

Vasilena Gankovska, Urban Melodramas, May 16, 2008 to June 15, 2008

Galerie Vaska Emanouilova / Sofia

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In her latest project »Urban Melodramas«, Vasilena Gankovska focuses her attention upon an existing edifice in one of the neighbourhoods of Sofia, making it a model subject of her work of art. The building is phenomenal for its brainless shape and decoration, which, albeit not very naturalistically, thoroughly resemble a snail. It represents a brilliant example of the complete aesthetic illiteracy of both its author and proprietor, as well as of the city council civil servants, the journalists promoting it as an attraction, and last but not least, the citizens, who are either blind or unaware of the physical milieu they inhabit. Vasilena Gankovska processes this information, interprets, edits and finally melts it into an artistic product. The Snail-Edifice gets rebuilt, in the right way this time. This work of art goes round the site, scans it from all angles and gradually reflects the observation into two canvases, a cycle of drawings, a newspaper publication and a textual installation on the walls of the exhibition hall. From this perspective, the exhibition turns into a crossing point of active »pro« and »con« debates about the social responsibility of art, »for« and »against« the pursuit of a wider spectator audience and »for« and »against« the degree of the pure aesthetic asset of contemporary art.

Apart from the visual milieu, the project also relates to certain communication problems between particular social strata, audiences and users of various visual products, as well as to the possibilities of their overlapping or at least to their approximation. A newspaper article dedicated to the aforementioned edifice constitutes a fragment of the exhibition and testifies to the significant contribution of the mass media in moulding the city's image, (not only) in their role as the highest authority. They indicate to the entire nation what they must see and think, monopolizing the right to create the collective city image. They also have the opportunity to determine how much publicity art will attract and are always in the front line to substitute for missing visual (or other) authority.

By the logic of upheaval and transformation of visual codes, active in various fields, Vasilena Gankovska adds her own serious questions to the exhibition in the form of casual street slogans. Questions – »Do you love Sofia?«, »What is an urban landscape?«, »Is Sofia pretty?«, »What does a post-modern city look like?«, »What is a post-modern city like?«, »What is beauty?« – have been scattered round the hall, if not with the aim of provoking a real dialogue, at least like supplementary elements to involve the spectator in the problem.

One more work of art appeared in the sculpture park round the gallery on the day following the exhibition opening. On the macadam beside the sculptures or directly on their pedestals the sentence »FRAGILE PIECE OF ART« is multiplied like exclamation marks, emphasizing the works of art, to some extent »floodlighting« their presence in the urban milieu.

The use of extreme examples, illustrating the lowest levels of pop-culture, is the link between the story of the Snail-House and the video »Lesson #0 – Dialogues about Love«, 2008. The work of art is based upon visual quotations from Latino soap operas and endless mawkish dialogues, whose aim is solely the joy derived from talking nonsense on all the levels of the love story. This substance is the setting for a fake TV foreign language course, where acting as a lecturer, the artist herself pronounces sentences in Bulgarian and Spanish consecutively. Her monotonous voice and poker face are in stark contrast to the painful expressiveness and exaggerated drama of the act. The two languages overtake and overlap each other like the images of excessively divided cultural levels, between which Vasilena Gankovska's artistic translation flows with plenty of irony but with an earnestly serious tone.

The exhibition »Urban Melodramas« fits into in a well-developed strategy of artistic policy, updated for Bulgaria in the course of the last few years. To some extent it is the follow-up to the programme »Visual Seminar« whose purpose was research, analysis and review of the visual character's problems of the city, as well as of all the overt and hidden collisions of social interests that define and create it. Within the framework of this programme, Luchezar Boyadjiev asked the question »Do you see Sofia?«, thus establishing the starting point for his work »Hot City Visual« (2003) which for the first time involved city authorities, journalists and common citizens in a

real discussion on the changing face of their city. Vasilena Gankovska's questions address his work, as well as many other artistic activities like the project »Visual Police« (2005) by Javor Gardev or the exhibition »Urban Legends« (2006), curated by Maria Vassileva.