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**THE CONTEMPORARY MUSEUM/THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART:
THE CONTEMPORARINESS DEBATE (WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY?)
FROM A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE**

Abstract:

Contemporary art is a situation or, rather, a plurality of situations, whose definition/naming involves irreconcilable differences. If what was contemporary fifty years ago is no longer contemporary, what name shall we give it? Does it automatically fall into the category of the “modern”? If so, will what is “contemporary” today become “modern” in the museum of tomorrow? Or will it be “after-modern”? Or will it, perhaps, directly be transformed into a “classic”? The article discusses the possible functions of a museum of contemporary art today. The lack of venues for contemporary art in Sofia, as well as of museums for both modern art and contemporary art, has been the subject of heated debate in recent years. What is contemporary and rightfully could belong in a museum of contemporary art is a central question in these discussions. “Contemporary art” cannot serve as a concept that is defined once and for all. Every time the term is used, it is used from within a particular situation and needs to be negotiated. This text contends that contemporariness is plural. To be legitimate, its presentation can/must also be plural.

Key words: Contemporary Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art, Contemporary Art, the Contemporariness Debate, Contemporariness in Plural

The art museum, the reformulation of its underlying ideology, and its role in the historical presentation of art constitute an issue whose relevance has remained undiminished for more than twenty years now. In Bulgaria, this issue is a painful one and discussions of it are inevitably polemical, due to the lack of any national art museums, and of any national contemporary art museums in particular, that are organized and run on up-to-date principles. This lack is felt particularly keenly – and is particularly astounding for an outsider – in Sofia, the country's capital city. Sofia is conspicuously absent from the general European map, as well as from the regional Balkan one, of art museum networks that mount major international exhibitions.

A Contemporary Museum

What is our idea of a contemporary art museum? What examples do we have of such museums? Today, with increasing opportunities for travel, for many people from all walks of life and regardless of their knowledge of or interest in the visual arts, visits to art museums are a staple of the tourist itinerary. In this manner, a broad and to a certain extent unpredictable public acquires its own experience and its own ideas of the art museum as an institution. Depending on the particular museums visited, these ideas are more or less varied. The types of museums vary: there are the mega-museums, the urban museums, museums dedicated to a particular epoch or region, university museums, and so on (it is not our purpose here to draw a comprehensive list of all the various types of museums or of their different policies).

In her essay "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship", Carol Duncan¹ discusses the role of art museums in the constitution of communities. She points out that contemporary art museums are important and necessary attributes of a well-furnished state. Thus, art museums – and museums of modern and contemporary art in particular – are also founded in so-called Third-World countries governed by authoritarian and despotic regimes, as a way to signal that the country shares the values of the highly developed West, that it is a reliable partner. Duncan offers the examples of the Museum of Modern Art opened in Manila by Imelda Marcos in 1975, and the Museum of Contemporary Art that opened in Tehran in 1977. Art museums transform the values of material wealth and social status crucial to rulers' and patrons' private collections into public "spiritual wealth".

In each particular case, however, whenever we examine the public meaning that art museums create and the means that they use to convey it, we need to consider the specific political context.

Duncan concludes her essay by posing two questions crucial to museum practices: Who constitutes the community at which a museum narrative is targeted? And who can / should exercise the authority to define its identity?

According to the contemporary idea of the art museum – once we allow for the variety of types of museums, – any permanent exhibition needs to reveal not only the specificity of the collection on display, but also its own manner of presentation, its own ideology and scenography. It is precisely *scenography* that is increasingly used to describe the design of a museum's space, expressing as the word does the idea of this activity's integral part in the overall "spectacle" of the exhibition. The availability of (at least three) different types of lighting; an air-conditioning system that ensures the comfort of both artifacts and people; a good sound system; facilities for the laying out / staging of the museum space; a variety of exhibition furniture – these are all a must for any contemporary exhibition. The similarities with the performing arts are obvious.



YANKO
APOSTOLOV,
PROJECT OF A NEW
ART MUSEUM
RECONSTRUCTED
BUILDING) IN SOFIA,
2010



The ratio between the exhibition space and the rest of the museum space can vary, but for newly designed, up-to-date museums it is believed that it should be about 1:2. Setting aside space for temporary exhibitions is also a must. The rest of the space – double that of the exhibition space – accommodates suitably equipped storerooms (in Sofia's museums, these typically look like and function as boxrooms for an assortment of humble objects); restoration studios and laboratories; photo studios; rooms for receiving visitors and preparing travelling exhibitions; a library; an archive room; the director's office; the offices of curators, guards, the staff dealing with the museum's public relations and educational programs, etc. Nor should we forget the obligatory bookshop and the gift shop selling museum-related gifts (rather than just any kind of souvenir), or, finally, the attractive café.

The polemics about contemporary art's entry into museums started as early as the last decades of the 19th century. One famous example is that of Manet's *Olympia* (1863), which was mocked by the public and caricatured by the press in 1865, but in 1907, after years of campaigning by Manet's admirers, entered the Louvre's collection. The knowledge offered by art museums and the effects sought through the spectacle of an exhibition have been the subject of vigorous debate.

The first major museum dedicated entirely to contemporary art, New York's MoMA, opened in 1929. Alan Wallach's book on art museums in the USA includes a chapter on MoMA, entitled "The Museum of Modern Art: The Past's Future".² In this chapter, Wallach discusses the different stages of the Museum's history and the strategies the Museum developed to resolve the contradiction between its contemporary art programme (the "Modern Art" in MoMA stands for art of the present day) and its accumulation of a museum collection.

In Europe, an example of such a museum is the Museum of Art in Łódź, founded in the early 1930s, on Władysław Strzemiński's initiative, as an avant-garde art museum with an international collection.

Since the 1970s, there has been a lively debate on the methodological principles of art research, of historicizing, and of critical writing. Presentations of art organized on a firm national basis, or on racist or sexist distinction, are unacceptable. Normative hierarchies and the positing of boundaries, such as that between "high" and "low" art, have been dismissed. Exhibition narratives that claim uniqueness or indisputable veracity are unwelcome. Basic concepts that were once used unproblematically have come to be questioned.

Art – Modern Art – Contemporary Art

Today, the idea of art is an uncertain one. The notion of art established in the Enlightenment era – with the emergence and the recognition of the role of the institutions of art: academies, museums, art salons, art criticism and art history itself – is now considered inefficient with re-

gard to contemporary art practices. In her book *L'Art contemporain en France* (*Contemporary Art in France*), Catherine Millet discusses the rejection of the idea of the art work in some art practices of the 1960s. The Group for Research in Visual Art (GRAV), for example, proposed in one of its manifestoes the abolishment of the category "work of art"; Ben Vautier declared art useless; and in a 1968 interview Daniel Buren proclaimed that art was no longer justifiable.³ The numerous examples are symptomatic of the change taking place.

Since the 1970s, the "end of art" debate has also gained impetus, joined, from different standpoints, by philosophers and theoreticians of the visual image such as Heidegger, Baudrillard, Danto, and Belting. The reverberations of this debate reached Bulgaria much later, with the publication of the first Bulgarian translations of Belting⁴ and Danto⁵, and the first essays on the issue by Bulgarian authors such as Angel Angelov⁶, Chavdar Popov⁷, and others.

I will not dwell here on that point in critical thinking and writing when the "end" of other / of all humanities formed in the modern era (the end of history, of philosophy, of literature, and so on) was the subject of lively debate. The debate about the end of modernity goes beyond the field of knowledge production to focus on the implications of a globalization that affects the very conditions of human existence.

Today, we can no longer talk of "art" unproblematically, as if nothing has happened. At the same time, the "end of art" debate seems to have exhausted its possibilities, and, after consensus has been reached in critical circles on what kind of art history is no longer necessary (or possible), the lasting question has re-emerged of how to write in the present day and what, if not "art", to call the thing we need to discuss. The second part of this question is particularly hard to answer.

If we look up the word "art" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we will find examples of dozens of uses in various fields of knowledge and activity. Broadly speaking, these ultimately describe skills resulting from knowledge or practice ("the art of management", "the art of love", etc.). Virtually all adjective-noun collocations containing "art" are related to the establishment and operation of the art institutions of the 19th century, when these phrases first came into use: "art auction", "art collecting / collection / collector", "art connoisseur", "art dealer", "art exhibition", "art life", "art-lover", "art magazine", "art market", "art world", etc. – to mention but a few. This is the language in which the narratives of modern art have been told in Europe and the USA from the 1850s onwards.

"Art" and the various collocations with "art" are still being used in the historical narratives produced today, which adhere to a modernist paradigm (though an admittedly broader one): a paradigm characterized by the clear sequence of various *-isms*, a paradigm linked to the idea of "progress" and excluding anything happening synchronically but outside the "line of progress" in form and style. In critical writing which steps beyond this paradigm, the words "art" and "artistic" are also used, but not in an essentialist way, as if these concepts were beyond all doubt: rather, they are used as concepts that emerged in and are related to particular circumstances and practices.

The phrase "modern art" originally came into being in the second half of the 19th century as a way to describe the art of the present day. Baudelaire proposed his ideas of "present-day" art in his study *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (*The Painter of Modern Life*) (published in 1863). Using the word "modernité" / "modernity" as a term, Baudelaire insisted on ephemerality and transience as modernity's key characteristics.

Today, there is consensus on the beginning of "modern art": it is believed to have emerged in the industrialization era. There is also agreement on certain of its characteristics, which ensures its continued existence and use as a term. But while it is possible to achieve consensus on

the use of “modern art” in the European paradigm, the notion of “contemporary art” is still the subject of heated debate.

A Necessary Digression

It is interesting to note that in Bulgaria it was “modern” rather than “contemporary” that was perceived as problematic as a reference to art. The art society that was founded in 1903 called itself “Contemporary Art”, and the art forms and practices it developed were analogous to those typical of modern art societies elsewhere in Europe around 1900. During the communist rule, it was not before the 1980s that modern art started to be written about – and this is true of both pre- and post- WWII modern art. Art in the new political situation was referred to as “contemporary”. The art of the other communist countries, too, was “contemporary” art. One remarkable event in these circumstances is Dimitar Avramov’s book *Aesthetics of Modern Art*,⁸



IVAN KIRKOV,
COMPOSITION,
C. 1980

NEDKO
SOLAKOV,
THE YELLOW
BLOB STORY,
1997



which was published in 1969 and offered an erudite account of “modern art” in the West European cultural paradigm. But at that time the cultural gap was unbridgeable: “modern art” was by definition “western”, while Bulgarian art was divided into art “of the bourgeois era” and “contemporary art”.

The characteristics attributed to “contemporary art” vary, according to environment. The term’s uses are often vague: “contemporary art” can be defined as the art of the present day; or as a variety of (neo-)conceptual art – as the staging of a situation with a certain underlying idea rather than as an aesthetic artifact; or else as works of art of indisputable value, although that value is never made explicit – and so on.

In her Introduction to *Petit dictionnaire des artistes contemporains* (*Small Dictionary of Contemporary Artists*), Pascale Le Thorel-Daviot explains that the dictionary covers artists born after 1900. The principle of selection is that of chronology. Some of the artists who feature in the dictionary are no longer among the living. The selection was the result of a survey conducted among 34 experts – museum curators and critics from France and elsewhere – each of whom suggested a list of about 400 artists.⁹ In this way, the subjective factor was eliminated. (A question – which we will not discuss here – is that of the criteria according to which the experts themselves were selected.)

In Millet’s *L’Art contemporain en France*, which we have already referred to, the chronological boundaries of the study are explicitly defined: from 1965 to the time Millet completed her text, 1987. A subsequent edition of the book contains an extra chapter covering the period after 1987. Millet’s main argument for setting the beginning of her narrative in 1965 is the substantial change that was taking place at that time in relations between art and society. Millet is, however, insistent that her narrative is a historical one and, “being a history, this book also tells about facts and events, highlights certain links between different trends, and focuses on connections with foreign schools of art”.¹⁰ Despite the change described, Millet very often uses the terms

“modern” and “contemporary” interchangeably – suggesting that there is no unbridgeable divide between the two terms.

Contemporary art is a situation or, rather, a plurality of situations, whose definition/naming-involves irreconcilable differences.

A Museum of Modern Art/A Museum of Contemporary Art

“Modern” and “contemporary”, we have seen, have often changed places; and the shifts and confusion that result, are only to be expected. When, for example, Baudelaire used the word “moderne” / “modern”, he meant “of the present day”. In her Bulgarian translation of Baudelaire, on the other hand, Lilia Staleva chose to use the word “savremenen”: that is, “contemporary”.

The earlier of the museums of present-day art typically choose the term “modern art” for their name – New York’s MoMA is one of these. Wallach tells us of MoMA’s efforts to resolve the contradiction between its contemporary art programme and its growing collection by selling to other museums works acquired more than fifty years previously. Thus, in 1947 MoMA sold the Metropolitan Museum of Art paintings by Cézanne and Picasso, among other works. Shortly afterwards, however, this practice was abandoned and the building housing the museum underwent several considerable extensions.¹¹ Today, when the idea of “modern art” seems to be more clearly defined, MoMA’s substantial collections mostly present a memory of the artifacts and art practices that precede the present day.

Enrico Lunghi, director of Luxembourg’s Museum of Modern Art (MUDAM)¹² once said in conversation that the mass public finds it easier to imagine what should be in a museum of modern art than what should be in a future museum of contemporary art. “When you say ‘museum of contemporary art’, everybody starts asking, “All right, but what shall we put in it?’ and so on and so forth. When you say ‘museum of modern art’, people say, “Oh, modern art. OK, we know what that’s about.”¹³

That does not, of course, mean that the presentation of “modern art” in museums is unproblematic. In the last two decades, modern art exhibitions have been the subject of lively discussions which have led to fundamental changes.

In local environments and cultural situations such as Bulgaria’s – environments and situations which do not in the modern time give rise to massive influence and whose cultural development involves political division, – the use of “modern art” as a term demands that a number of questions be asked and answered. Here is just one of those questions: Would we be justified to display in a conceivable museum of modern art in Sofia some of the work dating from Bulgaria’s communist rule, from the 1960s to the 1980s (such as, for example, the work of Ivan Kirkov, Ivan Vukadinov, Georgi Bozhilov – Slona), or the work of the next generation (Nikolay Maystorov, Andrey Daniel, Stanislav Pamukchiev, etc.)?

The museum which opened in Belgrade in 1965 is called a Museum of Contemporary Art. Today, it is still undergoing long-term reconstruction and when, fully renovated, it opens again, it will offer an overhauled vision of contemporariness. Museum collections, however, remain and – as we saw with MoMA – pose an insoluble problem. If what was contemporary in 1965 is no longer contemporary, what name shall we give it? Does it automatically fall into the category of the “modern”? If so, will what is “contemporary” today become “modern” in the museum of tomorrow? Or will it be “after-modern”? Or will it, perhaps, directly be transformed into a “classic”? The art practices and artifacts which become part of permanent museum exhibitions and acquire museum authority cease to be contemporary in the sense of involving the taking of artistic risk today. A museum of the classic type gives works of visual art an indisputable value,

it places them outside space and time. A museum's contemporariness is different from the contemporariness of artistic practice.

The terminological difficulties in the use of "modern" and "contemporary" reveal irreconcilable fundamental differences. The names we use cannot serve as concepts that are defined once and for all. Every time they are used, they are used from within a particular situation and need to be negotiated.

In the last fifteen years or so, we have been witnesses to a boom in contemporary art museums. In the Balkans, we have seen the opening of such public museums in Skopje, Bucharest and Istanbul. Belgrade's museum of contemporary art is, as we have said, under reconstruction. A few private museums have also appeared.

Many of the so-called museums of contemporary art are very flexible as institutions. After-modern critical ideology precludes the possibility of defining and fixing strict boundaries. Some art museums dismiss even the idea of the obligatory collection and their activities come close to those of such centres for contemporary art as the kunsthalle, or Warsaw's Ujazdowski Castle, or New York's P.S.1 (a public school converted into a centre for contemporary art). Is the appeal of visual images and situations created by different means today the result of their presumed "museum" qualities such as uniqueness, significant authorship, and a place in the hierarchy of historical narrative, or is it a matter of the value of our common present-day experience, of the sense of time they give us, of the transient moment shared? It is impossible to answer this question conclusively. Sofia simply lacks such venues – as well as museums – which could serve as a site for the ephemeral to happen, a place for what both vanishes and remains.

It seems important to me to problematize the venues of our encounters with contemporary art practices. The idea of contemporary art is related to the idea of the continual formulation and reformulation of the present-day situation, rather than with the traditional idea of the museum.

The Contemporariness Debate

The right to contemporariness is the subject of dispute – today more so than ever because of the global information network. As far as "contemporariness" in art is concerned, the differences are irreconcilable.

In a conversation about Sofia's prospective museum of contemporary art, Angel Angelov opposed the understanding of contemporary art in the singular. "Contemporariness is not unitary and it is impossible to construct it as unitary". Contemporariness, in other words, does not lend itself to museification.¹⁴

A museum is a machine for (the production and management of) memories. It is not a place for the arrangement of contemporariness. Where contemporary art is concerned, a "museum" is only the tentative name of an institution, of a public venue for art's encounter with people. This name points not so much to a traditional museum's chief function as memory depository as to a desire for the institution of contemporary art to evoke in public consciousness the idea of already established authority, of reliability. For the same purpose, Millet calls her book a "history". Histories today, however, are perceived as plural, according to different views on historicization. This plurality also underlies concepts of museums as institutions involved in the process of historicization. Contemporariness is plural. To be legitimate, its presentation can/must also be plural.

Endnotes:

- ¹ C. Duncan, Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship, in: *Exhibiting Cultures*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London 1991, 88-103.
- ² A. Wallach, The Museum of Modern Art: The Past's Future, in: *Exhibiting Contradiction. Essays on the Art Museum in the United States*, The university of Massachusetts Press, 1998, 73-87.
- ³ C. Millet, *L'Art contemporain en France*, ed. Flammarion, Paris 1987, 23.
- ⁴ X. Белтинг, Епилози на изкуството или на историята на изкуството, в: *Следистории на изкуството*, съст. Ирина Генова, Ангел Ангелов, превод Гертана Фъркова, изд. Фондация Сфрагида, София 2001, 49-64.
- ⁵ А. Данто, Приближавайки края на изкуството, в: *Следистории на изкуството*, съст. Ирина Генова, Ангел Ангелов, превод Милена Попова, изд. Фондация Сфрагида, София 2001, 11-26; А. Данто, Три десетилетия след края на изкуството, в: *Следистории на изкуството*, съст. Ирина Генова, Ангел Ангелов, превод Биляна Курташева, изд. Фондация Сфрагида, София 2001, 29-47.
- ⁶ А. Ангелов, Коментар върху „краят на историята на изкуството”: мнения и полемики”, от Чавдар Попов, сп. *Критика и хуманизъм*, кн. 20, бр. 1, 2005, 315-330.
- ⁷ Ч. Попов, Изкуствознание и постмодернизъм. Тезата за „края на историята на изкуството”: мнения и полемики, сп. *Проблеми на изкуството*, бр. 1, 2005, 15-24.
- ⁸ Д. Аврамов, *Естетика на модерното изкуство*, изд. “Наука и изкуство”, София 1969.
- ⁹ P. Le Thorel-Daviot, *Petit dictionnaire des artistes contemporains*, ed. Larousse- Bordas, Paris 1996, 5-9.
- ¹⁰ C. Millet, *L'Art contemporain en France*, ed. Flammarion, Paris 1987, 5.
- ¹¹ A. Wallach, The Museum of Modern Art: The Past's Future, in: *Exhibiting Contradiction. Essays on the Art Museum in the United States*, The university of Massachusetts Press, 1998, 80-82.
- ¹² Lunghi became director of MUDAM in 2009. He had previously been artistic director of Casino Luxembourg – a forum for contemporary art forms and practices; and has also curated a number of major exhibitions of contemporary art. In 2009, he was a visiting lecturer at the “Visual Image” seminar at New Bulgarian University.
- ¹³ Е. Лунги, Съвременното изкуство днес – преформулиране на местата, в: *Модерно и съвременно – за изкуството и неговите истории*, съст. Ирина Генова, изд. на Нов български университет, София 2010, 82.
- ¹⁴ Conversation published in *Kritika i humanizam*, vol. 24, 2007.

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SAVREMENI MUZEJ / MUZEJ SAVREMENE UMETNOSTI: DEBATA O SAVREMENOSTI
(ŠTA JE SAVREMENO?) IZ LOKALNE PERSPEKTIVE

Sažetak:

Pojam savremene umetnosti izaziva danas brojne nedoumice. Ako je nešto nazvano savremenim pre pedeset godina kako treba danas da ga zovemo? Da li ono automatski prelazi u kategoriju “modernog”? Ako je tako da li će onda svako “savremeno” postati “moderno” u muzeju sutrašnjice? Ili će biti “nakon-modernog”? Ili će možda postati “klasično”? Članak se bavi odgovorima na ova pitanja, mogućim smernicama delovanja “savremenih” muzeja danas, kao i problemom odsustva muzejskog prostora za savremenu ali i modernu umetnost u Sofiji.

Ključne reči: muzej savremene umetnosti, savremeni muzej, savremena umetnost, polemike o savremenosti, savremenost u množini

(KATEGORIJA ČLANKA: NAUČNI ČLANAK – POLEMIKA)