

FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE *

I.

It is traditionally believed that after the 1980s Bulgarian contemporary art emerged within the context of political opposition during the period up to 1989; subsequently, after the Changes in the political situation, it evolved and stepped onto the international scene, emerging out of an environment beset by institutional deficiency¹ such as a lack of national presentation at the Venice Biennale, a museum of contemporary art, public collections, private collectors, specialized private galleries, art market, good academic education - shortages which became major recurring narratives in artistic life and in the course of time markedly spilled over into thematic ideas of various artistic practices and artworks.

The development of art in such a context resembled a prolonged growth, a realization in deficiency, an existence in-between, under the shadow of non-articulation, similar to the never accomplished and forever going on political Transition period in Bulgaria that began equally for all countries of the Eastern Bloc in 1989.

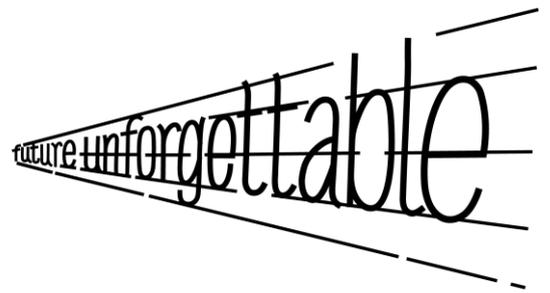
Prior to 1989, art was administrated and centralized by the state organs, part of which were the official artistic unions, whereas after the Changes it experienced a deficiency of new institutional support and regulations.

Paradoxically, the obsolete institutionalization and organization of cultural life, which it is doubtful whether the art domain has relied on and still relies on, remained a guiding point, according to which art exists in a continuous search for its manifestations in the future.

After 1989, the breakdown of the old has provided freedom for the emergence of various artistic stances and informal collectives, as well as freedom to refuse a particular stance in any common or shared "pattern" on the art scene (a vein that existed before 1989).

This situation brought about the emergence of bright and distinct presences, as well as silent and respectful ones, of artists who never ceased to work, yet who ceased to participate in the artistic

¹ Vessela Nozharova, *Introduction to Bulgarian Contemporary Art (1982-2015)*, Жанет-45 Publishing House, 2018, Open Arts Foundation, co-editor, 2018: <https://openarts.info/book-introduction-cont-art-2018/>



exchange. It is a question about the artists, but alongside them are also the curators, the gallerists, the collaborators of the creative process.

In a situation of non-existent or deficient professionalism and adequate institutional framework for the production of art, individualism came to the fore – a contextual phenomenon defined as an impactful factor by the researchers of Bulgarian art.² There was even mention of individual “ism”.³ (One might say that on the Bulgarian art scene each artist thinks of herself or himself as an individual “ism”). Name-institutions were formed. An overly hybrid version even produced names that combined the roles of artists, patrons, curators, gallerists and critics alike, some of them even having completely non-artistic side professions and workplaces. There was a time when these names – authors, collectives or organizations – began to be perceived as (truly or fictionally, willfully or by default) as exclusive national representatives. Before each of them stood a “the”, not far from the national myth of the hero-victim, pioneer, leader, model for everyone else. Some associated their engagement with their broader scope of activity; others verged on the engagement with contemporary art; part of them came to be acknowledged; some were discussed as potentially taking over development opportunities; yet, this specific “individualism” became a current characteristic and peculiarity of the developing environment, and until very recently it was considered a specific feature of Bulgarian art. Its presence was realized as a particular bent in the art sphere, as the functional role and the presence of the person as part of the whole, as creative and constructive labor. It destroyed the old and built the new all at once.

Institutionally and organizationally, some of these processes were accompanied and systematically sustained by the emergence of artistic unions and collectives in the state capital and around the country that had a definite profile and territory of their own. Some of them registered as legal entities, others became publicly declared group identities of artists in the period between 1995 and 2000.⁴

Alongside the institutionalization, instrumentalization, operationality, expansion of the body, or the engagement with the world scene at large, as previously mentioned, there also existed, although less frequently, retractions that found their own artistic gesture or stance. The inside-outside opposition (i.e. the borderline issue) with both parties has not yet become a place or a topic for dialogue.

² Boris Kostadinov, “EAST OF VIENNA, WEST OF ISTANBUL”, special publication on the occasion of Focus Bulgaria in *viennacontemporary*, September 24-27, 2015”, Open Arts Foundation, 2015:

https://issuu.com/open_arts/docs/newspaper_oaf_focus-bulgaria_web

³Luchezar Boyadjiev, *BOOM Magazine*: https://bombmagazine.org/articles/introduction-to-bulgarian-contemporary-art-vessela-nozharova-interviewed/?fbclid=IwAR3455Bsg16scZdQ0H_AtCM08_-lFjEJ9yewED8BE-4Ffchi3b2fSWekO-l

⁴ Organizations that exist to date: 1990 - “Art in Action”, Sofia; 1995 – “Institute for Contemporary Art – Sofia”; 1995 – “XXL Group”, Sofia; 1997 - “Art Today” collective, Plovdiv; the artistic groups of the 1980s whose members spilled over into some of the aforementioned organizations: “The City”, “Cuckoo Day”, “Cuckoo-Cuckoo” in Sofia, “Edge” in Plovdiv; “Blagoevgrad” in Blagoevgrad; and the later formations from the 1990s: “Disco 95”, Plovdiv; “Var(t)na”, Varna (originating from the “Vulcan” factory); “Duppini”, Gabrovo region etc.

II.

The processes of forming a civil society before and after Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007, as well as the preparation for this political act, stimulated the artistic and institutional development, the emergence of new cultural organizations, priorities and points of interest. This “coming out” did not only mean “going out” to the West – it led to the physical emergence of essentially experimental and not so much professionally determined spaces and curatorial projects. They were generated outside the “center”. An interest towards the city appeared in artistic practices and projects which would prove a meeting ground for future generations.⁵

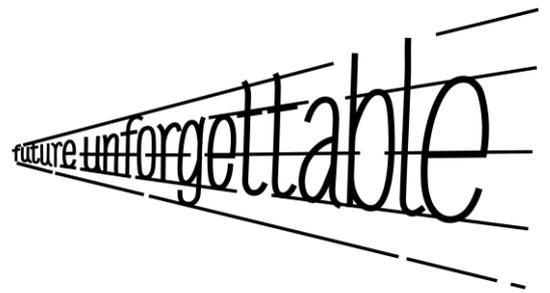
Meanwhile, art organizations of wider quorum began to operate in different parts of the country, making the environment more liberal and open. They mapped, outlined or mobilized the already existing models by including them in broader initiatives and images. Being publicly represented, they gathered the individual voices of the past into new constellations, opened up a field for generating new artistic stances, stimulated continuity and dialogue within the framework of the Bulgarian art scene and abroad.

“Them”, those who “provided opportunities for immediate communication, meetings and rapprochement that gave rise to new generations and a new type of city culture”⁶, at one point came to generate the new “mass” that changed the coordinate system of necessity in art and displaced the institutional, centralized model of thinking and governing. Some of them also created models for a more independent and complex financing of art and culture in the country. As part of the process they contributed to or as a consequence of it, we would say that new preconditions for cross-sectoral and public debate with state and municipal structures were being formed, out of which, subsequently and much later, sprang a direct interest in collaboration.

These essential and not only artistically oriented, but rather hybrid initiatives often combined clusters of organizations with a zest for activism which, although following up on Western models, developed

⁵ The *Studio Dauhaus* curated by Jovo Panchev in 2006 – a platform for independent culture and contemporary art in the Pavlovo district of Sofia; <http://studiodauhaus.blogspot.com> ; In 2003 – 2006, the Institute for Contemporary Art - Sofia organized the *Visual Seminar*: <https://ica-sofia.org/bg/arhiv/visual-seminar>

⁶ Vladiya Mihailova, “HERE EVERYWHERE”, *10 Years of Open Arts: HERE EVERYWHERE*, an anniversary catalog of Open Arts Foundation, Plovdiv, 2018: https://issuu.com/open_arts/docs/2018-05-22_oaf_catalogue10years_onl



strong local ecosystems and audiences. They habitually incorporated (typologically) new and until recently disinterested audiences.

In such a way, the accumulation of stability and persistence subsequently provoked the emergence (or the impediment) of new artistic circles, formats and topics in art. In purely thematic terms, this produced an impact associated with an act of looking around, by means of which the art domain started to deal not only with the city, but also with increasingly local and at times specifically marginal subjects, pressing issues and aesthetics.

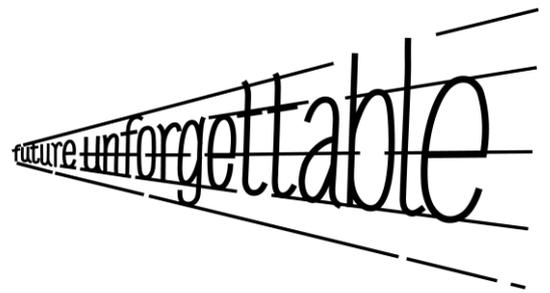
Not to be overlooked as an emotional precondition is the fact that the first more liberal and significant manifestations of contemporary art during the 1980s took place not so much in the administrative center of the country – Sofia, but much more distinctly in Varna, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad or in the outdoors.

The gradual return of these narratives, their purposeful elucidation as regards the reflection on Bulgarian contemporary art and the mobilization of these and new places around the periphery, alleviated the pressure of/over the individualisms. Some of them came to adapt, others grew silent.

Gradually, we began to discuss the real formation of a nutrient medium, presently effectuating empowerment via the cultural and increasingly artistic production. Evident is not only the significant example of Plovdiv as the starting point of this tendency that originated in the first years of the new millennium and has been actively developing since 2007 onward, subsequently establishing a mode of thinking with an apex in 2019, but also in more recent years with Veliko Turnovo following up among others.

Internationally, around 2007 many Bulgarian artists worked in the diaspora, while new waves of incomers were joining them – mainly in Paris, Vienna, Berlin. The openness and permeability after 2007 created opportunities for redefining the Bulgarian-born authors from the diaspora themselves as “Bulgarian”, renewing their connection with some local subject matters and for attracting them to the “Bulgarian scene” via programs, initiatives and exhibitions. Their increasingly regular return to Bulgaria and their presence on both scenes gave rise to one more precondition for the diffusion of Bulgarian contemporary art.

Permeability worked both ways – more and more private enterprises moved to the “outside” and presented Bulgarian artists abroad who were living or not in their native country. Some of them were actively engaged and exhibited a sense of “introduction to Bulgarian topics” and “national



representation”, others were rather self-contained and focused on their personal goals. Whatever the motif of Bulgarian-born artists, making and presenting their art had more and more reasons to be considered “Bulgarian” and this trend could be traced in specific works.

It is interesting to note that the natural mobilization of the peripheries, along with their values and exchange models, essentially altered the more centralized cultural life in the state capital and imposed new patterns for the development of the entire scene as well. Following upon periods of pronounced manifestations and lulls after the first decade of the 21st century, we have now witnessed a mobilization, via a series of focal initiatives and educational events⁷, of an entirely new and diverse audience for contemporary art, gravitating around these enterprises organized in accordance with the “grassroots” model and providing a new type of institutionality.

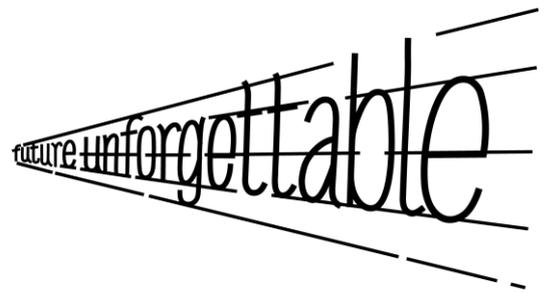
Valuable in these trends was the role of informal artistic groups that rendered these tendencies and organizational efforts transpolitical, truthful, real, feasible and subsequently realized to the stage where all the elements of a given environment empowered one another. Processes which were increasingly visible, developing and mutually facilitating.

III.

Presumably, one way or another, Bulgarian contemporary art exists within the framework of the local and international art scene and environment. What could we then define as the predominant characteristics of today’s Bulgarian contemporary art?

Acknowledged as part of the Eastern-European heritage, Bulgarian art belongs formally, but not so much aesthetically, to this politically defined region and periodization. At the same time, it is framed by its topographical location on the Balkans and its mental proximity with the countries of this geographical and in the present case historic-political area. With its inherent sense of detail, everyday folk-style objectivity, problematic and obsessive interest in history, unbending patriarchy, this area empowers thematically and materially generations of artists, working in radically different spheres, genres and media.

⁷ Ex., lectures and events from the platform *Introduction to Contemporary Art* from the period 2011-2018, organized by Open Arts Foundation; the *Sofia Contemporary* festival by *One Magazine* and its parallel program with editions 2012 and 2013, and others.



In the situation of a small, non-homogeneous identity, traversed by different vectors, emerges a somewhat well-defined desire for self-justification, characterization, yet also for inscribing oneself into the other, the common exchange, the canon. We can imagine this “inscribing” as characterized by dialogue, argument, conversation, jabber and, overall, as dynamically unfolding narrative. And it seems that the presence of the narrative in the works of Bulgarian artists lends a generalizing character to Bulgarian contemporary art. It is that small narrative or those little stories and non-stories that emerge as a muttering or reality-spamming signals, introspections or even worldbuilding tales, but also as the poetry which remains hidden within the amplitudes of works and words, forming their own body and bodily dimension through the voice. With respect to the authorial works, this narrative has a very different basis for its emergence compared to the text and the language of Western conceptual art. In the present case, the text and the language do not partake in the broad exchange of contemporary art topics, but instead situate, humanize and reconcile. Here the gesture is present as constitutive of the individual voice, protruding and emerging from the consistent whole, rather than being the constitutive position of the whole or the community that emerged via “consistent” individualisms. A text which is not seen, yet which exists beneath “the surface of the picture”⁸. It characteristically persists as such in various artistic practices and generations, because the “the text as artistic medium can naturally form an artwork without any visual, formal or material expression”⁹, hence without any aesthetic means.

In this case, the work emerges as a spiritual value considered as the place of formation and establishment of identity.

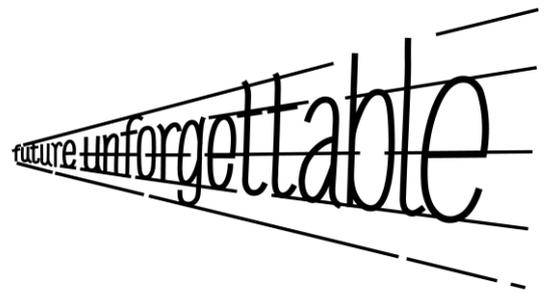
Most recognizable in these hidden or obvious dynamic narratives of Bulgarian contemporary art are the vital text styles, the irony, the humor, the paradox, the social peculiarities, the reversals of meaning, form and material.

By “inscribing” and textuality we mean a segment of established structures and familiar artistic stances in the history of Bulgarian contemporary art that does not exclude the entire field of possibilities and unilluminated aspects. We do not wish to neglect them, yet it is not our task now to elucidate them.

IV.

⁸ Daniela Radeva, “TEXT AS ARTISTIC MEDIUM”, *Open Art Files*: www.openartfiles.bg <http://openartfiles.bg/bg/topics/3091-текстът-като-художествено-средство>

⁹ Ibid.



Nowadays, by taking interest in the narrative bound “performance” of the work’s value and identity, we do not exclude its likely transformation and fading away in contemporary art.

This would appear as a direct “reflection” on the time we live in whose logic seems inconsistent, while its narratives oscillate between the starkly obvious and the clandestine.

A kind of plasmatic overflow whose point of departure becomes increasingly transnational. In this respect, the definitions of local topics have become increasingly fused in recent years, while the scope of the art domain has grown wider and sometimes “noisy”. The manner of “conducting art” has become the object of a number of problematic discussions.

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As the ultimate result of this, the 2020 world crises brought about new tendencies: an expansion and disintegration of cultural space, institutional desacralization, discreditation of the time-space relation in the functioning of a particular institution or practice, large-scale invasion of the Internet into the art sphere, as well as the inrush of new players and principles; additionally, the invention of new or the vulgarization of old cultural segments. And even the introduction of a completely different commercial logic of the art market.

Tendencies whose emergence, logic and organization become increasingly speculative, yet more and more interesting to observe from the viewpoint of the present, the history of digital art, the net-art etc.

The democratization in question has largely provided a precondition not only for the existing hypertextuality, but also for a supratextuality and for increasingly distinct and parallel aerial worlds of art whose logic is newly-formed.¹⁰

V.

Entering the very short temporal distance of observation in this text and tackling the most current problems, it is likewise essential to us to enter a dialogic situation and tackle the following questions: What is contemporary art representative of? What is contemporaneity? Who/What is art? Is it possible for art to be contemporary nowadays? Is there contemporary art nowadays? What is the situation

¹⁰ Ex., Gallery Gallery – a digital network gallery created by Rene Beekman and Albena Baeva, November 2019, Sofia: <https://www.gallerygallery.space/bg/>

around the notion of “contemporary art”? Does this term not designate another already absent system and organization of artistic life?

Respectively – To what extent is it possible for art to be museum bound or encompassed, channeled, commercialized by any existing institutional framework? Is it possible for the existing institutional framework and organizational units to encompass art anew? What specific institutional practice would encompass art? What kind of institutionality does art necessitate nowadays? Is there any such real necessity? In what way is art defined by relations? How do we write about art nowadays? How to curate art?

These are all research guidelines and questions, some of which have already been reflected on in the artistic events of Bulgarian artists and institutions ever since the first lockdown of 2020 and have continued their development in current projects. Events whose profile we could describe as self-reflexive, parallel, fluid, and which subsequently finds expression in the principle of work production, in the manifestation and structure of the realized exhibitions and projects, in the relations among the participants, in the definition of authorship or even co-authorship, in the curatorial practice and the sharing of spaces as a general concept.¹¹

Although developing the pre-knowledge and pre-definition of their own framework, some of these manifestations have contributed to the whole and have accepted performativity and the poetic medium whose institutionality has been displaced and has become a scenic act, rather than a policy of bundling up and determining the nature of the exhibition.¹² Other manifestations simply continue to contribute to the period and the work by sustaining around their practices and projects an experimental, commonly shared, communal and open environment.¹³

¹¹ Ex., the artistic studio and residence on the territory of SARIEV Gallery, Plovdiv, May - June 2020. Selected author: Maria Nalbantova, with a realized art project and exhibition *hybrid-pure*: <http://www.sariev-gallery.com/lab/studio-at-sariev-gallery>
<http://www.sariev-gallery.com/exhibitions/artist-s-studio-at-sariev-maria-nalbantova#info>

InSitu-Institute, an interaction field for communication between the artists Sophia Grancharova, Maria Nalbantova, Aksiniya Peycheva, Martin Penev and Radostin Sedevchev, Institute for Contemporary Art - Sofia, November 2020:

<https://www.ica-sofia.org/en/ica-gallery/exhibitions/item/476-insitu-institute>

Platform Institutions, Swimming Pool, Sofia, December 2020: https://swimmingpoolprojects.org/bg/projects/vzmozhnata-instituciya_6075825e386463608700004e/eseta/viktoriya-draganova

¹² *Magia Naturalis*, idea and conception by Boyan Manchev and Vesselin Sarieva (Phase I) - an environment of works, texts, situations in SARIEV Gallery, Plovdiv (www.boyanmanchev.net/blog), featuring works by Bignia Wehrli, Marta Djourina, L., June-August 2020: <http://www.sariev-gallery.com/viewing-room/magia-naturalis>

Pretty Sure It's Just the Wind, project and exhibition by four artists from Frankfurt am Main realized by Goethe-Institute Bulgaria and Swimming Pool. Authors: Minhyeok Ahn, So Yeon Kim, Kristina Lovaas und Rudi Ninov. Curator: Victoria Draganova, March 2021: <https://www.goethe.de/ins/bg/bg/kul/sup/gal/just-the-wind.html#i6921812>

I Heard a Flutter of Wings at the Window, collaborative project by Maria Nalbantova, Marta Djourina and Sophia Grancharova. An exhibition realized by Cultural Perspectives Foundation in Structura Gallery: <http://structura.gallery/bg/exhibitions/i-heard-wings-fluttering-at-the-window/>

¹³ *Æther*, Sofia - project and art space of the artist Voin de Voin; see also *School of Kindness*: <https://aether-artspace.com>



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It seems that the “text” in the works, subsequently the hypertext and the supratextuality, evolve into unavoidable hybridity. That is to say, into a future structural polyphony or a multi-focal dynamic narrative.

Speaking of multi-focal dynamic narrative, let us go back to the goals of the present text so as to provide practical reason, as well as to presuppose its own narrativity.

The text hereby entitled FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE¹⁴ functionally aims at introducing the homonymous “multi-genre” situation into the visual arts domain organized by the author of the text. This situation creates an environment step by step in several thematic time phases which carry out the realization of main exhibitions, satellite exhibition gestures, documental video series, screening programs, meetings with artists, spatial situations and interventions, open conversations, exhibition and collection tours, publications on thematic tests, accompanied by a recommended bibliography and links.

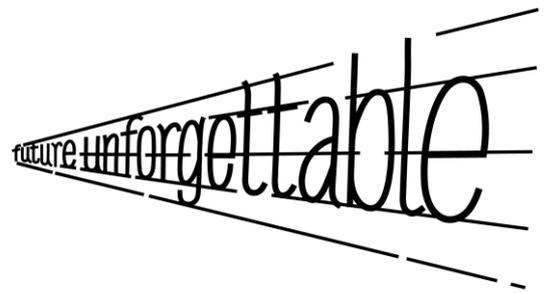
The thematic focus of this multi-genre situation is polyphonic and wide-ranging. Through the medium of curatorial analysis and selection, it deals with topics such as contemporary Bulgarian art from the 1980s to the present day, art collecting, mapping of topical art spaces in Bulgaria, contemporary institutional practices, hypotheses on the past and the future. In its separate thematic and temporal phases, FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE brings out specific microfocal points and topics.

The phases of FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE will unfold in a programmed temporal span between September and December 2021, at different locations in Bulgaria which will be announced by stages.

The present text outlines the main conceptual and developmental vein of the FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE phases. It is open to possible development and expansion, but not as its own plan and commitment, rather as a particular style and character.

Illustrating in itself the multi-focal narrative which unfolds jointly or separately, this situation is concerned with and based on practices which are rooted structurally, thematically and professionally in previous events and activities organized and conducted by SARIEV Gallery and Open Arts Foundation.

¹⁴ The title FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE is inspired by the drawing from Krassimir Terziev's art project *Future Unforgettable*, 2018, marker on paper, 28 x 35.5 cm., Vesselina Sarieva collection.



Besides the fact that, while browsing, it derives a basic theoretical hypothesis about Bulgarian contemporary art, this multi-genre situation complicates and challenges itself by providing opportunities for a real “check-up” on itself. In this way, it adds another visibly-invisible vein that bears significance on art and emphasizes the importance of the acquisition of the work as its realization, confirmation, illustration, acknowledgement and inscription into a broader context – in the present case, the context of “collecting Bulgarian contemporary art”.

By collecting we refer to the practice of having knowledge of, recognizing, acquiring, owning, storing and granting continuance to a particular artwork.

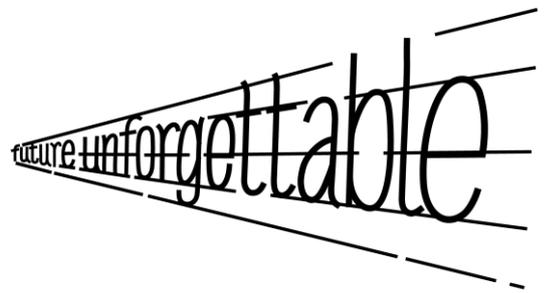
Within the framework of this situation, collecting is partly observation and partly sharing of one’s own experience in collecting and organizing a communal environment amongst the work’s companions where the artwork functions as a central point of convergence.

As value and contribution in itself, the vein dedicated to collecting Bulgarian contemporary art owes its attractiveness to the fact that it will show hitherto unilluminated aspects and practices of art collecting, and even works.

By all means, for those who are not tempted by major topics the “situation” could be interpreted just along the tit-bit vein of art collecting and relatability, or simply as “group of exhibitions”. Others will keep track of only a few elements or events from the entire structurally complex pattern of FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE. As people who work within the art domain, we would say – this is sufficient for it is valuable enough if we are open to further dialogue, no matter what stage we would reach.

Why FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE?

Having started this analysis with the “unforgettable” and difficult to overcome past before the Changes of 1989, the ensuing Transition period, the pandemic reality etc., the project FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE insists on looking towards the future which is considered “unforgettable”, meaning “unimaginable” and “undefinable”, yet accepted as fully positive. We consciously put the “unforgettable” in brackets as a reference to the awkwardness, the hesitation and the anticipation of its own prospective oblivion.



VI.

Speaking of the future, the final stage of this "multi-genre situation" is to be different in nature whereby the project itself will not fail to provide its own interpretations about the future of art, the environments and the institutions.

Vesselina Sarieva

January – August, 2021

All my thanks to the participants

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* The title FUTURE UNFORGETTABLE is inspired by the drawing from Krassimir Terziev's art project *Future Unforgettable*, 2018, marker on paper, 28 x 35.5 cm., Vesselina Sarieva collection.