

THE AICA CONGRESS IN POLAND IN 1960: *THE INTERNATIONAL CHARACTER OF CONTEMPORARY ART. IDEOLOGICAL DISCREPANCIES AND MISUNDERSTAN- DINGS – A VIEW FROM BULGARIA*¹

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The article discusses the International Association of Art Critics congress held in 1960 in Poland and the modest Bulgarian participation through Mara Tsoncheva. The Congress theme The international character of contemporary art exposed complex relationships, various disputes and misunderstandings in connection with the concepts realism, humanism, international character and national tradition between representatives of the art scene east and west of the Iron Curtain, but also between socialist countries. The author reveals the differences in the official culture policy in Poland and Bulgaria manifested at the Congress, as well as the significance of the French-Polish art network with its indirect impact on artistic life in communist Bulgaria. The concluding thesis confirms that, although vaguely documented, the Bulgarian reactions to the 1960 AICA congress broaden the context for a deeper understanding of the contemporary Bulgarian dialogue with Western-European art.

Keywords: AICA Congress 1960, art criticism during the Iron Curtain period, realism, humanism, international character of art

For critics, the AICA (International Association of Art Critics)² forums during the time of the Iron Curtain were as significant as the international biennales were for artists. After World War II the biennales flourished: The Documenta in Kassel, the biennale in Sao Paulo, the Young Artists Biennale in Paris, and a multitude of other graphic arts biennales, all of which started in the 1950s or early 1960s. According to the stated intentions, they were supposed to guarantee opportunities for communication and the exchange of knowledge

1 This article is a revised version of a publication in Bulgarian [“Конгресът на АИКА в Полша през 1960 г.: Интернационалният характер на съвременното изкуство.” *Sledva* (Следва. Списание за университетска култура, НБУ), no 40 (2019/20): 82–90]. It is the result of a one-month scholarship within the frameworks of Campus France Programme, held in Paris, INHA in 2019. I would like to thank Dr. Elitsa Dyulgerova and Prof. Serge Wolikow for their professional support, as well as the colleagues from the INHA and the Kandinsky Library.

2 AICA – Association internationale des critiques d’art: <https://aica-international.squarespace.com/aica>

beyond the ideological and political enclosures (virtual and real). Of particular interest today is the question of the extent and manner of implementation of these intentions.

After two congresses in 1948 and 1949, the International Association of Art Critics was founded in 1950 and affiliated with UNESCO. In 2019 it celebrated its 70th anniversary. AICA, similar to ICOM (International Council of Museums), was founded with the idea of gradually overcoming the war traumas, as well as of creating the prerequisites for a common world cultural space. Following the UNESCO model, the organization chose Paris for its headquarters. Initially, the two official languages were French and English, with Spanish added as the third official language at the beginning of the 1960s (Meyric Hughes 2014).

The first AICA member countries coming from the Soviet sphere of influence were Czechoslovakia, Poland and Yugoslavia. There is evidence that the very idea of creating the Association was given by the Czech Mojmír Vaněk, head of the art section in UNESCO (Kramer-Mallordy 2015). For the countries situated east of the Iron Curtain, the AICA Congress in Warsaw in 1960 was of significant interest.¹ That was the first forum of the organization in a country from the so-called Eastern Bloc, the next being Czechoslovakia in 1966.

After the mid-1960s, the process of de-Stalinization of the East led to some tangible results with varying consequences to different communities. Without being rejected, the doctrine of socialist realism lost its irrevocability. This style (known as an *artistic method*) was replaced by the more widely applicable concepts of *humanism* and *realism*. The general topic of the congress in Warsaw, *Le caractère international de l'art contemporain et le rôle des différents milieux nationaux dans la formation de cet art* (*The international character of contemporary art and the role of the different national milieus in the formation of that art*), seemed meaningful both in the West and in the East. The topic was put forward for discussion on the previous congress in Palermo in 1957 by the President of the Polish section in AICA Juliusz Starzyński (Arnoux 2018: 81). The official ideology in the Soviet Bloc countries unconditionally imposed communist internationalism², but towards the end of the 1950s the most lively discussions in socialist countries concerned the national character of art. West of the Iron Curtain, the concept of the *international* was seen not only as international stylistic trends, but also as a global impact of art practices.

Why was the Congress held in Poland? Warsaw, a capital east of the Iron Curtain, provided an easier access to participation for representatives of the communist countries.

1 The French art critic Mathilde Arnoux draws the attention to the AICA congress in Poland on the occasion of Pierre Restany's response to Polish abstract painting (Arnoux 2018: 77–84).

2 Communist internationalism in the Soviet Bloc is a notion of the ideological struggle, close to anti-imperialism.

The division between the two Europes had long become hardened even though the Berlin Wall was still to appear¹. Warsaw and Krakow, as a partner city, were centres of dynamic artistic life. This fact serves as proof for the different artistic conditions in Poland and Bulgaria during the period. In his book *Polish Art in the Last Hundred Years* Dimitar G. Dimitrov enumerates the opening of new galleries and exhibitions of contemporary art, both Polish and foreign, in 1958 and 1959.² The author concludes that during that time Poland was bustling with energy and hope for renewal.

From a Western perspective, the Polish scene was different from the common practices of realism from the end of the 1950s in the Eastern Bloc. For example, in 1958 an Exhibition of art from twelve socialist countries, including Bulgaria, was launched in Moscow. The event was thought of as an Eastern equivalent of the multiplying international forums in the West, as a *realistic* response to Western *abstractionism*. The Polish state purposefully sent a collection inconsistent with the ideological aspect of the event. Part of the paintings of abstract character expressed a will for the emancipation from the influence of the Soviet Union. The commissioner of the Polish participation was J. Starzyński, a representative figure of the political status quo in Poland at the time: apart from being the president of the Polish AICA, in 1958 he was the director of the Art Studies Institute at the Polish Academy of Sciences, as well as a leading figure in the Art History Department at Warsaw University (Arnoux 2018: 82). The challenging works, with the support they received from the officially authorized art critics, did not remain unnoticed. The inside reaction against the abstractionist traits in the Polish collection was expressed most categorically by the Bulgarian participants at the Moscow discussion: the statements made by Alexandar Obretenov, Nikolay Shmirgela and Mara Tsoncheva were later published in Sofia.³ An article by A. Obretenov, written on the occasion of the Exhibition of art from twelve socialist countries in Moscow, was published first in Russian in the Soviet magazine *Iskusstvo (Art)*⁴, and later in Bulgarian in the press, with another version in Obretenov's book *Art and Contemporaneity*⁵. The case of the Polish participation in Moscow together with the general artistic

1 The Wall dividing West and East Berlin, which has turned into a metaphor of the separation of Europe, was built in August 1961.

2 The chapter *From 1960 to the end of the 20th century – what happened in Polish art? (От 1960 година до края на XX век – какво се случи в полското изкуство?)* – Dimitrov 2000: 188–189.

3 The journal *Izkustvo (Art – no 5 & 6, 1959)* published (completely or partially) a number of statements from the discussion in Moscow.

4 The article was entitled *For Realism, Against Abstractionism!* (Obretenov 1959: 25–28).

5 Obretenov 1960. This collection of essays was reviewed in the *Izkustvo* journal (Tsoncheva 1961: 34–36). Obretenov's text was republished in 1984.

uplift in the country had undoubted influence on the selection of Poland as a host of the meeting between the East and the West in the VII Congress of AICA. The choice confirmed the relevance of the leading theme (*the international character of contemporary art*), put forward by the President of the Polish section of the Association.

Apart from Poland, other countries with AICA sections east of the Iron Curtain in 1960 were Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The Polish group was the most numerous. During the VII Congress, a Hungarian section was established. The possible acceptance of an organization from East Germany, as pointed out in the Congress documents, was still raising *issues*¹. Among the Balkan countries, national sections existed in Greece and Turkey; the Romanian one was founded and accepted at the Congress in Prague and Bratislava in 1966. Notable activity in Warsaw was demonstrated by the Turkish section. In 1960 the country delegated one representative displaying a large variety of materials (books, catalogues, journals, etc.) on contemporary Turkish art. A special committee was established to examine the Turkish documentation. As a result, what was *recognized* as European style tendencies on the Turkish art scene were: Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Neo-Cubism (realistic Cubism), Neo-Traditionalism (a new classical tendency), Constructivism, non-figurative (abstract) art, Primitivism (naive art). It was decided that a text on contemporary Turkish painting should be prepared and sent to the different AICA sections together with some reproductions in order to publish these materials in separate countries². I am not able to trace whether such articles were indeed published or not, but the attempt to include or equate contemporary Turkish painting with the accepted European classification is indicative of the existing predispositions in the West at the time.

In Bulgaria during the 1960s, there was no AICA section established, however the state sent a representative with the status of an *observer* in Warsaw³. The task was assigned to and performed by the artist and art critic Mara Tsoncheva. (There were three more critics of the same status at the Congress from the German Democratic Republic.) M. Tsoncheva presented a report and participated in the 12th General Assembly of AICA, which was held simultaneously with the Congress.

1 See the Summary of the 7th Congress at the *Archives de la critique d'art*: https://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/isadg_cpl_annexe/synthese-viie-congres-de-laica-1960/attachment/prisme_synthese1960-validee.

2 Ibid.: https://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/isadg_cpl_annexe/synthese-viie-congres-de-laica-1960/attachment/prisme_synthese1960-validee.

3 According to different editions and documents, the Bulgarian section in AICA was not registered neither in the preceding, nor the subsequent Congresses in 1966 (in Prague), 1969 and 1972.

Among the participants in Warsaw were Giulio Carlo Argan, Pierre Courthion, James Johnson Sweeney, Jan Białostocki and many other eminent art historians and critics. The topic of the AICA conference in 1960 *The international character of contemporary art* at that time was of considerable interest to the art milieu both in the East and the West. However, the differences in the comprehension and interpretation of the concepts of *international character* and the *national specifics* gave rise to misunderstandings. The manifestation of ideological opposition just reinforced the confronting views. The will to create conditions for a mutual dialogue, e.g. the project for a glossary of art criticism terminology¹, turned out to be inefficient.

East of the Iron Curtain, the *international character* in terms of form and style meant two mutually excluding *evils*: the lifeless photographic quality and pseudo academism of the *misconceived* socialist realism on the one hand, and the *infertile* abstractionism on the other. In the East, the national character and traditions, together with the figurative, were the legitimate means of fighting against both evils, and what was *truly* international in the understanding of Eastern Bloc participants were the ideas of *humanism* and *staying close to the people*. In the West, the international character of contemporary art was mostly interpreted in terms of its significance and presence on the international scene, or as an opportunity for creating international communities beyond political borders and divisions. For western critics, the national character seemed guaranteed by the artist's freedom: it is constantly manifesting itself regardless of any imposed guidelines and regulations.

According to J. Starzyński, the President of the Polish AICA (earlier, the curator of the Polish section in Moscow), however, it was the abstract works that manifested the national traditions in Poland: the pre-war colourism, the connection with French art, etc.² Yet, the controlled situation in the sphere of the Soviet influence and the attempts of the national art milieu to get emancipated from the *centre* through the specifics of their national art culture (in this case, the Polish one) were often misunderstood in the West. Mathilde Arnoux analyses Pierre Restany's disapproval of references to experiences from earlier periods in Polish art in the already quoted chapter of her book³.

The forum in Warsaw and Krakow included a number of exhibitions and art events. The foreign guests gathered rich impressions of art in Poland and various personal contacts

1 See the Summary of the 7th Congress at the *Archives de la critique d'art*: https://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/isadg_cpl_annexe/synthese-viie-congres-de-laica-1960/attachment/prisme_synthese1960-validee.

2 Arnoux 2018: 79–82.

3 Arnoux 2018: 100–101.

were established. Along with that, the occurrence of misapprehensions and disagreements was understandable and expected, with their roots in the pre-war years, or in new confrontations, constructed and exacerbated by the political circumstances.

The discussions on art traditions in Bulgaria by the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s were part of this context of misapprehensions and disagreements¹. Specific and controversial, they were an expression of both the socio-political conjuncture and the will for emancipation. What was of significance for the rejuvenation and changes in the artistic practices was the local pre-industrial and material culture, which was a subject of multiple studies². Along with them, the modern figurative art of the West from the first half of the 20th century, and French art in particular (although this was seldom admitted), were a source of the invented tradition of realism in Bulgaria during the 1960s³. Misunderstandings happened when the Western view seemed to register only nationalism in the compromising distancing from the doctrine of socialist realism, and – on the other hand – conservatism in the reworking of the pre-war (concerning both World Wars) experience: of Post-Impressionism, Constructivism, the New objectivity, etc.

The Bulgarian representative-observer at the Congress in Warsaw was known to J. Starzyński and to other critics from the Polish section of AICA through her presentation in Moscow in 1958. In her Warsaw statements, unlike the Moscow meeting, M. Tsoncheva did not use the term *socialist realism*. In her speech she focused on concepts, such as *connection with the peoples, the social character* and the formula of art as *a reflection of life*. Her thesis was that *the issue of the international character of contemporary art* could not be treated separately from *the issues of its dependence on life in the particular country* as a whole. According to her report, *the distancing of art from the life of the peoples (...) can happen through some negative internationalization of contemporary art*. M. Tsoncheva emphasized the problem of alienation of art from the general public, which appeared only in countries where abstract art was flourishing.

The Bulgarian report included some positive examples of *art as a reflection of life*, such as Renato Guttuso, Diego Rivera, the Mexican muralists, the progressive graphic arts in Japan, and the French impressionists. According to Tsoncheva, the *international* was

1 Numerous articles and statements in Bulgarian specialized periodicals confirm the significance of that topic.

2 As a result, for example, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences published the series *Bulgarian Art Heritage*.

3 D. G. Dimitrov wrote about *the Bulgarian artistic temperament*, to which *the decorative appealed more*, referring to Kiril Krastev. He referred to Polish artists and connoisseurs of art (without citing names), who showed *some lightweight art, over-rating aestheticism and the pleasing for the eye at the expense of the problematic* (Dimitrov 2000: 9).

manifested through the humane values in art; the artist had to be a great humanist.¹ However, those values were not clearly specified.

At the Warsaw congress the opposition *abstract – figurative* was no longer the centre of artists' and critics' attention. Greater interest drew the issue of realism and reality in the West and the East, in France, Poland and elsewhere. The concept of *reality* in art was discussed as being key for the contact with the audiences as well. The discrepancies concerning the notions of *reality* and *realism* were set by the indelible ideological opposition. In that respect M. Arnoux discusses the deliberate borrowing and deviation of terminology (Arnoux 2018: 75). As an example of terminology deviations, the name of the *New realism* group was borrowed by Pierre Restany from a group of artists supported by the Communist Party at the beginning of the 1950s.² Thus, *new realism* turned into a challenging label and drew the attention of the critics both in the East and West.

Reality / Realism on the threshold of the 1950s and the 1960 was a broad topic. In 1957, the French art critic Pierre Volboudt conducted a survey among 17 contemporary artists, asking them a single question on how they comprehended the notions of *reality* and *realism*. The survey was published in the prestigious magazine *XXe Siècle* under the title *A chacun sa réalité* (Volboudt 1957: 21–35). The survey reconsidered the notorious *quarrel about realism* (*La querelle du réalisme*) from the 1930s in the post-World-War-II context. In Bulgaria, similarly to the whole *socialist world*, an extension of the canon of *realisms* in the Soviet Union from the time of *the Thaw* after Stalin's death was visible, but this extension appeared to be ambivalent and selective; Roger Garaudy's book *Realism without Borders* was widely criticised.

The debate from the congress in Warsaw did not reach the Bulgarian specialized press. In the columns *Foreigners about us* of the *Izkustvo* journal we can read that M. Tsoncheva's presentation was mentioned in Jean Rollin's article from 12 September 1960 in *L'Humanité*, as well as in a publication in *Les Lettres françaises* journal. What *Izkustvo* summarised from *L'Humanité* was *the unity of art, based on tradition*, and from *Les Lettres françaises* (Rollin 1960: 10) – *the significance of the moral and humanistic aspects, which are supposed to inspire artistic works*³. It is worth noticing that the article on the VII Congress of AICA in *Les Lettres françaises* was also written by Jean Rollin. Both references to the Bulgarian report were in the form of a brief outline of statements made during the Congress.

1 AICA Actes 1960: 102–106.

2 According to the study of Sophie Gras *Nouveau Réalisme: From Socialist Realism to Capitalist Realism*, quoted by M. Arnoux (Arnoux 2018: 75).

3 "Foreigners about Us." *Izkustvo*, no 10 (1960): 40.

In conclusion, the 1960 AICA Congress in Warsaw was a notable event in the communication between the East and the West at the time when Europe was ideologically divided. It fitted into the network of forums, planned as an opportunity for a common artistic scene. However, the conjunctures – ideological, political, or of the specific cultural traditions – maintained the possibilities for confrontation and created discrepancies and misunderstandings. In the case of Bulgaria, this situation was to a great extent due to the country's relatively weak presence in the modernist and the avant-garde milieux prior to World War II, due to the strong connection with the policies of the Soviet Union and the high degree of centralization of the artistic life (in comparison to Poland, for instance). On the other hand, the French-Polish network, which was the main force behind staging the Congress in Warsaw, developed further and led to the organization of other international forums, such as the Biennale of Graphic Arts in Krakow, the Carpet Biennale in Lausanne, as well as the Young Artists Biennale in Paris (Sissia 2017: 24).

Unlike the Venice and Paris Biennales or the AICA Congress in Poland, the possibilities for communication between Bulgarian artists and their foreign colleagues in the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s were limited to international forums in fields which were not rigorously targeted by ideology, such as graphic arts, book illustration (especially children's books), artistic textile, and ceramics. The French-Polish network undoubtedly had an influence on the renewal of the artistic paradigms in Bulgaria, though today it is difficult to detail the process due to the lack of written evidence.

I can only speculate whether this historical episode can contribute to the understanding of the contemporary Bulgarian dialogue with Western-European art. It is my belief, however, that it might contribute to today's understanding of Bulgarian art traditions of the 1960s and 1970s.

Article translated by Albena Vitanova

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