

ArtReview

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Pravdoliub Ivanov

Rooted in his early experiences of life behind the Iron Curtain, the Bulgarian artist suffuses the stuff of everyday life with unresolved geopolitical tensions and anxieties

by Oliver Basciano







above *Up or Down*, 2015
(installation view, Old Turkish Bathhouse – Centre for Contemporary Art, Plovdiv).
Courtesy Sariev Contemporary, Plovdiv

preceding pages *Childhood*, 2013, mixed media, dimensions variable.
Courtesy Sariev Contemporary, Plovdiv

“It was like an American robot had landed.” It is dusk in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, and Pravedoljub Ivanov is pointing out the site of the city’s first Coke machine, installed in 1989 as the country transitioned from communism to capitalism. We pass through the city centre, filling with Saturday night revellers, and the artist – in his early fifties, shaggy-haired, cagoule now slung over the back of a restaurant chair – tells me about growing up under communism. Tales of his politicised education are intermingled with nostalgic stories of playing guitar and drinking with friends among the ruins of Plovdiv’s first-century open-air theatre. I wonder to what extent these memories are politicised too.

This mixture of the political and the personal, or how the political becomes personal, has run through the sculptures and installations Ivanov has made since the early 1990s, when he left Bulgaria’s second city to study in Sofia, where he is now based (Ivanov had travelled back to his home city to show me around). Case in point is one of his more recent works, *Childhood* (2013), in which the artist has combined a drill and a clunky old turquoise-painted metal slide projector, the drill bit forced into the hole where the lens would ordinarily be. For a 2016 solo exhibition at Sariev Contemporary in Plovdiv, the sculpture was installed with the bit bored into the gallery wall at such a height and angle that the power cord dangled impotently a foot or so off the ground. There’s something violent about this work, and for me (from the West, and nine when the Soviet Union was dissolved and Bulgaria held its first free elections in decades) the design of the projector element is alien. For Ivanov, though, the hand-winding slide projector is an immensely evocative object. “This thing is paradoxical. I remember the design from childhood, anyone my age would. It was used for my childhood slides, but also I remember they used to use it to show propaganda imagery.”

Knowing this, one interpretation of *Childhood* is blatant, of how the communist narratives presented by the Bulgarian government were drilled into the population to such an extent that the idea of the individual citizen – with a private life, a family life, separate from state control – evaporated. As in so many countries in this era, the state and the person became one. Yet there is more to it than this: the work’s purpose is not primarily to reminisce on the past but to think about how external political narratives, things that we have no control over, shape one’s subjecthood. To what extent are we political subjects today? On which side of the Iron Curtain we stood (if we are old enough) demarcates one’s understanding of *Childhood*, for example, separating those familiar with this Soviet-produced object, sold only in the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, and those for whom it is strange – a demonstration, perhaps, of long political shadows. “I realise”, Ivanov tells me, “that when I think of social, political and global problems, I am actually thinking of my own fears.”

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Natural Fear, 2014–16, HD video, colour, sound, 2 min 30 sec. Courtesy Sariev Contemporary, Plovdiv

In the same exhibition, Ivanov showed the two-and-a-half-minute video *Natural Fear* (2014–16). He installed it under the gallery’s entrance desk, requiring viewers to crouch and to stretch the headphone cable awkwardly. (Ivanov is an old hand at utilising discomfort in his work: the 3.4m-high 2015 installation *Up or Down* invited gallery visitors to climb a narrow set of wooden steps to the daunting pinnacle, then carefully step down the other side. This a strategy that has a long history in contemporary eastern European art practice, from the body sculptures of Eva Kot’átková to the extreme performances of Oleg Kulik.) The uncomfortable viewing position in *Natural Fear* mirrors the squatting and ducking evidenced in the video’s shaky point-of-view footage filmed during some sort of battle. Ivanov ripped the video from a website that collates conflict material posted on social media. Strikingly, however, at no point do we see the fighting taking

place – we only hear thundering shells and zipping bullets – and instead the screen is filled with the long grass and undergrowth that whoever made this video is hiding in. Wildflowers grow on the battlefield; explosions can be heard

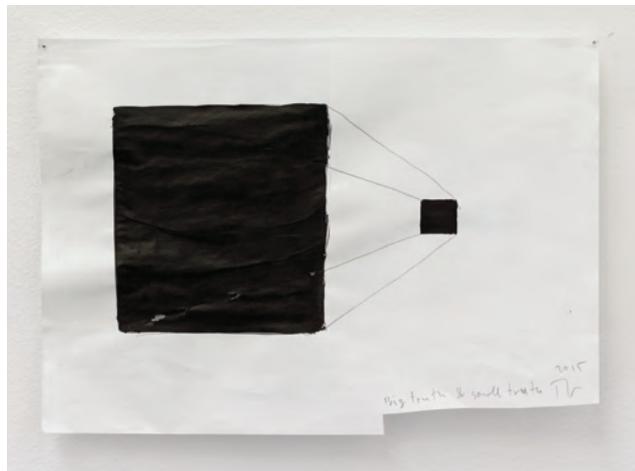
raining down. While Ivanov tells me he believes the video originates from the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, he has taken pains to excise anything that identifies the scene too specifically (Russian voices can apparently be heard, for example, in the original unedited file). All the viewer gets, as we hunker down, is the noise of conflict and the palpable fear of the protagonist, evidenced in their heavy breathing. All wars are personal, the work demonstrates; all conflict comes down

to individuals.

Looking at Ivanov’s older works makes it clear that geopolitics, filtered through subjectivity’s lens, has been his preoccupation for some time. “Some of the works are triggered by certain political events,” he notes, adding emphatically, “but it’s not journalism.” The red fabric in *Trouble is Always Double* (1997–2015) – a single length of material hung from two wall-mounted flagpoles, the middle of this ‘flag’ resting on the ground – evokes the Hammer and Sickle and can

therefore be placed in a Soviet history. But despite the reference to Bulgaria’s past, we can also read this as a more general comment on the tensions arising from political alliances and notions of statehood. There is some confusion about the political stance of this work, admittedly: is this push-me-pull-you flag a testament to collaboration or control? The title might suggest the latter, yet the artist clearly invites a degree of ambiguity. These are not clear-cut political statements, manifestations of an unflinching point of view, but works born of political and social confusion. They are attempts to process an ebb and flow of history from which the individual is alienated. Ultimately they are about not being in control of one’s own political destiny.

“I grew up in a swamp of ideology, but I think of these as social works – works about society – as opposed to ‘political’ works,” Ivanov says. *Truths* (2015)



top *Transformation Always Takes Time and Energy*, 1998, hot plates, pots, teapots, cables, water, electricity, time.
Courtesy Kontakt: The Art Collection of ERSTE Group and ERSTE Foundation, Vienna

bottom *Truths*, 2015, drawing, black ink, pencil, 21 × 30 cm. Courtesy Sariev Contemporary, Plovdiv

features two squares drawn in black ink on a white A4 sheet (a reference to Malevich), one square significantly smaller, perspective lines connecting them. Hand-scribbled in the bottom right corner, in English, is the phrase ‘big truth and small truth’. Ivanov explains that in the Soviet Union this was a political philosophy, one adopted by the Bulgarian communists. “The big truth was the communistic truth, the truth about the idea we’re supposedly working towards. The small truth was the truth of daily life. So if you experience difficulties in your daily life, they would tell us, ‘You should not confuse the big truth with the small truth.’”

Another largescale work involving the flag motif is as ambivalent as *Trouble is Always Double*. In *Territories* (1995–2003), first shown in 1995 at the 4th Istanbul Biennial, a row of flags is hiked on poles along the gallery wall. The flags, however, are rock-solid, uniformly caked with mud. The effect is that instead of offering differentiating symbols to denote individual territories, and all the baggage that entails, there’s a parade of uniform, anonymous brown. The ensigns come together as a paean to universalism and a desire for the collapse of nation-state borders – earth is earth, with no regard to the lines we have drawn in it – yet this is expressed in a motif symbolic of the exact opposite. Ivanov talks about his attitude towards the nation-state: his abhorrence of the nationalism and tribalism that wrought terror in the country’s Balkan neighbours during the 1990s, and the conflicting belief that a strong Bulgaria is necessary (given the country’s history of submitting itself to the directives of Moscow): Ivanov’s big truth and the artist’s

small truth, perhaps. When we discuss his fear of Russian aggression today, covert and otherwise, I’m also reminded of the artist’s 1998 installation *Transformation Always Takes Time and Energy*, which features dozens of kettles and pans filled with water, each placed on a network of hotplates installed on the gallery floor. The heaters aren’t powerful enough to bring the water to the boil; instead the water just evaporates over the course of each day (the receptacles are refilled each morning to start the process over). Likewise, Russia’s relationship with its Eastern Bloc neighbours, even 19 years after Ivanov’s work was originally conceived, seems to simmer with tension, never quite achieving resolution.

The slide projector used in *Childhood* was popular when political narratives came ready-packaged (though the artist’s family was firmly against the regime) and there was a clear distinction of sides. Now, at a point in history when the world is such a mix of confused alliances and multisided conflicts, those certainties have all but evaporated. The Sariev exhibition was titled *On the Wrong Side* (spelled out backwards in neon mounted in the gallery window). In today’s climate of Wikileaks, fake news and fluctuating political identities – in which the poles of left and right have been supplanted by nationalism and

globalism – it is hard to say who is on whose side, let alone whether it’s the ‘right’ one or not. The message in Ivanov’s work, with all its inbuilt uncertainties, is that we have more to fear than ever before. **ar**

Work by Pravdoliub Ivanov can be seen in La Tierra Inquieta, Triennale di Milano, from 28 April through 20 August



Trouble is Always Double, 1997–2015, two rods of stainless steel, two metal holders, red fabric, 282 × 120 × 165 cm. Courtesy Sariev Contemporary, Plovdiv