

The long way of Rene Block

Rene Block in conversation with Svetla Petkova

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- What is the role of the curator today for the contemporary understanding and comprehension of art? What do you think, for example, about the last Istanbul biennial which was drafted, not curated, by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev?

- I didn't have the opportunity to visit this year's Istanbul Biennial, therefore I can't say anything about its curatorial achievement. I don't think that a curator's task should be evaluated generally, as his or her role and function is largely depending on the specific conditions. A biennial, which is ideally an artistic laboratory enabling a dialogue between a local scene and global tendencies, demands for a different approach than curating a thematic exhibition for a museum, for instance. But in general, the tasks of the curator remain the same. A curatorial ethic should be the rule, an unwritten law.

- You told once in an interview that the mainstream art and art-fair art are boring. In fact your interests in the past are linked to some of the most influential artists and groups, as Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik or Fluxus, that are non-commercial. If you started your career now, when we know that the commercial side of art is very well developed, what kind of art could be interesting for you?

- If I would start again now, I would also seek the contact to the youngest generation. It is important that the gallery space is part of a scene with which it can grow. If one is lucky, the engagement will be also commercially successful one day. An old rule says that this phase that one has to hang on with the artists lasts about seven years.

- What do you think about the geopolitical situation nowadays and how could it influence the art? Is the art in a transitional period?

- Art is permanently in a transitional period. The transitional state has only changed during the last century. It gained more speed and extended globally.

The purpose of art has never changed over the centuries. Art should delight and educate people. It should set new ethical and aesthetical standards and take up a stance in actual political discourses.

- You are interested in Balkan art and especially in that, coming from Turkey.

Where did your interest start from? What do you think about the Balkan art nowadays and especially about Bulgarian art? You have some Bulgarian artworks in your collection...

- Well, my interest in Turkish artists and artists from the Balkan started the moment I had a chance to meet them and to receive information about their work. But this is no difference than with artists from Germany or other countries. The difference however was for me that it was not just individual artists, but a whole new scene that was to discover in Istanbul in the early nineties. And it was like that with certain countries of the Balkan region after the political opening that came with the fall of the Berlin wall. I am lucky to have some beautiful works by Bulgarian artists in my collection.

During the preparations for the big Balkan exhibition at the Fridericianum in Kassel and the Cetinje Biennale, that is thirteen years ago by now, my impression was that there was no direct communication among the various scenes in the Balkan region. Of course, many artists from different countries knew each other, but they knew each other from bigger or smaller exhibitions that took place elsewhere. They met each other at biennials, for instance, in distant and often non-European countries, or at exhibitions most likely taking place in Western Europe, to which they were invited. But there was probably no exhibition in Sofia with artists from Albania, Montenegro, or Slovakia, and none in Belgrade with artists from Romania. Instead you-the countries had exhibitions with artists from France, Germany, or England, because the cultural institutions of these countries funded those exhibitions. There were also no direct flights between Belgrade and Sofia, or between Zagreb and Tirana – one had to fly to Vienna and Istanbul to connect. The observation of the situation led to the wish to organize events in each of those different places in the Balkan related to the exhibition in Kassel, in order to establish a communication amongst the small participating countries. This happened through exhibitions, publications and conferences as the Balkan Reunion Conference in Sofia in 2004.

- Could you tell something about that important exhibition including part of your archive and collection and running at the moment in Germany with the title *Ich kenne kein Weekend*. Why did you choose this title?

- I started organizing exhibitions in 1964. In 2014, I could look back on 50 years of practice as exhibition maker. The Neuer Berliner Kunstverein took this occasion to show material from my archive in a retrospective exhibition, and to document those years in a publication.

So it is an exhibition about me rather than by me. I am just the lender of the material. It was also the organizer who chose the title. It's a quotation from Joseph Beuys, and the title of a work that I published in 1972 in the form of a Ready-made object.

- What has been important for you during the years as a collector? In Bulgaria for example there are very few collections of art – and at all the people who have a possibility to buy artworks are not interested to collect contemporary and young artists. How the situation could be changed?

- My way of collecting is in so far different from most other collections, that it generated directly from ~~the~~working with the artists. Most works originated from the mutual work on various projects and were later acquired for the collection. This is the foundation from which I collected further works, according to my humble means. Sometimes I wished I was a millionaire and could purchase also historical works of modern art. I am certain that the situation in Bulgaria will change soon. Since I guess that until 1990 private persons didn't even have the possibility to ~~collect art~~create art collections. The country is at the very beginning of this development which is an interesting time.

- What would you suggest the students and young artists in Bulgaria who are educated in a more classical academic tradition? Some of them are far away from the world process in art... And at all here the level of institutional support for art is very low...

- The official education in schools and art academies is one thing – the possibility of informing oneself beyond that is another. Even young artists can travel today, or have the possibility to inform themselves via the internet, and to discuss things together. Young artists in Bulgaria are not different from artists in other countries: they paint, they photograph, they work with video and film, they express themselves through performance or Concept Art. I am very optimistic regarding the future, and the support through institutions. Also here, a young generation of private art lovers will take over responsibility soon.