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Reconciliation and young artists' perception.

A case study from the 60th Venice Biennale of Art.

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Abstract

The primary focus of the research is to analyse the artistic expression of Bulgarian artists and researchers from the recent past. This research particularly emphasizes the Bulgarian pavilion at the 60th Biennale of Art in Venice. Alongside the topics of forced labour camps and the traumatic experiences of political prisoners, it employs a desk research analysis to explore artistic practices related to remembrance and reconciliation. The concept of postmemory is utilised to examine various collective memory practices and to trace the process of addressing trauma-related questions from the recent past. Its main novelty arises from the research questions posed, which argue that the role of art is not only to be reflective or critical but also to facilitate transformation. Thus, artistic expression ultimately aims to recreate an unbiased memory process of the recent past, serving as a rich field for reconciled practices.

Key words:

Young artists, culture, Art, recent past, Bulgarian pavilion, Venice biennale, reconciliation, trauma, remembrance, postmemory

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1. Introduction and literature review

In its many forms, art has an extraordinary ability to channel experiences across history, activating processes of memorialization that are also processes of transformation. Art has always been a powerful instrument of memory, truth in the public realm, and at more intimate scales. Living in a transformative era, where tendencies of youth are in excess, being driven by social media, it is extremely conducive to observe how young artists are focused on the past to transcribe their understanding through modern art - visuals, photographs, and multimedia art installations. The post-memory concept through which the article approaches young artists, conceptualizing the Communist past of Bulgaria, and applying it in the narration is derived from the works of Mariane Hirch (*POSTMEMORY.Net*). Post-memory term narrates one generation to another, heroes or those affected in this story. The prefix 'Post' points to the subject, which occurs after the experience itself, and next generations. Memory can transform information not based on personal experience, however, being told by secondary sources into secondary narration. The postmemory term describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those, who came before; the experience in this context is they "remember" only using the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grow up to the traumatized experience of the generation - close relatives. Hirsch explains the concept of 'Postmemory' referring to the Holocaust, but this concept can be applied to the explanation of the phenomenon of 'Historical trauma'. The research approach and process of the postmemory of Mariane Hirch, although being referred to the Holocaust is applied in this study to confirm the process, which is very strongly linked to trauma discourses, hidden stories from the public and raises the following research questions:

- What is the effect of Art expression in dealing with the recent past?
- What is the influence of young artists' perception in unveiling trauma discourses and the subjectivity of the process?

Previous work on the topic of this paper is on methodological issues when presenting the curator's observations (Boychev, 2020). Data protection of artists' work is also a discussed topic (Czaplewski, M. *et al.*, 2018). Artists' perceptions and customer interactions are another topic (Dushkova, M and Kostov, I., 2025). Using AI for generating artwork and ethical issues is an important topic (Vasilev, J., 2021; Marinova, N., 2024). Presenting artwork in mobile applications is also discussed (Cristescu, M. *et al.*, 2019; Penchev, B., 2025; Vasilev, J. *et al.*, 2024). Creating virtual exhibitions is a forthcoming topic (Vitliemov P., *et al.*, 2020).

2. Materials and methods

A curator is a professional who manages and oversees collections, exhibits, or even specific areas within cultural institutions like museums, galleries, or zoos. The author of this paper is the curator for Bulgaria (https://wammuseum.org/the-team/) at the World Art and Memory Museum (https://wammuseum.org/country/bulgaria/). The author's work and expertise are focused on commemoration and collective memory in the cultural area. The author's research areas of interest are focused on the history of Science, Immigration policies, Human Rights policies, and Public policies for Youth people in a worldwide context. The main method for collecting data for this paper is personal observations. The topic of this paper is extremely timely and original. The article illuminates "quiet" areas of Bulgaria's historical past through the prism of contemporary art, managing to weave artistic interpretation with a social and educational mission.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Reconciliation through forgetting vs the memory of the past being accepted

The past 36 years spent in transitioning from a totalitarian regime to democracy inspire the memory work in the Art scene in Bulgaria. Similar to many other societies that have gone through traumatic events, two conflicting approaches emerge in dealing with this past: the first one is "reconciliation through forgetting". The second is where the memory of the past is not brushed aside but examined and accepted. Thus, the memory politics of the recent past, on remembrance, lies between these two poles, representing different social groups and legitimising their collective memory. While there is still a tremendous gap in Bulgarian historical memory about the communist labour camps in the country due to authentic visual evidence, the archive documents, oral

histories, and personal memories of the survivors present a powerful image and cognition of the repressions. Artists, as well as citizens, have not been able to construct a unified past. But their efforts in Bulgaria have been reflective and critical within their own national context, no matter the systematic shortages the art scene has suffered. Among these concepts, stories and thorough scholarly research emerged at the Bulgarian pavilion at the 60th Biennale of Art in Venice, where artists were invited to respond to the theme "Foreigners Everywhere". In January 2024, "The Neighbours", a curated project by Vasil Vlof Artv of the artists and scholars Krasimira Butseva, Julian Chehirian, and Lilia Topouzova, was selected to represent the country by a jury in the Ministry of Culture; the pavilion was located in Titian Hall in Don Orione Center.

3.2. Curating cultures of remembrance

My research works on the 'World Art and Memory Museum'(*WAMM (World Art and Memory Museum)*, 2021a) and the curation of the Bulgarian chapter(*Bulgaria*, 2020) brought me to the initiation of elements of the presented work - "The Neighbours" through a video art by Jullian Chehirian and Krasimira Butseva. My experience in curating the artworks of Butseva (*Krasimira Butseva*, 2021) and Chehirian (*Julian Chehirian*, 2021), on the repressive labour camps in Bulgaria (1945 - 1989) and the role of Bulgarian psychiatry to undermine talented artists due to streams of influence, convinced me of their strong research position to combine oral stories through visual art and to evolve context of silenced stories through generations and politics.



Image 1 –"The Neighbours"
Source: https://bulgarianpavilionvenice.art/en/media

The presented work "The Neighbours," a multimedia installation, explores the silenced stories of survivors—victims of political violence during the Bulgarian communist era. Before being finally set up in 2022, as a result of long labour, the first exhibition of the installation, later to be selected, was shown in a studio on Georgi Benkovski str. 49 in Sofia, Bulgaria, to many people, friends, and collaborators.



Image 2 - "The Neighbours" - (a living room)
Source: https://bulgarianpavilionvenice.art/en/media

The three sections of the pavilion – a living room, a kitchen, a bedroom- represent stories from inner circles, where light, objects, sound, video, are in effect connected through an ecosystem of networks between me and others, of affects, where you tend to forget to survive. The narrated texts by the actors, the stories of survivors, are silently welcoming you to move across the rooms and to listen. Having graduated at the crossroads of the two political regimes- Communism and Democracy, I do remember the untold stories in the textbooks about the repressive nature of the regime. The stories and facts from the recent past, even today, when we have a law on the 'Criminal Nature of the Communist Regime', face counter-narratives in the high school educational system. However, recently newly proposed history books for high-school students in Bulgaria have triggered controversy, glaring omissions about the fear, oppression, and desperation that defined the daily existence of many Bulgarians under Communism, and whitewashing over the repressive nature of the regime. The installation brings the discourse of the repressive nature of the labour camps – approximately 100 euphemistically termed "Correction through Labour Facility" camps across Bulgaria created and closed in different periods between 1944 -1989. The stories in the installation are revoking the discourse of the space and nation through the forcible change of the names of the Muslims in Bulgaria, and the people who opposed this eventually were being traumatised through various means.



Image 3 – "The Neighbours" - (a kitchen)
Source: https://bulgarianpavilionvenice.art/en/media

As well, the three sections - rooms, also reflect three ways of the lived experience of state violence. The living room resembles the voices of those who've been vocal about their experience in public. The bedroom holds the stories of those who have been reluctant to speak because of fear, or due to those who have never been asked. The kitchen, as a metaphor of community and stories themselves, represents the silenced stories of those who cannot remember the details, but the stories remain. Moreover, in the essay "Collecting Against History," Krasimira Butseva, in the catalogue to the exhibition, brings us to why we need to revoke the vanished stories, to materialise them, not to forget, and to be silenced. During the 60th Venice Art Biennale, Pope Francis addressed a group of invited artists in the Church of La Maddalena in the Giudecca's women's prison facility and praised artists as true visionaries, who can see beyond the boundaries of our world. The message, which was imported by the Pope Francis was *"art has the status of a 'city of refuge', a city that "disobeys the rule of violence and discrimination to create forms of human belonging capable of recognizing, including, protecting, and embracing everyone"*(*Visit to Venice: Meeting with Artists (Church of La Maddalena on the Island of Giudecca 28 April 2024*).



Image 4 - Vicinity of Don Orione Center - Workshops with children led by Teodora Baharova; Source: https://bulgarianpavilionvenice.art/en/media

4. Conclusions

In the introductory section the questions have been asked whether the effect of Art expression on the recent past by young artists holds subjectivity or its effect is to have a certain impact. One of my starting research questions and conclusions was that Artists of different generations working on commemoration and remembrance search for an unbiased approach to recent history, where the border between subjective and objective moments in the transition from living memory toward historical narrative is being challenged. Moreover, applying this on the site-specific Bulgarian pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale, based on the postmemory, by recreating these three sections, the three artists/researchers are reflecting very significantly as well how we remember, carry, and reflect trauma through "banality of the evil". And here in the essence of educational re-creative activities(workshops) which were carried outside of the Bulgarian pavilion with children, comes one statement, which provoked me a year ago to seek more practices for reconciliation during an exhibition visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, USA, *"the past is never fully past; rather, it is a fertile field of possibilities for the present.*" (*Chosen Memories: Contemporary Latin American Art from the*

Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Gift and Beyond), where our ability for reconciliation should lead us.

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