

PROJECT FOR THE BULGARIAN PAVILION AT THE 60. INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION, LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA in 2024

GETTING OFF HIGH HORSES (2004-2024 and on)

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Artist: Luchezar Boyadjiev



A fragment of the proposed Bulgarian Pavilion

We live in the times of polarization where many monuments are falling and others are protected by pillows at the time of war. ***“Everyone can be a statue, but for this your life needs to matter”*** wrote philosopher Paul B. Preciado in response to the iconoclastic gestures on colonizer figures all over Europe and the UK since 2020. Whose life really matters or whose life matters more than the others, are the major questions that have defined the global political agenda especially in the last two decades. Those dilemmas are reflected upon by Luchezar Boyadjiev’s extensive proposal for the Bulgarian pavilion at the 60th International Biennale of Art in Venice curated by Adriano Pedrosa for 2024.

“Getting off High Horses”-- built on the artist’s ongoing On Vacation series -- is an installation of artistically and digitally manipulated photographs in which human figures have been removed from the public equestrian statues in Bulgaria, in various countries of Europe and around the world. The artistically erased subjects are predominantly male political leaders involved in the colonial conquest of the world and historical characters, military commanders, and members of

imperial families, all depicted heroically riding their high horses. In response to the core theme “Foreigners Everywhere”, we plan to exhibit a large and wide constellation of these monuments. The collection at present is around 120 and our aim is to reach 500 of them with the collaboration of researchers and activists in respective countries, and even open source data from the Internet. The special focus will be put on Italy and its colonial heritage.

“Getting off High Horses” is an ongoing archive of the artist’s idiosyncratic perception of the power and sovereignty struggles. **The installation is a counter-monumental gesture showing how art can sensitively and humorously undo and redo the public sphere today.** By liberating the animals from their equestrians, Boyadjiev’s gesture challenges dominant narratives and power structures, opening possibilities for engaging critically with existing statues, which dominate the public sphere almost globally. Boyadjiev’s work opens up a debate on the necessity of changing the dominant narrative of the public realm and its governance, in Bulgaria, in Eastern Europe, and across the planet, contributing to the ongoing process of unlearning **the hegemony of the colonial and imperial embedded in the Eurocentric thought.**

“**Getting off High Horses**” is a part of an idiomatic English expression warning to stop taking yourself for better or cleverer than the others.

The work will be exhibited in a forensic approach both inside the Bulgarian pavilion and in the courtyard’s hallways, with images placed on walls (made of light, ecologically sustainable panels, or mesh wire support panels), and attached with magnets. The prints are printed on polypropylene foil, laminated, which is a sturdy, weather-proof material. The installation will be inspired by both the early XIX-century saloons school of hanging giving rise to the contemporary art exhibitions and the forensic investigative gaze to strengthen the work’s particular political humor. **Next to the old and new photographs by the artist, we will approach artists, writers, activists and historians who are interested in pluralizing today’s public sphere in a decolonial manner to help gather the material from their respective contexts, or sometimes using open access data-base from the Internet.** In all cases, our contributors will be respectively credited. The installation will also be accompanied by lists and positions of the statues, their authors and the authors of the pictures, as well as the possible selected audio material telling stories about some of the case studies. At the exit (or in the courtyard) an empty board will be displayed for the public to contribute with their collective knowledge with some monuments we might have omitted. A public access program for events in and around the pavilion and the issues raised, will

be developed with the only independent artistic and critical art space in Venice - SALE Doc, a close neighbor of the pavilion in Zattere. We are also planning for periodic extensive guided tours with the artist and/or the curators where the detailed stories of the monuments and the problems of public space will be shared.



2023



2004

“Getting off High Horses” is inspired by and built upon the ongoing cycle **“On Vacation”** that **Boyadjiev initiated back in 2004**. It started with the removal of the equestrian monument of Alexander the IInd, Tzar Osoboditel in central Sofia back in fall of 2003 within the context of a project dealing with the discriminatory representation of the Roma minority in the highly polarized Bulgarian public sphere - both media and urban. Here above are the first image from the cycle, Alexander the IInd from Sofia (2004) and the newest image from the cycle, Alexander the Great from Athens (2023).

Equestrian statues traditionally are the monuments representing a rider mounted on a horse, and derive from the Latin *equus*, meaning ‘knight’, deriving from *equus*, meaning ‘horse’. They have typically been portraits of kings, emperors and from the Renaissance and more recently, military commanders. The removal of those subjects, or so-called heroes, while leaving incomplete pedestals, illustrates how memory work remains infinitely open ended. It will also investigate how contemporary art can propose counter-monuments while testing the limits of what memorials and monuments in general can achieve. 2200 BCE was the first time horses had been domesticated in the western Eurasian steppes and they had been instrumentalized as an extension of ‘manliness and masculinity’ and ‘political hegemony’ against the barbarian, the foreigner, the other, the intruder ever since. In other words, they have been direct witnesses of human-to-human crimes on this planet for a very long time. Their singular presence - heightened by Boyadjiev’s intervention - underlines this witnessing role and animates the surrounding public space while stepping onto the representations and understandings of power.

It is additionally interesting that the artist is a man in his mid-60. Thus each intervention has its own story in Boyadjiev's personal archive of artistic encounters.



Luchezar Boyadjiev is driven by curiosity about what hides behind the most visible in his work. He is internationally well acknowledged for his critical observations and dissections of the transforming public sphere in Bulgaria and South-Eastern Europe especially after 1989. "Getting off High Horses" represents a chance for Bulgaria to introduce the most important dilemmas around the concepts of "multidirectional memory" and "counter-monumentality" in a strikingly visual manner.

The US-American scholar Michael Rothberg, a potential contributor to our catalogue, unpacks those questions in his book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009). How can we relate the histories of victimisation of different social groups, especially in the current times of polarisations? How can we avoid a situation where one commemoration is a denial of another, which we very much see in the present political landscape especially in the Middle East? Boyadjiev in his extensive complex and yet visually very appealing project proposes to think of collective memory from a multidirectional and anti-competitive perspective, creating **a step towards an intersectional and collective public sphere, where monuments are counter-monumental**. And the horses? They also need self-determination and anti-domestication soon in a planetary public realm which art helps us to strive for.