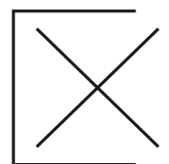


30 years „Without Innocence” - relics from one exhibition

Ventzislav Zankov

Vladimir Iliev Collection

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CHARTA

In 2023, several paintings by Ventzislav Zankov from the early 1990s fell into a private collection. The idea of showing them to the public at first glance sounds pleasant, if only because of their already established place in the history of art in our country. However, it turns out that just one look at them is enough to realise that Zankov is terribly (and in the literal sense) relevant today. Stories of nationalism, extreme poverty, the devaluation of aesthetic nominals, xenophobia and hopelessness creep into the four fragments of the 1995 exhibition „Without Innocence”¹.

It is interesting that the 90's, together with mutrobaroque and pop folk, managed to generate the first adequate to the world processes art. At the same time, the art community is splitting into two parts, with the contemporary oriented wing seeming to cede rights over painting. Thus, Zankov turns out to be one of the few who export current content to canvas. And he becomes recognizable to the general audience as well, deftly dosing the levels of sincerity and provocation. From the current distance it seems amazing how there were still art shows on TV and criticism in newspapers back then. The artist's rich archive documents that he is all over the media, while also receiving supportive reviews from almost everyone in the professional art critic's circles.

Design of the reputation is part of the artistic strategy and the position that only creative people, not marketers, have the right to arrogantly claim to be Gods. In the 90s, there was no other way to model the view of the progressively impoverished (and in terms of aesthetic taste) mass audience. Interpreting the self-portrait with the title "Here I am" from 1993, Maria Vassileva writes: "The analogy with "I came to save you" is not far-fetched."² If we make a connection with the title of the exhibition, we can also read "here I am, I have not emigrated". Because for those who do not know him, the image presented is of an average citizen of Bulgaria. The emphasised innocence in the gaze immediately resonates with the child's handwriting.

The same handwriting appears in several places in this pictorial cycle, and in different semantic configurations with the images. And it becomes even more complicated to retell it unambiguously. In "Taste of Paradise" from 1993, Zankov writes with pink spray, a traditional tool of street vandals. Shot on the meticulously painted white drapery, the tearful Renaissance quote by Tsvetan Radoslavov is able to activate the reactions of absolutely all layers of the audience. In a punk-sounding review, Svilen Stefanov sees the exhibition as a resistance to "the rising plebeian 'patriotism' - preached by 'intellectuals' whose place should long ago be in prison for spreading Nazi ideology."³ Yet it is painfully beautiful, and it's terribly hard to swallow that it should be traded — I don't mean the painting, but what it's a metaphor for.

¹ The four presented paintings are part of the exhibition "Without Innocence", Mix Gallery, 1995.

² Maria Vasileva, Ventzislav Zankov, Magazine Gallery, November 1996.

³ Svilen Stefanov, Zankov Frontally, newspaper Kultura, Issue 26 (2147), June 30, 1995.

A compelling element in the exhibition "Without Innocence", as well as in other works of Zankov from this period, is the deformation of the artistic understanding of the idea of "beautiful". It is equated with the 'attractive' based on the immediate experience of the desire to consume goods or bodily desires - an 'aesthetic of disillusionment', as Philip Zidarov⁴ would say. "No Foreigners" from 1993 is branded with the logo of a local modelling agency and marked with the pink spray. In an auto-interview, the artist talks about his grandfather - a sculptor and his grandmother - a prima ballerina, and about an original Degas pastel that they had. "In my vague memories of my early childhood there are dim silhouettes of ballerinas hanging on the walls."⁵ Fading memories of a time of innocence.

In the painting "Fading Memories" from 1994, even the composition itself speaks of how the make-up beauty from the period of the transition to liberal democracy turns away from Debelyanov's sentimental poetry from the textbooks. If the era of socialism censored eroticism in art, high art in the 1990s mocked the sentimental, the idealised, and all the visible marks of the old craft. By education, Zankov is a sculptor and his first paintings were untouched by the heavy hand of academic painting. The images come directly from photos in fashion magazines and from advertisements. Before this painting here also referred to photography with the pretence that it thus reflects the true reality, but in fact they used to manipulate it. In 1995, Boris Danailov wrote that Zankov was "far from the requirements of normative aesthetics, which still dominate Bulgarian art. Without the depiction of flailing fists and low-faced "grave diggers", without the until recently obligatory references to dubious heroic traditions, Vencislav Zankov is too current..."⁶. Indeed, in 1995 it seems that democracy is here and the transition is already underway, but the change only touches the surface - the source photo has gone from propaganda to advertising.

Daniela Radeva

Ventsislav Zankov (1962). Graduated with a degree in Sculpture at the National Academy of Arts in Sofia in 1988. Over the years, he has been behind many initiatives and curatorial projects, including the weekly *[close-up]* discussion club in Hambara (2004-2008), the *newspaper 39 grams* (2005-2008), the *Ventsislav Zankov Foundation for Contemporary Art* (founded in 2009), the *Ventsislav Zankov Iron Medal for Contemporary Art* (founded 2010), "Everything on Man" (2004-2008) together with the Goethe Institut - Bulgaria, "White, male, straight" project (2002) with the support of Swiss cultural program for Bulgaria Pro Helvetia. Curator for Bulgaria of international video art projects organised by Magmart, Italy (2013-2019). His most recent individual projects feature: *They Are Still Here*, prospective exhibition, Credo Bonum Gallery (2022); *V&V EPICRISSES*, Vaska Emanuilova Gallery /SCAG/ (2021); *In Front of Me*, large-format painting, sculpture and neon, Rayko Aleksiev Gallery, UBA, Sofia (2020), *The Last Burghers of Calais*, sculpture, construction site NBU (2016) and Artium, Serdika Center (2016), etc. He has participated in numerous group exhibitions and other events. Ventsislav Zankov is the author of numerous publications in periodicals and on the Internet.

⁴ Philip Zidarov, TV program "Forum", Channel 1, 1995. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agSbMpk0HKg>

⁵ Vencislav Zankov. The metamorphoses of non-place. Texts and projects from the period 1991-2001, Sofia, 2001.

⁶ Boris Danailov, The Challenge of the Artist, newspaper Democracy, June 17, 1995, Issue 139 (1633).