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A FLIGHT OVER THE RELIEF MAP OF MEANINGS

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“Take from this sentence as much as you can carry”

I have borrowed the title for this text as well as its subtitles from a textual installation by Pravdoliub Ivanov titled “At the Level of the Eyes”. This work was presented in 1998 in a small private gallery in the city of Varna, Bulgaria. In the space of the gallery, straight on the walls, the artist had arranged single sentences that he had composed himself – something like an assemblage of phrases that look like news headlines, advertisement messages, political slogans, poetic fragments, intimate notes... After the show, these sentences ended up in an artist’s book printed in a very limited edition – an archive of ideas, whims, and motivations. Here I take the liberty to use them in the same way as the artist, in his own words, is using them ever since – as titles for works.

Pravdoliub Ivanov was trained in the traditional discipline of painting in the National Art Academy in Sofia graduating in the early 1990ies. However, he disposed of the means usual for a painter quite rapidly as if agreeing with Damien Hirst that if painting is anyways dealing with the adaptation of already existing objects, then the artist is better off dealing directly with them. Thus the “characters” in the installations, the objects, the drawings, and the photographs of Pravdoliub Ivanov are most often the very ordinary objects that are with us daily or the typical situations where everyone can recognize his or herself. The interest of the artist for the easy to find and atypical for art materials and/or found objects, at the expense of paint and brush, is probably due to the reaction to his conservative education as well as to his attentive curiosity for the surrounding world where the man-made may possess more than just use value. The famous sentence of Comte de Lautréamont – “Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table”, seems to apply to the works of Pravdoliub Ivanov as well. That’s mainly because of the fact that the “encounters” engineered by the artist in his works are always fun to follow. He is revealing his attention to the “hidden life of things”, his sensibility in utilizing the potential of these things by bringing it out into the open through rearrangement of details and different reassembling of their composite elements. The artist manages to de-contextualize their usual existence while constructing a different set of circumstances that are reinforcing the links to the viewer.

“Metaphor is a transport company”

Transformation Always Takes Time and Energy (1998) is the title of one of the most well-known works of Pravdoliub Ivanov. The installation consists of a multitude of large metal cooker pots full of water – quite ordinary ones,

colorful, well used by their owners. These are positioned on top of as many small electrical hot-plates that are composed elegantly straight on the floor among their power cables plugged through extension cords to power sockets. The contradiction between the large pots and the weak small hot-plates makes the boiling of water a difficult, long and painful process though the water is slowly evaporating in steam. The typical sound of stormy boiling is never quite there. However, it is exactly the invisibility of what's actually happening, familiar to all of us both as an elementary household procedure and as a persistent reminder of the laws of physics, that is transformed into a metaphor for those endless processes of political and social transformation that are generation has gone through.

In the middle of the 1990ies the installations of Pravdoliub Ivanov were very often a direct reaction to the actual political events – the wars on the Balkans, for instance, with all the territorial claims, ethnic conflicts, and border disputes. But he never wanted to create documents or historical narratives. His interests are related to the analysis of “otherness”, to the search for the differences of meaning, the investigation of symbols, the explorations of the relations between the object and its representation. The installation “Territories (1995-2003 shown for the first time at the 4th Istanbul Biennial in 1995) is a row of large banners that have been “cast” in mud and earth. The impulse for this work came from the experimental field of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in the outskirts of Sofia, which the artist saw daily from his window and where all kinds of “nation’s” soil(s) are collected. The banners of mud, the flag as the most authentic symbol of each nation state, its basis and substance, are replacing the pieces of fabric arranged with often incomprehensible and forgotten symbols, while turning into a monumental installation, which is a powerful reflection on the very concept of territory”. The message of the massive single flag of mud laid into a specially made wooden case is similar (“Territory”, also 1995). Here though, the contrast between the earthen natural material of the flag and its luxurious velvet “bed”, which makes it look like expensive jewelry, are a reflection on the dramatic conflicts between reality and interpretation especially in the sphere of politics. The third time the artist turned his attention to the same symbolic form is even more ironical. “Easy Banners” (1996) is a row of similar flags arranged as a row on the wall but the flags are made of transparent nylon “fabric” on the typical wooden polls. The message is that each one can invest in the flags that national, political or symbolic meaning, which is most important for him or her, can fill up the “form” as he/she wishes...

“Civilization is a habit”

The works of Pravdoliub Ivanov almost count on the special relation with the space they occupy and to which they belong. The game with this space may often turn into the main element of the work itself as it happened

in “Plus 1 m³, Minus 1m³” from 1994. In the middle of a romantic pretty yard of a house (in the historical part of the Old City of Plovdiv with its architectural heritage from the National Revival period) there is a 1 m³ cubicle hole perfectly dug into the ground and next to it there is its “positive” in the exactly same form of the 1 m³ earth, which seems to have been extracted from the ground without any loss or displacement. This minimalist sculpture had the function of an exclamation mark put over the opposition between the “enduring historical characteristics” of a given space and the “contemporary perception” of the same. Thus, even the unpretentious ready-made plastic wash basins embedded outdoors into the flat grassy lawn are able to transform the lawn from a typical landscape surface into a colorful bright palette full of joyful color spots - “Water Monuments” (1999-2004). The installation was first realized in Holland, the Sculpture Park in Drechtoevers, where the author experienced severe craving to diversify the monotony of the perfectly maintained nature through the introduction there of cheap objects for daily use.

For Pravdoliub Ivanov art in public space is an apparent challenge to overcome the distance between the “high” and the “low” in the name of the unmediated communication with the local audience. The artist is collaborating with space using not only its volume or specific geometry, but also by counting on its history, its political and cultural memory. Thus, his installations are not only site specific but also context specific activating around themselves the various energies of the very location. In “Monument to the Unknown Washerwoman” (2005) in Luxembourg the artist marked with a high column made out of multicolored washing basins placed vertically one on top of the other, the very place next to the river where generations of local women had been washing laundry. The author is carefully “quoting” Arman’s ideas about the accumulation of quantities of identical objects as a critical gesture on consumer society in order to underline delicately the social aspect of his work.

The “Fountained Fountain” (2005) is once again a context specific installation in public space which is asking questions about the existing status quo. When Pravdoliub Ivanov arrived in Regensburg, Germany he found in the center of town a three-year old ditch meant for the “Fountain of Europe”. It had stayed unfinished due to the lack of funds. The ditch was covered with a wooden top, which the artist lifted slightly in order to place underneath powerful light projectors – at night the illusion for active construction work going on under the wooden cover is totally convincing. The ironical confusion transforms the passersby into viewers while pushing them towards a conscious reaction to the situation in the city.

In the installation “Path” (2006) in the woods of Darmstadt, Germany, the artist is once again using the scenario of confusion, of braking up the

monotony, of interference into the ordinary. By placing a 100 m long wooden pathway with handles on top of small path made almost invisible from the bushes, he is asking everyone stepping there to not only remove literally him/herself from the ground but also to take part in the dialogue about the attention to detail and humor.

“To whom it may concern - don't be so naive”

For Pravdoliub Ivanov each new work and show is a process of building up a dialogue where the artist is voicing the first sentence in a friendly, mischievous, and urging manner while hoping for a feedback. He does not like to force the relation and leaves enough time for each one to get in. His works though possess aesthetical, psychological, political and even physical arguments that are motivating the viewer to rethink his/her ideas about normalcy.

In one of his very rare performances, titled “Into the Problem of Misunderstanding” (1999), at the exhibition “Bacterium Bulgaricus” (so titled after the small bacillus famous for “producing” yogurt) the artist is standing with his shoes on right in the middle of an inflatable children’s pool while scooping up yogurt from the pool and offering it to the audience. The name of the artist’s fatherland is part of the Latin name of this bacillus, which is the cause for ironical reflection on the national identity; stepping over the yogurt “symbol” while imitating the classical expression of hospitality is a further confusion of cause-and-effect; the possible reading of the work within the traditional links between symbol and substance is disturbed.

In the cases of “Confusion” (2002) or “So many reasons” (2004, Galerie für zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig) the possibility to fully identify with the situation is most strongly orchestrated. The first installation consists of a piece of domestic carpet, which is positioned in the white cube of the gallery in such a way as if one of the walls of the space had been constructed on top of it. The second work is site specific – an old kitchen table seems to be standing in front of a door to the room while blocking, as it would appear, it from opening. However, one perfectly and delicately cut away piece of the table seems to permit the opening of the door, which looks like it is “passing” through the table, thus opening the way of passage.

Another work is paradoxically offering the solution to an obvious problem. “Pessimism no More” (2002-2004) was at first conceived as a billboard image and later transformed into an installation. It consists of impressive pieces of prime choice cheese pierced by huge holes. These are positioned on top of school desks that have been arranged in the space according to tradition - in monotonous geometric order. This is a situation of a pause full of respect, as if before or after an important event. The space of

the installation does not have special characteristics but all of a sudden you notice that the pieces of cheese are actually undergoing medical treatment – the holes are carefully bandaged with band aid... The “poor” cheese has been given “first aid” but – how, why, by whom? All at the same time comes down to a childish game playing of inventing paradox and manipulating the concepts of the “possible impossible” and so on.

The objects and the ways of presentation, with all their programmatic communicative lightness, do often initiate a mild shock at first, which is removing them from the domain of entertainment and placing them in the context of philosophical statements. The half-letters of the slogan “Semi-Truth” (1999-2007) are somehow too obvious and literal – in Bulgarian language there is even some tautology here. However, the missing half of the whole slogan, which ends up being in the open public space one way or another (as a “half” textual inscription on the street, as a sticker, or a postcard), is demonstrating serious manipulation of meaning – could it be that the missing invisible part is a “half-lie”?

The four meter long silicon spermatozoid, a sculptural object titled “The Kingdom of Wish and Waste” (2004) is effective with its size to begin with (!). Taken as a set with the title, which the artist has been carefully looking for, the work is a straightforward statement about some catastrophe recurring daily, which is related to sex, ambitions, claims, hopes, even with love. The work could have been a clearly male statement if only its vision and materialization was not so childishly absurd!

One of the newest works of Pravidoliub Ivanov is the well-known black and white barrier in the “art space” of an exhibition – “There are no Forbidden Thoughts” (2007). Here the artist is appealing once again to our ability to appreciate a paradox and to follow without prejudice the paths of association branching out from the work. The barrier should look like an unpleasant hint for restrictions, censure and control; or at least it should be a sign of critique on these. In this barrier however, the traditionally moving part is static while the stand of the device is going up and down, moving beyond the context of rationality. Though the work does not reject the above mentioned reading, it is an absurdity and a cause to laugh over our apprehensions, fears, and conventions.

For the Bulgarian pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennial the artist conceived an object titled “Memory is a Muscle”. As I have already mentioned, Pravidoliub Ivanov’s titles are never accidental. They provoke...interpretations, guesswork, predictions, that are adequate during the production process of this catalogue – the period of time before the show. However, as the artist’s archive of titles suggests – **“Don’t read but contemplate”**.