

## **Review**

**By Prof. Dr. Galina Lardeva-Minkova**

For the dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional field 8.2. Fine Arts, Scientific Degree in "Art Studies and Fine Arts" by Ilko Borisov Nikolchev on the topic "The Interaction of the Viewer and the Work in Nonobjective Sculpture. Manifestations in Bulgarian sculpture from the end of the XX and the beginning of the XXI century".

### **I. Applicant and Competition Details**

Ilko Nikolchev graduated with a degree in Sculpture from the National Academy of Arts in the class of Prof. Krum Damyanov in 1995. He is a lecturer in the Department of Drawing and Modeling of the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy. Ilko Nikolchev has been an active participant in the processes of contemporary Bulgarian art from the second half of the 1990s to the present. He has been involved in creative appearances in the group „7 + 1”, which has existed since 1997. The main members of „7 + 1” are the sculptors Johannes Artinian, Kamen Tsvetkov, Krasimir Angelov, Pancho Kurtev, Stefan Hadzhiev, arch. Georgi Daskalov and Ilina Koralova - art critic. Like other members of the group, Nikolchev works in various media, with his main creative appearances in the field of research in his dissertation: sculptural compositions and installations in public environments.

Ilko Borisov Nikolchev is a PhD student at the Fine Arts Department of the New Bulgarian University - Sofia, with order # 3-PK-30, effective 01.10.2018. The dissertation work was discussed at a meeting of the department, held on 28.10.2019, and on this basis it is scheduled for defense. The procedure was followed.

## II. Description of the dissertation work

Ilko Nikolchev's dissertation consists of an introduction followed by an introduction to terminology, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. The work is complemented by three annexes relating to each of the chapters.

If - from the point of view of the integrity of the research, we try to summarize - the main point of view in the dissertation is the problem of the new ways of influencing contemporary sculptural practice towards the viewer and its multifaceted interaction with it. Fortunately, in the overall narrative of the study, this emphasis not only is present but also builds relationships, organizes the internal logic of presentation, and assumes a major role in the juxtaposition of world and Bulgarian examples. However, the title does not particularly carefully place one in a certain sense a precarious notion: "nonobjective sculpture".

It is difficult to explain what non-objective art is. As the text points out (p. 14), it is a 1918 Alexander Rodchenko concept, which has a lasting impact in the context of constructivism between the two world wars, but its character is markedly manifest. That is, the concept has no theoretical or reflective potential. Moreover, in the Russian language, the morphemic negation "необъективная" (under Rodchenko's title "Необъективная живопись") has a different meaning from the Bulgarian "необективна", which moves only in the direction of the meaning "subjective" and even "biased" and not towards the idea of withdrawing the object from its status as a central aesthetic element.

All the conceptual wandering (non-objective - abstract - concrete - minimalistic) that is evident in the conceptual arrangements of the introduction could have been spared if a neutral "operational-floating" definition were used, which the work practically uses. The development deals with sculptural works, sculptural objects, sculptural installations, sculptural structures, and sculptural compositions. The authors of texts for these sculptural manifestations use the same definitions, and rightly emphasize that the manifestations function in the context of the sculptural tradition, but in different ways withdraw from it, that is, they are "moving", "commenting" on the sculpture in

its the classic sense of being relativistic. This operability is also enshrined in the performances of the „7 + 1” group.

**Chapter one** presents the various phenomena in the development and reformation of sculptural language in the twentieth century, as well as the important intersections of this development with other events in the visual arts. With reason and a good sense of historical contexts, special emphasis is placed here on the aesthetic radicality of the avant-garde, and more specifically on the fundamentalist of avant-garde reductionism: the question arises without what else can be a work of art. The examples that show how avant-garde requests are gradually being transformed into a multifaceted process are appropriate and correct.

Along with the appropriate example targeting, from the beginning of the first chapter the development has stabilized theoretically. Of particular importance is the definition of a place in the plan of its phenomenological, social and discursive dimensions (p.28-29) - this is appropriate and important. This was done by referring to Miwon Kuon's book "One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity". Another important and precise step brings to the idea of transforming the meaning of a work of art from material to situational domination (p.33). - These correctly occupied settings naturally lead to the outlining of the new role that is taking over the public space in focal phenomena.

The works and authors themselves that fall under the observation of the first part are properly selected. The quotations related to their work are correct and homogeneously interwoven with the main narrative of the dissertation. Works by Frank Stella, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, Christo, Daniel Buren, Anish Kapoor and more are presented.

**Chapter two** looks at phenomena similar to those already described worldwide in a Bulgarian context. It begins with an attempt to define a theory of perception that is justified, since the title of the piece focuses its attention on "the interaction of the viewer and the work". Particularly valuable in this chapter is the directing of Ilko Nikolchev to the story of the works of his colleagues, to the contexts and situations

that they simultaneously inhabit and articulate with their works, to the material and super-material problems that they express. In this way, the development enters into the essence of the views and sense of the space-time continuum in which the works in question exist.

Thus, the story of the role of sculpture symposia and plein airs (p.71) becomes a natural center here. These forums have been shown to become a laboratory receptive space for rethinking the new functions of sculpture in the changing times of the 1980s. Nikolchev rightly refers to them and considers them in their complexity - both as a result of a process and as an initiator of processes. The overall symptomatology of this situation of the transition from classical to - conditionally speaking, situational sculpture - is felt and conveyed. It is remarkable that the transition process is captured in its duration, in a smooth and consistent continuity between generations and authors.

Particularly interesting and dense are the developments dedicated to the work of Dan Tenev. At the same time, the comparative perspective in them clearly flashes: the land-art works of the Bulgarian author are seen and understood against the background of the works of Robert Smithson or Christo, but Nikolchev manages to highlight features that - on the one hand - are an expression of the specific Bulgarian environment, and - on the other - are intended for it.

**In the third chapter**, the dissertation transfers its object of observation to Ilko Nikolchev's own creative practice in the context of his participation in the group "7 + 1". This is done through a well-grounded and completely consistent transition from what has been stated in the previous chapters, regardless of the change of view. The focus here is on personal evidence of spatial transformations, as well as strictly related "technological" issues and solutions. Also noteworthy is the appropriate selection of secondary literature for what the group has created. These are not just praiseworthy texts that give 7 + 1 a leading position in contemporary visual art in Bulgaria. These are texts (mainly those of Maria Vassileva) that, in keeping with the narrative of the intentional perspective, interweave the threads of the dissertation concept.

Here again, as in the previous chapter, the impression is given of the collective nature of ideas in the creative process, which ultimately brings to the value of tradition. It is the sum of common understandings, attitudes and creative reflexes that, even in the range of the most radical gestures, bring communication to the other as the highest value of any art activity.

As a result of all this, **the conclusion** sounds completely convincing and precise with the way it sums up the various contributing moments of the dissertation, but also with the way it captures the spirit of what Ilko Nikolchev has written. The creative logic that drives the story, has made the suggestions of the development so clear that the essence of the overall comparative structure is enlightened without being directly stated: The difference between the world and the Bulgarian creative experience is not in scale, but in the infrastructure of discussion. As the conclusion remind again (p. 103), the significance of works such as Richard Serra's "Tilted Arch" and Daniel Buren's "Les Deux Plateaux" are determined by and for the sake of talking, and the discussion they engender is an integral part of them.

The corpus of literature used both in Bulgarian and English, is remarkable, and in almost all cases it has been appropriately and fully implemented, and references have been made in accordance with the norms of the scientific standard.

The abstract follows correctly the structure and content of the dissertation, supplemented by rich visual material.

### **III. Contributions of the dissertation**

- The indisputable contribution of the dissertation is **the dynamic combination of three separate stories about the development of sculpture** of the last century. These stories are fundamentally different in their optics and in principle difficult to reconcile: (1) the historical perspective on the avant-garde phase of modernism and its implications in sculpture; (2) the perspective of the Bulgarian transition and its consequences, belonging to the scope of the art criticism rather than the history; (3) the

expression of explicit poetics, laid both in the traces of historical and aesthetic grounds, and in the plan of contemporary community attitudes.

- The essential contribution of the dissertation is the imposition and consistent following of the receptive perspective, which brings to the fore the relationship between the work and the perceiver and traces it in many cases and contexts. In this way, deviations in the reception create constitutive differences in the works; they carry the "mirrors" in which the works of contemporary sculpture exist.

- As an important contribution, it should be noted that the **precise narrative** of the development of Bulgarian sculpture since the 1980s has been presented from **the position of an active participant in the artistic process**. The characteristic intersection of historical "chronicle", personal presence in the historical situation and own artistic views is distinguished by its depth, density and homogeneity (except for the introductory paragraphs).

- Plenty of photo material perfectly selected and oriented towards the dissertation. This contribution stems in part from the previous one. The choice of both physiognomic and photogenic works is excellent, the images in the three appendices are very precisely selected. As a result, the specific accents that the dissertant Nikolchev has decided to bring to his work are distinguished by their sensibility, with good visibility for the reader / viewer. This applies both to representative works of the world avant-garde and to Bulgarian examples - something that is extremely difficult and valuable.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In his dissertation, Ilko Nikolchev has reworked and rethought a large amount of heterogeneous material, transferring this new experience of reflection to his own work as a successful visual artist. Despite the known conceptual uncertainty of the concept of "nonobjective sculpture", Ilko Borisov Nikolchev's dissertation has all the qualities to be successfully defended. The contributions listed above are real and indisputable.

They give me reason to suggest with full conviction to the honorable scientific jury award him a Ph.D., and I strongly vote in favor.

Prof. Dr. Galina Lardeva

16.11. 2019