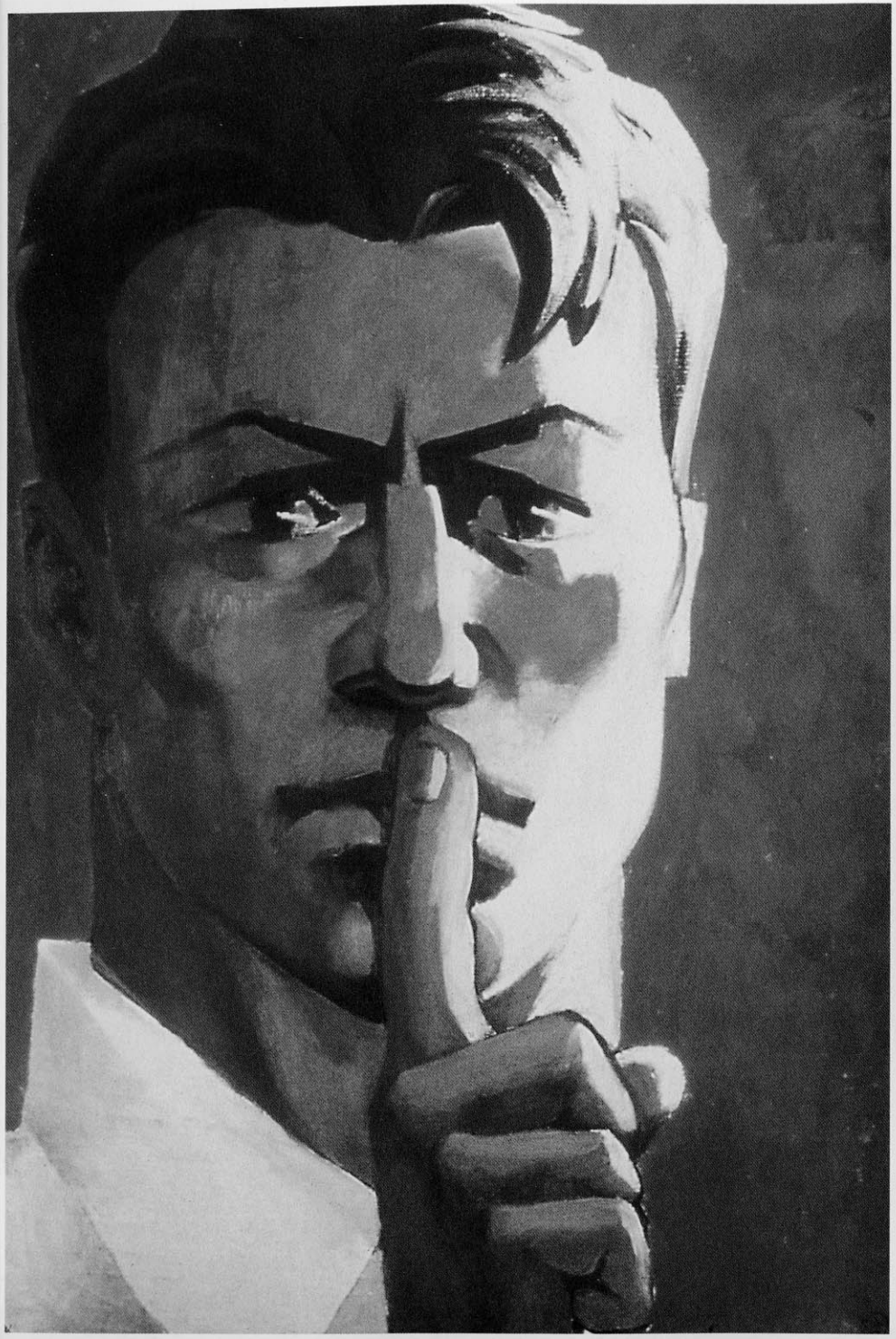



# Primary Documents

## A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s



# Primary Documents

## A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s

*edited by Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl*

*with the assistance of Majlena Braun and Clay Tarica*

*Foreword by Ilya Kabakov*

**The Museum of Modern Art, New York**

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# Contents


7 **Foreword** *Ilya Kabakov*
9 **Introduction** *Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl*

## 1

13 **The Secret Life of People's Culture**

15 **Virtual Estonia and No Less Virtual Moscow: An Essay on Island Mythology** *Yuri Sobolev*
29 **The Intellectual under Socialism** *Jindřich Chalupecký*
37 **Nonofficial Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s** *Andrei Erofeev*
53 **The Bertalan Case: The Artistic Experiment as an Exercise and Neurotic Sublimation** *Coriolan Babeti*
56 **A Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival** *Ivan Martin Jirous*

A CASE STUDY: REPRESSION
65 **The Bulldozer and Izmailovsky Park Exhibitions, Moscow, 1974: Chronology of Events, Letters, and Interviews**

## 2

79 **Pioneers and Their Manifestos**

80 **Manifestos** *Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos*
85 **MANIFEST "HAPPSOC"** *Stano Filko, Zita Kostrová, and Alex Mlynárčik*
88 **An Introduction to a General Theory of Place** *Wiesław Borowski, Hanna Ptaszkowska, and Mariusz Tchorek*
92 **OHO Manifesto** *Marko Pogačnik and I. G. Plamen*
95 **A History of Chance; Art as an Empty Sign; Theses for the Marly Conference of 1980** *Miklós Erdély*
102 **The Milano Lessons: 12—Before the End of the Twentieth Century** *Tadeusz Kantor*

A CASE STUDY: ARTISTS INTERVENE IN EVERYDAY LIFE
120 **An Event for the Post Office, the Police, and the Occupants of No. 26 Václavkova Street, Prague 6, and for all Their Neighbors, Relatives, and Friends** *Milan Knížák, with Jan Maria Mach*

## 3

123 **Conceptual Art and Times of Transition**

124 **Gorgona: Art as a Way of Existence** *Nena Dimitrijević*
140 **The Ethics of Form or Aesthetics of Logic** *Braco Dimitrijević*
154 **Krzysztof Wodiczko and Polish Art of the 1970s** *Andrzej Turowski*
162 **Moscow Romantic Conceptualism** *Boris Groys*
174 **Seven Photographs** *Andrei Monastyrski*
182 **The Readymade and the Question of the Fabrication of Objects and Subjects** *Suzana Milevska*

A CASE STUDY: WEEKEND ART
192 **"Weekend Art: Hallelujah the Hill"** *Aleksandar Battista Ilić, in collaboration with Ivana Keser and Tomislav Gotovac*

## 4

197 **Body Unbound**

198 **One Sunday . . .** *Alina Szapocznikow*
199 **Sleep—Awakening—The Game** *Geta Bratescu*
203 **Double Life: Documents for Autobiography 1959–75** *Sanja Iveković*
220 **Encounters with Action Artists** *Petr Rezek*
225 **Male Artist's Body: National Identity vs. Identity Politics** *Piotr Piotrowski*
234 **Where the Heck Am I? Where Are My Things?** *Vladislav Mamyshev (Monroe-Hitler)*

A CASE STUDY: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A HORSE
242 **Carrying Buckets, Trotting Like Pigs** *Artur Żmijewski interviews Katarzyna Kozyra*
250 ***Pyramid of Animals* by Katarzyna Kozyra: Letters and Articles**

## 5

257 **Onward Toward the Retro-Avant-garde!**

258 **The Barren Flowers of Evil** *Komar and Melamid*
271 **Chronicle of the Events** *Wojciech Marchlewski*
277 **The Action is on (for the time being) . . .** *Nedko Solakov*
281 **Untitled Celebration** *Călin Dan*
285 **Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?** *Slavoj Žižek*
288 **The IRWIN Group: More Total than Totalitarianism** *Boris Groys*

A CASE STUDY: NEUE SLOWENISCHE KUNST
294 **Laibach**
297 **Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater**
299 **IRWIN**
301 **NSK State in Time** *Eda Čufer and IRWIN*

## 6

303 **An Empty Pedestal: Between Freedom and Nationalism**

304 **The Balkanization of *Alpa Europaea*** *Luchezar Boyadjiev*
311 **A 1992 Guide for the Creation of Works of Art with Nature Themes** *Imre Bukta*
312 **Monument Revisited** *Helēna Demakova*
318 **Selections from "Mail Radek"** *Anatoly Osmolovsky*
325 **Balkan for Beginners** *Bojana Pejić*
340 **The Revenge of the Background** *Ekaterina Degot*

A CASE STUDY: EAST AGAINST WEST
345 **An Open Letter to the Art World** *Various Authors*
347 **Response to an Open Letter to the Art World** *Viktor Misiano*
349 **Why Have I Bitten a Man?** *Oleg Kulik*
351 **The Cultural War** *Wenda Gu*
354 **Dialogue** *Igor Zabel*

362 **Acknowledgments**
364 **Editors and Consultants**
366 **Selected Bibliography**
371 **Credits**
372 **Index**

## LUCHEZAR BOYADJIEV

*Born in 1957 in Sofia, Bulgaria, Luchezar Boyadjiev trained as an art historian and theorist before becoming an artist in the late 1980s. His work, which includes videos, installation, web design, and printmaking, deals with the communicative possibilities of art. He often uses his art as a tool to display social structures of Bulgarian society and to explore his own role as an artist both in his homeland and abroad. He was one of the founders of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sofia.*

*The following text, written for the catalogue of the Third International Istanbul Biennial in 1992, addresses the fluctuating position that the Balkans occupy in the minds of their neighbors.*

### The Balkanization of *Alpa Europaea*

I.

Seen in their geographical location/relation, the Balkans appear to be both the Same and the Other of both Europe and Asia. This strange geosituation of a territory, "populated" by several incredibly same/different countries, could be explicated in the following manner:

II.

***1. The Balkans as the Other of both Europe and Asia***

Depending on the passive or aggressive "interpretative" ambitions/strategies of both out-of-the-Balkans reflecting subjects, the metaphorical status of the Balkans could be expressed figuratively through the metaphors of The Door or The Corner. Or if put in a diagrammatic form:

**a. Door—passive strategies = regard for the Other:**

Here the Balkans are the very epitome of transparency.



**b. Corner—aggressive strategies = disregard for the Other:**

Here the Balkans become an especially heavily inflamed point of friction where all notions of transparency are annihilated.

Both of the above-described cases are defined geographically by the viewpoint of the out-of-the-Balkans reflecting subject. Without dependence on the character of his or her ambitions/strategies as cultural, political, economic, etc. ones, this ambiguous metaphorical status of the Balkans has received concrete realization throughout history in an alternating rhythm—the Balkans have been thought of as either a door or a corner at any given historical period. Only the passive or aggressive exercise of those ambitions/strategies determines the switches in the metaphorical orientation of the European and/or Asian viewpoints toward the Balkans. It should be clear that historically the metaphorical orientations of the European and/or the Asian viewpoints toward the Balkans have not necessarily coincided. That is, Europe and Asia have not always perceived of the Balkans as either a door or a corner at one and the same time. There have not only been switches in the orientation toward the Balkans from one of the two viewpoints, but there also have been times when one of the viewpoints thinks of the Balkans as a door while the other as a corner (and vice versa). All of the ethnic, religious, moral, aesthetic, military, financial, etc. specifics of these ambitions/strategies are irrelevant. The only relevant point is the character of the metaphorical orientation and the switches this character suffers from time to time.

As the Other of both Europe and Asia, the Balkans are a function of out-of-the-Balkans agents, their strategies and orientations. Because of that the most difficult times for the Balkans themselves come at times when there appears a switch in the metaphorical orientation of any one of the two of its Others—Europe and/or Asia. This is so because such a switch causes severe confusion over the sense of Balkan identity for the Balkan people themselves.

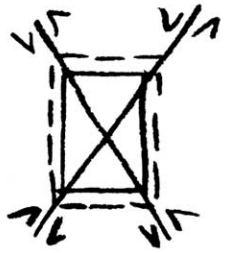
At the present time there is just such a switch taking place on the part of the European viewpoint. Up until recently Europe thought of the Balkans as a corner. In the European view the Balkans were at the same time a part, and not a part, of Europe—a corner. Now the Balkans are slowly being *turned into* a door. The only problem is that they are not awarded the right of choice to or not to turn *themselves* into a door *on their own terms*. This could only be done on European terms. For instance, as is well known in a corner, there appears an aftereffect, an *echo,* a reverberation of concepts belonging originally to the Center, but long ago disposed of by the same Center. The corner starts acting

in accordance with these concepts, believing they are the right (central = good, etc.) concepts because they are the ones of *the Center* and thus the corner wants to fit in with *the Center.* But it turns out that the Center has long ago changed its concepts and the corner is way behind the times. Take the case of the "one nation—one state" concept and the present crisis in the (Balkan) former country—Yugoslavia. Serbia, being the legitimate child (= corner) of Europe, appears to be acting upon this old European concept now. And Serbia is being disowned by Europe, which refuses to acknowledge responsibility for its own child and its behavior—what was once thought of as a civilized action is now a monstrosity.

Strange, but by refusing *to be turned into* a door, a former corner is nevertheless becoming a center which terrorizes all the rest of the diagram. This former corner has taken a hostage—the very new concept of all-over Europeanness as it is being defined now.

### *2. The Balkans as the Same of both Europe and Asia*

The Balkans are the coordinate system, a *screen* where Europe and Asia come together. The geographical reality of the geographical concept *Eurasia* is the Balkans. It could be claimed that at least one way to spell the cultural name of Eurasia is the B-A-L-K-A-N-S. It is the Balkan viewpoint itself that could metaphorically think of the Balkans as simultaneously a door and a corner. The emblem of the Balkans could be:



It is only the Balkan viewpoint itself that could think of the Balkans as the Same of both Europe and Asia. An integral part of the organic Balkan intuition for the world is this sense of belonging simultaneously to two very different in themselves cultural, political, etc. real worlds. This intuition is internalized in many different ways and on many different levels. The cultural anthropology of the Balkans, if it reaches a stage of classical scientific conceptualization, may read as a matrix for the Eurasian history.

The Balkan viewpoint is necessarily and naturally a schizoid one—in order to perceive of its own wholeness it has to think in at least two different cultural/historical coordinate systems.

Paradoxically the Balkans are the Same (as a thing in itself) only when they are the Other (as a thing for itself) and vice versa. Exactly who that concrete historical Other might be is simply a matter of circumstance. The relevant fact is the ever-present Same-Other dichotomy in the Balkan sense of identity.



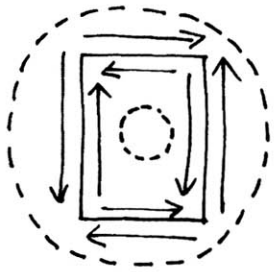
More, the schizoid sense of Balkan identity is "fortified" further by the time-space dichotomy implicit in the door-corner metaphors. In the metaphor of *the door* there is only the concept of time and not of space. In the metaphor of *the corner* there is only the concept of space and not of time. The Balkan coordinate system suffers an *either space or time* dichotomy which, combined with the *either same or other* dichotomy, produces a monstrous "quadrochotomy" [*sic*] of split identity which is natural to the Balkans but could be calamitous for other geographical parts of the civilized Eurasian world. It is only when these other parts of the Eurasian world project disciplinary/civilizing measures/wishes, etc. toward the Balkans that the innate Balkan terror is being let loose. This is the terror of the nonidentity refusing acceptance of any (only) one given identity. In the state of health of the Balkans it is projected, as if on a screen, the state of health of Eurasia. If the Balkans are sick, that only means that either Europe or Asia (or both?) is sick. This author, for one, thinks that Europe now is deeply sick of not being able to come to terms with the perfidy of its own desire (actually, nondesire) to be one total whole. For Europe now claims intent to become united and at the same time is unable to cope with the consequences of its own claims for unification. Europe, it turns out, is unable to endure and tolerate the results of the realization of its concepts. And this is not happening for the first time in recent memory.

## III.

Bulgaria might very well be the ultimate Balkan country, the ultimate door-corner of Eurasia. It is not only a matter of the many duplicities active in its present-day reality—religious, ethnic, political, economical, etc. ones. Some duplicities are just as active in some other micro door-corners of the Balkans. Take, for instance, Bosnia and Herzegovina. But take it for real—look at what happened there as a consequence of all this messing around with the identity problem in the Balkans. As opposed to the situation there, Bulgaria is exemplary on at least two more counts. First is the (so far) relatively tolerant interiorization and relatively peaceful coexistence in its present-day culture—reality of all identities. Tolerance, to the point of chaos, ripe with possibilities and potential (but for what?). And second, the past of this territory. Unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina (which, to the best of my knowledge, has never in the past been an independent state = political subject), Bulgaria, for all of the complicated centuries of its past, has alternately been *in* and *out* of history as if it was a supermarket. This was so depending on whether Bulgaria was an *autonomous political entity* (and thus, even though BG has its own history for any such particular periods, the whole of the fragmented independent BG—a "history" is of no importance for the general schemes of History and Historical development in Europe—so, when BG was independent it was *in* its own history but *out* of the European history; Bulgaria was at such times a corner of Europe), or *a part of some larger empire* or other type of political state organization (and thus, even though BG did not have at such periods its own history it was, paradoxically, part of the European history. So, when BG was dependent on some bigger political force it was *out* of its own history but *in* the European history; Bulgaria was at such times a door for Europe). Of course, the above argument could be reversed, especially if one believes in the general progress of humanity. The point is that Bulgaria has and is surviving now precisely because it takes very seriously, although intuitively,

the whole issue of how to preserve its own nonidentity (in European and maybe Asian terms) as an identity (on Balkan terms). It is very possible that its present-day cultural "originality" follows exactly from this preserved, typically Balkan, confusing for others, quadrochotomous [*sic*] intuition for the ways the Eurasian world moves along the path of its own Historical progress. I don't want to sound too patriotic and/or overly optimistic but maybe it is not a simple coincidence after all that Christo (Javacheff), who so successfully rids the world of its utopian illusions, was born in this part of the Balkans. The point is that we have now as a fact the so-far-successful and peaceful (unlike in the former Yugoslav federation) Balkanization of this typically Balkan country in the situation of the present-day realities of Eurasia. And maybe that's quite an interesting thing to observe—the corner is turning itself (and is being turned by the Other) into a door, without forgetting that, in a way, it was a door (while still a corner), and imagining that even if it indeed becomes a door in the future, it will be, in a way, a corner (while being allegedly a door).

The emblem of Bulgaria could look like this:



Repeated *ad infinitum* in all directions.

**IV.**

The space-time, door-corner quadrochotomy in the Balkans (read: Bulgaria) produces the "logic" of the heavily corporeal (body) metaphors. Because people (reflecting subjects) here are not very clear about the meaning of their abstracts and concepts, they tend to literalize these to extremes. The literalized intuitions for the world have at least the advantage of being tangible here and now, unlike the imported, and thus abstracted further, concepts. By being imported to the Balkans, the concepts from out-of-the-Balkans become an abstract square. So, the schizoid Balkan intellect suffers from the inflammation of the doubt which desires verification. The strange thing is that even if some imported concept (take, for instance, the newly fashionable one for the *utopia without illusions*) has a tangible reality here, it still needs to be verified further by special procedures. The paradigm of survival in the Balkans has always been the thought that utopia has to be stripped of its illusions. And yet, this is often forgotten by the Balkans themselves. So, top artists, thinkers, etc. every now and then tend to undertake projects in reconfirming the preciousness of the above paradigm. In a way this has become the visible side of the Balkan cultural originality. Take, for instance, the art of three young BG artists—Lyuben Kostov, Nedko Solakov, and Georgi Rouzhev.



1. During the several years just before and just after the political changes in Eastern Europe, Lyuben Kostov produced a group of works—wooden machines, which exemplify best the above statement. These machines, very operational indeed, acquire extremely anti-utopian meaning when seen in the context of real socialism as a perfect social technology for the realization of certain (European in origin) utopian visions.

It is a well-accepted fact now (at least in Bulgaria) that the original utopian values of socialism were substituted (first by Lenin, second by Stalin, third by other leaders) by the social technology of the construction of socialism. Among the most productive parts of this machinery should now be counted the Bolshevik party—a machine for overtaking political power, the Gulag—a machine for disciplining the mass collective bodies of socialism, all the way down to the machine-type formations such as the state security apparatus, the creative unions of the artists, writers, etc.

But what is interesting is the way in which values were substituted by the technologies and social machines. Generally speaking, this was the mechanism of literalization. The utopian socialist values were originally expressed in a metaphorical form. Later on they were taken at face value, as a plan for the construction of a utopian reality. The whole building up of the real socialism could be explained as a literalization of metaphors. At one point, for instance, the leading metaphors to be literalized as reality were the so-called *five-year plans*. At another (early on) it was Marx's metaphor that the true task of philosophy is not to explain the world, but to change it. This way of thinking/acting tended to naturalize everything. To see History, Society, etc., as mechanisms operating according to the same objective Laws that govern nature. And it is clear that the genetics of such literalization of nature go as far back as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Take, for instance, Leonardo. He "pierced" the skin of nature with his eye, hand, and mind only to explicate the mathematical-mechanical laws of nature inherent in its construction. What he did afterwards was to apply these same laws to the science of technology, to draw up a "sketch," so to say, of the future technological progress of modern times. Marx, Lenin, etc., on their part, only applied the same procedure to history and society, thus marking the final state of the degradation of reason = the unquestioned faith in its power.

Of course, neither Leonardo nor anyone from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries is to be blamed in any way for this. But strangely all the parts, cog wheels, mechanics, all the way to the general plastic form of L. Kostov's machines, remind one of the models being made these days, reconstructing the original ideas—designs of Leonardo for the helicopter, the submarine, the clock, the gear, the airplane, etc. But this is a similarity of shape, not of function. For the only thing Kostov's machines are "producing" are the liberating, anti-utopian impulses for laughter, relief, satisfaction, impulses which tend to contribute to the dismantling of the reality of socialism.

The everyday life, the Street in real socialism, used to express its opposition to the ruling, literalized metaphors of power by producing its own anti-utopian metaphors. For instance, the convention of the BG Communist party (or any other public = official meeting that was taking place to simulate collective decision-making process, such as the Parliament, for instance) used to be

called "a *machine* for voting," the leaders of the party, lined up on the Mausoleum, greeting the crowd, jubilating over the successful construction of socialism, were called "a *machine* for hand-waving," etc. L. Kostov's machines only *literalize* these subversive mass-metaphors, thus creating an alternative reality, a space for freedom of thought. His machines for applause, for congratulatory gesticulation, for painting, for bell ringing, for breaking down of idols and many other smart mechanisms are opponents of the power machine of socialism. Their own power rests in the effective way they deconstruct and "pierce" the *skin* of the simulative, symbolic reality of socialism. If Christo (Javacheff), by wrapping a building, simply stops its potential utopian emanations and changes the mass-perception of a natural and/or cultural object, L. Kostov goes as far as to *"unwrap"* piece by piece a whole system of symbolic reality.

2. The installation *New Noah's Ark* by Nedko Solakov, on the other hand, comes afterwards to fill in the symbolic space, thus "cleaned-up," by offering new mythologies of survival. But make no mistake, some years ago Solakov made his own contribution to the de-montage of socialism in numerous works—paintings and drawings, objects and installations, books and all other kinds of culturally subversive plastic gestures. His newest installation is meant to overcome the sorry past of socialism. It deals not only with the problem of survival but of deliverance as well. And this is done in a typically Balkanic, schizoid fashion. First Solakov dissimulates (in the sense Jean Baudrillard uses the term) his socialist past. He pretends not to have any values left and thus to be free for a new beginning. Then he takes on the ontologically powerful myth of Noah's Ark.

In its schizoid state of existence the Balkan creative intellect is "free" to manipulate everything in quasibombastic statements. Solakov is not satisfied only to dwell upon the now-fashionable quest for new "Messiahs" in the post-totalitarian value vacuum. He goes farther back. There is a need for ontological gestures, for a new world, for a new look beyond to transcend the current cultural Eurasian stalemate of identity intuitions. So it is Noah's Ark time once again. How could it happen? Who is to get into the Ark? *Whose* world, *what* world is to be saved? The deluge is here now. Noah is to be found somewhere in the concrete panel buildings (= catacombs?) of the Balkan city of Sofia (no less). So, crawl in, try to become one of the candylike strange creatures from the installation if you feel like you want to be saved. Maybe Solakov, in his endlessly self-confident Balkan ego thinks of himself as both Noah and a creature. Maybe you (the viewer) do so as well. Anyway, the viewer, wandering among the exhibits of the *New Noah's Ark,* is put into a corner which it is only up to him or her to see as a door. "O.K. Eurasia—where do you go from here?" That is the question Solakov's work puts forward now.

3. In a no less quasi-bombastic gesture (but in the far less bombastic media of photography) Georgi Rouzhev asks similar questions. In the *One-Dimensional Man Died* he sees himself as a Christlike figure (only shorter) symbolically striped of (ironed out of) any phallocentric potential. In a powerfully symbolic gesture of self-castration of identity Rouzhev disposes of the "privileged signifier," thus getting rid of the basic symbolic institution of European culture. The greatest narrative has come to an end—what's next? How is this next possible? Are we to come out of



the molehill for a new start or shall we still stick to the state of being (in Rouzhev's view) the Homo sapiens version of the *Alpa Europaea* (the Latin term for a mole)?

In another of his photographs, *Self-Portrait,* Rouzhev has wrapped (like Christo?) his head with his own long hair (just like Christ's hair, only longer) to produce an amazing statement of identity. With only eyes and mouth left visible, Rouzhev has turned himself into a strange sadomasochistic wild man (just like the one from the medieval illuminated manuscripts and tapestries). Is his hair becoming a mask, a *"natural"* mask to signify his own difference and identity nowadays? Is the image in the photograph an image of a Persona or just of a "face"? How could the production of identity be neutralized? Once again we have here a case of Balkanization of the entire humanistic problematic. And once again it is made painfully, tangibly, bodily apparent. This is a literalized metaphor of the Eurasian crisis of identity in a Balkanized version.

**V.**

So what's next? Hopefully the *Alpa Europaea* will pierce its own symbolic skin and find that its own mechanics have been transformed to fit the populace of the *New Noah's Ark.* It will still be the Same but maybe it will develop intuitions for the Other. The Balkan other?

Written in 1992. Originally published in the catalogue of the Third International Istanbul Biennial, 1992.

•●

## IMRE BUKTA

*The Hungarian artist Imre Bukta (born 1952) studied at the Dobó István Polytechnic College in Eger, Hungary. From his agricultural actions in the early 1970s to his grotesque objects and installations from the 1980s and 1990s, he has used materials associated with Hungarian agricultural life to create sculpture, photography, installations, and performances, endowed with his personal mythology. He quite literally designated himself an "agricultural artist."*

*In the following text he breaks down the distinction between human and animal nature by making both man and pig equal co-conspirators in an amusing fable. Although his art represents his own eclectic individuality, his approach elevates the elements of everyday existence to ritual symbols that are an important element of Hungary's collective identity.*

### A 1992 Guide for the Creation of Works of Art with Nature Themes

Go to a corner of Europe, or to another continent—on foot, if possible. Take four things with you.

Take a PANE OF GLASS through which to observe the environment. This will be your window on the four points of the compass.

Take a PIG to remind you that you are a human being. He will be your companion in solitude. You will be grateful if he allows you to scratch his ears.

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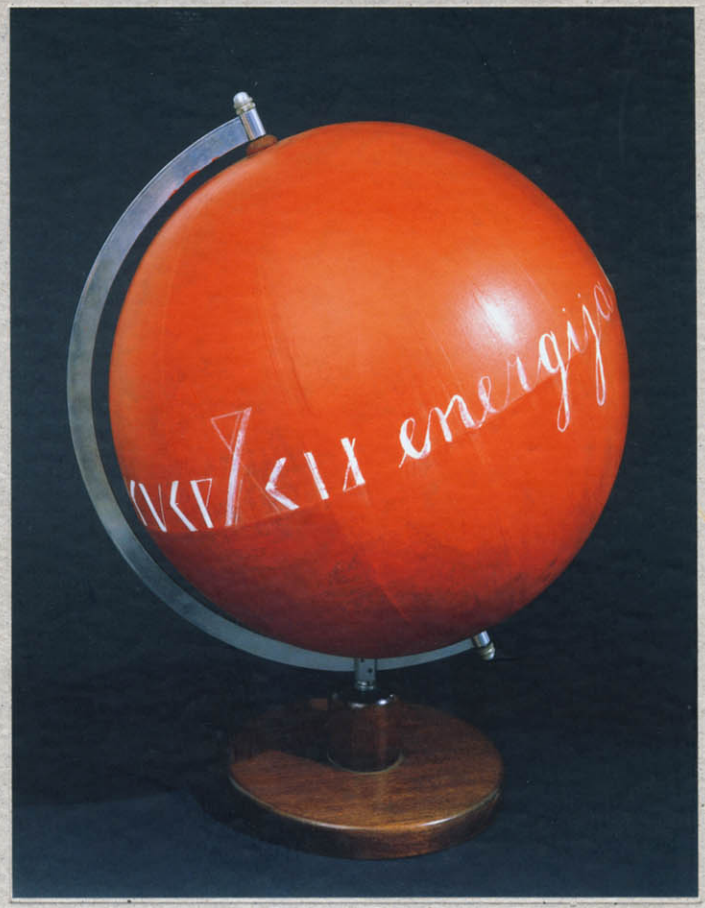
Frontispiece: Komar & Melamid. *Don't Babble.* 1974. Oil on canvas, 35½ × 24" (90.2 × 61 cm). Collection Richard Karasik. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

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