Creation, Destruction, Transformation, and Monsters: Bulgarian Contemporary Art in Sofia

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Thesis Abstract

Over the last 15 years, Bulgarian artists have taken over and transformed public spaces in Sofia. This thesis focuses on how they have reached out to the population by engaging with the history and layout of the city, at times remapping and reshaping the urban fabric itself. There is emphasis on the importance of collectives, and interactions with municipal, cultural, and international organizations. The work and the artists both engage with the history of Sofia in the context of foreign political pressure during three time periods: the years after the liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, Socialist times (1944 - 1990), and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The distinction between center and periphery of the city becomes clear when tracing the government’s choices in the establishment of public spaces. The Europeanization of Bulgaria (interrupted by the 44 years of Socialism) has played a major role in the decision making behind the allocation of funds.

Many contemporary artists have gravitated towards Parks as historically charged public sites that have been used to make political statements - both through the creation of the green spaces themselves and through the monuments inside them. Artists are also creating works that are concerned with or are on the Transit Network, a dynamic part of the city marked by government authority and the restriction of movement. Many artworks discussed in this paper directly reference local history, and push towards the periphery of Sofia in response to the government’s focus on the center and efforts to erase its
Socialist past as quickly as possible. Even more recent has been the popularization of Virtual Space as a means to extend and supplement public space. Through this new medium and venue, artists have been more equipped than ever to cross boundaries and re-imagine the map of Sofia.
Introduction

“Our goal was to exit the galley and exhibit in places that would reach as many people as possible. It was not difficult to leave the galleries because we had never entered them in the first place.”

- Ivan Moudov, 2012

Over the last 20 years, artists have taken over and transformed public spaces in Sofia. The prominent Bulgarian artist Ivan Moudov’s description of his art collective skyParty’s aspirations in the late 90s represents the direction taken by many contemporary Bulgarian artists.¹ This process has paralleled other work being made in Eastern Europe. Piotr Piotrowski uses the word *agoraphilia* to name the intense fascination with public space in Post-Communist Europe.² He clarifies that the word in this case “describes the drive to enter the public space, the desire to participate in that space, to shape public life, to perform critical and design functions for the sake of and within the social space.”³ According to the author, this is a response to both the shifting map of Europe during and after the Cold War and to the state control that was imposed during socialist times.

This thesis focuses on how Bulgarian artists in Sofia have gravitated towards public spaces in the spirit of agoraphilia. The three chapters trace three urban sites - Parks, Transit Network, and Virtual Space. Contemporary artists have questioned who has had the power to map the city and the continent.

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¹ Ivan Moudov: How do you make not standard change?, Artist Talk organized by Gorichka Organization in 2012
through their works and chosen venues. They have challenged the dichotomy between center and periphery that has been present in both Sofia and Europe. This has effectively been a fight against the “symbolic act of imprisonment” that mapping represents.\textsuperscript{4} It’s a struggle that has not been unique to Bulgaria. Romanian artist, theorist, and curator Calin Dan writes about his fraught relationship with Europe and how it has been influenced by cartography, which he describes as an act of freezing “patterns of dominance.”\textsuperscript{5} According to him, any questioning of the resulting maps is “an attack on the survival of the human species.”\textsuperscript{6} This assessment of the pushback against status quo maps casts the work of Bulgarian contemporary artists in a subversive light that is in conversation with other work from Eastern Europe.

Parks in Sofia are seen as historically charged sites that have been used to make political statements - both through the creation of the green spaces themselves and through the monuments inside them. The Transit Network, made up of streets, roads, trolleys, and trains, a dynamic part of the city marked by government authority and the restriction of movement has also become a part of the urban landscape that artists grapple with and work on. Even more recent has been the popularization of Virtual Space as a means to extend and supplement public space. Through this new medium and venue to artists have been more equipped than ever to cross boundaries and re-imagine the map of Sofia that has historically been shaped solely by the government. The thesis also examines the

\textsuperscript{4} Calin Dan, COMPUTER GAME EUROPA, essay published in \textit{After the Wall: art and culture in post-Communist Europe}, editors Bojana Pejic and David Elliott, Stockholm : Moderna Museet, 1999

\textsuperscript{5} Calin Dan, COMPUTER GAME EUROPA

\textsuperscript{6} Calin Dan, COMPUTER GAME EUROPA
ways in which artists have reached out to the population by engaging with the history and layout of Sofia at time remapping and reshaping the urban fabric itself. There is emphasis on the importance of collectives, and interactions with municipal, cultural, and international organizations.

Bulgarian artists have engaged with the history of Sofia in the context of foreign political pressure during three time periods: the years after the liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, Socialist times, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Bulgaria had been under Ottoman rule for about 482 years when in 1878 it was finally liberated after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. After long negotiations, which included the United Kingdom, Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the Ottoman Empire, with the Treaty of Berlin it was decided that Bulgaria would be split into two. The eastern part of the country would still be under direct Ottoman rule and was called East Rumelia. The Principality of Bulgaria, on the other hand, would be ruled by a prince, who was to be approved by the countries that had participated in the Congress of Berlin, but it would still be a vassal state under the Ottoman Empire. In the process of fighting for the independence and unification of Bulgaria, a liberal constitution was drafted, modeled after those of other Western countries. Diplomats fought for the right for Bulgaria to be seen as an important political actor in the international scene despite its ambiguous status as a vassal state.

Sofia was declared to be the new capital in 1879 and its planning was an essential element of the government’s move towards Europeanization. Foreign architects, artists, and even gardeners were invited to devise a map of the Sofia
that would emulate European capitals. This led to a circular layout of the city that would later come to have a clearly defined center and periphery. The only garden in the city was restructured in 1879 and new ones were established in the following years. The National Theatre was planned and built in 1907 by the Austrian architecture firm Fellner & Helmer.\footnote{Vasil Stefanov, Vileta Decheva, and Kristina Tosheva. \textit{100 Years National Theatre, Daian Jakov Publishing House}, 2004.} Sofia University was established in 1888 and its edifice was planned by the French architect Henri Bréançon in 1907. The building was finished in 1934.\footnote{“Sofia University St. Kliment Orchidski”, “Sofia - 127 years capital”, Website of the Sofia Municipality.}

At the end of the 19th century, Aleko Konstantinov wrote one of the most iconic pieces of Bulgarian literature, \textit{Bai Ganyo Travels Around Europe}. The author describes the misadventures of a Bulgarian rose oil merchant clashing with Western European culture. His stories are told through the eyes of young students from Sofia who share their embarrassing experiences with Bai Ganyo in Europe. Konstantinov’s writing exposes the chasm between a country that was very recently under Ottoman Rule and the powerful Western European states. Bai Ganyo is emblematic of the aspirations and misunderstanding of Bulgarians who strive to be as refined and well-educated as Western Europeans. This marked an important point in the idealization of the West that would carry on through to socialist and contemporary times.

In the First and Second World Wars, Bulgaria had attempted to remain neutral, but because it had felt betrayed and robbed of territory by Russia and Western Europe after the Balkan Wars, ultimately sided with Germany. In 1944...
the Soviet Army entered and occupied Bulgaria and this in combination with the 9th of September coup d'état led to a change of regime. When the Fatherland Front (Bulgarian Communist Party) came into power, Europe was no longer the hegemon to which Bulgarians were compelled to appease and aspire. The ties with the Soviet Union and the new political order in the country led to a transformation in the landscape of Sofia that took the form of creation of new parks, housing complexes, factories, and policing facilities. State control was ever present in the workplace, school, street, and private life.

Artists were employed by the government to create propaganda in the form of art for public spaces and events like parades. The majority of monuments in Sofia were built at this time and state sanctioned art was in the International Social Realism style. The Union of Bulgarian Artists was an influential organization obligatorily headed by a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party. Most notably Svetlin Rusev led the organization until 1985 for 12 years as opposed to other mandates that lasted 3 - 4 years. Government monopoly over all the art world resulted in feelings of stagnation and frustration in many artists who were eager to break out of the restrictions of government authority.

Hristo Yavachev, who is known internationally as Christo, left Bulgaria to go to Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1956. His pursuit of artistic and political freedom eventually led him to escape to Vienna, Austria and later move to Paris, France. There he met his partner Jeanne-Claude and they began creating environmental works of art. The duo went on to settle in New York and create numerous large-scale installations in public space that have inspired Bulgarian artists since. Their
practices of wrapping architectural elements and parts of the landscape have influenced the practices of many of the artists discussed in this thesis. Christo has become a powerful symbol of an extraordinary artist who in his success in the West has rejected Bulgaria. He did not return to Bulgaria despite multiple invitations and award ceremonies. His controversial image has been defining in the practice of numerous Bulgarian artists who have often had a difficult time coming out from underneath Christo’s shadow.

On November 10, 1989, as socialist regimes toppled around the world, Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian Communist Party’s leader since 1954, resigned from his position. Petar Mladenov came into power until February 1990 when the Communist Party itself voluntarily stepped down. In June 1990 the first free elections since 1931 were held. Unlike other Eastern European countries where people had protested and fought for democracy prior to 1989, many Bulgarians has a hard time believing that Zivkov had resigned and thought it was a test to check which citizens were not true communists. The jarring change in regimes once again reversed the polarity of what superpower Bulgarians aimed to establish a connection with. Europeanization became an official priority of the state and it led to Bulgaria joining the European Union in 2007.

In the art world, there were a variety of responses to the political changes and three main spheres of artists formed – Rusev, who shed his Communist affiliation quickly, led one that revolved around the National Gallery, another focused on operating outside the boundaries of the large national institution and formed the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sofia, and finally art collectives like
Destructive Creation created a sphere that lived solely in urban space. The generation of older artists continues to be headed by the painter Svetlin Rusev who as of 2016 continues to be an integral part of the administration of the National Gallery. Despite changes in cabinet that have caused parallel turnover in the directors of the gallery, Rusev has retained his influence. In 2015, the Bulgarian and Foreign Art collections of the National Gallery were merged into a new building called Square 500. Rusev headed the committee for the planning of the new museum and his curatorial decisions shaped the majority of the galleries.\(^9\) The painstakingly slow change in the institution has made it extremely difficult for young artists to enter the museum space.

Another group of artists formed around curator Iara Boubnova and the Institute for Contemporary Art in Sofia. This includes Luchezar Boyadjiev, Nedko Solakov, Maria Vasileva, Krasimir Terziev, and Ivan Moudov. Boyadjiev worked with Boubnova on curating the first Bulgarian pavilion at the Istanbul Biennale in 1992. Together they founded the Institute in 1995 and began the process of opening up the Bulgarian art scene to the world and vice versa.\(^10\) Solakov was the first Bulgarian artist in 30 years to participate in the Venice Biennale though not in a national pavilion in June of 1999.\(^11\) He works in mixed media and the majority of his work are meant to be exhibited in a gallery. Almost all of the 11 artists, curators, and historians who are members of the institute have exhibited all over Europe and have enjoyed international acclaim over the past decade. In

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\(^9\) Interview with Iara Boubnova at Square 500 on January 15th, 2016
\(^10\) Interview with Iara Boubnova at the Institute of Contemporary Art on January 14th, 2016
the last few years there has been more collaboration between the sphere of the National Gallery and the Institute for Contemporary Art. For example, Nedko Solakov’s work is currently on view in Square 500. Iara Boubnova is also currently one of three Deputy Directors of the National Gallery - she heads the “Foreign Art” division.

Ivan Moudov (b. 1975), who is one of the key figures in the Institute, has worked predominantly in public space as his quote at the beginning of the introduction suggests. He was born in 1975 in Sofia and got his degree in Mural painting in 2002. He began his career joining a collective called skyParty and using parties as venues to exhibit and reach as many people as possible. While Moudov was still studying at the National Academy of the Arts in Sofia, he was disheartened by how few opportunities he felt like he had to pursue a career in the arts. His way of countering those feelings was to find a space where he had the right of way - in a roundabout. Moudov’s first notable performance in the street was An Hour Priority took place in 2000. The artist videoed himself driving non-stop for an hour in one of the busiest and historically charged roundabouts in the capital. Later works by him further engage with historical sites in Sofia, state control, and public engagement. All of these themes relate closely to issues with which other even younger contemporary artists in Sofia are grappling. Moudov has since become one of the internationally better known Bulgarian artists. He participated in the 52nd Venice Biennale at the Bulgarian Pavilion, curated by Vessela Nozharova.

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12 Ivan Moudov: How do you make not standard change?, Artist Talk organized by Gorichka Organization in 2012
The third sphere of artists that formed has been marked by large collectives, collaboration, and work done almost exclusively in public space. Two early Bulgarian groups of artists are “Ръб” and “Disco 95.” They worked in the 90s exhibiting both inside and outside galleries in Sofia and a nearby city called Plovdiv. Unfortunately their work is not very well documented and mentions of it can mostly be found in articles about Kolio Karamfilov, Krasimir Dobrev, and Rumen Jekov, who were all active in those groups. In the early 2000s there was a lull in the number of collectives but the economic recession of 2008 led young artists to work together again.

In 2009, a group of young architects, who were frustrated with the lack of projects and jobs, established an association called Transformatori. They are a legally recognized organization that can enter legally binding contracts. Their goal is to revitalize collective use spaces and to encourage the interaction between state institutions, non-governmental organizations, and to create partnerships with firms and commercial organizations. Their practice began with small-scale installations in the center of the city that got them exposure and more commissions. Overtime they have moved towards both larger ventures and making art in the periphery of Sofia. Another important aspect of their practice has been to encourage new members to join the association in order to keep their energy and momentum going.

Two years later in 2011 a collective emerged in Sofia with a bang when they illegally painted over the Soviet Army Monument in the center of the city.

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13 The founding members of Transformatori: Valeri Giurov, Martin Angelov, Delian Delchev, Anna Kalinova, Avgustina Veleva, and Todor Atanasov
They recast the Red Army soldiers as United States heroes and symbols like Superman and Ronald McDonald. The artists, who call themselves Destructive Creation, remain anonymous in part because a lot of their work falls under the category of vandalism despite the fact that nowadays the collective receives commissions both from private companies and the municipality of Sofia. Unlike Transformatori, they don’t always ask for permission when working in public space and that has given them freedom to challenge government authority in different ways. Another motivation for their anonymity is the desire to show a unified front while allowing for the jolt of energy new members provide. With very few exceptions the work of this collective has originated and lived in the parks and streets of Sofia.

Both of Transformatori and Destructive Creation have been central in engaging the public with contemporary art from the different vantage points - one of obtaining permission from the government and the other being willing to break the law. They have participated together in numerous festivals and have collaborated with each other and other artists in the city both in Parks and the Transit Network. They share a common goal of provoking Bulgarians to think about the recent socialist past that the government has so vehemently attempted to historicize and tuck away in the proverbial cupboard. As Tanja Petrovic writes, this is a trend in much of Eastern Europe. Socialism is seen as a non-European legacy that pulls back Eastern European societies from truly integrating into

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14 Some ex-members of the collective have shared their identities and the ones who remain anonymous are known members by many people in the municipality and even journalists who respect the wishes of the artists and don’t reveal their identity.
Another set of questions then emerges about what political change has meant in the region and how the different approaches of the two groups of artists have engaged with commentary on government authority.

Artists have grappled with the issues of government control on the street both in Parks and the Transit Network. However those sites make it difficult to ensure artwork isn’t destroyed, altered, or in any way censored. This uncertainty in urban space has driven artists to archive, exhibit, and create in yet another kind of public site - Virtual Space. Since 1999, when government restrictions on Internet providers in Bulgaria fell, there has been a boom in the number of people who are on the web. This has made it possible for artists and collectives to carve out their own autonomous space that they have complete control over. Nedko Solakov, Transformatori, and Destructive Creation have all been very active online and have their own websites that serve as curated archives. They have also wielded social media to generate interest and communication lines between themselves and the viewer.

Others have gone a step further and have began producing digitally native works. For example, Spartak Dermenjiev, who is an artist that belonged to the older generation but clashed with Svetlin Rusev, began creating virtual monuments in 2014. His impetus for moving to virtual space was that he felt trapped by obscure municipality competitions that felt rigged. His works live both on a personal website and on Facebook where he organizes virtual openings. A younger duo - Tochka Ilieva and Atanas Kustev - have also created a project.

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15 Tanja Petrović editor, Mirroring Europe : ideas of Europe and Europeanization in Balkan societies, Leiden, Netherlands : Brill, 2004
called *Sofia Monsters* that was born on the Internet but later jumped into physical public space. Their work has garnered a lot of attention online and in national news.

Over the last 26 years since the fall of the socialist regime in Bulgaria artists have moved from the static spaces of Parks to the more dynamic Transit system and finally they have been able to take advantage of the ultimate network - the Internet. The following chapters trace this process and attempt to paint a picture of the historical mapping of the city and how artists have pushed back against it.
Parks

In 1879, when Sofia became the capital of the Principality of Bulgaria, the city had a single garden and it was located in front of the main Ottoman administrative building (konak). In the years since then the number of parks in Sofia has jumped to more than 20. There is also a tremendous amount of smaller green areas around city squares, playgrounds, and train stations. The numerous parks in Sofia have shaped the character of the capital and have often served as political stages, gallery walls, and performance venues. Looking closely at the past of these public spaces is essential to understanding the contemporary artworks that have been created in them. The history of the development of parks in the capital of Bulgaria can be broadly be divided into three major stages: the period from the liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878 to the establishment of the socialist regime in 1946; the time of planned economy while the Bulgarian Communist Party was in power; and the years since 1989.

View of the palace of the Knyaz and the Sofia City Garden at the end of the 19th century
Immediately after the establishment of the Principality of Bulgaria, tremendous efforts were undertaken to distance the newly formed state from Ottoman influence. The new government began to forge ties with other European countries and to shape Sofia’s architecture to reflect that of a modern European capital. In hopes of emulating cities like London, Paris, and Vienna, the entire park in front of the konak was torn down and then completely restructured by Czech architect Antonín Kolář from Austria-Hungary in March of 1878. On April 4th of that same year the park was renamed “Alexander's Garden” after Alexander II Tsar-Liberator of Russians and Bulgarians. In 1882, the mayor of Sofia, Ivan Hadjianov, invited the Swiss gardner and botanist Daniel Neff to plan a new park in the center of Sofia called Tzarigradska Garden. Over the next four years Neff’s project grew and it was renamed into the Knyaz Boris Garden and the Knyajevska Garden. The landscape was changed dramatically with artificial lakes, fountains, and foreign species of trees. Ten years after the Knyaz Boris park was founded, the first botanical garden was established by the first university Professor of Botany at the Sofia University. Knyaz Ferdinand, who was in power at the time, was present at the opening of the garden and famously planted a gold coin in the roots of a Golden Oak that still stands today. This is also in the context of the recent founding of the university, which had opened doors in 1888, following the model of other European institutions of higher learning. In the 1930s, there was a move away from the establishment of large gardens. Rather, many smaller parks were built around open air waiting areas.

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16 The Tzarigradska Garden (Tzar’s City Garden) and renamed after the birth of Boris Turnovski
17 Tihomira Mihailova, The Botanical Gardens of Old Sofia, October, 2011, Novinar Newspaper
like baths and train stations as well as transitional areas like Vyzrajdane Square. In addition, Parks and gardens were constructed around churches and monuments.

The next major regime change would bring dramatic shifts in the use of Sofia’s public spaces. Most dramatically in 1951, a mausoleum was constructed for the first Bulgarian communist leader Georgi Dimitrov. The structure was built in the City Park in only six days because Dimitrov has passed away in the USSR and it took as many days to transport his body back to Bulgaria. Once more the City Park had become a stage for a political statement. Seventy years prior it had been the ground zero for a series of changes to the cityscape that were meant to solidify the status of the new government and the building of this monument was another similar beginning. The mausoleum stood in that location until August 1999 when it was demolished as a means of making a statement that the political
regimes had changed. In 1954 in the Knyajevska Garden, the Bulgarian government commissioned the building of the Soviet Army Monument. It commemorates the lost lives of the soldiers who gave their lives fighting against Nazi Germany and shows gratitude towards the Soviet Union for liberating Bulgaria. For many years, especially after the fall of the socialist regime, this monument in the center of the city has been a source of controversy. There have been many debates on whether the Red Army monument should be removed or not. Many people perceive it as honoring an army that liberated Bulgaria from a country with which it was allied. The monument is often seen as a symbol of the forceful exertion of Soviet influence on Bulgaria.

Aside from building monuments within pre-existing green spaces in the center of the city, the socialist government founded three major parks all in the periphery of the city. The parks in questions are the South, West, and North. They are all tremendously large and were conceptualized as bridges to the Vitosha and Liulin mountains that surround Sofia. Creating public spaces in neighborhoods that were densely populated with factories was more in line with the communist ideals of equality and elevation of the working class. In the years between 1989 and 2013, the government has struggled to maintain all of the parks and gardens in the capital. Most recently there have been major improvements to the Knyaz Boris Garden, the National Palace of Culture Park, and parts of the South Park. Finally, there has been a project for the first time since socialist times to construct a major park and it was just finished on the 18th

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of April this year in the Vazrajdane neighborhood. All of these locations are in the center of the city.

On the morning of June 17th of 2011, Sofia awoke to a bright and controversial re-imagining of a part of the Soviet Army Monument that is located in the Knyajevksa Garden. Someone had painted the West-facing mural of the monument with American Superheroes and Symbols. The group of Soviet soldiers depicted on the relief was cast as Superman, Capitan America, the Joker, Santa Claus, and Ronald McDonald. The bronze relief is one of three on the square base of the monument and it is at eye level for most viewers. Above

19 “Park Vyzrajdane is Open”, Press Release by the Vyzrajdane region of Sofia Municipality, April 18th, 2016.
this base, a square tower extends about a 100ft up and on top of it rests a 26ft sculpture of a Soviet Soldier with Bulgarians at his side. The relief that was painted over is called “The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union” and it depicts nine figures.\textsuperscript{20} In the center of the foreground, a young man in military uniform holds a pistol in his right hand and his left arm is extended towards his comrades, beckoning them to fight. He faces the people behind him and his mouth is open in a yell that echoes the positioning of his body. Behind him a kneeling man appears to be loading missile into a launcher and in front another soldier crouches with a rifle. In the middle ground more men carry weapons and advance to their goal. One in particular holds a Degtyarev Light Machine Gun, which contains a very distinct large circle where the bullets are contained. In the background a man holds a flag, which waves in the wind and a woman stands behind the rest of the fighters observing the battle. The dark bronze in which the figures of the soldiers are cast creates a sense of unity and uniformity that, along with the determined gazes and actions of the men gives a sense of purpose and cohesion to the group’s sense of movement and dynamism.

Fifty-seven years after the immense structure was built and 22 years after Bulgaria became a democratic country, this group of Soviet soldiers were recast as American Superheroes and Symbols. The central figure in the foreground was covered in the red and blue colors of Superman and his chest bore the telltale yellow “S” of Clark Kent in his hero ready garb. The missile loader was now Robin, the sidekick of Batman, while the crouching man in the front was the new Joker. Next to him the only bearded soldier, wore the red and white colors of Santa Claus. The bearer of the machine gun was painted as Captain America with the circle of bullets reimagined as the famous shield of the superhero. Ronald McDonald, who like Santa did not originate in comic books, takes up the background. He held the American flag and behind him in the back, the only woman was painted as Wonder Woman. Below the relief, “In step with the times” or “Going with the times” is written with large black letters in Bulgarian. The color palette used in the painting of the monument recalls the bright colors used in
comic books and pop-art, which makes the references to the various heroes very clear. The authorities washed off the paint within 4 days, but there was ample time for a great deal of photographic material to be gathered\textsuperscript{21}.

Newspaper headlines around the world varied from “Russia not amused at Red Army statue re-invented as Superman and friends” published in the Guardian to “Bulgaria Soviet Army Monument Gets Superhero Makeover” in the Huffington Post\textsuperscript{22}. During the summer of 2011 a shroud of mystery surrounded the new “Bulgarian Banksy”, as the Daily Mail in the UK had dubbed the party responsible for the painting of the Red Army Monument\textsuperscript{23}. Debate concerning whether this was vandalism or art brought to light strong russophobic and russophilic sentiments within Bulgaria. Three months later, on August 14th, the nine people responsible for the painting of the monument revealed the name of their collective, Destructive Creation, and gave an interview for Edno magazine. The young men were a mix of 17 to 21 year olds, some of whom lived and studied outside of Bulgaria and others who studied in Sofia. They chose not to reveal the identity of the individual members to avoid legal action being taken against any of them. Most significantly in this interview they spoke about the choice of location and their intention. To them this socialist monument was

\textsuperscript{21} Link to a 360 panorama of the painting of the monument: http://bg360.net/pano/sofia/popart-soviet-army.php


particularly powerful and stood out amongst the many others in Sofia because of its history. It was built in the most prominent and central location possible and it went on to be guarded by the militia until the change of the political regime. Anyone who loitered in the vicinity was considered to be suspicious and subject to investigation.24

Post 1989, the area around the Red Army monument became a key site for teenagers and artists to gather because a skate ramp was built on the west side of the monument. It was this ramp that the painted relief was facing. Finally, and very importantly to the members of Destructive Creation, there had been a great deal of conflict over what to do with the monument. A controversial perspective that had been gaining traction was that it ought to be demolished, as it had been done with the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov. These political and social undercurrents led the collective to choose this particular site to express their ideas.

24 Interview with Destructive Creation, Edno Magazine, August 14, 2011 http://edno.bg/blog/koy-e-v-krak-s-vremeto
In the words of the artists: “what we wanted to depict with the painting of the monument was Bulgarian politics, which always shifts with the changing currents, without regard as to whether [these changes] affect our national interests. Just as our parents grew up with the heroes of the Red Army, we grew up with American comic book heroes. I want my children to be inspired by heroes with Bulgarian last names.”

One member went on to specify that when there was a socialist regime, the Bulgarian government built this structure because “we wanted to be the best communists and now we want to be the best democrats”.

The members of Destructive Creation do not support the destruction of the monument. According to them, a part of performing the role of “the best democrats” seems to be erasing the communist past, which in this case has manifested in efforts to demolish this site of memory as in the case of the Dimitrov Mausoleum. Rather than supporting this push to forget the recent history of the country, the painting of the relief was meant to recall how Bulgarian politicians reacted to direct political pressure from the Soviet Union - they built a monument to an army that had been initially seen as invading rather than liberating. By then choosing to recast the soldiers as comic book heroes and American capitalist symbols like Ronald McDonald and Santa Claus, the artists are commenting on the new kind of pressure that is being put upon Bulgaria in the form of economic and cultural influence from the U.S.

Destructive Creation’s work suggests that the new kind of hegemony in the form of U.S. power may not be so radically different from that of the Soviet Union. The USSR’s propaganda of communist ideals was aggressive and far

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25 Interview with Destructive Creation, Edno Magazine, August 14, 2011
from subtle, making it not difficult to detect. It also centered on working and completing the goals of the planned economy. The U.S.’s way of approaching the spread of capitalism on the other hand was more indirect because it was delivered in the form of entertainment instead of the more unpleasant encouragement to do work. The Hollywood film industry is used as the ultimate marketing model. Through movies and commercials images of happiness and success have been created. They sell cultural values that in turn propagate capitalism. To be happy, one can purchase a “Happy Meal” from the friendly Ronald McDonald. To experience the magic of Christmas and Santa Claus, we must buy gifts for our loved ones. Captain America and Supermen are presented as the great protectors of the world and their action figures then become a part of the “Happy Meal”. The end result is in the ideological struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union both countries were using a form of propaganda to spread their ideas and influence. As Destructive Creation and the controversy their work produced demonstrate– these forces are still at work in the post cold war world.

Looking more closely into how each figure is depicted reveals more about Destructive Creation’s attitudes. For example, the shield of Captain America is painted over the magazine of a light machine gun. This imagery contrasts the defensive symbol of protection with the offensive nature of a gun. It brings to mind the adage that the best defense is a strong offence. Perhaps it references the U.S. employment of that strategy in their invasions of countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. Santa Claus was shown holding binoculars, scoping the battlefield, and making sure the way forward is secure. This is perhaps a reference to the
image of Santa that was skyrocketed to international fame in the 1930s through commercials of Coca Cola that forged the indelible connection between Christmas, gifts, happiness, and carbonated soft drinks. Coca Cola was a powerful symbol of the West in Bulgaria that was shrouded in mystery in the late 1950s. By 1965 the first Coca cola factory in the Eastern bloc was established in Bulgaria. This helped create a mechanism of increasing demand through selling joy and the utopic image of the West. The natural continuation is that Ronald McDonald’s drink of choice is of course none other than Coca Cola and as of 2016, McDonald’s serves 68 million customers daily in 119 countries. The U.S. corporations may not have invaded and occupied the countries that they are profiting from but they have found a different, arguably much more effective way to exert their influence through pop culture.

Ivan Moudov is another artist thinking actively about the erasure of the past and the unwillingness of Bulgarian institutions and people to grapple with the recent history of the country. In the late 90s he was a part of a collective called skyParty. Their goal was to leave the galleries and exhibit in public spaces, where they could reach as many people as possible. In Moudov’s words

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27 “Coca Cola…it’s appearance caused excitement almost equal to that before a sacred ritual” Georgi Markov, Extramural Report from Bulgaria, book I, 1969-1978
this was not particularly difficult because they “had never entered the galleries in the first place.” He graduated from the National Academy of the Arts in Sofia in 2002 and since then has become one of the most prominent contemporary Bulgarian artists. A year after Destructive Creation brought intense attention to a monument that some thought should be demolished, Ivan Moudov pinned the public’s focus on the site where a building and a site of memory had actually been destroyed - the City Garden and the empty slot where the Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov had once stood. For a contemporary arts festival called Sofia Contemporary (October 19th to November 11th, 2012), the artist worked with curator Iara Boubnova and made an installation that created the illusion that a new building was being raised in the empty slot of the mausoleum. Iara Boubnova was one of the key organizers of Sofia Contemporary and she drafted proposals for all of the works that were to be a part of the festival.

Moudov erected blue, thin, metal walls around the perimeter of the old mausoleum and put on a large plastic label that proclaimed that the municipality of Sofia was constructing a new building on that site. He formatted the plaque in the style of official notices for projects taking place around the city, even including citation of decrees that had supposedly been passed to approve the project. Aside from the official seal of the municipality, included was picture of what the new “multipurpose building for public use,” as he had dubbed it, would look like. It bore striking similarity to the old mausoleum, a white building that had a short pyramidal base and a facade that recalled greco-roman temple with square columns. The fictional new building was in the “gangster neo-classical” style with sculptures of lions, elaborate friezes, and marble in too many different colors. There was a phone number to contact on the poster as well (as of December 2015 when the number is called it rings but isn’t being answered). The only marginally out of the ordinary element was an extra piece of scaffolding inside the fenced off section, on which there was another banner with the new building printed on it.

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29 Quote from Ivan Moudov from *Visual Seminars / The City as a Museum*, 2005
30 Quote from Ivan Moudov on his work *Untitled 2012* in Edno magazine. [http://edno.bg/blog/ivan-mudov-v-contemporary-space](http://edno.bg/blog/ivan-mudov-v-contemporary-space) “gangster neo-classicism” describes a kitschy style of overly lavish and distasteful architecture.
On the first day of the festival calls and complaints about the fictional building project flooded the municipality. Heated debates about the lack of transparency of this government venture took place both on site and on the Internet. The architectural plans themselves were seen as an insult because of their garishness and similarity to the original mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov. Ivan Moudov and the curator of the festival Iara Boubnova felt forced to announce that Untitled 2012 was an artwork that had meant to provoke and it was not an actual undertaking by the municipality. There was confusion both among the public and the government despite the official permission that had been issued to do this installation thanks to Boubnova’s careful wording in their proposal to the authorities. Many people challenged the idea that this was an actual artwork. One interpretation suggested that the government had made a wrong decision to

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31 Boubnova, Iara. Quote from Audio Recorded Personal Interview with Daniela Dimitrova, Sofia, Bulgaria, January 14, 2016.
do this project and was trying to backtrack. Moudov was certainly surprised by some of the reactions but spoke of the fact that he “created a situation and then let it go”. Many newspapers and media outlets called his work a provocation and there were some mixed feeling about whether it was a positive or negative action.

The imagery Moudov evoked in Untitled 2012 was controversial because it mixed the old and the new in uncomfortable ways. The two sitting lions in front of the fictional new building echo the pair of lions walking that were installed in 1985 in front of the Sofia Court House. The color of the marble used by Moudov is similar to the shades of marble found in the Ministry of Education and the Bulgarian National Bank. In fact, it seems as though the artist turned the foyer of the National Bank inside out to produce the fictional building. The fusion of the recognizable façade of the mausoleum with the familiar symbols of government and finance draws parallels with between the old socialist regime and the new democratic government.

32 Quote from Ivan Moudov on his work Untitled 2012 in Edno magazine. http://edno.bg/blog/ivan-mudov-v-contemporary-space
Furthermore, the overall appearance of the different elements coming together in the “gangster neo-classical” that Moudov speaks about is gaudy. He further leads the viewer to make a comparison between the past and present political regimes and to think about how the nouveau riche criminal class fits into government. Moudov asks important and difficult questions though the creation of this installation. For who are the Bulgarians willing to build a monument? In 1954, it was the Bulgarian government that paid for and built the Soviet Army Monument to show loyalty to the powerful the USSR. 58 years later it’s important to consider what has taken the place of the Soviet Union. The ostentation of Moudov’s design for a new building recalls Jay Gatsby’s style and hints that perhaps an obsession with wealth at all cost has become worthy of monuments. Through Untitled 2012 the artist seems to be conducting a social experiment on whether people are complacent enough to allow something as inappropriate to be built on a historically charged site. Though there are no clear-cut answers to all his queries, the outcry and discussion that ensued showed that the public is not indifferent to these issues.

In 2013, yet another historic monument in a Sofia park became a site for conversation and art making. The monument itself is called “1300 Years Bulgaria” and is a 37-meter tall imposing polygon made of concrete that rests on a metal frame. It was built in 1981, while Bulgaria was under communist regime and it celebrates the 1300 years of Bulgarian history since the creation of the First Bulgarian Kingdom in 681 CE. It was raised hastily in only 8 months.

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because it needed to be finished in time for the opening of a complex that had been created to commemorate the anniversary. This complex is named “National Palace of Culture” and it was built in place of army barracks and an industrial train station for coal transportation that had been in that location since World War II. The “palace” itself is an imposing 123 000 square meter “multipurpose building” that was intended to house conferences, exhibits, and concerts. The sculptor Valentin Starchev along with architects Atanas Agura and Alexander Barov, were commissioned to design the “1300 Years Bulgaria” monument to complete the large complex.\textsuperscript{34} This project had been planned for at least 6 years and though it was one of the most large-scale efforts to honor the anniversary, it was by no means the only one. Around the country, several other monuments were erected to celebrate the anniversary.

\textsuperscript{34} Yordan Miloshev, \textit{National Palace of Culture: Memories of the Builders}, Svetulka 44 Atenei, 2015.
Though not all elements of the monument in Sofia remain intact because many pieces have broken and fallen off, when it completed it contained three figural sculptural elements perched on separate sections of the base and sloped upward to the right. Tzar Simeon and academics form a cluster of men in the lowest portion of the monument. They embody the “Golden Age of Bulgaria” from 839 to 927 CE. In the middle, an older woman mourns a young man and their posture recalls the Pieta. Finally, the last figure is that of the Worker, the man of the people, who was portrayed again and again in socialist painting and monumental sculpture. On the concrete base there is text as well: “The time is in us and we are in the time”, “Go forth, reborn nation”, “He, who falls in a fight, he does not die”. The writings are by three famous Bulgarian revolutionaries who reference Bulgaria’s liberation from the Ottoman Empire. Taking into account the figure of the Worker and writings about the partisans who helped liberate Bulgaria in 1945, it can be inferred that these messages of struggle and liberation also apply to those who fought for communism. The three separate scenes create a narrative arc that describes an ascension from the far past, through the recent history, and finally to present and future. Currently, only parts of the figures remain and most of them are now metal skeletons of their former selves.

35 Encyclopedia Bulgaria, Volume 2, Publisher: Bulgarian Academy of Science, 1981.
Even in the first few years of its founding, the public regarded the monument as an unappealing part of the park. Almost immediately after construction was finished, it became evident that the outer concrete had not been securely mounted onto the metal frame and pieces began to fall off. Over time the perimeter was secured with a fence that ultimately did not prevent people from walking in and painting and tagging the work. Both because of safety concerns and because the structure has been seen as a symbol of decay, there have been numerous campaigns to reconstruct the monument.36 Beginning in 2001, every few years the municipality declares that a decision has been reached to demolish 1300 Years Bulgaria. Yet as of October 2015, the task of gathering the necessary funds has proven to be insurmountable. This uncertainty

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36 Maksimilian Berovski, "Monument in Deconstrucion: 1300 Years Bulgaria", Magazine for University Culture, Sofia University, pg. 109-112.
has led to a great deal of frustration that can be seen in the explicit ways that many people from the younger generation have been referring to the monument. A commonly used term is the “six-angled polydicker.” Both the general public and various artists expressed discontent at the state of the monument and that inspired the organizers of a festival called Sofia Architecture Week in 2013 to harness this energy. For this festival, the Transformatori association\textsuperscript{37} created a competition called ReVISION for projects to transform the \textit{1300 Years Bulgaria} monument that culminated in a presentation of the winning projects on November 1st, 2013.

For the opening of ReVISION, Transformatori created a light projection work called “The Thoughts of a Naked Monument”\textsuperscript{38}. Visually, the monument was bathed in blue light and there were stripes only over the sculptures of human figures. Numerous black and white eyes popped all over the rest of the surface and there were two mouths - one on each of the two main sides of the large structure. The round, varied in size eyes and the mouth with three teeth, recall images of cartoon characters and set a playful tone. This was paired with audio that gave the inanimate object a voice. Martin Angelov, the founder of the Association of Architects, wrote the script.

\textsuperscript{37} The Transformatori Association is first mentioned in the introduction. They are a group of architects who create work in the streets of Sofia.

\textsuperscript{38} The company electric.me handled the 3D mapping element of projecting light onto the monument.
Initially the monument directly addresses the audience by telling a pair to “stop whispering, you’re bothering the lady next to you” and a person to move up closer (“Hey you, yeah you with the yellow jacket. Come closer! You can’t see anything from back there!”). The playful remarks further convey a tone of humor. The monument introduces itself and remarks that on its purpose (to commemorate the long and famed past of Bulgaria, all 13 centuries of it) and its own brief history of only 32 years. It addresses that it is known as the “six-angled
poly-you-know” and that has not been liked since it was young. It says that its clothes fell off and it was considered dangerous so it was cooped up behind a fence. This references all of the broken pieces of stone that were falling off the monument and the actions by the municipality to cut off the perimeter around it with a fence. Yet the anthropomorphized piece of sculpture considers itself “better naked than in tattered clothes” though it laments the fact that only foreigners pay attention to it and take pictures. According to the monument, one such foreigner was a wealthy Russian wanted to buy it but became dissuaded when he realized that “1300 Years Bulgaria” would look tiny in his foyer next to his portrait. The next topic is the monument’s dreams - to be a horse on pedestal with a general wearing a hat on top of him. People would stop and admire him then. This alludes to a commemorative sculpture of the Russian Emperor Alexander II, which stands across the National Assembly is a small park. With the rumination of the monument coming to a close, it expresses a hope that it will fulfill its function to make people think about their history through a new set of eyes. In a final direct address to the current event, it states that “these nice youngsters will clothe me in new apparel for a moment to ‘experiment with my vision to provoke your senses’ and even if they fuck up, I hope you consider your history anew whether it be pleasant or not so pleasant”.

39 Alexander II is known as the Tzar Liberator for his leadership during the Russo-Turkish War that helped liberate Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire.
Despite the humor of Naked Monument, the topics addressed are poignant and often points of contention rather than open conversation. The choices in language used around the most controversial subjects are deliberately meant to provoke compassion. The words used to describe the initial dislike of the monument are childlike. The fence around the Naked Monument, it describes as a coop rather than prison. Later when referencing another monument, the topic is broached by first mentioning a horse rather than the powerful figure that sits a top of the equestrian animal. All of these decisions are in line with the stated goal - to provoke people to think about the recent past through a new set of eyes like those of a child. Though the voice of the monument the artists directly speak about how they think of their work - as clothing the naked monument momentarily to expose certain parts of its history to the public. Though at first glance covering something to expose it seems contradictory, it is
by no means a new phenomenon. A very prominent example is Christo’s work of wrapping buildings and landscapes to reveal the essence of what is being concealed with fabric. By hiding certain aspects of something, others that are usually not at the forefront become more prominent and considering them can be very illuminating. *1300 Years Bulgaria* is not just a metal skeleton that teenagers meet up at and call offensive names; it was also built with a purpose that had a political and ideological agenda. By remembering this, the conversation can expand from only looking at this structure as a hazard to be torn down (but there are never enough funds to do it) to contextualizing this part of the landscape and understanding how it fits with the rest of the city. This opens up a whole new world of interpretation and meaning making that is not a possibility when everyone is trying to vehemently forget the traumatic past that makes them less “European”.

Naked Monument makes two direct references to the recent history of the country - on one hand the anecdote about the Russian businessman and on the other the dream of being the horse of Tzar Liberator. The tale about the Russian foreigner who tried to buy him but gave up on it because *1300 Years Bulgaria* isn’t sufficiently grandiose addresses the changes that have come about since 1989. Russia used to be the heart of the Soviet Union and it was the epicenter from which communism spread in the region. It was the political power that exerted tremendous influence on Bulgaria and has historically been referred to as the “Big Brother”.\(^\text{40}\) Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, Russia has

become a capitalist country, which as of 2015 stood at number 10 in the list of countries with highest Gross Domestic Product. The exaggerated story of a Russian business man who considered buying a piece of history sounds less outlandish when one considers the private collections of some real individuals. For example, Sergey Veremeenko, whose net worth according to Forbes magazine is at about $1.4 billion, owns a private museum of Russian religious art. The works in his collection are valued at about $200 million. The humorous anecdote brings attention to the history of Soviet influence that was critiqued with the painting of the Soviet Army Monument but also touches upon the power of Russian capitalism. It raises questions concerning the relationship of Bulgaria to its dramatically changed “Big Brother.”

![Image](Part of Veremeenko’s private collection)

The anthropomorphic Naked Monument’s hope to be the horse of the Russian Tzar Alexander II takes us deeper into Russo-Bulgarian relations. The name of the monument to this ruler is called Tzar Liberator because he was the

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ruler who led the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 that culminated in Bulgaria independence from the Ottoman Empire. Once again, there is also a conversation between this work and the Red Army Monument, which honors a different liberation of Bulgaria at the hands of Soviet Union. The artists in Destructive Creation stated in an interview that they would like to see some Bulgarian role models and heroes as well and hoped to point out the lack thereof through their work. In the same spirit, the Naked Monument expressed a desire not even to be a Russian monument but to be the animal of the foreign hero emphasizing the fact that in the capital city there are no real Bulgarian monuments to strive to be.

Amongst the well-known sites of memory in Sofia there are monuments honoring the Russian or Soviet liberators, tombs of the foreign rulers of the Principality of Bulgaria, and two monuments remembering Bulgarians. One is that of Vasil Levski and another is of the “The Unknown Warrior”, which is as far from the glorification of the individual seen in the other types of monuments around the city as it could possibly be. What does it mean for a nation that one of the only monuments in its capital that has faces of its people is the most hated monument in the country? Furthermore, what attitude does having so few faces of Bulgarians on such important sites betray? It is particularly moving that the anthropomorphized 1300 Years Bulgaria wishes it were the horse and not the Tzar because it is telling of a national sentiment that Bulgarians tend to be less worthy than the great Big Brother and then the West. Because of the levity with which these heavy questions and commentary are delivered, they can slip by.

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unnoticed but perhaps they can also slip through some defenses that people usually put up when considering sensitive subjects.

Only a few hundred feet away from 1300 Years Bulgaria, stands another work by Destructive Creation that was actually funded by the Municipality of Sofia. Though the collective remains anonymous to the public they began working with different organizations and even the municipality. For their work, The Pipes (2013), Destructive Creation painted old ventilation shafts of the National Palace of Culture and the metro underground. These metal structures pop up from the soil in various places around the park. During the summer they disrupt the green scenery with their rusted color and in the winter they pop out of the snowy white background. When considering how to create a culture of appreciation of Bulgarian culture and history, Destructive Creation sought out those preexisting disruptive elements. There are 24 pipes on one side of the ventilation shafts and 16 on the other that also houses an electrical box. The cascading formation of the pipes and the three rows of circles/heads recall singers on choir risers. The artists transformed the three rows of eight pipes into a choir of female folk singers by painting on the traditional garb. The side with the circuit box was turned into a squad of soldiers and the rectangle with electrical wiring was turned into a new interpretation of the Samara Flag.
The Samara Flag is one of the most significant military symbols in Bulgaria. It was hand made by nuns in Samara, Russia and gifted to the Bulgarian people by the Russian Knyaz Nikolai Nikolaevich. The physical flag itself never fell into enemy hands and grew to be a symbol of the fight for freedom. In the original flag, on one side within a golden cross there is the Virgin Mary and on the other are St. Cyril and Methodius, who created the Cyrillic alphabet. In this reimagining of the Samara flag, instead of the religious figures that were sent from the nuns, at the center stands the Madara Rider. This large relief that was carved into an almost vertical rock face 75 feet above ground level and it is one of the oldest Bulgarian symbols because it dates back to the reign of Khan Tervel at the end of the 7th century CE. and beginning of the 8th century CE. It depicts a horseman spearing a lion and it has often been thought that this is a depiction of one of the pagan gods that were worshiped at the time - Tangra. The choice to make a direct reference to this historic military symbol but alter it once again engages with the tumultuous relations between Russia and

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Bulgaria. The flag is not erased or forgotten in this case but it is changed to contain a solely Bulgarian symbol that reminds of an even more remote part of the nation’s history.

On the side of the pipes is the crest of Sofia, which is used by the city government to signify their involvement in projects. Ivan Moudov included it in his poster for Untitled 2012 when he wanted to create the impression that building over the site of the mausoleum was the state’s project. Unlike Moudov’s work, The Pipes was actually commissioned by the municipality. To the left of Sofia’s crest stands the Destructive Creation’s logo, which proclaims, “you should have done it yourself”, which in turn is a nod to some of their other projects that they did without permission or funding from the government. The visibility and prominence of two crests together implies the municipality’s approval of Destructive Creation’s work.

Destructive Creation’s logo is sharp and can be perceived as accusatory but it voices an opposition to a feeling of hopelessness and inability to act that has pervaded public consciousness in recent years. The reality is that in Sofia there are numerous public sites that require repair - from the tremendously large monument in National Palace of Culture Park to the benches in parks and the
broken roads. There are never quite enough funds or resources to clean and fix these spaces and this is one of the realities of living in Sofia that generates a great deal of pessimism in its citizens. The state of disrepair of these spaces is also often quoted as evidence that indeed Western Europe is the cleaner and ‘objectively’ a better place. This sense of disappointment is often reinforced when individuals or small groups of people try to take matters into their own hands and clean or fix public spaces. For example in order to clean a park, one must have permission from the municipality otherwise cleaning considered an illegal act. The heart of the issue is that the municipality doesn’t have enough funds to actually upkeep the parks but it also isn’t taking advantage of the help it could be getting from it’s citizens. This is understandably a frustrating situation that leads to an unwillingness on the part of many who otherwise would be happy to help to fight a broken bureaucratic system. Quite a few people give up and do nothing about their grievances with the city. It is this sentiment of hopelessness, or even worse apathy, that Destructive Creation is trying to combat.

One of Destructive Creation first attempts to fight apathy repairing and painting benches in the “St. Sedmochislenici” park in the center of the city. Instead of waiting for the municipality to buy new benches (as it is common practice to buy new ones instead of patching up the old ones), they took matters into their own hands. They stole the benches, took them to their studio and not only made them functional but painted them in bright colors, and returned them. These bright splotches of color were not only functional and pleasant to sit on but they became a symbol of taking ownership of public spaces and of the
willingness to overstep the rules for the sake of creating change. Each renovated bench had the DC crest on it so Everyone sitting on the benches could see the message “you should have done it yourself”, which sent a message that despite the broken system it’s possible to make a difference and do something positive. The objects upon which it is placed prove that change is possible and directly address the viewer and their inaction. The message is that there are no excuses. If we don’t fix our problems, no one else will.\textsuperscript{45} Finally, looking at what the effects of this strategy have been on the city it becomes evident that it has resulted in tangible change. Perhaps the biggest marker of this was Destructive Creation’s city-sanctioned work in the National Palace of Culture Park - \textit{The Pipes}. By funding artists whose work is vandalism according to the law, the municipality de facto gave its blessing to all of the work by Destructive Creation.

\textit{The Benches} in the park around St. Sedmochislenici

\textsuperscript{45} Veliana Kasheva, \textit{Interview: Destructive Creation}, Video for Bulgarian National Television, June 2013.
A few patterns emerge from the Sofia artists’ engagement with parks as sites of memory and as active public places under a municipality’s control. On one hand Destructive Creation’s “St. Semochislenici” project brought attention to the poor condition of many public spaces around the city. This particular project got a great deal of attention from both the public and the municipality because the brightly colored benches in the church’s yard highlighted a major problem and showed that there were low cost solutions. Engaging with aspects of the parks other than simply monuments was a significant move towards widening the kind of work that Destructive Creation would do in the coming years. Furthermore, it became evident that the vast majority of gardens and parks the municipality maintains are located in the center of Sofia in the vicinity of government buildings. Both Destructive Creation and Transformatori have done work that addresses the implications of the lack of public spaces for repose, conversation, play, and monuments in neighborhoods outside of the center of Sofia.
Sofia. Examining what actions the city of Sofia had been taking to try and remedy these same problems helps contextualize the actions of the collectives.

In 2010 the municipality applied for a European Union Regional Development Grant and received it. The money was to be used on “Festivals for Art in Public Spaces: SOFIA CONTEMPORARY and “Festival in the Open in West Park”. The goals of this 24 month endeavor were to “develop, enrich, and renew cultural life in the center and periphery of the city”, to strengthen Sofia’s bid for Cultural Capital of Europe in 2019, and to “ensure access [to cultural events] to citizens from various social and ethnic groups”. Both festivals took place in three consecutive years starting in 2012. Ivan Moudov’s Untitled 2012 was a part of the first iteration of SOFIA CONTEMPORARY. For the second Festival in the Open in West Park, Transformatori and Compote Collective held a workshop called “New Life” in June 2013. It was also financed with money from the European Union Regional Development Fund. The event took place by the West Park at a Health and Social Development Center in the Faculteta, a low-income neighborhood about 4km away from the center and populated primarily by Roma. The group of artists invited people from the community to help build a fence around the Development Center thereby learning how to cut wood, paint, and construct a stable structure. The goal of the workshop was to empower the residents of the Facultata to create beautiful and useful things with a very low budget. The new fence is predominantly yellow and white with bright splotches of

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color and it is made out of pallet wood and sliced tree stumps. It is short enough to not have been constructed to keep people out. Rather this fence is made to invite by defining the space as a bright and positive one. The colors of it are in stark contrast to parts of the neighborhood that are marked by brown and grey houses put together with plywood, corrugated metal, sheets of plastic, and cardboard boxes. The gate closes with a latch on the inside but because it is even lower than the rest of the fence it is extremely easy to reach in and open it from the outside as well.
Outside of the boundaries of the two festivals, the city of Sofia organized another bench construction project in 2013 in the periphery of the city, at a park in Studentski Grad. The name of this neighborhood translates to Student’s City and it is a place where many university students who aren’t from Sofia live. It is located in the Northeast part of the city in the vicinity of the City Zoo and it was established in the 1980s. The occasion for the municipality’s efforts was December 8th (the Student’s Holiday). Transformatori and Destructive Creation were commissioned to make benches and install them in late November. According to Destructive Creation’s website, there were several obstacles in installation - the low temperatures, lack of electricity, and short deadlines. Transformatori came up with a simple design that sidestepped many of these challenges because the installation work was minimal. They chained together two black industrial pipes, which park visitors can sit on and rearrange to suit their needs. They playfully named them “Пейка Тръбка” meaning both “Pipe Bench” and “Thrill Bench”. Destructive Creation took three pieces of old playground equipment that had been broken and fixed them. The metal structures were globes that they then built up the sides of to create gazebos. Unlike the majority of work by both collectives, these works ended up being in a much more subdued color palette. Even though the gazebos were yellow and had some red and green in them, the brown panels on the sides dominated. The Transformatori bench was also not painted and remained the original black color of the industrial pipes.

47 Destructive Creation’s description of the working conditions - http://destructivecreation.com/?p=1740
Despite the fact that the city of Sofia was finally paying attention to upkeep of playgrounds and public spaces in the periphery of Sofia, there were still quite a few problems. The municipality seems to have misunderstood what made projects like DC’s “St. Sedmochistlenici” effective. Installing gazebos in a park at the beginning of the coldest part of the year was ineffective in engaging people in the neighborhood because almost no one sits outside for prolonged periods of time when the temperatures fall below 45 degrees Fahrenheit. It also made the process difficult for the artists because they had to work in those conditions. Furthermore considering the low budget materials they would presumably get damaged over the winter and need repair in the spring. Furthermore there was still a sense of imbalance in how much attention as being paid to the center versus the periphery. The simplest example of this is the when searching for the SOFIA CONTEMPORARY festival online there is a cohesive home page for it on the website of “Edno” magazine that has a list of events and schedule. Conversely, when looking up “Festival in the Open in West Park”, there are a few articles about the festival but no page that gives information about the actual program. Frustrated with these issues both Transformatori and Destructive Creation went on to do projects in the periphery without direct municipality funding or support.  

Transformatori continued focusing on the Faculteta. They ran a fundraiser with the Health and Social Development Center and Compote Collective the

48 Destructive Creation and Transformatori still applied for grants from the European Union through the municipality.
creation of a game and education space by the HSD Center building. There was a dire need for such a place because there was not a single playground in this part of the city. The result was that there were only dangerous and unsuitable areas for play. Dreams Faculty, a small house was built in the backyard of the Health and Social Development Center, which opens up to a green space and is always accessible. The name of the work references the neighborhood’s name “Факултета” (Faculteta). In Bulgarian it means an academic department so the name of this project means “Department of Dreams”. By being encouraged to come into a playground dedicated to learning, the children are being invited to dream big about school and later on university. The organizers, Health and Social Development Center, Transformatori, and Compote Collective, began this process by involving people from all ages from the community - from children who decorated to hiring fully paid local construction workers. This helped establish the house as a part of the neighborhood to be used by families and kids in the region.

In terms of the layout of the Dreams Faculty: “The wooden house itself has openwork wooden facades and roof – an effect created by the modular structure covered by transparent solid polycarbonate boards. Thus, everything happening inside the house is exposed to the public. Those spatial characteristics of the architectural structure aim to provoke communication within the neighborhood and to the rest of the city.” This description by Transformatori clearly states their intent in designing the house to be an inviting for all members

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49 A center established by the Health and Social Development Foundation and a collective of artists coming from an animation background called Compote Collective.
50 Description of the work from the website of Transformatori.
of the community and to provide a space for dialogue. They are also clearly marking that the physical characteristic of openness and transparency is not just symbolic of welcoming residents of Faculteta but it is also about establishing a relationship with the rest of the city. The porch of the house doubles as a stage and acts as a platform for hearing the voices of members of a neighborhood who often don’t get heard. It serves as a way of encouraging children to encourage children to be creative and feel comfortable with sharing their talents on stage. This group of architects is using their design to convey ideas and enact the sort of change that the municipality was aiming to achieve but doesn’t always take the right approach to accomplish these goals.

The municipality took note of this project and invested in planting flowers in the vicinity of Health and Social Development Center. This was the first time in 7 years that the government had invested Bulgarian taxpayer money as opposed to EU funding in maintaining public spaces in Faculteta. All of these efforts, led to a great deal of energy around the Dreams Faculty when it opened in October 2014. Members of the foundation that established the Health and Social Development Center headed a small organization devoted to maintaining the

*Dreams Faculty, Transfomatori*
facility. Unfortunately, as of late 2015, little remains of the *Dreams Faculty* because most of the wood has been stolen. Though maintenance of the physical edifice of the project proved difficult in the long term, Transformatori also showed that there are relatively low cost ways to reach people in all communities.

Destructive Creation, on the other hand, participated in an event held by a grassroots organization for the improvement of the Liulin. This is a newer part of the city that was established in the 60s. It is located in the Northwest part of Sofia. To the West of it are the Sofia Ring Road and Filippovci, which is another area with a high density of Roma population. To the Southwest is the West Park. People living in the region planned “The Heart of Liulin” event. They devoted their energy to cleaning open spaces, cutting down overgrown grass, and creating an impromptu small park because they are in need of local one. They chose to hold a gathering on July 20th, 2014 at which everyone would help in making the open spaces usable. DC made and painted benches of palette wood that would help complete the feeling of a guerrilla park of sorts. The benches were constructed with palette wood and in some cases skis. The majority were blocky, solely made of wood, and each was painted in a different color (blue, yellow, red) with butterflies, faces, or stripes. The rest had a plain wooden base and broken skis in place of some planks. Comparing the color palette of these benches with the gazebos in Studentski Grad, the ones in Liulin were much brighter and more solidly constructed.

Transformatori and Destructive Creation’s actions recognize the revived interest in parks as a way of examining of municipality’s focus on the center and
the neglect of development on the periphery. Residents of several areas of the city farther away from the center have campaigned for the creation of more playgrounds and parks. Yet the mayor of Sofia Yordanka Fandykova has launched a project to create a park in the Vazrazhdane district, which is a part of the center of Sofia. According to news sources, this park cost the city about 6 million leva ($2.6M). These decisions to upkeep and create parks in the center of the city, while not investing in other parts of Sofia are politically charged. They are in line with the stated goal of the municipality that “Sofia has ambitions to take its worthy place among the European capitals”. By not funding the maintenance of public spaces created during communist times, the government is erasing the non-democratic past of the country. The art collectives creating guerilla parks and working in parks established in the period 1945-1989 are making political statements of their own. They have heeded the appeal of the anthropomorphized monument of “1300 Years Bulgaria” that we need to “look at our history through new eyes…be it pleasant or not.” Fully recognizing what role parks have played in the transformation of the capital, the artists are constructing a new map of the city and its future.

Transit Network

The history of Bulgaria’s ability to communicate internally and with the rest of the world has been dictated by international politics. The first major factor linking cities within the country to each other, and later, Bulgaria to Constantinople were foreign owned private companies building railway lines that became a part of the Orient Express. In 1885 the Bulgarian State Railways was established when the National Assembly passed the Railways Act, according to which, all railways were to become state property. This change gave the Bulgarian government more control over the movement of people through its territory.

One of the most popular Bulgarian books Bai Ganyo Travels Around Europe was published in 1895, about 10 years after the nationalization of the railways. The author, Aleko Konstantinov, describes the misadventures of a Bulgarian rose oil merchant clashing with Western European culture. His stories are told through the eyes of young students from Sofia who meet on a train and share their embarrassing experiences with Bai Ganyo. This first volume is filled with humorous albeit tragic anecdotes, which expose the chasm between a country that was very recently under Ottoman Rule and the powerful Western

Illustration of Bai Ganyo

European states. Another key juxtaposition established in the first chapters of the book lies in the generational difference between the well-educated college students and the older merchant. Bai Ganyo is representative of the “old ways” that are perceived as primitive and often mortifying to the younger onlookers. While there is no complete second volume about the infamous merchant, Konstantinov wrote a collection of much more sobering and sinister feuilletons about the return of Bai Ganyo to his homeland. Upon his arrival to Bulgaria, Ganyo Balkanski becomes a journalist and later a corrupt politician. This collection of stories is emblematic of the contrast between Bulgarian and European as well as the old and new world orders that were evident during the Tzarist time. It establishes how the citizens of a country, in which Bay Ganyo is mandatory reading in school, see the ability to travel to Europe and themselves in relation to the better, true Europeans.

Laws put in place by the Socialist government further complicated the relationship of Bulgarians with travel and чужбина (foreign land).\(^{53}\) The only people able to get permission easily to leave the country were party or military members and those related to them. For everyone else it was an almost impossible task to pass through border control. Special authorization was issued to visit countries like Turkey and Hungary to certain individuals, who had to wait months and sometimes years for this privilege but never to entire families. Trains were the most common mode of transportation within the country because cars were very difficult to purchase. It was commonplace for people to wait 3 to 5

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\(^{53}\) The word чужбина refers to all territories outside the borders of Bulgaria. The root of the word - чужд means “not our own”.

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years to have the chance to buy an automobile that was beyond the means of many. In the 1970s when more people were able to acquire a vehicle, the militia sought new ways of exerting its control over the roads. Their solution was to build cabins that stand several feet off the ground and act as watchtowers from which officers observe and control traffic. Visiting and moving to the capital was almost as difficult as travel abroad. People from around the country could only visit Sofia for short periods of time because there was a citizenship to the capital. To obtain the right to live in Sofia a person had to either have been born in the city or to have married a person from the capital. Occasionally exceptions were made for members of the Communist party. The first democratically elected President of the country, Jelio Jelev, removed the Sofia citizenship restrictions as soon as he stepped into office. The tight control that the state had over the movement of people both in and out of the country through the militia and border control was a clear and constant reminder of the power of the government between 1944 and 1989.

After the Socialist government completely lost power in the beginning of 1990, travel became a possibility for a greater number of people though it was not financially viable for many. Emigration became commonplace and many Bulgarian students once again began studying and settling in Europe as they had before 1944. Bulgarians from all over the country flocked to Sofia and the population of the capital skyrocketed. Urbanization in the entire country picked up pace tremendously. Amidst all of those changes the emphasis on the importance

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54 Ivan Balev, No Need for Sofia citizenship, Bulgarian National Paper, June 2007. pg, 7.
of mobility and government authority over the transit network shifted slightly but did not falter. The old traffic control militia cabins that had been established in the seventies became police posts and continued functioning much the same way as they had before. In order to pay for the maintenance of the roads citizens had to now pay a fee to travel between cities. Toll booths were too expensive to build and staff so “vignettes” or stickers became the way to insure one had paid for the privilege of going from one part of the country to another. Police officers were still legally allowed to pull over anyone on the highway and check whether or not they had the “right to travel” just as they had been able to do prior to 1989. The main difference was that the basis upon one’s ability to move freely was not one’s political affiliation but rather the purchasing power that allowed certain people to afford vignettes. In 2016, the cheapest such vignette for a noncommercial vehicle costs 15 leva while the minimum monthly wage is 250 leva, making the cost of traveling not insignificant to a number of people. These fees have led to continued tension over the state of the disrepair of roads despite the steadily rising prices of vignettes.

Within cities the public transportation has been much more stagnant. Nothing illustrates this better than the Ikarus busses many of which have been in use for well over 40 years.\(^\text{55}\) The first older models of busses to become unusable were Chavdar, which first entered the market in the 1940s and were still in operation as late as the late 1990’s.\(^\text{56}\) By the mid 2000s the Bulgarian government was finally purchasing older Mercedes models from Germany where

\(^{55}\) Busses manufactured by the Hungarian company called Ikarus that began to be imported in Bulgaria around the mid-1960s.

newer models were being put into circulation. There were quite a few quips that for Germans traveling to Sofia was akin to visiting to the Berlin Transport Museum (Museum für Verkehr und Technik). This is one of the many ways in which modernized Europe has been pitted against the “backwards” Balkans and has contributed to the negative attitude towards one’s own national identity that many Bulgarians hold. Such juxtapositions in combination with the numerous conditions Bulgaria and Romania had to meet to join the European Union in 2007, made it clear that Eastern Europeans were not “European enough”. One powerful instance of the Europeanization on the road was the presence of signs in various modes of public transportation that implored people to “Please be European and don’t draw on or destroy the motor vehicle!” In that phrase, the nationalistic adjective can be replaced with words like “kind”, “polite”, or “respectful”, which helps the reader define what it is to be European. These stickers began popping up in busses and trams in the beginning of 2010, three years after Bulgaria’s entry in the EU.

The efforts on the part of Sofia Public Transport to discourage vandalism is a poignant example of the fact that the process of Europeanization has not been a one

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sided practice of Western Europe espousing its culture as superior. The title, *East of Eden*, of documentary film about Sofia University is telling of Bulgarian’s attitudes toward their own country. The West is seen as paradise and the East is where the fallen out of grace humans reside. Naturally, Bulgarians must then do everything within their power to move toward the West. Yet as Stefanos Katsikas points out in his publication *Bulgaria and Europe: Shifting Identities*, the drive towards the West has been complicated. It became a clear unifying goal after 1989. Since then there have been some Russophile sentiments in the country but the majority has been in support of Bulgaria joining the EU. To establish the physical connection between Bulgaria and the Western part of the continent, knowledge of all of the major highways and roads connecting the country to Europe was included as a mandatory part of the High School Geography curriculum. The focus on the transit network as a means of connection with a better world has made roads and train stations particularly fertile sites for performances and installations.

The Transformatori association’s *Park Green*, a project created to “conquer” a parking space in the center of Sofia introduces the importance of transit to contemporary art in Bulgaria. The work was created for a festival called APERO ELEKTRO and the World Environment Day on June 5th, 2010. Transformatori laid down about 25 pieces of sod on the street in front of the French Cultural Center where there is a clearly defined parking space. They also

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58 Phrase from Genesis, Chapter 4, verse 16: "And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the Land of Nod, on the east of Eden" and perhaps reference of John Steinbeck’s novel with the same title.
put modular pieces of furniture that could be rearranged and repurposed on the

glass. The basic building blocks of the improvised furniture were cardboard tubes

that had been used to support large rolls of paper. Twenty or so tubes were

strung together with thin rope and the collection of them was meant to be shifted

and used as chairs, tables, or a mat.\textsuperscript{59} Transformatori were inspired by Shigeru

Ban’s work with recycled cardboard tubes, which he used to house the victims of

natural disasters.\textsuperscript{60}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{installation_shot_of_park_green_by_transformatori.png}
\caption{Installation shot of Park Green by Transformatori}
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The members of Transformatori also placed Park Green within the greater

context of Park(ing) Day, an international initiative meant to “Reclaim your city!”.
The goal of this yearly event is to transform metered parking spots into public

parks as a way to remind people to stop, appreciate nature, and reevaluate how

much they rely on cars. Though the work in front of the French Institute did not

\textsuperscript{59} Description of Park Green by Transformatori http://transformatori.net/en/park-green/

\textsuperscript{60} Unlike Shigeru Ban’s tubes that can be the size of neoclassical temple facades, the scale on

which Transformatori worked in is much smaller.
take place on same the day as Park(ing) Day, the artists drew inspiration from it. In an archival shot from work, a poster proclaiming Europe’s intention of going green (L’EUROPE passe vert) peeks through pedestrians who have stopped to enjoy the small island of grass. One way to read this sign is that to be green is a way to show one’s Europeanness, which relates to the bus signs that also asked citizens to not vandalize property in the spirit of Europe. Park Green is telling of what spaces artists believed would be noticed in 2010 - ones in the center of the city that carry the weight of a well-respected European institution. It set precedent for other works and collaborations between artist collectives and foreign cultural institutions. In particular, artists have partnered often with three European Cultural Centers in Sofia - British Council, Institut Francais, and Goethe Institute. For example, in 2015 Transformatori contacted a duo of artists who had created a project called Sofia Monsters. The two groups of artists worked together with Goethe Institut in Sofia on BUD.KO, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Taking into account the history of parks and roads in Sofia, Park Green takes on meaning beyond a call for environmental consciousness. As discussed in the previous chapter, parks have long been used as sites of political engagement in the capital of Bulgaria. The creation of the first large public gardens was a way to make a statement about a newly formed Principality’s desire to align with the European powers.\(^{61}\) It is not a coincidence that

Transformatori chose the space in front of the French Institute as the location for their park. In some ways they are aligning with a European space and that can be interpreted as a continuation of the tradition of establishment of parks in Sofia. Yet the act of “conquering” the street can be extended to dominating of a European space by creating their own area for recreation over which they have control. On their website the artists also write about a dance party that was supposed to take place inside the French Institute but because of poor ventilation (“to our joy”) they invited the people to step out of the interior and dance in the streets. The physical barrier between inside and outside can be read as symbolic of the divisions between East and West. Transformatori took charge and crossed the barrier – acts that are all the more significant because they were done outside of police authority. The hijacking of the parking space then is just as powerful of a symbol as the image of the Bulgarian parks. Through occupying the space of a stationary car in direct proximity to vehicles in motion, Transformatori bring attention to the cost of occupying space on the road and having the means to own and operate a personal vehicle.

The title *Park Green* also references the two parking zones in Sofia – blue and green. The municipality has defined the center of the city to be in the blue zone. In it everyone without exception must pay for parking and only residents of the neighborhood may do so for longer than two-hours. The green zone on the other hand is much larger and it covers a lot of the periphery of Sofia. In the green zone parking is much less restricted and must be paid only in certain

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62 “Hourly Parking”, Center for Urban Mobility in Sofia Website. https://www.sofiatrffic.bg/bg/parking/pochasovo-plateno-parkirane/p/1
circumstances. The French Institute, being in the center of the city, is located in the blue zone. The title of Park Green draws attention to the clear-cut division between a green and blue zones which is a state imposed sectioning of the city into a center and concentric circles that define the periphery. Later works by Transformatori, like Dreams Faculty and Parco Alabastro (work in Romania), show a further interest on the part of the association to engage with the whole of the capital rather only the “central” part of it. In Park Green, they were firmly situated within the blue zone directly on the road, which hints at dynamic movement and connection between different parts of Sofia along the transit network.

In 2011, Transformatori organized an exhibition called Box Street. They invited 15 young Bulgarian artists to paint all of the electrical boxes along Tzar Shishman Street. This is a major street that connects the area around the
National Palace of Culture with the rest of Sofia center (the National Assembly building and Sofia University). The viewer is unable to see the entire “exhibition” without driving by it or walking on one of the oldest streets in the city. Box Street is emblematic of other initiatives by artists in Sofia that ask the audience to move and explore the city. This motion is an essential element of all of the pieces discussed in relation to the transit network. In later artworks Transformatori strive to break down the barriers that have made the movement of people along the network difficult and to establish a more meaningful connection between the center and periphery.

Destructive Creation’s work Беседка, which translates to Gazebo takes us into the traffic control police cabins. It addresses police authority on the road and asks the visitors to the Sofia Contemporary 2012 festival to physically engage with a traffic control cabin that had been not in use in years for. It is located on the intersection between one of the busiest boulevards of Sofia (Patriarch Evtimii) and Angel Kyntchev St. Just a block away there is an active post where an officer keeps watch and regulates traffic by manually overriding the light in busy times of day. Though the Gazebo was in a highly visible place (directly across from the 1300 Years Bulgaria Monument), the artists did not obtain permission from the police to use the facility. Since the repurposing of the police property the municipality has made no efforts to convert it back to a traffic control cabin.

The shape and placement of these structures around the city is quite distinct. They stand upon a steel base that consists of two beams - one that is

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63 The word for gazebo in Bulgarian also means a conversation with a goal to reach a consensus.
perpendicular to the ground, which supports the actual cabin and another that connects to the ground at a 45-degree angle and doubles as a staircase. The hexagonal space within which the person actually sits is usually covered with dark windows that make it difficult to see whether there is a person inside or not. The design is meant to intimidate by virtue of placement in key locations, the considerable height from which the officer looks down upon the citizens, and the uncertainty that being unable to see inside produces. It is a structure strikingly similar to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon circular prison constructed with individual cells that can all be seen from a tower in the center. Everyone is visible to the person inside the observation tower. At the same time, the observed are unable to see the person inside. It is this invisibility and therefore omnipresence of the authority figure that assures order will be maintained. As Foucault writes in his book *Discipline & Punishment*, as a result of the panopticon “the crowd… is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities.” The organizational power of the masses is lost making rebellion impossible. In the case of the traffic control cabins, the panopticon is being taken out of the prison and placed into the street, effectively turning the entire city and country into the controlled territory. Particularly poignant is the fact that the socialist government of Bulgaria and the USSR implemented these watchtowers that divide the collective and enforce order through individuality. This is paradoxical because according to Marxism-Leninism, the collective strength of the working class is the

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64 Michael Foucault, *Discipline & Punishment*, pg. ___ (looked at book online and need to find the page number in a printed copy)
driving force of the political regime. The government is then effectively destroying the chances of true unity that would lead to communism.

In practice, the traffic control watchtowers along with other techniques proved effective. Citizens were terrified of being seen as anti-communist and in opposition of the Party. The consequences of being so perceived involved loss of respect, income, and privileges to travel. In the most extreme cases people were taken to work camps, never to be seen again. The day-to-day life of Bulgarians between 1945 and 1989 was eerily similar to Orwell’s description of life in 1984 “it was almost normal for people over thirty to be frightened of their own

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65 Common practice was for citizens to file formal complaints against each other when they had done something anti-socialist.
children 66. Expressing dissenting political opinions in front of even your own child could mean imprisonment. Thus the traffic control cabins were the ultimate physical manifestation of the government’s power in everyday life. The feeling of being imprisoned was constantly reinforced by the presence of these органы на реда (the organs of order and authority) in the street. Nowadays though quite a few cabins are still being used, there is a move towards placing more cameras than building new posts for actual officers to observe from. The cameras have bred even more sense of distrust because imply incessant surveillance that is even more far removed from the person being observed than the watchtower cabins. This is once again reminiscent of 1984 by Orwell and the symbol of Big Brother but in the case of contemporary Bulgaria the watcher is the corrupt government whose only ideals are to steal from the people.

66 George Orwell, 1984, pg. ___
For *Gazebo*, Destructive Creation stripped the structure to its bare bones. They then built up the walls only a third of the way up and installed no windows. The sides were boarded loosely people passing by could see the feet of those inside. This manner of remodeling the space assured that the cabin was completely open. It made it impossible not to see who is observing from higher up. In addition, the artists added three support beams that would allow the structure to carry the weight of several people at the same time rather the one person as the original design was meant to. The lack of windows or way to lock the structure is in complete opposition to the way that the structure functioned as a traffic observance post. The white color they chose to paint the outside of the summerhouse further heightened the contrast between the old brown and black cabins and the new place that is open to all. Aquamarine blue covered the inside creating a playful contrast to the yellow flowers they would later put in.

The original thought of Dimitrian Kjutëv was to open up the space to the public and designate it as a smoking area.\(^{67}\) The fumes from cigarettes often irritate people and a spot away from everyone else to smoke would lessen the annoyance for everyone else. In a way the solution was to put the irritant away in a spot that used to be occupied by a member of the police (another less than pleasant factor). Yet the artists never chose to label the space as one for tobacco users because that would have excluded people who don’t partake in that

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\(^{67}\) One of the original members of Destructive Creation who later left the collective and has agreed to not remain anonymous in an interview with Daniela Dimitrova.
Destructive Creation transformed a site that was perceived as an ultimate symbol of the state oppression into an object of recreation.

The ability of 3-4 people to sit inside and feel comfortable in the Gazebo was essential and a push back against the power of the panopticon to break up collectives and separate them into individuals. Like Park Green Destructive Creation’s work also pulls the social element of the park into the connective aspect of the street by referencing the gazebos found in parks all over parks in Sofia. They connect the name of the work Gazebo (meaning a conversation) with the acts that they are encouraging to take place – come together and talk about government authority past and present. Further enhancing the connection to a park and at the same time to the old regime, DC also installed boxes with yellow flowers on the outside. This is a direct reference to the municipality handing out flower boxes to people living on Patriarch Evtimii, where the Gazebo is located. Residents would then line the streets with flowers for visits of government officials and parades. Washing of the streets before processions was also customary and it is often juxtaposed to the fact that nowadays the only time the streets are washed is around election time. The practice to put on a pristine appearance of the city for the leaders of the Communist Party was usually limited to the center of the city – once again putting emphasis on the center.

In May of 2013, Destructive Creation did maintenance on Gazebo. They put in new flowers but not in pots - they put in soil in the wooden boxes and planted the flowers straight in it. Previously it had been easy to pick up the entire

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pot and steal it. By this time, Destructive Creation had also worked on painting and repairing the benches in front of the St. Sedmochislenici church and those had also been drawn on and broken. In a video interview with one of the members of Destructive Creation a reporter asked if the collective is discouraged by their work getting painted over and broken. The member of the collective (whose face is blurred out in the footage) replied, “If others keep breaking, we’ll just keep fixing”. While Destructive Creation has repaired certain works of theirs less often, they have maintained the Gazebo regularly.

Veliana Kasheva, Interview: Destructive Creation, Video for Bulgarian National Television, June 2013.
In August of 2014, Gazebo was patched up for a Sunday market/festival called Sofia Breathes, which takes place every Sunday in August. The first Sunday in August in 2014 Sofia Breathes took place at the Малките Пет Къщета (a star shaped crossing of 5 streets). Angel Kyntchev is one of the beams of the star and the Gazebo was located in a position that made it a convenient place from which to play music. A parallel can be drawn between the officers that used to control through surveillance and the DJ, who exercises a different kind of control through music. The DJ makes decisions about what everyone in the vicinity hears. The only way to stop hearing the music is to leave this part of the public space, which creates a parameter around the Gazebo. This is an act dominating over the street and road from a place that symbolized the destruction of police authority. Turning the star shaped crossroads into a pedestrian zone for the duration of the Sofia Breathes Sunday further strengthened this gesture. It echoes the desire of Transformatori to “conquer” a part of the city through their work Park Green. Less sinisterly the Gazebo being used as a place to play music can be read as a beacon of a unifying power. By playing for all, the DJ provides a unifying beat that could allow the pedestrians around to feel a part of a collective, once again pushing back against the divisive powers of the panopticon’s function.

Most recently in February of 2015 the traffic control police cabin was transformed for the launch of a campaign “To the Bees With Love” that Destructive Creation supports. The campaign is collaboration between “National
Association of Women Beekeepers” and “Stipka.” The hexagonal structure of the Gazebo was painted in yellows, reds, and black. It was covered with small hexagons made of wood, which mirror a beehive, and numerous bees and hearts. The bottom of the roof has a bee painted on, which matches the logo of the campaign. This remodeling of the Gazebo was meant to bring attention to problem to the rapid drop in bee populations and remind that we’re all citizens of this planet and. It is an important move away from the explicit associations of government control and toward making use of the site to express ideas more removed from the original purpose of the Gazebo. This latest reimagining of the traffic control police cabin is also an excellent example of the rich collaboration among artists and associations in Sofia.

Another work by Destructive Creation that relates to the transit network is *The Wall*. The artists wrapped in fabric a monument (slab of the Berlin Wall) commemorating the fall of the Wall in 2014. The monument is located at the crossing of two major roads – Bulevard Vasil Levski and Fritjof Nansen Street. It consists of a segment of the Berlin Wall and a platform made of glass and metal. Underneath the glass there is gravel and a metal sign that has the dates of the building and fall of the division between East and West Berlin. A metal pane, which has a brief history of the Berlin wall, stands on both sides of the piece of concrete. Grey dominates the monument, which in such close proximity to the road makes it appear to be an extension of the boulevard. In combination with the worn concrete with graffiti, which echo buildings all around the city, this

70 Stipka is another association aiming to connect people working on different problems through art.
significant piece of history often camouflages as another rundown part of Sofia. Destructive Creation measured the fragment of the wall and they sewed together a sleeve of blue fabric that they slipped onto the fragment at night. The material appears to have been synthetic and bore a white painted on “f”. The single letter was drawn in the “Facebook Letter Faces” font that was custom made for the social network.

Very few monuments have been built in 21st-century Sofia and the one to the Berlin Wall stands out both because of its key location and the history of its inception. The segment of the Berlin wall was sent to Bulgaria in 2006 at the request of the mayor of the municipality of Sofia. The non-profit foundation “Legacy” worked with the municipality on planning and fundraising for the building of the monument. Together they chose to place the piece of the Wall at the outskirts of the same park in which the National Palace of Culture and the 1300 years Bulgaria are found. Even closer is another monument.

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71 The mayor at the time was Boyko Borisov, who later became the prime minister of the country and is well known for his work on infrastructure.
commemorating the victims of totalitarianism, which itself is a wall with the names of people who suffered at the hands of the authoritarian socialist government. Yet despite the charged site and rich historical context the majority of citizens aren’t aware of what the structure is. There is no better proof of this ignorance than an incident in March of 2015, in which men who were working on repairs in the park of the National Palace of Culture painted over the piece of the wall in grey. They reportedly found the spray painted concrete to be ugly and took it upon themselves to “renovate” it. People employed by the municipality defaced this piece of history in broad daylight and no one attempted to stop them. Furthermore, though it is uncertain exactly how many days it took for someone to notice, it was several.

The lack of public awareness of the monument initially drew Destructive Creation’s attention. They saw parallels between life behind the Iron Curtain as told by their parents and their own everyday. Before 1989, the Berlin wall

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symbolized the unattainable dream of living in the West that people living in socialist countries held. It became a metonym for the despotic political regimes that kept people from getting to the capitalist utopia on the other side. It parallels the stringent measures taken by the Bulgarian state between 1945 and 1989 to ensure that no one could emigrate. Thus the charged history of traveling and restrictions on the transit network are tightly woven with the symbol of the Berlin wall. The placement of the Berlin Wall monument also connected to the interest of Destructive Creation in spaces that border the roads and become a part of the actual transportation network.

A powerful example of the implications of these ideas is an event held in 2007 called “To Break the Silence - To Break the Wall” by foundation “Legacy”, which had helped fund the building of the monument of the Berlin Wall. They organized a concert and installed an ice sculpture of a wall in front of the actual fragment from Berlin and invited children to break it apart with hammers. Their motivation according to their website was to make it possible for Bulgarian children’s voices to “break through barriers and be heard outside the borders of our country” and to allow everyone “to break down their own Berlin Wall”. The ambassador of Germany at the time, Michael Geier, made the first hit
to the wall and then the children “happily” destroyed the rest\textsuperscript{73}. Underneath the ice was a European Union flag, which celebrated Bulgaria’s entry in the union and the newfound ability of Bulgarian citizens to travel to Western Europe freely. The tension between the intense focus on the monument as evidenced by the aforementioned event and the almost instantaneous erasure of it from public memory further attracted the artists to this site.

Twenty five years after the fall of the physical Berlin wall, Destructive Creation wrapped the monument in blue fabric with a white “f” painted on - the logo of Facebook. Their goal on one hand was to bring attention to the forgotten monument. At the same time clothing it in a symbol of the virtual world that represents a new way of connecting (social network rather than transit one) is yet another statement on how control is exerted nowadays. The artists directly reference the virtual “wall” that each user of Facebook has on their homepage and uses as a platform of communication. Beyond the film industry that emerged in the analog age, we now have the Internet, which has expanded the possibilities of how we can interact with each other and how we portray culture, ourselves, our ideas. Destructive Creation is bringing attention to how living in the age of digital media and globalization has changed how we create spaces for ourselves but it hasn’t necessarily changed the kinds of imaginary spaces we define. They saw a new kind of virtual wall that is no less divisive and like the physical wall that fell in 1989 it represents a utopian space that is beyond unattainable. The artists’ statement of their own work: “Your own personal wall - ....place in which you can be whoever you want to be - it protects you from the

\textsuperscript{73} All quotations describing the event are taken directly from the Foundation “Legacy” website.
world and protects the world from you -. Unlike the Berlin wall this one makes you love it, not to run from it, instead - there is your real world. Both walls have a purpose to define a wonderful place, in which you can feel good, without pretensions for that place to be real". Their main concern is the lack of awareness of the connection between our actions today and the recent past, which we have so vehemently trying to erase, as the workers who quite literally painted over the fragment of the wall.

Thematically, The Wall is closely tied to the Transformeri’s "Revision", their projection onto the 1300 Years Bulgaria monument at the other side of the park. Aside from the physical proximity and the similar messages imploring Bulgarians to remember their history, both collectives have chosen to cloak monuments - one in light and the other in textile. In both cases it was vital that the changes made by the artists were not permanent and did not cause damage to the historic sites. Christo’s wrappings of trees, bridges, and the Reichstag have influenced both groups of artists; in fact, during an interview with a member of Destructive Creation, his computer was visible nearby, displaying Wrapped Trees as its desktop background. Despite all of the similarities, the means through which the ideas are expressed is dramatically different. Transformeri did their “Revision” project with permission from the municipality, while the work on the Berlin Wall fragment is considered vandalism by the authorities.

Transformeri chose to become legally recognized in order to enter into binding contracts and to communicate with the government; Destructive Creation, on the

other hand, has chosen to remain anonymous, and this has lent their work a more subversive air. The collective has become a hybrid between an entity that is often commissioned and funded by the city but at the same time make street art without permission. The paradoxical relationship between the authorities and the artists is fraught with uncertainty and lack of clarity on both sides. Both Destructive Creation and Transformatori share an attention to the center of the city. On one hand such focus provided maximum exposure (most people passing the center regularly) and on the other hand it was out of necessity. Their studios at the time were not far from each other and were both in the center city. Destructive Creation’s headquarters were located very close to the five corners, which is where Sofia Breathes took place. A project like their bench repairs at the St. Sedmochislenici was possible because the artists’ work place was so close to the park around the church. Some of the members of Destructive Creation were able to pick up the benches and carry them to their studio and back.

The members of Destructive Creation realized how constrained they had been and in 2014 applied for a grant from The Bloomberg Foundation to create a mobile workshop to transport tools and materials they needed to farther reaches of the city. They did not win the competition but their proposal got a lot of publicity. In 2015, they were able to realize the Mobile Workshop project with sponsorship from the Ford Motor Company’s Bulgarian branch and Orgachim (a Bulgarian chemical company specializing in production of paint). Using a Ford 75

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75 Transformatori’s headquarters are located at University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (by Vasil Levski Subway Station) and Destructive Creation’s studio used to be at the Five Kiushetta. It is currently at the Factory for Urban Art by Stochna Gara (train station).
car and Orgachim paint, Destructive Creation was able to repair and transform bus stops all over the city in the winter of 2015. Most notably there were able to work in the outskirts of the city in Boyana. This is a wealthy neighborhood where residents typically have several motor vehicles and do not need to use public transportation. The people who use the bus stop that Destructive Creation painted are locals who have been struggling to continue living in their family homes because of gentrification. By the summer, Destructive Creation took their mobile workshop across the country to Varna. This first venture out of Sofia is indicative of the recent expansion of their practice beyond the boundaries of the capital. Destructive Creation’s lack of transportation had limited the locations that they could work in and made it more difficult to push back against the dichotomy of center and periphery. Their persistence to find means of travel shows the collective’s awareness of these issues.

76 Destructive Creation, Mobile Workshop In Varna, Video, August 2015.  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9qi9fq7teU
Destructive Creation’s concern with mobility is in part borne from the mix of members of the collective who have lived both abroad and in Bulgaria. In 2012, the artists who were a part of the collective were an almost even mix of young men who studied in Sofia and ones who studied abroad. Destructive Creation has also had numerous members that have worked with the collective for short periods of time. Some would come back from University and help out, while others lived in Bulgaria and then emigrated looking for job opportunities. Over time this revealed a contrast in some member’s ability to travel more freely around the world and others’ difficulty in doing the same. While a few of the artists were able to fly by plane to Western Europe, one of the founding members of Destructive Creation was able to afford traveling to the Netherlands only via hitchhiking. Considering these internal processes within the group it is understandable that so much of their work is engaged with the transit network and traveling. They have faced first hand the challenges of travel in 21st century Bulgaria and are able to draw parallels between the older regime that their parents experienced. Though the barriers to travel are not the same, there are still very real impediments to the movement of people - now they are not about political standing but purchasing power.

Ivan Moudov has also engaged with many of the same issues that have been discussed thus far in the chapter. His work relating to the transit network has predominantly been directly on the road and has taken the form of performance. As a relatively young artist born in 1975 and who graduated in 2002, Moudov was experiencing much of the frustration that others who had not
seen change for the better in the 1990s. The inefficient bureaucracy and corruption in government were as bad in the early 2000s as they had been in the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Despite the promises of politicians that in the capital hard work can build your career, one still needs connections to get a job, an exhibition or any kind of opportunity for profit. He felt constantly at a disadvantage and the collective he been working with had just disbanded. In his own words, he was looking for “a place in which I could have priority and in which I could continue” after the change in his artistic path. This led him to create a performance piece called “One Hour Priority” in 2000. He found the one place where he would always have priority or right-of-way – a roundabout. Moudov drove around one such roundabout nonstop for a whole hour in heavy traffic. The site he chose to perform this deeply symbolic act is by far the most historically and emotionally charged roundabout in all of Bulgaria - the one that encircles the monument of Vasil Levski.

The tribute to Levski is now in the center of the Sofia but in the early 19th century this was just outside the city limits. It is believed that the most revered national hero of Bulgaria, Vasil Ivanov Kunchev (Levski), was hung by the Ottomans in 1873 for creating revolutionary liberation committees all across the country in this location. A monument, plans for which were first conceived immediately after the liberation in 1878, marks the site. It took 16 years and 70,000 leva to build the 13-meter stone structure that in the end was cause for

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77 A roundabout is a circular intersection in which road traffic flows nearly continuously around a central island in one direction. Roundabouts require entering traffic to give way to traffic already in the circle.
suspicion of corruption and embezzlement. The monument rests on the stone base, and has a square foundation with relief on it, and an obelisk like top that tapers up. It was designed and executed by Italian, Czech, and Austrian artists and funds were gathered from all major cities in Bulgaria. This decision to turn to foreign architects and artists reflected the attitudes of the time toward westernization and the desire to become a part of Europe. The municipality later added a small park around the Vasil Levski monument. Located at the center of the busiest traffic circle, there is no easy way to reach the round island in the middle of the roundabout. The only time there is official access to the monument is on the day the hero was killed 19th of February, when there is an official ceremony and hundreds of people gather to pay their respects.

Czech architect Adolf Colar, Italian stone mason Abramo Perucelli, Czech sculptor Frantishek Novac, and the central portrait of Levski was made by the Austrian artist Rudolf von Weir.
During his performance around the Vasil Levski Monument, Moudov taped a video camera to the back seat of his car. From the resulting hour of footage, Moudov edited “fragment 4.15” that included the back of his head as well as everything that he could see through the front windshield. The viewer is allowed a glimpse into the face of the driver through the rear view mirror and when he turns his head to check whether other drivers are indeed yielding to him. His radio is on and the first commercial is about the mobile phone network in Bulgaria.

Eventually “Super trooper” by Abba comes on and Moudov switches the radio channel, stumbles on “Drinking in L.A.” by Bran Van 3000 and finishes listening to the song. A female radio host gives a brief preview of new edition of a magazine and its joke “to English speakers, just wanted to let you know the name ‘Putin’ is written as one word”. More reviews of American movies in Cinema Levski, nearby where “there will be tequila shots” and finally a note that Disney’s “Toy Story” will be out in theatres soon. There is a discrepancy between
the Western references in the audio and the visuals that show anything but the streets of a city like L.A. The abundance of Lada and Trabant cars visible in the video gives away the fact that not so long ago they were the only automobiles available for purchase in Bulgaria. The distinctive newspaper kiosks that became very popular during socialist time also grace the scenery. What isn’t visible is the monument itself but to most people this is a familiar enough site that the presence of the stone tribute to Vasil Levski is in no way weakened by the absence of it in the picture.

There is undeniable humor in the way the artist took advantage of traffic laws. His juxtaposition of audio with visuals is also comical, especially the discrepancy of hearing a pun about Vladimir Putin’s name that only an English speaker would understand at a time when most people were still driving Russian cars and few spoke English. The humor almost masks the tragedy of the senselessness of the search for priority – we are seeing the artist video documentation of quite literally going in circles – the definition of a futile exercise. At the same time, there is commentary to be made on people who have the privilege of others yielding to them choosing to perpetuate the cycle of an unequal opportunity. All they have to do is not let others ever go in front of them. On the international relations scene for example, Bulgaria has had to make concessions that no larger country that is a part of the “First World” would have to make.

Beyond straightforward economics and politics, Bulgarians had to recalibrate from having learned almost exclusively the Russian language in
school to having to switch over and begin learning English. Otherwise they would not be able to read the best textbooks, hear the latest world news, or conduct business - all of which were now most often in English. This transition was accompanied by anxiety that the Bulgarian people are being left behind the rest of the world. The cellphone network advertisement is an example of how the need to be a part of a global network is being sold. The ironic realization that dawn on the viewer is that not much has changed since the late 1800s. Bulgarians are still striving towards being accepted by Europe and the West a hundred years later. The point is driven home by the dissonance of Vasil Levski’s monument - no Bulgarian artists were considered worthy to create the biggest Bulgarian national hero’s monument.

In 2001, Moudov performed Traffic Control in Graz, Austria. He also dealt with issues of Bulgarian identity in relation to “Europe”. Though this piece did not take place in Sofia, it is an integral part of the dialog around Bulgarian government authority on the street, control of the transit network, and the relationship between East and West. On November 12th between 5pm and 5:20 pm he stood at the intersection between Grieskai and Belgiergasse, right outside the Inner Stadt of Graz by the Mur River. He was dressed in a Bulgarian police officer’s uniform, had a whistle, and a hand held stop sign. Under the working traffic lights, he directed the motor vehicles’ movement – when the light turned green, he would stop the cars and when it was red, he would give them a signal to go. Despite the fact that he was bearing the Bulgarian coat of arms on his uniform and police was written in Cyrillic, drivers followed his signals with the
hand-held stop sign. When they did not obey, he used a whistle to underscore his authority.

Moudov showed this work while giving a talk in 2012\textsuperscript{80} and the audience’s immediate reaction was laughter. The absurdity of doing the exact opposite of what the law dictates and his assumption of control are so unexpected and ridiculous that they end up reading as funny. His affect both while performing in Graz and while speaking about the work contributes to the humor. He speaks of illegally acquiring the uniform of a police officer with mirth: “I borrowed [a Bulgarian police officer’s uniform] for one bottle of whiskey, back when that was still possible”. The artist offers an explanation for the way he approached the role of a traffic control officer by referencing the mannerisms of policemen in front of

\textsuperscript{80} Ivan Moudov: How do you make not standard change?, Artist Talk organized by Gorichka Organization in 2012
the Parliament in Sofia\textsuperscript{81}. The expression on Moudov face while directing people in the middle of the intersection mirrors that of the officers in Sofia and reads as taking one’s self too seriously. His irreverent attitude towards the authorities is in complete opposition to how the citizens of Graz are behaving. Even when actual Austrian policemen come, they also wait for the artist’s signal to go. Present at the scene was Moudov’s lawyer who claimed the artists was just a man who was waving a stick around in the middle of the road and was not impersonating a police officer. Yet this wasn’t what helped the artist evade arrest, it was the group of people that crowded around and “all in all if there is anything police officers are afraid of its cameras.” \textsuperscript{82}

This impetus for this work is a very natural extension of the drive behind \textit{One Hour Priority}. This time instead of finding a place where he would be given the right of way, Moudov took control and became the person that decided who

\textsuperscript{81} “My skills as a traffic control officer I acquired in front of the Parliament where there is always such an officer.”

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ivan Moudov: How do you make not standard change?}, Artist Talk organized by Gorichka Organization in 2012
gets to have the right of way. The gesture’s symbolic power is heightened by the location of the performance. Graz is the second largest city in Austria, which was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its name is derived from several Slavic words that mean small castle and city (gord, gradec, grad). On one hand, the city is a symbol of a powerful empire that is truly a part of Europe and on the other hand, it also has a history of Slavic settlements. Thus the gesture of a Slavic man putting himself in a position of power is complicated. It references the history of the region and the futile attempts of Slavic people in the region to exercise the right to self-determinate.

There is a parallel to be made between the taking the panopticon out of the prison and placing it in the street (Gazebo and the police traffic cabins in Bulgaria) and the symbol of the absurd Bulgarian policeman being inserted into the Austrian reality. The ending of Traffic Control once again proves that “watching” is an effective means of controlling human behavior. Moudov was allowed to perform for only 20 minutes but he did not face any consequences for breaking the law because of the bystanders who were watching and recording every move of the police. This reversal of power dynamics echoes the ideas of author Clay Shirky on the shift away from institutional power and towards collaborative action taken by civilians. In his book, Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations, Shirky writes about new technology’s power to made working together possible across the board. For example, low-cost cameras and the ability to organize on the Internet have made it feasible for individuals to come together and put pressure on governments. Not
only do many people have the mean to make a video record of any event but that information can spread like wildfire all over the world. Though in 2001 when this performance took place relatively few people in Bulgaria had access to Internet, Moudov took advantage of the fact that people in Graz did have both cameras and means of spreading the footage they took with them. In the next decade and a half both Moudov and many other artists in Bulgaria would harness the power of digital media to generate spaces and challenge the status quo.

Further examining the choice of location, Moudov was interested in performing in a German speaking country because according to him, there is a particular respect for people in uniforms there. It almost goes without saying that this is not the case in Slavic countries. When Moudov repeated the performance in 2002 in Montenegro, people came back around to where he was standing just to disobey what he signaled twice. A year later in 2003 in Greece, the police drove right by Moudov without noticing anything was amiss. Another significant choice was to direct traffic right next to the river Mur, which is a tributary of the Drava and subsequently the Danube. This provides a direct route from the site of the performance to one of the first train stations in Bulgaria along the Danube in Rousse. Though in the recording of his work the river is not visible, the location the performance took place is the first frame of the
It clearly marks that Moudov was right before the Belgiergasse street turns into the Tegetthoffbrücke (bridge), which crosses over the Mur. Aside from this work taking place directly on the road, it also highlights the part of the transit network that connects Bulgaria to this part of Europe. It references the trains and Danube that were a part of the Orient Express. This is a nod to the fact that technological inventions have changed the way people connect with each other.

Ivan Moudov’s interest in train stations as a means of connection is further underscored by a major undertaking of his called MUZIS. This work’s starting points were the Poduyane railway station and “the virtual facade and visual communication of a future Bulgarian Museum of Contemporary Art”\(^{84}\). Moudov devised a campaign to promote a fictional new museum of contemporary art in the capital of Bulgaria. At the time this was the only European country without such an institution and Moudov wanted to highlight this gap in artistic life. In the absence of a physical archive of contemporary work, young artists had been

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\(^{83}\) Video recording of *Traffic Control* by Ivan Moudov.

\(^{84}\) Quote from Visual Seminars / The City as a Museum
turning to the street and the Internet as sites for inspiration and communication. This has significantly affected how art in Sofia has developed because it is not the museum as an institution that is the spark for the generation of more contemporary work. The new museum’s building was to be the railway station Poduyane - a symbolic site that signifies Bulgaria’s opening to the rest of the world. It was the train stop that the Orient Express passed through on its way to Istanbul. Moudov worked on this project in 2005 when he was a Resident Fellow in a Visual Seminars program organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art in Sofia.

MUSIZ advertisements. The close up shows the date and location as well announces a special guest, Hristo Yavachev, and a DJ.

To realize this massive promotional campaign and the actual reception at the functioning rail station, Moudov collaborated with Iara Boubnova, Nedko Solakov, Maria Vassileva, and quite a few others. Four days before the actual “opening”, they put up posters all over Sofia extending an invitation to all citizens to come to the opening. In order to avoid other people covering up their posters
with other materials, they were out almost 24/7 \ putting up more and more of their advertisements. Moudov also secured 4 billboards in the center of the city that he could use free of charge until the opening. Maria Vassileva wrote the press release and Diana Popova published an article about the new museum in magazine Kultura. Invitations for the VIPs were designed using examples that had been sent out by the British Embassy and they were sent out using lists from the Sofia City Art Gallery and the Red House Center for Culture. The posters and invitation boasted that Hristo Yavashev (Christo) would be a special guest. Moudov set up website and an email account for the new museum and was flooded with questions about when Christo would be arriving in Bulgaria. Journalists began to try and contract Christo’s relatives and Vlado Yavashev got in contact with Moudov, who explained to him about MUZIS. Though very reluctantly Vlado agreed to not say anything to the press and despite a few other close calls? it was not public knowledge that the new museum was a fictional one.

On the actual day of the opening, 26th of April 2005, about 300 people showed up including ambassadors of several countries, Svetlin Rusev, and Boris Danailov, who at the time was the Director of the National Gallery of Bulgaria. According to Ivan Moudov, the opening was just like any other – “you drink and you talk”. There was a great deal of confusion, mirth, and anger at the fact that there was no actual Museum of Bulgarian Contemporary Art. Many people in the art community felt cheated that they had not been let in on the

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85 Renowned painter that headed the Union of Painters during Socialist times. He still heads various committees related to the National Gallery of Bulgaria.
86 From talk Ivan Moudov gave for gorichkaBG in 2012. (14:20 minutes in)
secret and there was great disappointment over the fact that a much needed institution was not in existence. The MUZIS project generated an incredible amount of debate over the need for a space to exhibit contemporary art in Sofia.\(^7\) It also highlighted the lack of communication amongst certain people in the art scene in Sofia. It seems almost inconceivable that a new museum would be founded without the awareness of the Director of the National gallery yet that was the case. Concurrently, it is also an impressive showcase of the organizational might of the group of curators and artists who all work with the Institute of Contemporary Art.

Moudov wrote that he conceived this work as a way of getting feedback from the public on how much interest there is to create a new museum. He also focused on the Poduyane railway station because he wanted to bring attention to the history of the connection between Europe and Bulgaria. At the time, this was a particularly hot topic because of Bulgaria’s pending candidacy to join the European Union. Moudov played upon the intense interest in чужбина (foreign land) by indirectly making a nod towards Musee d’Orsay by announcing the opening of a museum in a former train station. He also took advantage of how famous and larger than life Christo or Hristo Yavashev (as Bulgarians insist upon calling him) is. His purported presence was a part of what attracted so many people and journalists to come to the opening on the 26th of April. It highlights just how important international acclaim is to the Bulgarian public and it once again exposed the unpleasant truth that Hristo Yavashev ran away from socialist

\(^7\) Martina Drobenova, “MUSIZ/SAMAC or how do we make ourselves a contemporary art museum”, Academia Online Publishing, Sofia, 2011.
Bulgaria and never looked back. He has not come back to the country of his birth despite numerous invitations and awards. He has become a symbol of “making it in the West” and has provided an example of how to relate to Bulgaria afterwards – or in other words to completely disengage with Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{88}

Above all MUZIS showed the dire need for young Bulgarian artists to have a space to exhibit their work. For decades the institution of the National Gallery has been monopolized by the older generation headed by Svetlin Rusev. That has left little to no room for artists to enter museums and galleries. Since 2005, aside from making art in the street as artists had been doing, there have been several major processes that have offered different solutions to the impossibility of young artists to find a space for themselves: building of new museum spaces, establishment of several new art festivals, and most prevalently making use of virtual space. In 2011 after 4 years of planning, the first floor of an actual Bulgarian Museum of Contemporary Art opened doors. It has been funded by the European Union and chiefly Norway. The space is not large and the museum is currently still under construction as of 2016. Floors two and three will open in the coming years and there are plans to eventually build storage spaces. In the mean time, a new building called Square 500 was built to house the collection of the National Gallery of Bulgaria and the collection of the Museum of Foreign Art\textsuperscript{89}. This has been an impressive effort to bridge the gap between Bulgarian and foreign art yet it has left little room for artists in the younger generation. A

\textsuperscript{89} Svetlin Rusev headed the committee for the building and curation of the new building, Square 500.
common solution has been to plan art festivals like Sofia Contemporary and Festival in the Open in West Park where Transformatori, Destructive Creation, and Ivan Moudov have participated. While this has popularized Bulgarian contemporary art it has created only temporary spaces for it leading many artists to turn to the Internet as a venue to record, exhibit, and create artwork. The next chapter looks at how artists have taken ownership of the virtual reality, have changed the way they connect to their audience, and in the process have completely redefined their network.
Virtual Space

In the late 90’s the cost of monthly access to Internet in Bulgaria was $25 while the average salary was $100. Nine years after the World Wide Web had opened to the public in 1991, only about 5% of Bulgarians had been on it. At the time the Bulgarian Telecommunications Company was still not privatized and it had a near monopoly on providing Internet services. This was the result of requiring competitors to go through a process of licensing that was almost insurmountable. In 1999 the Bulgarian chapter of the non-profit organization Internet Society sued the government for their unreasonable restrictions and won. In a press release, Internet Society – Bulgaria wrote that this was a good example that “civic society can achieve its goals through normal civilized methods.”\(^9^0\) This court case was a defining moment in the history of the country because it represented the Bulgarian people’s determination to take control of the communications network. In contrast to the transit network, the Internet has proven harder to regulate and easier to access for a larger number of people. By 2016 almost 60% of people in the country have become Internet users.

Krasimir Terziev’s work from 2010 *Space Enlargement Tool* is emblematic of the role the Internet has played in the life of artists in Bulgaria. It is a piece that can be installed anywhere and it consists of two stickers that when taped together create scroll bars typically found on a computer screen. Terziev’s simple

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\(^9^0\) “HOT NEWS NO licensing for the ISPs in Bulgaria!”, Internet Society – Bulgaria, November 18\(^{th}\) 1999 http://isoc.bg/kpd/index2-eng.html
message is that virtual space provides a way to expand the physical world. He chose to make an unlimited number of versions of this work and has reprinted the stickers in different sizes. The artist invited collectors who purchase a *Space Enlargement Tool* to install it anywhere they would like thereby turning any wall or flat surface into a computer screen and a tool allowing for molding and expansion. The flexibility of the Internet has transformed how people consume art around the world but it has become a particularly powerful symbolic space for Bulgarians. It is the ultimate communication tool that can connect the country to Europe and the rest of the world in a way that the historically policed transit network could not. The lower cost of Internet access in recent years has allowed artists to carve out their own spaces rather than rely on institutions investing in supporting them. Members of all generations of Bulgarian sculptors, painters, and collectives have begun using virtual space as an augmentative public space to exhibit their works.

Nedko Solakov, who in June of 1999 became the first Bulgarian artist to participate in the Venice Biennial though not in a national pavilion, was born in 1957. His first solo exhibition was in 1982 at a gallery in the center of Sofia called Rakovski 108. Though he has found space within museums and galleries he now makes extensive use of the Internet to archive his work. Since 2007, Solakov has had a carefully curated personal website that functions as a permanent retrospective. The home page serves as the equivalent of the entrance and wall text and features a photograph of a work of Solakov’s *Black & White*. The right quarter of the screen has a white background and there is only a scribbled
“actually it would be much better if the browser fits to the image” in the lower right corner. Though the image is easily scaled to a different size to fit the browser this may involve cropping and stretching that the photograph thus altering its original form. The comment in the lower right corner that is embedded in the page that could only be there if it was deliberately placed there by someone who knows how to do web design. The joke functions as a way to point out to the viewer that anything out of the ordinary is intentional. It also comments on the tendency of virtual space to alter everything that came from the physical realm.

To enter the actual website the user can click on two signs. The first one is placed centrally onto the Black & White background and it states “Nedko Solakov Official Website” and then changes to “Please Enter” when the viewer puts the cursor over it). The second option is a smaller clickable element on the left - “Nedko Solakov Non-official Website” that turns to “Good Luck!” when cursor is on top of the link. The official website has always been “UNDER CONSTRUCTION” and is “Supported (maybe)” by all major art institutions in Bulgaria. These indications of the contingent nature of the site serve to critique the failure of local museums to provide consistent support to Bulgarian artists or even to showcase their work. As of April 2016, there is no online collection of the National Gallery online or individual artist pages. Manually searching for Solakov’s name on the website of the national museum returns no results despite his numerous works in their collection. In contrast, a quick search on the

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91 Supported (maybe) by The Ministry of Culture, the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, The National Art Gallery, The Museum of Contemporary Art, The National Academy of Fine Arts, all in Sofia, and some other institutions in Bulgaria dealing with contemporary art...
Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, Tate Modern, and MOMA’s websites immediately bring the user to pages with Solakov’s work. Even one of the most established Bulgarian artists needs to carve out his own space on the Internet because the large Bulgarian institutions like the National Gallery have not done so.

Clicking on the alternate non-official path takes the user to a page that has a navigation section on the left, white margin on the right, and randomly placed links in the middle of the page. The background is a cracked wall with a small spider that is present of several works by the artist. The user can choose to explore Solakov’s biography, exhibition history, individual art works, and more. Visiting the individual links leads to more similarly styled views with haphazardly placed links over the background. Every time a page loads all of the links are regenerated and placed in new locations, ensuring that the user rarely sees the information in the same order twice. This encourages the visitor to be whimsical
and explore the art in a more creative way. The artworks, found as one would expect by following the individual art works link, are divided into several sections: Simple Works, Complicated Works, and recent/ongoing projects. Each artwork is presented in a unique way using pop up windows that are styled differently and present pictures, video, instructions for performance pieces, etc. In the source code of the web page there are multiple instances of checking whether the user has the correct tools on their device for the website to display properly. For example, if the user doesn’t have the right browser, it shows a message: "Your browser does not seem to support CSS properly. It is very likely that the page does not look the way it is intended!" This simple yet important attention to detail and desire to present the material in a very particular way speaks to the artist’s archiving process morphing into one of curation as well.

Transformatori and Destructive Creation have also taken advantage of the ability to carve out their own space through the Internet. Unlike Nedko Solakov, who has always been a more gallery-oriented artist, both groups of artists produce works primarily in public spaces where the life of a piece of art could be very short-lived because of the elements or vandalism. When an institution accessions a work, such as one by Solakov the artist is able to provide instructions for its care. In public space on the other hand there are too many variables to exert control over the future state of an artwork. Weather, people’s interactions, and vandalism are some of the factors that affect how a piece will look in even a few hours. Thus one of the main concerns of both Transformatori and Destructive Creation is how to keep a record of their works and make them
accessible to the public. The archiving of the art in virtual space both counteracts and contributes to some of the inherent loss of control over how street art lives out its life. Having a website provides a space where content’s presentation can be managed down to fine details. At the same time, it allows for the unlimited copying of records and therefore their use and alteration by others. When creating and posting digital content, artists give up the control over how large or small their work is, where it will be seen, and even exactly what colors it will be because of different screen settings. These considerations only become more complex when the line between an original piece of art, an archive, and a copy of either is blurred.

In 2009, the Transformatori association created their first rudimentary website and by 2010 they had started filling it with images and short descriptions of their first two works – *Architects at a Street Stand* and *Park Green*. Over the next few years their website evolved from a simple but informative page in Bulgarian to a more complex archive that divided their work into five categories. Transformatori translated their site in English in 2013 and came up with the following names for the organizational categories: Urban, Design, Workshops, Events, Action. The urban section is by far the most populated because the majority of their practice deals with public space. Within the categories the organizational principle is chronology. They include a description about every work and in several cases provide the only information available about an installation that may have been unlabeled and unexplained when it was originally created out in the urban space. While the association also provides a way to
contact them directly, there is no comments section that would act as a forum.
The main purpose of this site is to act as a cohesive archive of all of the work of
Transformatori. Their Facebook page is where they communicate with their
audience and popularize new initiatives.

Destructive Creation also created a website and a Facebook page in 2013
as a way of archiving their work and connecting with their audience. By this point
they had worked with the municipality and they were starting to collaborate more
with other artists and organizations. Destructive Creation has been seeking more
ways of getting feedback from their audience. Unlike most other artists in Sofia
they have a comments section on their website that allows for directly receiving a
kind of feedback that is not possible to get on the street. Their robust Facebook
page is also telling of the interactivity and engagement that the collective seeks.
In terms of archiving, Destructive Creation’s work is categorized under the labels
Social, Illegal, and Commercial with several smaller subsections like Mobile
Workshop and Factory for Urban Art.\(^\text{92}\) The classification of their practice as
being both illegal and commercial speaks volumes about the political climate in
Bulgaria. Breaking the law has been normalized enough that an art collective is
comfortable publicizing its illegal activity. Moreover, Destructive Creation is able
to vandalize public property and still get commissions from both the municipality
and private companies. Destructive Creation has taken matters into their own
hands because of the generally understood inability of the city to process all
project applications and lack of funding. The mistrust in government has

\(^\text{92}\) Factory for Urban Art is a project headed by Destructive Creation that transformed an old
factory into a communal art space.
manifested itself in multiple protests in 2013 and 2014 that were all organized on the Internet.\textsuperscript{93}

In November of 2015, Destructive Creation exhibited prints of the images that appear on their website under the category of Illegal. They worked with a “little urban place with drinks, art-information, and live events” called Art News Café that’s located in the second largest city in the country, Plovdiv.\textsuperscript{94} This was the first official exhibition of the collective. This exhibition showed the artists traversing physical and virtual space - starting with the original piece of art in the street, moving to the to an archival image on the Internet, and ending with those same images printed as photographs and exhibited as artworks in their own right. The line between these different public spaces becomes blurred just as the concept of the original becomes more multifaceted. At the opening, they held an artists’ talk “Friends Behind the Bar” that featured some members of the collective who wore masks. On Destructive Creation’s Facebook page they note that police officers came to the event and checked the identification of everyone present and left. In the words of the artists, “to get a police officer to go to an exhibition we consider a communal success.”\textsuperscript{95}

Spartak Dermenjiev is an artist that further complicates the relationship of original and copy in the context of the Internet by creating artworks that are digitally native. He is another member of the older generation of artists who began their career during socialist times and established their place in gallery

\textsuperscript{93} Protests calling for the resignation of the entire cabinet in summer of 2013 and demanding resignation of the newly appointed Head of the National Security Agency in summer of 2014
\textsuperscript{94} Description of Art News Café from their website: http://artnewscafe.com/about.php
\textsuperscript{95} Facebook post by Destructive Creation on November 30th, 2015
spaces. His father Krum Dermenjiev was a well-respected sculptor who was a part of the Union of Bulgarian Artists and was commissioned often by the socialist government. Spartak Dermenjiev turned to creating art in virtual space when he “couldn’t fit into reality” or win contests to design monuments in an urban setting. According to him, the contests for planning a new monument in Sofia are shrouded in the mystery of nepotism. He has argued that democracy is a territory shaped by the descendants of powerful socialists who “have subscribed to, have self-elected themselves.” There are rumors that competition winners are chosen with no regard for the published applications processes. Spartak Dermenjiev’s solution to these barriers was to sidestep them by creating virtual monuments that could live parallel to our reality.

Dermenjiev’s digital process begins with small-scale physical sculptures (about 30-40 centimeters) made in clay. He then photographs both the hand-made object and the site where he will place it. Using Photoshop integrates the sculptures with the photographs that are taken from different angles and at various times of day. An integral part of each of these virtual works is the unveiling of each monument on Facebook. He creates events that he uses to communicate with the people who express their intention to attend by clicking a “going” button. He usually has about 150 to 200 people marking that they are attending his events online and 50 to 100 more indicating they are interested. In addition to using the social network, Dermenjiev also has a personal website and

a blog. On his site, he has curated a small exhibition of all of his virtual pieces. The visitor can click on any artwork and a carousel of images begins rotating. More detailed information about each work is available to read on his blog. While the website has no interactivity, his blog and Facebook are forums where Dermenjieiev regularly engages with the public. He is not afraid to express his opinions about the old political regime and his distaste for totalitarian art. Through his blog he has woven a narrative of his life and practice and that has resulted in clashes with people of opposing interpretations of history.

In 2014, Dermenjieiev invited the public to a virtual celebration of his new sculpture of Georgi Markov via Facebook and his website. Markov is a Bulgarian writer and journalist who left Bulgaria in 1969 and eventually he was sentenced in absentia to six years and six months in prison for his defection. He first moved to Italy and later settled in London where he became a radio host for BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Radio Free Europe. In his shows, he critiqued the Bulgarian communist regime and in particular the leader of the country Todor Zivkov. On September 7th, 1978 Markov was assassinated via a pellet containing ricin that was fired into his leg using an umbrella. Dermenjieiev chose to honor this particular figure because Markov was able to escape to the West and became a formidable force in critiquing the Bulgarian socialist regime. He became a powerful symbol to the Bulgarian people of someone who had crossed the border and had become successful in the coveted West. Until 1989, nothing was heard of Markov in Bulgaria, adding to the mystery of the journalist.
Dermentiev felt drawn to the personality of Markov and the “Journalist” city square. In the middle of this circular park there is a column with four street lamps on it and a network of electric cables connected to its top. The artist envisioned Markov leaning on the tall pillar, gazing up above the horizon. The figure of the writer is depicted with hands in his pockets, wearing a trench coat and slacks. The face of Markov is rendered with visibly loose gestures and his expression is wistful. The network of cables connects the monument to the whole of Sofia via the electrical grid and mirrors the World Wide Web where the artwork originates. On March 1st the artist published this virtual sculpture online and almost immediately there was some confusion about whether or not a physical version was to be built. Despite Dermentiev clearly stating his work was purely digital, the
mystery was intensified when a monument to Georgi Markov was unveiled in November of the same year in the same square but by another sculptor Danko Dankov. There was a public outcry both online and in the media that Dermenjiev’s version of the monument had been a better choice. However the artist had not submitted his idea for the monument because there had been no transparency on the deadlines and conditions for the contest. Dermenjiev multiple times declared on Facebook that there was no “danger” of his sculpture being realized in physical space and that it was a coincidence that his virtual monument to Markov coincided with a contest by the municipality to build a physical one of the journalist.

In May of 2015, Dermenjiev created another virtual monument this time commemorating Aleko Konstantinov, the writer of *Bai Ganio Travels Around Europe*, who was also a lawyer, and a politician. In this case the artist intended from the beginning for the work to not participate in a contest held by the municipality for the commission of a monument to Konstantinov. Dermenjiev was protesting one of the requirements to compete – any entry had to be a sculpture of both the writer and of Bai Ganio as depicted by actor Georgi Kaloianchev. The sculptor took issue with a statement issued on television by the municipality that Bai Ganio was Konstantinov’s alter ego. Such a statement could theoretically apply only to the uncouth and endearing Ganio Balkanski from the first set of feuilletons. Perhaps the writer could connect with the difficulty his character experienced encountering new cultures but it inconceivable that he would identify with the Bai Ganio’s corrupt life as a journalist and politician. Konstantinov wrote
about the dangers of greed and lack of education that can turn a seemingly harmless individual into destructive force in government. It’s his involvement in politics that led to his assassination at the hand of crooked officials who had intended to kill the writer’s friend. The municipality’s statement that the alter ego of Konstantinov is Bai Ganio sounds like an insidious joke meant to minimize the powerful message of one of the greatest Bulgarian writers.

Dermenjiev recognized the tragic irony behind the current government using and misinterpreting the image of Bai Ganio to project a benevolent view of municipality officials. In his statement about this virtual monument he points out

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98 Unsuccessful attempt on Mihail Takev's life in 1897
that Konstantinov as a politician “may have been forced to live and interact with Bai Ganio but in his dreams, he was elsewhere.” 99 The virtual sculpture of the writer that Dermenjieiev created reflects this sense. Konstantinov is depicted standing alone and proudly on boulevard Vitosha where it intersects with the other major boulevard Patriarch Evtimii. With a hand in one pocket and leaning on a cane, the writer looks off into the distance to Vitosha Mountain. He stands in the middle of a tiled compass on the street floor that a references his life as a traveler and his immense contribution to tourism in Bulgaria. Aleko Konstantinov’s book *To Chicago and Back* from 1893 sparked the imagination of Bulgarians about the United States and the unknown new world. His writings about traveling captured the imagination of Bulgarians for generations and helped build the cultural climate that led to the Transit Network becoming a powerful symbol in the collective memory of Bulgarians. During socialist times Konstantinov’s works were read as critique on the insincere nature of the capitalist world and served yet another political agenda. Dermenjieiev wanted to commemorate the life of an artist whose writing has been used so often to further other people’s goals. He wanted to liberate Konstantinov’s image and give him room to be seen as the artist and dreamer that he also was. The Internet proved to be the only space Dermenjieiev could do this because he wasn’t dependent of getting funds from the municipality or could be censored.

Reflecting on the promises and disappointments of post-1989 political and social change Dermenjieiev created another virtual monument in November of

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99 Spartak Dermenjieiev, Description of Virtual Monument of Aleko Konstantinov on Facebook, May 24th, 2015 https://www.facebook.com/events/684000658412904/?active_tab=posts
2015 called *Transition*. He chose to place it on the site of Georgi Dimitrov’s mausoleum and rendered it at various angles and times of day. The monument itself consists of four curving and upwardly sloping pieces of what appear to be rusted metal. Each piece has holes in the shape and size of human bodies. The pieces together create a spiral that looks to be about 6 meters at the highest points. It evokes imagery of a propeller or a drill that pull the viewer both towards the sky and underground. The contradictory motions of being pulled in two directions fit Dermenjiev’s thoughts on the dual nature of the transition that “has ended for some and not even began for others.” The site the artist chose has already been discussed as historically and politically charged in Tsarist, socialist, and contemporary times. It has gone from a city garden meant to symbolize Europeanization in Bulgaria, to a mausoleum, and finally to a site for Ivan Moudov’s *Untitled 2012* work. Finally with the virtual *Transition* monument it has begun a life in alternate realities that Dermenjiev suggests may actually be “more real” then the one we live in.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Spartak Dermenjiev, Description of Virtual Monument *Transition*, https://parisvirtual.wordpress.com/2015/11/12/
In a tumultuous time in Bulgaria’s history, Spartak Dermenjiev has felt as though his “life was deliberately wasted and … creativity irrevocably tainted.” He identifies his work as his only resistance and last fight. Thanks to digital media and the Internet he has freedom and ability to express himself in a manner that can’t be censored. Even though his work cannot be encountered in the street, he has finally found online space to claim as his own. Transition has resonated with the visitors of the event on Facebook and there have been calls both online and on radio to realize this virtual work in physical space. Though currently the only way to experience these monuments is online and that restricts the number of people that can view them, the energy that is generates online

102 Quote from artist’s statement
makes it a possibility for Dermenjiev’s ideas to someday jump out of the web and into the actual street.

*Sofia Monsters* is another example of a digitally native body of work. It is a virtual project established in early 2015 by two young artists - Atanas Kutsev and Tochka (Antonia Ilieva).\(^{103}\) Kutsev is a photographer who takes pictures of places all around Sofia and Tochka draws over them in Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. Through their work they hope to provide an alternative interpretation of how Sofia and Bulgaria are perceived. They post their works on sofiamosters.com, a site that is hosted on tumblr, and they have a strong presence on Facebook. Kutsev and Tochka don’t rely on *Sofia Monsters* for income and have not pursued any commercial collaborations with businesses. They chose the name *Sofia Monsters* (Софийски Чудовища) because they were playing on the Bulgarian word for monster (чудовище). Their interpretation of it is that the roots of the word mean both miracle and the imperative form of the verb to see.\(^{104}\) They hope to challenge people to see the miracles in Sofia. *Friday Games*, one of the earlier works that they published in February of 2015, is a good example of the kind of works that they have been producing.

The background of *Friday Games* is a photograph that comprised of lines and rectangles that define several planes. These surfaces are of a few different materials including brick, metal, concrete, and paint. Though they appear to have a very rough texture, the digital format of the work dictates being experienced on a flat screen with limited capacity to conveying texture; one cannot use impasto

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\(^{103}\) Tochka is Antonia Ilieva’s pseudonym that in Bulgarians means spot, point, and period

\(^{104}\) Interview with the artists in Sofia on January 8\(^{\text{th}}\), 2016
on a digital display. The broken bricks in combination with the exposed insulation material in the photographed setting signal that this is a place in a state of disrepair. In the foreground, Tochka drew three figures. A small feline form marked by its tail and distinctive ears rests in the top-most-center, while to the right and below it two humanoid figures appear to be sitting on a crumbling ledge. The three characters are all rendered with emphatic two-dimensionality, seen in their well-defined contours and unmodeled torsos. The curvature of their bodies contrasts the rigidness of the straight lines in the background. Despite the fact that they are clearly sitting on the physical space around them, there is no other evidence of their interaction with it. The right most humanoid holds a hand puppet with an orange beak and the figure on the left has a salmon colored hand puppet. The manner in which the figures themselves are drawn recalls an international style of animation.

Friday Games by Sofia Monsters, February 2015
Friday Games introduces us to the Monsters of Sofia and references Western European stereotype of the East as a ruin in habited by uncivilized beings. This is yet another instance in the long history of humanity labeling the unknown as monstrous. In nearby Romania this trend can be seen, especially in the space that Dracula occupies in popular culture. Because the infamous vampire is from Transylvania, the entire country suddenly becomes conflated with the image of this monster. The subREAL collective from Romania has pointed towards this issue with a performance piece for which “the artists produce their own blood and then consume it as part of their artistic work”. In fact in the very same work the artists make a statement about the similarities between their native country and others in the region who also idolize the promised land of America and the West.

Kukeri in Bulgaria

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By showcasing a rundown, dilapidated part of the city, the Sofia Monsters are presenting the perspective of people who have internalized the negative stereotypes of what Bulgarians are like and what conditions they live in. Yet these monsters are not Dracula. By inserting cartoon characters adorned in neat clothes and bright colors in this setting, there is a reversal of expectations. Where there should be scary beasts, there are cute child-like creatures that are playing with sock puppets. A great deal of pop culture associations come up in relation to them – from the Disney blockbuster "Monsters Inc." to the Muppet Show and the artists message comes into focus.\textsuperscript{106} In the Bulgarian context, the symbol of monsters in has been shaped by the custom of kukeri - men dressing up in monstrous costumes with the purpose of scaring away the real evil spirits. With the act of placing Monsters of Sofia in the broken-down parts of the city the artists are exorcising the demons of the capital. Finally when looking to the title of the work for more clues, it becomes immediately apparent that the central action taking place is playing games on a Friday. This reinforces the mood of lightheartedness and makes the viewer wonder what might be significant about the end of the working week. The most direct answer is that this piece was published on the Sofia Monsters website on Friday, February 27th 2015. Even as this work alludes to the labor of changing attitudes about life in eastern Europe, it is also an image of playing around on a Friday afternoon after school and work are done for the week.

\textsuperscript{106} Monsters, Inc. is a 2001 American computer-animated comedy film directed by Pete Docter, produced by Pixar, and released by Walt Disney Pictures. It centers on two endearing protagonist monsters.
On 29 April 1917 the Bulgarian writer Geo Milev lost his right eye. Which may have been a sign that a while after he would be forbidden to “see”.

Geo Milev by Sofia Monsters, April 2015

The Sofia Monsters piece on Geo Milev is an example of their direct concern with the politics and history of Bulgaria. Milev was an expressionist poet, who as a soldier in the First World War lost his eye.\textsuperscript{107} He went on to become a strong proponent of Marx’s ideology and wrote poetry that was characterized by idealism and hopelessness in the face of the Great War and conflicts in Bulgaria. Because of his political convictions, Milev was interrogated and killed by the monarchy that was in power in 1925. Twenty years later in 1945, Russia came

\textsuperscript{107} Ruja Lazarova Marinska, Geo Milev and Bulgarian Modernism (International Geo Milev Foundation, 2005)
into Bulgarian territory and helped establish a communist regime. In the following years, Milev’s poetry was lauded as being representative of the spirit of party and was taught in schools. It was even translated and published in English in 1961, which is significant because so little communication was taking place between Bulgaria and English speaking countries.\textsuperscript{108} The monster version of Milev is shown in front of the head quarters of the Bulgarian Communist Party between 1954 and 1989. The building is now a secondary space for the National Assembly.

Considering the complex history both concerning Geo Milev’s image and the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), multiple interpretations emerge. The artists themselves mark the uncertainty of understanding of symbols and signs by stating that Geo Milev’s loss of his eye “may have been a sign that a while after he would be forbidden to ‘see’.”\textsuperscript{109} A crucial question is how the viewer perceives the signifier that is the National Assembly, or Party Home, as the public knows it. For proponents of the old communist regime, the signified is the power and strength of the BCP because the party erected the building.\textsuperscript{110} Following this line of thought, placing the poet who was killed by the monarchy for his communist beliefs in front of the symbol of might of the Communist Party makes a great deal of sense. Doing so is marking his political convictions and is highlighting that the “fascists” who murdered Milev and forbid him to “see” did not win – in the longer term, socialism did.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{108}] Geo Milev, \textit{September} (Foreign Languages Press, 1961)
\item[\textsuperscript{109}] Tochka and Atanas Kutsev’s caption underneath the Geo Milev \textit{Sofia Monsters} piece
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
At the same time, for others who may have been ideologically aligned with Marx’s ideas but opponents to how the government functioned in Bulgaria between ’45 and ’89, the National Assembly reads in an alternate way. The monumental building to them signified the corruption and lack of integrity of the people in power. Milev’s image then becomes a symbol of the old and true idealists and believers in communism. His being blinded in one eye and prohibited from “seeing” then becomes about not being able to see what became of the Communist Party and how depraved it would become. On the other hand, individuals who look at the entire history of the Party House and consider that it is currently a place where the Parliament meets can have yet another perspective and interpretation of Sofia Monster’s work. For example, in the last few years it often became a site of protests against the corrupt democratic government. The building then becomes a symbol of power, which has been corrupt and ineffective and continues to be. From the monarchy that killed a poet who dreamt of a peaceful better future through the communist government that put people in labor camps to the corrupt government nowadays, this work can be seen as a criticism against all of these forms of authority.

The *Sofia Monsters* Geo Milev piece is a work that one might imagine printed and hanging in a gallery. That begs the question of why it is that these artists initially chose to work only in virtual space and what has contributed to their continuing to predominantly work solely in virtual space. The simplest initial answer is that the cost of printing photographs and using paint on them can be hard to cover by young artists. After the initial investment of a computer, camera,
and editing software, the cost of producing a new work becomes only time and a little bit of electricity. They can also share their work free of cost on social media and that allows them to enter public space albeit virtual. Thanks to the exposure Sofia Monsters got on the Internet the largest news network in Bulgaria called bTV ran a story about the Tochka and Kutsev. The duo was then flooded with invitations to collaborate. The next question then becomes if they have opportunity to get funding from businesses, why have they not taken advantage of that? According to Tochka, they have been offered several contracts but they were not in line with the messages of Sofia Monsters and would have also restricted their audience.

In the summer of 2015, Tochka and Kutsev agreed to participate in one non-commercial project organized by Goethe Institut and Transformatori called BUD.KO. It was born out of a “workshop for ideas” that drew attention to the numerous abandoned kiosks for selling newspapers and food around the city. The focal point of the project became one particular newsstand in front of the Opera house at the corner of boulevard Dondukov and Stara Planina Street. The first archival images of it date back to the 1930s when it was first built. During socialist times many more kiosks popped all around the city and a metal frame was added to the one across the Opera for the sake of uniformity. Since 1989, the kiosk in question has not been in use and over time became a patchwork of old advertisements and posters. In a brochure about BUD.KO, one of the organizers Victoria Paeva anthropomorphizes the kiosk in a similar manner to

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111 Sofia Krancharova, "Monsters on the Streets of Sofia", bTV May 1st, 2015
112 “protokoll 1.0 BUD.KO”, Goethe Institut Publication, December 2015
Transformatori’s *Thoughts of a Naked Monument*. In fact it was Transformatori who first intervened in the kiosk, starting off the event by wrapping the kiosk in plastic wrap and then painted over it in white. They then invited the public to draw and write on it.

About a week later in August Tochka painted the kiosk with monsters taken out of their project with Kustev who then took photographs of the work. They uploaded the photos on a blog devoted to BUD.KO, to their site and on Facebook. According to both artists the painted kiosk and Kutsev’s photographs of them are both artworks in their own right. For the first time their work jumped from the virtual world to the physical and back. Tochka chose to not take down
old posters but to paint over them. The color palette she used is composed
mainly of blue, yellow, and purple. Those are also the colors that the three
monsters are depicted in. In the transformation of the kiosk they had included a
mailbox and their web site address. This encouraged direct interaction with the
artists that they then honored by posting some of the letters that had been left in
the mailbox online. This made it possible for an 83-year-old man named Kiril’s
words to reach people in a way that would not have been possible without the
Internet. He named the three monsters after flowers – Sinchec, Violetka, and
Gluhar.

This first jump to the physical world for Sofia Monsters reiterates their
choice to work in a public space rather than a gallery. For the artists it is
important to “engage people and make them feel like it is possible to change their
own environment.”¹¹³ For Tochka and Kutsev this sort of empowerment happens
in public space where art is available to all. Thus their choice to work
predominantly on the Internet and later in the presence of funds to stay outside
the gallery or commercial space is a statement about who their audience is. They
both hope to engage people abroad and people in Sofia to shift their perceptions
on the monstrous nature of Bulgarians. Their only other foray into working
outside the Internet has been to create monster puppets, buttons, and a few
small-scale prints for Park(ing) Day 2015. By making the two blue and red
monster puppets available for people passing by to interact with the artists once
again showed their dedication to working exclusively in public spaces.

¹¹³ “protokoll 1.0 BUD.KO”, Goethe Institut Publication, December 2015
As with most art in public spaces, they were aware that there was a danger that BUD.KO would be defaced and were pleasantly surprised when no one painted over their work for more than two months. They were shocked when it was candidates for mayor's posters were glued onto the pavilion mid October. Their immediate response was to make another digital work that pointed out that the posterizing in public spaces outside of designated areas is illegal. Like the Kiosk piece, this work began with Tochka’s illustration: a digitally rendered mayoral poster of their own featuring Bai Ganio inspired character called “Shopa Monsterov” as the candidate. It proclaims the Mr. Monsterov as an engineer, doctor, and architect, poking fun at the occasional Bulgarian official who it turns out had a fake diploma.\textsuperscript{114} It also turns around the message that is required to be on every campaign poster (“The buying and selling of votes is a crime.”) by saying that the buying of a certain type of food (kebapche) is a crime without also buying a drink. The artists set this poster as their profile picture on Facebook. Kutsev photographed another kiosk in the Borovo neighborhood that is in the periphery of Sofia and they digitally placed Shopa Monsterov’s advertisement on it. The humorous but poignant critique of contemporary Bulgarian politics made it to national news, which was the second major media coverage Sofia Monsters have had.\textsuperscript{115} While the report that was online did not go into great detail it directed people’s attention to public art that they could access via the Internet. Finally, above the colorful posters in the photograph stands another advertisement that translates to “By God people, buy!” that references an

\textsuperscript{114}“Bulgarian Official Blames Turkey for Fake Diploma Scandal”, Novinite, August, 2012.
\textsuperscript{115}“Sofia Monsters with their own candidate for mayor”, BTV News, October, 2015.
imploration by a past Bulgarian Minister of Finance to stop buying products when inflation was very high in 1991. They are criticizing the actions of the candidates for mayor who disregard the law and have people put posters up in inappropriate places. Sofia Monsters is also very much keeping with the spirit of their previous work to use humor and endearment to make an issue more accessible and perhaps easier to engage with.

Гласувайте с 007 за арх. инж. д-р Шопа Монстъров! Купуването и продаването на кебапче е престъпление без ракия!

Shopa Monsterov by Sofia Monsters, October 2015

The recent Sofia Monsters works BUD.KO and Shopa Monsterov are emblematic of the movement of artists between physical and virtual public space.

The *Sofia Monsters* webpage and social media presence are platforms the artists used to think through and express ideas that they later introduced into physical space. Working in the street proved fraught with issues of vandalism and government authority when politicians running for office – including the current mayor of Sofia, Yordanka Fandakova – defaced BUD.KO with campaign posters. Tochka and Kutsev then once again turned to virtual space where they have complete freedom over how they can express their discontent with the Bulgarian political climate. These dynamic interactions on social media between artists and the public, along with the archiving and creation of art in digital space have turned the Internet into an alternative to the Transit Network and the Park. Nevertheless virtual space has not remained isolated from the physical realm because the freedom the web has provided has in turn enabled artists to venture back into the street. The works described in this chapter are the first signs of how this new relationship between artists, audiences, and public spaces will unfold in the coming years.
Conclusion

Over the last 26 years, Bulgarian contemporary artists have played a major role in transforming the landscape of their capital city, Sofia, a process that took them out of the galleries, into the parks, streets, the internet. In the process they challenged the longstanding dichotomy between center and periphery and taught us ways of joining art and its public. Initially the focus of this thesis was artist’s aspirations to re-map the city through creating work in public space. The supposition about the virtual realm was that it served as a dynamic place for alternate cartographies and an escape from censorship. As research progressed, it became evident that the artists discussed are indeed concerned with the political history of Sofia and use the Internet as a way to carve out their own spaces. However, their ultimate goal has been to generate alternative means of engagement with the public rather than to simply push back against the traditional mapping of the capital. In the process they have created an integrated urban experience that is completed and enriched by Virtual Space.

The use of social media and websites to create digital works, as well as archive, has dramatically changed how the public interacts with art in public space. It has prompted a movement from the static sites of Parks to the more dynamic Transit Network, and finally has led to the vibrant Internet. These places don’t need capitals. Rather than this trajectory culminating in a flight away from the street, it has ended up being an injection of energy back into physical space. Online pages have served as labs for communication, collaboration, and
experimentation between different artists and collectives. The ability to create countless digital versions of an artwork, to exhibit them to a large audience on the Web, and to curate a near unlimited archive has lowered the cost barriers of trying out new things. The increased ease of contacting artists has made it easier for people to volunteer their time and energy to assist in larger projects. Many fundraising opportunities have arisen as well. By gaining traction on social media and later in news, artists have been able to work with private companies and non-for-profit organizations to realize their ideas. These newfound freedoms have revitalized the contemporary art scene in Sofia and have made it possible to engage a larger number of people both off- and on-line.

Contemporary art practices have significantly contributed to the shifting landscape of the city. From the transformation of abandoned sites like the traffic control police cabins and kiosks to the establishment of a guerilla park in the periphery of Sofia, artists have been altering public space. The online archive of these changes has served the purpose of both record and sounding board for new ideas. Artworks created in urban space are shown on the Internet where they can be exhibited at the discretion of the artists and can be accessed at anytime by anyone. Digitally produced pieces are born and live in the same space as the works that have migrated to the Internet. Conversations with the public and colleagues on personal pages and social media give rise to more collaborative ventures that in turn are created in the parks and streets of the capital. Artist’s documentation practices have guided their interactions with Sofia, essentially forming living archives online.
The new direction artists have taken in using Virtual Space has invited a different approach in the research process as well. Any genuine effort to explore their work necessarily involved tremendous use of the Internet. The websites and Facebook pages of the different collectives proved an invaluable resource. These are the only places where the whole body of work of most artists can be found with photographs, descriptions, and sometimes videos. Attempting to find all of the pieces in the streets of Sofia is futile because many have been altered and possibly destroyed by the elements or they have been vandalized. This is without taking into account the temporary installations and performances that by definition can’t be seen in person after the fact.

Another significant issue is the large cost involved with writing and printing a major publication. This has meant that even better known artists like Nedko Solakov and Ivan Moudov have no comprehensive retrospective catalogs and none of the other writings about them are accessible through the Brandeis library. While Solakov has a well developed website that makes it easy to discover most of his major works, finding resources on Moudov was a more complicated task. It involved searching through the online archives of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sofia, listening to artist’s talks published on YouTube, and digging deeper into the records of festivals in which he participated. An added layer of difficulty in the cases of Transformatori, Destructive Creation, or Sofia Monsters a layer of difficulty arises due to just how young they are, making it even more challenging to find secondary sources on their practice beyond newspaper or magazine articles and the occasional short publication. Though
there is writing being done about these artists at Bulgarian universities, none is yet publicly accessible.

Two things made it possible to research the artists at the heart of this project: archives in virtual space and living in Sofia. The two locations I have resided in the capital of Bulgaria are a few hundred feet away from several of the artworks, allowing me to see the art as it lived a life on the street. By interning at the National Gallery of Bulgaria at the branch of Socialist Art in the summer of 2014, I was able to see first hand how the institution functioned and how it handled the historical period that so many artists are engaging with. I also had the privilege to work with Destructive Creation that same summer after reaching out to them online. Though I did not participate in any of the projects I’ve written about, I was able to become familiar with the collective and the way it functions as well as to learn about past projects. All of this allowed me to make connections with art historians and other artists Destructive Creation works with.

While studying at Brandeis University, I focused on keeping up with the fast paced Bulgarian urban art scene through social media and artist’s personal webpages. I conducted a great deal of my research by reading forums and following the new materials artists published online. In order to fill the inevitable gaps that emerged, I traveled back to Sofia for a month at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016. There I saw as much of the work in person as possible, visited the newly formed Square 500 building of the National Gallery, the Institute of Contemporary Art, and Transformeri’s headquarters. I interviewed Dimitrian Kjutev, one of the former but founding members of Destructive Creation; Tochka
Ilieva and Atanas Kustev, the duo that formed Sofia Monsters; Valeri Giurov, Delcho Delchev, and Ivan Bonev, all core members of Transformatori; Iara Boubnova and two other art historians, who teach at Sofia University and New Bulgarian University respectively – Albena Spasova and Tedi Liho. I was able to obtain some written materials in the form of booklets about BUD.KO and the Institute of Contemporary Art.

Since returning from Sofia, I have continued following the work artists post on the Internet and the living archive has been evolving both off- and on-line. It has been fascinating to trace the feedback between what is going on in the streets of the capital and on the Web, as well as to realize that my own research has paralleled it. I intend to eventually make this thesis, as well as the recorded interviews I conducted, available on the Internet, thereby participating in the ongoing conversation between virtual and physical space.

This research has been an exploration of how the generation of artists born in Sofia around 1990 has been relating to the history of Bulgaria and the rapidly digitizing world. By following artists’ exit from the galleries to a variety of spaces from center to periphery, from walls to public spaces, and finally from analog to digital, we can see how art reaches people and transforms a city. The formation of living archives online and bustling social networks has disrupted the established formulas of engaging with urban space all over the world. It’s thrilling to see how future generations from all over the world will shape the new routes of creating art and how that will relate to what Bulgarian contemporary artists are doing in the present.
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