

FOREIGNERS NOW/HERE

artist

BORJANA VENTZISLAVOVA

curator

GALINA DIMITROVA-DIMOVA

EXHIBITION PROJECT
FOR THE BULGARIAN PAVILION
THE 60TH VENICE BIENNALE 2024

01 CURATORIAL-ARTISTIC CONCEPT

title: FOREIGNERS NOW/HERE

artist: BORJANA VENTZISLAVOVA

curator: GALINA DIMITROVA-DIMOVA

The theme of migration and the foreigner has been present in Borjana Ventzislavova's artistic practice for many years. She herself is an emigrant to Austria, where she initially went to study in 1996 and then settled to live and work as an artist. This biographical fact, as well as her early encounter (through collaborative projects with *dezentrale medien*) with migrants and refugee minors (from different parts of the world, such as Rwanda, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Philippines, Turkey, etc.) explains her interest and tendency to develop the theme throughout the years in different aspects and messages. From the early project *Luis, I think!* (2003), *Outside it was always dark* (BV's first solo exhibition in Bulgaria at SGHG, 2006), through *We shall overswim* (2008, Academy Gallery), *Me, you and them. No one is secure* (2008, Credo Bonum Gallery) to *Migration Standards* (2011) and *American Dream Acting* (solo exhibition at SAMSI, 2013), which also had a reference the theme.

What is distinctive about Borjana's work is the presence of social engagement and a political statement on the current issues of the day, but in a specific way - through metaphor, role reversal and ritual, which places her in the line of the poetic political - a current and increasingly popular artistic practice in the contemporary art scene. This approach can be seen in projects such as *And The Sky Clears Up* (Magic Resistance), *We The Nature*, etc.

These two leading lines in the artistic practice of Borjana Ventzislavova are present in the *FOREIGNERS NOW/HERE* project, which we propose for the Bulgarian pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024. The project deals with artistic-magical practices for healing the individual, society, governing institutions and their representatives, from racism, xenophobia, homophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Gypsyism and all forms of intolerance and hatred.

The times we are living in are marked by multiple crises: climatic, political, economic, unfolding against a backdrop of military conflicts and a powerful wave of immigration. The sense of apocalypticism is thus particularly strong and creates anxiety and panic in modern man. The *The Doomsday Clock* now stands at 90 seconds to midnight—the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been in its history since 1947.

That is why the *FOREIGNERS NOW/HERE* project offers healing practices. Healing of the fear and hatred that give birth to racism, xenophobia and aggression, and that lead to the crises and conflicts we face today. The healing process emphasizes empathy and mutual aid and involves the application of artistic and magical rituals and the use of their respective tools. These rituals are usually associated with tradition and superstition, which are the guardians of the patriarchal spirit and culture of the community. Superstition is even more concerned with guarding against the alien, the unfamiliar, and the different, which is what this project deals with. The artist's tactic is to apply similar means, breaking down the patriarchal to achieve the absolute opposite of this, namely understanding, care and tolerance of the other, the different.

Borjana Ventzislavova's project is closely related to the Venice Biennale theme -- *Foreigners Everywhere*. Curator Adriano Pedrosa explains its double meaning as follows: "First of all, that wherever you go and wherever you are you will always encounter foreigners—they/we are everywhere. Secondly, that no matter where you find yourself, you are always, truly, and deep down inside, a foreigner."

The title of her project, FOREIGNERS NOW/HERE, is a play on words that also has a double meaning. The first is that we are all foreigners here and now, or that there are no foreigners anywhere, but we are all people inhabiting the same place. According to Borjana, "we have to rethink freedom and life, we have to overcome our prejudices towards the other, the stranger, the unknown, the different". In other words, to go beyond the logic of binary antagonisms and realize that we are all connected and live on this earth in interconnectedness.

If Adriano Pedrosa argues that the artist is precisely such a figure who freely crosses different territories and limitations and thus challenges their boundaries, Borjana's project also metaphorically addresses the theme of the foreigner through the sense of the different and the protection against the unknown.

At the center of her project are magical rituals and symbols that people use to protect themselves from the unknown. Here, however, they are included with the idea of healing this atavistic fear and offering people reassurance and acceptance of these differences. Because the differences enrich local culture with new and exciting inputs. Moreover, many of the traditional symbols are present not only in our culture but in many other cultures, which is what the project aims to reveal: we have much more in common than we have different.

As the Austrian philosopher and curator Boris Maner says on the occasion of the film Magic Resistance "In Borjana Ventsislavova work describes a life that should take place in the now in a direct encounter with the other without resentment or prejudice. The social utopia that she evokes in the film lies neither in the past nor in the future: It is the living present in its fragility and beauty. Borjana Ventsislavova uses the form of the ritual to present the possibility of a social reality without ideological instruction, which is constituted by a lively, prejudice-free encounter. An idea that she shares with the concept of love by the Russian anarchist Pyotr Alexejewitsch Kropotkin."

The FOREIGNERS NOW/HERE project involves different means of expression and an interdisciplinary approach. The trans-media work includes film, object installations, neon signs and interventions. In the exhibition space, we see different staging, presenting rituals, objects and symbols that convey the ideas of removing prejudice, charging with good energy and vibrations, invoking good luck and healing, giving gifts and making wishes for a world without prejudice and hatred.

Inspired by the intangible cultural heritage, traditional rituals, knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe, the author creates artistic and magical rituals, the application of which aims at change for the general population in a social, political and environmental direction. Each ritual can be performed by anyone without the need for specific skills or tools. The main focus of the work is on methods to heal hate speech, violence and discrimination against a person or group of people.

¹Our collaboration started with the two solo exhibitions of Borjana Ventsislavova in the winter of 2008-9, then continued with her participation in my curatorial projects for the Week of Contemporary Art in Plovdiv in 2012 and 2022, as well as in other projects.

²Founded in 1945 by Albert Einstein and University of Chicago scientists who helped develop the first atomic weapons in the Manhattan Project, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists created the Doomsday Clock two years later, using the imagery of apocalypse (midnight) and the contemporary idiom of nuclear explosion (countdown to zero) to convey threats to humanity and the planet. The Doomsday Clock is set every year by the Bulletin's Science and Security Board in consultation with its Board of Sponsors, which includes 10 Nobel laureates. The Clock has become a universally recognized indicator of the world's vulnerability to global catastrophe caused by manmade technologies

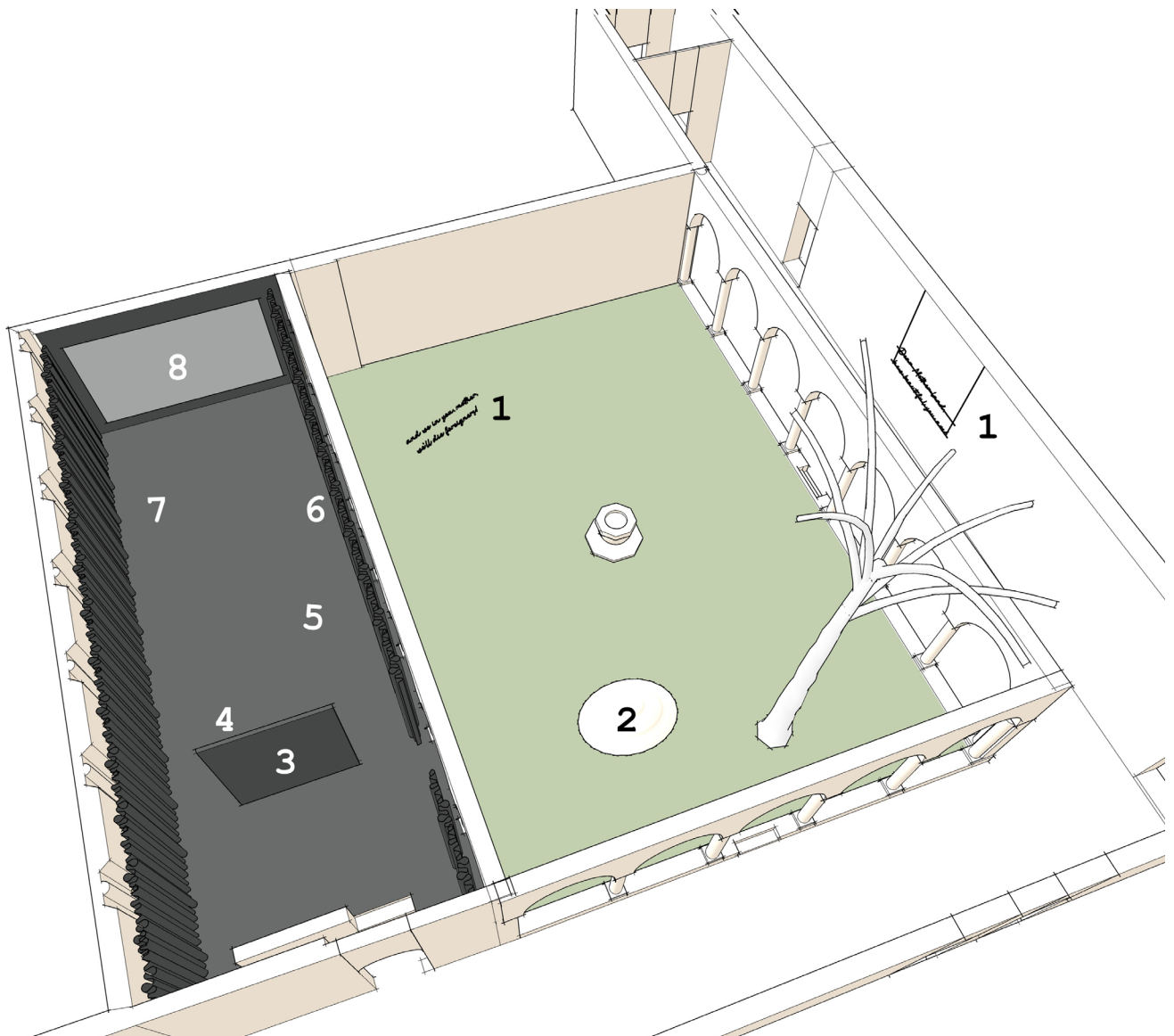
³Curatorial statement by Adriano Pedrosa, published on the Venice Biennale website: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2024/introduction-adriano-pedrosa>

⁴Borjana Ventsislavova. And the sky clears up (MAGIC RESISTANCE). Text by Boris Maner (2020)

02 LIST OF WORKS

The project was conceived specifically for the space of Tiziano Hall, where the Biennale's Bulgarian Pavilion exhibition will be held, and covers both the interior space of the gallery and the corridor and courtyard.

1. **Dear Mother-land!**
neon text, two parts. 300cm x 80cm, 290cm x 80cm
2. **Throw/Plant a Bean**
intervention in the yard and performance at the opening
3. **Voodoo-garlic**
photo wallpaper, 3m x 3,5m
4. **Sweet, sweet salt**
object mixed media installation
5. **No fear for your soul to survive**
installation with small metal objects
6. **How beautiful you are!**
object mixed media installation
7. **We circle around (Shamanic Stones)**
installation of stones, colored bands, text
8. **We are no/w/here**
video installation, 15 min.

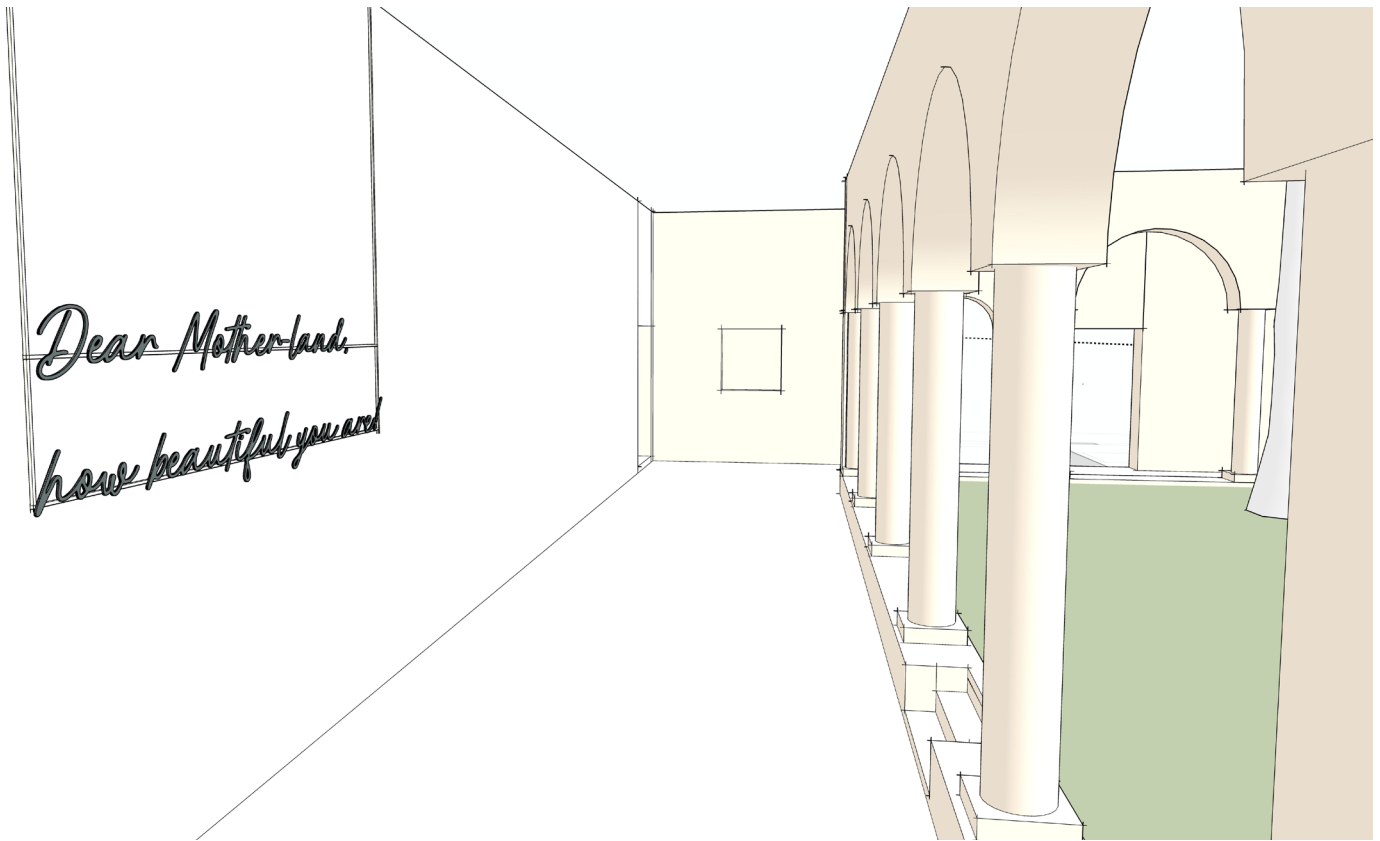


03 VISUALIZATION OF THE EXHIBITION / OUTSIDE SPACE

1. **Dear Mother-land!**
neon text, two parts. 300cm x 80cm, 290cm x 80cm
2. **Throw/Plant a Bean**
intervention in the yard and performance at the opening



1. Dear Mother-land!
neon text, two parts. 300cm x 80cm, 290cm x 80cm



“Fatherland kindly, how beautiful you are!and we in you, Mother, will die foreigners!” are the first and last stanzas of Ivan Vazov’s poem “Fatherland kindly, how beautiful you are!”, written in 1882. They were chosen because with them Vazov, a classic of Bulgarian literature, conveys the idea that we are all passengers in this world and nothing belongs to us, but for our short journey on earth, we remain foreigners.

The two stanzas of the poem translated and adapted into English are done in white neon with handwritten script to create a more personal experience of the message. They are installed in two different locations in the outdoor space of SALA TIZIANO. “Dear Mother-land, how beautiful you are!” is positioned on the brick wall of the vestibule leading to the hall. The stanza “and we in you, mother, we’ll die foreigners” will be installed in the courtyard, on the lawn, slightly buried in the dirt.

1. Dear Mother-land!
neon text, two parts. 300cm x 80cm, 290cm x 80cm



“and we in you, Mother, will die foreigners”

2. Throw/Plant a Bean

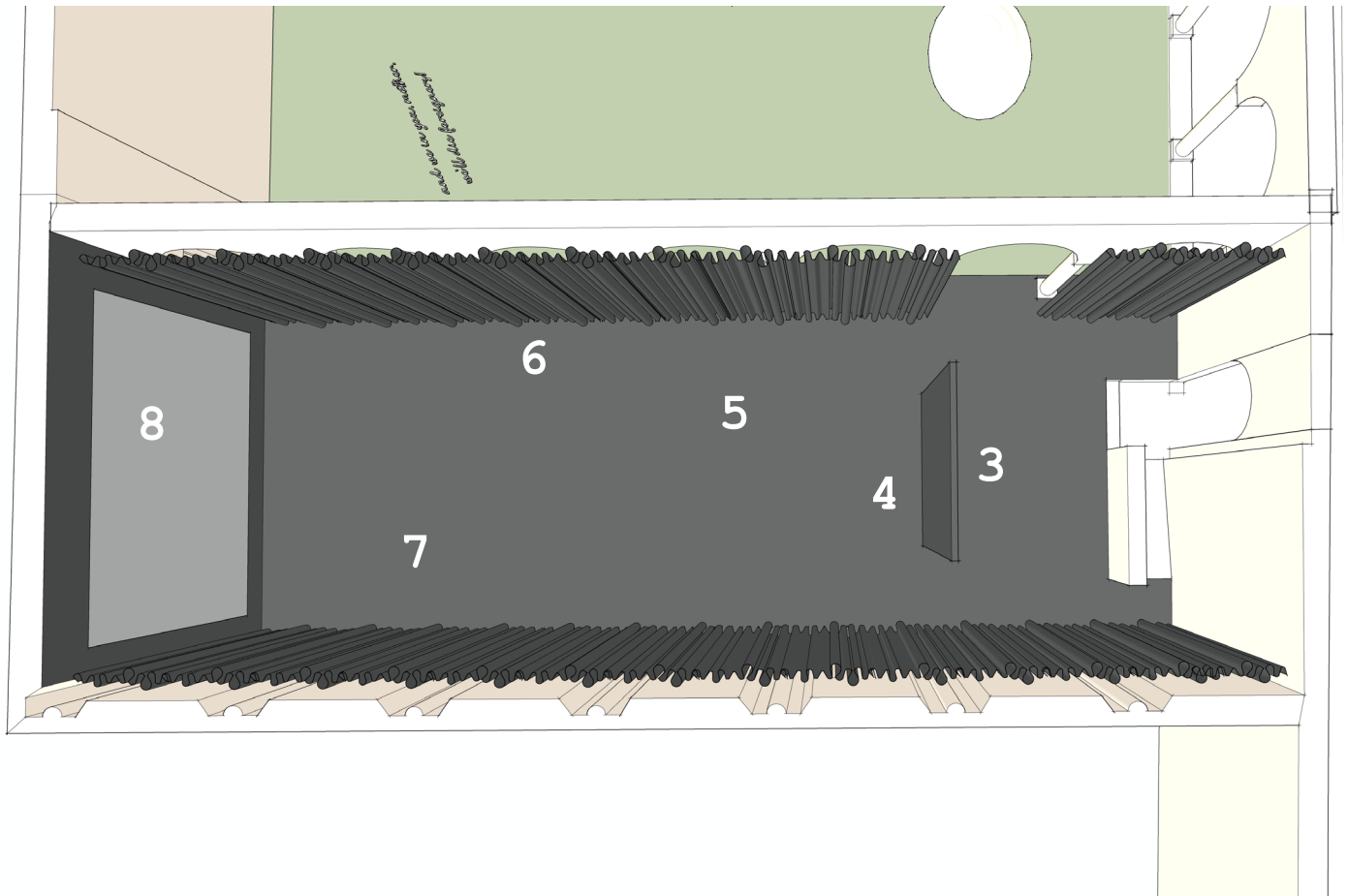
intervention in the yard and performance at the opening



Bean throwing is an old divination practice used to predict the future or to give answers to certain questions. As for many other traditions and customs that we consider “ours” and come from our lands, so bean watching is spread across cultures and practiced in many places, in different variations.

This divinatory custom is implied by an intervention in the courtyard of SALA TIZIANO, where a huge pile of beans will be placed. Next to it, there will be a sign explaining that each visitor can take a few beans as a souvenir, but can also plant them and grow a bean plant that will give birth to more beans, and with this gesture, participate in the “planting and growing” of the abolition of hate speech. A part of the beans will be encrusted with signs-symbols of empathy, tolerance and mutual aid.

During the opening a performance /staged divination session with bean throwing will take place. A fortune teller (or performance artist) will “watch” the visitors by the beans thrown, but her words will be taken from the project’s messages of changing attitudes and stereotypes towards healing.



The interior space of the hall will be shaped like a black box with separate exhibition sections created by the interior design of the exhibition using half wall, light and curtains. From a door to the right of the entrance we can exit or re-enter the courtyard.

3. Voodoo-garlic
photo wallpaper, 3m x 3,5m (rendeing of SALA TIZIANO)



Entering the hall, the viewer finds himself in front of a photo wallpaper with a huge head of garlic pierced with needles. Garlic is a universal symbol for protection against magic, disease and vampires. Combining it with the voodoo practice of needle-piercing seeks a double effect of magic, namely on the one hand protection, but at the same time healing hatred and prejudice through the purifying power of garlic.

Behind the wall with the photo wallpaper, the installation continues in a darkened space, in separate places with illuminated elements and objects.

4. **Sweet, sweet salt**
object mixed media installation (rendeing of SALA TIZIANO)



Piles of sea salt with bouquets of herbs hanging above them, combined with everyday objects such as a mobile phone, food and drink packaging, a mirror, an electrical cord and the like. This part of the installation is reminiscent of a scene from a ceremony in which everyday objects are purified between which devices communication and communication-related elements through which ideas of segregation and hatred are spread.

Please note that all used objects for the mobile are found objects or from my private archive. For the installation we use sea salt and resin.

5. No fear for your soul to survive
installation with small metal objects (rendeing of SALA TIZIANO)



Casting a bullet, for all those who fear the foreign, the other, the unknown, the artist casts bullets and banishes their fears. Fear has to come out of a person's soul, otherwise it can make them sick.

The pagan ritual against fright and disease is performed by "extinguishing" in water the molten lead (or other metal), then divining by the resulting shapes. The ritual can be found as a tradition in various cultures, including Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Germany, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Turkey and Finland.

The cast metal figures hang from the ceiling and represent the fears and illnesses of the individual nations and countries the artist has made the viewing for. Depending on the figures that visitors recognize, they can read for themselves, according to their own traditions and experiences, to what extent the fear of the foreigner and the stranger has been cured in the respective country.

6. How beautiful you are!
object mixed media installation (rendeing of SALA TIZIANO)



A pile of sand in which are stuck, or over which hang symbols of good luck and happiness from different cultures around the world, such as clovers, ladybugs, the knuckle eater, the number 7, a rabbit's foot, fish, acorns, a five-pointed stick, a horseshoe, a red toadstool, a red chilli pepper, a tree of life, etc. This installation has the function of a spirit house, a shrine to the spirit-wings of different places and cultures, all good and bad, to pass on good luck and to achieve a community feeling and togetherness for a better, healthy and beautiful world.

7. We circle around (Shamanic Stones)

installation of stones, colored bands, text (reworking of SALA TIZIANO)



Climate change will increase migration in the future drastically.

Yes, foreigners will be everywhere, we are here and now and will always be. (Until humanity extinct)

Text plate with the chanting for the ritual hang next to the ribbons:

To act on global warming collect stones from anywhere and use them to form a circle.

Hang colour ribbons above, and then recite:

We circle around. We circle around. Everyone gets to be involved.

The boundaries of the earth.

There are things we can do Consumers, policy makers,

Food growers and energy providers Everyone gets to be involved.

The boundaries of the earth.

Leave the stones and the ribbons for four hours in a dark room.

To preserve the effect, repeat the chant once a day.

This performance, as well as the video work, uses rainbow-coloured elements that are now most commonly associated with the LGBT+ community, but were popular across cultures and traditions long before the 1970s. Some ancient cultures believed rainbows to be a bad omen, while others attributed positive associations to them, such as health, spirituality and healing.

The basic concept of colors that exists in Buddhism is that of the rainbow body, which is considered “the penultimate transitional state of meditation in which matter begins to transform into pure light.” Metaphorically speaking: everything is diverse and colourful and everything becomes light (and comes from light).

8. We are no/w/here
video installation, 15 min. (rendeing of SALA TIZIANO)



A video that follows rituals for purification and healing from acts of violence, hatred and discrimination. The rituals are performed by 7 performers in different locations in Sofia, most of them referring to specific events or playing an important role in today's political and social life. These locations serve as a backdrop for the performance in the public space of the city of Sofia and include the National Television, the Court House, the Ministry of the Interior, the Lions Bridge, the Borisova Garden, etc. They are places where acts of violence have occurred, sometimes even leading to death (Borisov Garden), or represent institutions responsible for legitimising acts of intolerance as criminal, as well as for monitoring their observance and enforcement. Also included are public institutions responsible for educating and spreading the ideas of tolerance, solidarity and empathy, combating hate speech and discrimination, such as educational institutions or mass media.

In the individual ceremonies, which derive neither from dogmatic nor formal religious norms but are abstract artistic interventions, the characters call for healing, empowerment and solidarity. The rituals and devices used in the performance are inspired by various traditions and rituals from around the world, such as indigenous, animistic, spiritual or religious ceremonies, but are artistically and aesthetically translated for the purposes of the project. Some of the movements in the choreography are inspired by Paneurhythmy (founded by Peter Dunow) or Planetary Dance (by Anna Halprin).

The mantra that the participants repeat to themselves is:

I am You, You are He, She is I

We are You, You are Us.

Together WE

are CARING FAMILY

....

AND WE ARE FREE

....

We need to talk

The film also shows another topical aspect, characteristic not only for Bulgaria, but also for many other countries in Europe, where sentiments and politics of discrimination and hatred are today trying to shape the global landscape.

INSIDE SALA TIZIANO

(two directions, rendering of SALA TIZIANO)

