

non-objective art in bulgaria¹

by georgi dimitrov*

today one would easily notice that bulgaria is geographically close to greece, turkey and the former soviet union. in fact, the byzantine empire, the ottoman empire and later the ussr were the states which have periodically, mostly, influenced bulgaria's culture. it is also true that ever since its foundation in the 7th century ad bulgaria has kept its original name, however, the country has been occupied by the byzantines for 170 years [1018–1185], ruled for 500 years by the ottomans [1396–1878] and controlled by moscow for almost half a century [1944–1989].

despite those prolonged foreign interferences, the people who have populated bulgaria have made a distinct contribution to the global cultural heritage. for instance, the oldest man-processed gold in the world was found at *the varna necropolis* which signifies the existence of an advanced civilisation some 6,000 years ago. the orphic mysteries, preaching human immortality and universal balance within nature, were also quite present in the lands of today's bulgaria. the cyrillic script – officially used by many other countries nowadays – was elaborated and adopted in the 10th century ad as an alternative to the mainstream greek alphabet. around the same time the bogomils emerged – a powerful dualistic sect opposed to institutional hierarchy and materialistic values.

but unlike its vibrant middle ages, bulgaria began developing a modern capitalist society way too late.. in the last decade of the 20th century. this indirectly explains why there is almost no local tradition in modern non-objective aesthetics.²

five centuries of ottoman rule – until the end of the eighteen hundreds; the volatile, often violent, political situation and autocratic monarchy afterwards, and finally, the totalitarian regime³ prevented the dawn of a blooming bulgarian modernism. positively, certain signs of modernism in the post-liberation years can be pointed out. for instance, the work of sirak skitnik [1883–1943], geo milev [1895–1925], ivan milev [1897–1927] and the dadaist/futurist *crescendo* circle around kiril krustev [1904–1991]. nevertheless, the significant cultural phenomenon that shook almost all corners of the world in the first half of the 20th century never matured or concluded in bulgaria. if it had, there would have been a clear non-objective module as part of it – as it was in germany, the netherlands, france, switzerland, italy, england, hungary and poland.

the abundance of decorative patterns applied even today in traditional bulgarian pottery or weaving is the consequence of a rich folklore heritage stemming back from neolithic, ancient and medieval times. along with these encrypted stylisations there are only two artists worth mentioning, whose non-figurative oeuvre received international recognition during the interwar

¹ this is a revised version of *non-objective art in bulgaria*, an essay published in the orthogonal12 catalogue in 2013.

² the most generic term *non-objective* is intentionally being used here, as reaching a *constructive* phase requires strong individual self-awareness and active social maturity which are impossible to cultivate in a severe totalitarian climate.

³ the years between 1944 and 1989 are popularly referred to as 'the communist era'. a reference which reveals the actual level of political culture within bulgarian society.

years of the previous century. georges papazoff [1894–1972] and nikolay diulgheroff [1901–1982] were born and grew up in bulgaria. both of them, however, made their contribution to european modernism after fleeing the country in their early twenties.

having arrived in paris in 1924, georges papazoff easily entered the city's avantgarde circles among which he quickly gained popularity. he participated in exhibitions together with paul klee, joan miró, max ernst, jean arp, georges braque, pablo picasso and others.⁴ it was the time when surrealism was taking shape. andré breton's 'sectarian' despotism, however, kept the bulgarian artist away from the emerging movement.⁵ papazoff is often described as a dissident⁶ thanks to his moral values and spiritual longings. in the 1930s an attempt, on his part, to resettle in bulgaria and promote non-objective aesthetics failed due to the exuberant cultural discrepancies he and his family refused to comply with.



⁴ kiril krustev, georges papazoff [yambol, 2009], 29–30, [in bulgarian]

⁵ ibid

⁶ see andrei nakov, georges papazoff: franc-tireur du surréalisme, éditions de la connaissance, bruxelles, 1973

but most of all, papazoff's natural inclination towards seclusion, or more precisely, his strife towards personal freedom, is observed in the genuine painterly style he developed over the years. a series of childhood memories, visions and dreams come alive – in terms of anthropoid structures and cosmic landscapes – to constitute the surrealist body of his work. meanwhile, a solid spatial literacy and an eloquent use of geometric rhetorics reveal papazoff's sharp constructive flair. yet, his expressive palette provokes the viewer's sensitivity with a deep spectrum of emotions. it is needless to say that such an eclectic approach to art could hardly evolve or survive in bulgaria of the early 20th century. honestly speaking, it would be quite difficult to exist even nowadays.

similar to his compatriot papazoff nikolay diulgheroff had already gathered some international experience before enrolling at the architecture faculty of the albertina academy in turin at the age of 25.⁷ from 1926, when he settled in the industrialised and culturally lively italian city, diulgheroff unfolded a profound artistic career until he died as an honorary citizen in 1982. nikolay diulgheroff was one of the two bulgarian nationals⁸ to have studied at the original bauhaus in weimar where he became friends with johannes itten. a remarkable polymath, diulgheroff would remain true to the bauhaus tradition and employ various media, e.g. painting, architecture, graphic and interior design, furniture and ceramics. it is also known that diulgheroff has shortly worked at fiat's design studios, contributed to the list of futurist meals and produced numerous graphic advertisements.⁹



furthermore, his intellectual capacity allowed him to contribute to the theoretical base of the second futurist generation, i.e. the group around fillia – and more specifically to the rising *aeropittura*. until fillia's death in 1936, nikolay diulgheroff took part in the most significant futurist exhibitions around italy and abroad, including several editions of the venice biennale. later on, the artist's paintings and collages continued to articulate his fascination for the astral, cosmic space and mankind's relation to it. in 1975 and 1976 the kyustendil art gallery received a total of 23 artworks on behalf of nikolay diulgheroff. these were recent serigraphs as well as neon light boxes from the mid 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰ together with works from the collection of the national

⁷ papazoff studied in prague and munich before going to berlin, geneva and then paris, whereas diulgheroff did his university education in vienna, dresden and weimar prior to turin.

⁸ bauhaus-archiv, berlin provided also information for mara utschkunowa-auboeck [1894–1987].

⁹ see irina genova, ed., nikolay diulgheroff: the multiple artistic identity, ministry of culture, sofia, 2008.

¹⁰ during the transit the light boxes had to be dismantled for a check at the yugoslav border. unfortunately, the neon pipes did not survive the ignorance of the customs officers.

art gallery they formed a show at sofia city gallery to celebrate the 100th anniversary of this prominent visual thinker.¹¹

after the second world war bulgaria was left behind the iron curtain. the new people's government abolished the monarchy, nationalised the economy and monopolised the cultural activities in the country. art was simply reduced to craft and totalitarian propaganda. during the years of the cold war bulgaria was often regarded as the 16th soviet republic. there was nothing like the hungarian revolution of 1956, the prague spring of 1968 or the solidarity movement of the 1980s. apart from a few motion pictures made in the spirit of the italian neorealism and later in the line of the french new wave, only graphic design managed to keep up with the existing european tendencies.¹² naturally, no alternative art movements were present either – the abstract art available at that time in bulgaria was expressive and sporadic, very far from a systemic social phenomenon.¹³

not until the early 1980s, when a series of non-conventional artifacts appeared in both largest cities on the black sea coast – varna and burgas. perhaps, the geographic distance from the capital and the natural communication to the world have made such processes possible. the outdoor exhibition *terrain and constructions* by the sculptor veselin dimov [b. 1955] took place in varna's sea park in 1982. two months after it was installed, however, the exposition was brutally demolished and its remains were carried away by the authorities.

around the same years georgi yanakiev [1933–1998] had already developed his extraordinary geometric narrative away from the popular trends of the day. his contemporaries remember him as a scrupulous, analytical and very consistent personality. neglected by the official art clique he lived humbly and survived by teaching fine arts in burgas. a graduate of the art academy in sofia [1969] yanakiev maintained contact with a number of notable bulgarian intellectuals such as dimitar avramov and ivan kirkov among others. dobrinka yanakieva, his widow [who lost their son nikolay – also an artist and a citizen of the world – five years after her husband's death], speaks through



¹¹ the travelling outdoor exhibition *nikolay diulgheroff: the multiple artistic identity [2008/09]* has already visited rome, turin, sofia and kyustendil – diulgheroff's birthplace. the aluminium plates presenting a considerable scope of the artist's oeuvre are now installed at the union of bulgarian architects, 11 krakra st., sofia.

¹² e.g. the work of bulgarian designer stefan kanchev [1915–2001] and the spectrum almanac [спектър], published between 1964 and 1986.

¹³ see peter tzanev, *the untold bulgarian abstraction*, sofia, 2014.

tears about georgi yanakiev's correspondence with victor vasarely and his solo exhibitions in portugal [evora, 1987], england [london, 1988], etc. despite the international exposure he enjoyed in the late 1980s, yanakiev's work is yet to be scrutinised and evaluated. no other bulgarian artist has reached such an elaborate level of concretion in their plastic expression.

another very important figure who played a significant role for non-objective art in bulgaria was petar dochev [1934–2005]. again a graduate of the art academy in sofia [1956] he worked as an in-house painter at one of the largest metallurgical factories in eastern europe – kremikovtzi. from 1960 to 1975 dochev would subversively depict a great deal of industrial scenery, clearly based on the orthogonal grid. while 'praising' technological progress in accordance with the official pictorial doctrine, his raw industrial landscapes reveal a complete lack of hope. there is hardly any sign of nature's heartbeat either. this paved the way for dochev's ascetic and often geometric style which he practiced in the last 20 years of his life. isolated in the silent village of lesidren, his birthplace, he created numerous monochromatic graphite-on-wood reliefs.



petar dochev, circle (2005)



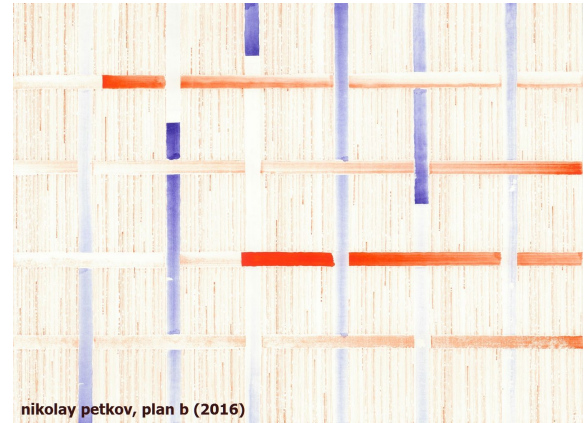
ivan shumanov, untitled (ca.1992)

another intriguing and again sadly late painter is ivan shumanov [1961–1993]. it was the summer of 2010 when i accidentally came across his posthumous exhibition at the shipka 6 gallery in sofia.¹⁴ compared to his early work his 1990s paintings reveal how he had recently discovered the power and beauty of the non-figurative geometric abstraction. this plastic maturation came just a couple of years before his unfortunate death at 32, leaving the question, how far would he have gone, were he still alive today?

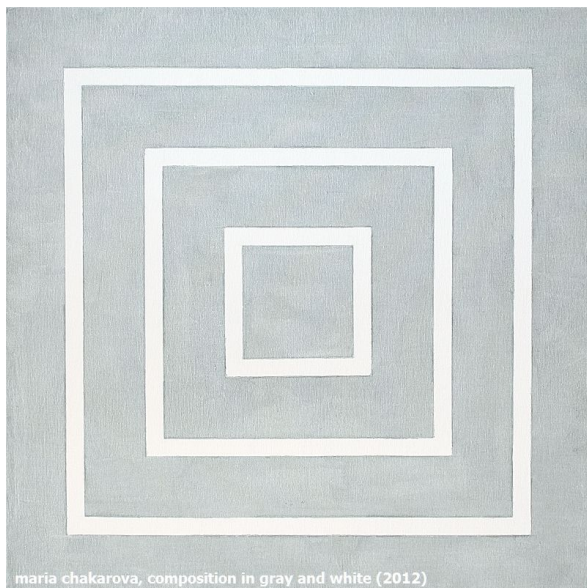
nikolay petkov's *epical abstraction* exhibition is one of the most important non-objective art

¹⁴ shipka 6 is the name of the gallery facilities administered by the union of bulgarian artists. shumanov's exhibition is partly covered at nonsofia.org.

shows of 21st century's first decade. probably the most recognisable among all active non-objective artists in bulgaria, petkov [b. 1967] currently teaches at the art academy in sofia. he holds a m.a. degree in mural painting and has completed a ph.d. in art history. but his literacy is visible outside of the curriculum vitae too. in 2008 *epical abstraction* presented 20 oil canvases with a different story compressed in each of them. the show was reviewed and highly rated by the late art-historian ruen ruenov [1958–2011], who was one of the very few bulgarian art critics to possess the necessary sensuality for non-figurative art. petkov is also well known for his watercolour paintings and the usage of the so called *slow brush* technique.¹⁵



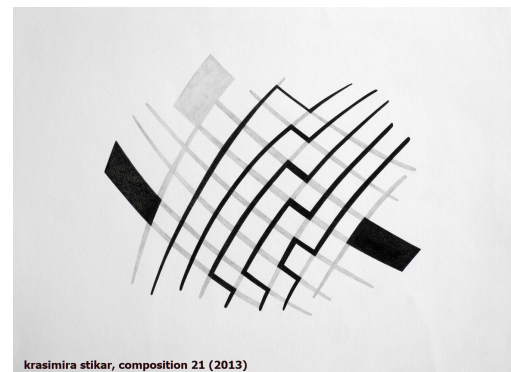
nikolay petkov, plan b (2016)



maria chakarova, composition in gray and white (2012)

the next name in this subjective and hopefully incomplete selection of bulgarian artists is that of maria chakarova [b. 1972]. a graduate of one of the most conservative faculties at the national academy, she has resisted the institutional pressure by creating a fortified refuge out of her non-objective work. moreover, this secure shelter has kept chakarova away from the contamination of the public prejudice and is becoming an effective communication medium for her. she finds a true comfort in the square format and feels confident within its larger scales. surprisingly, her work is not planned in advance, but that only uncovers her deep intuition and natural intelligence.

one could also be interested in the drawings, collages and animated videos of krasimira stikar [b. 1980] who lives and works in vienna. she studied animation in sofia before moving to austria and completing a diploma degree at the academy of fine arts in vienna [2005]. krasimira participated at the second edition of orthogonal and enjoys working with children. other examples of non-objective artwork found around bulgaria could be seen online at nonsofia.org.



krasimira stikar, composition 21 (2013)

¹⁵ the exhibition review [in bulgarian] is still online at grosnipelikani.net. ruenov attempts on a historic analysis of the bulgarian abstract tradition which is partly the subject of this short essay.

as to me, i arrived in geometric abstraction after a degree in international relations and by learning the simple practice of recording my ideas. at the beginning i would employ literary means. later, words turned into shapes and sentences became multicoloured schemes. it was a process of transforming thoughts into conceptual maps or compositions. once, a friend of mine gave me a book on *de stijl*. i realised i had not been alone – the more i read about that and other non-figurative art movements across the world, the more i knew about myself and where i stood.

gradually, lines would straighten along the four cardinal directions and angles rectified. detail was minimised and colours were reduced to a strict chromatic suite. here is how i naturally came to the creation of my own system of rhetorics – *the orthogonal art*. apart from a visual language, it is also the convention which i use in all sorts of social interaction. based on a few physical parameters, the process of objectifying ideas has evolved into a communication pattern. i can hardly find any distinction between art and life.



the presence of non-objective art, as part of the bulgarian art scene, is growing but is still relatively small these days. in 2010 i launched *безпредметна софия*, a.k.a. *non-objective sofia* or simply *nonsofia* as an online platform. since its creation, nonsofia.org has been aiming at increasing the popularity of non-objective and constructive art in bulgaria by reflecting on numerous art events or artifacts. two years later, in 2012, nonsofia was legally registered as the first ever non-profit entity to offer institutional support for non-objective art in bulgaria. making these aesthetics recognisable within bulgarian social context and bringing bulgaria onto the world map of non-objective art are among the association's primary goals.

conceived as an international forum, *orthogonal* is nonsofia's capital project. the event aims at introducing the bulgarian public to a number of selected artists and theoreticians, who work in the field of non-objective art. the editions, held in 2012, 2014 and 2017 have so far shown the works of more than thirty participants of various generations, representing the non-objective traditions of fourteen different states: australia, austria, bulgaria, france, germany, greece, hungary, italy, the netherlands, new zealand, romania, switzerland, turkey and the united kingdom. apart from an exhibition, the event offers a programme of open lectures and film screenings which deal with contemporary and historical issues of this yet little known in bulgaria art movement. the three editions of the forum have established the formation of a unique international biennial, part of bulgaria's contemporary art calendar.

today – more than a century after the first appearance of malewicz's quadrilateral¹⁶ – the acceptance of non-objective aesthetics still seems to be a tremendous cultural challenge for bulgarian society. but this is a useless conclusion which one should not just passively complain about. art's public function is not only to reflect on the on-going social tendencies, but to actively assess their ethical basis and if necessary, to correct it. that should be the responsibility of every creative individual, e.g. artist, architect, philosopher, designer, etc. the facilitatory role of the mass-media is also essential here, especially when overconsumption has become the determinant of our daily agenda. only a consolidated group of self-aware strategic thinkers could lead bulgarian modernism to its end. bulgarian conceptual art will then have a chance to lose its prematurity and mediocrity. naturally, there is a long way in front of us and loads of work has to be done in that respect. nevertheless, one thing is certain – the foundations have been laid, long before nonsofia and orthogonal existed.

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¹⁶ malewicz's quadrilateral, commonly known as the black square, was part of the stage design for the *victory over the sun* opera in 1913.