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**THE UNSEEN WOMEN'S MARKET: AN ART-
DOCUMENTATION INITIATIVE AS AN INSTRUMENT
FOR STRUGGLE**

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The Unseen Women's Market: an art-documentation initiative as an instrument for struggle

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The author apologises that due to the time constraints this is an unfinished text, especially lacking the discussion of public effects. Sadly, also lacking the pertinent illustrative visual material.

How could an anthropological study about the marginalised in an urban conflict be brought beyond the confines of the usual academic and activist audience? How could it be translated to a visual and other sensory and conceptual language that touches the common person? How can you engage the public opinion about an urban space (and mainly, its inhabitants) that is widely seen as undesirable, yet used by so many ordinary people? Could the anthropologist change the course of events aimed at the imminent destruction of this place and dispersal of those benefiting from it?

I will tell the story of a volunteer artistic initiative that I managed to set off on the side of my fieldwork activities, just a few months before the largest market in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, was demolished.

The Women's Market ('Jenski Pazar', a historical appellation) is a lively open-air marketplace for food and wares, located in the centre of Sofia some 700m from the official governmental centre. In the last decade a very negative image started to be constructed by a nexus of social actors and factors (see my other submission to Stream 4). This brought about an ever clearer public vision for the future of the Women's Market: it had to be re-developed into a non-market in order to solve 'the mounting social problems' in that part of the city centre. The solution for the municipality was to stimulate retail gentrification to a pedestrian high street in order to limit income opportunities in the area for the poor and minorities. Yet this market was still used not just by minorities excluded elsewhere in urban space, but still by large swathes of Sofia's population which was left out of the recent economic pick up (2001-2008). The hegemonic construction of the market's image meant that they supported a re-development that would bring 'their' place to a middle class consumer dream, yet they didn't realise they wouldn't become the middle class consumers to make use of it.

As I followed the pre-redevelopment process as part of my PhD research project, I could see that neither those who earned their bread at the market, nor the visitors who saved their limited pennies by coming here from across the entire city, would not be able to mobilise a response to the impending threat to their livelihoods and the cheapest shopping place in the city. Additionally, mine was just about the only public position critical of the

transformation of the market. I needed to produce new discourse, and strive to make it at least somewhat 'hegemonic'. I identified the younger generation of Sofia citizens with more post-modern outlook, as the potential support group. I knew from my interviews that they enjoyed the market as a spectacle, and also had positive rather than negative stereotypes toward ethnic and cultural diversity. A cultural event was necessary to provide a focus point and a platform for mobilisation of their attention to the issue.

The Unseen Women's Market was a project to make visible the value of this unique social world for so many downtrodden men and women whose voice will not be heard, as they are marginalised again and once again. The stated impact of the initiative was:

- To provoke a debate about the value of this type of urban spaces in Bulgaria and what their future should be.
- To give voice to communities for which the market has significance.
- To accumulate community memory of a new for Bulgaria local type. In effect, create the first urban community 'museum', based on non-homogeneous and non-national narrative.
- Through creatively playing with and turning into art the daily surroundings that we 'dislike', to enable us to appreciate our urban environments.
- To uphold the significance of those truly shared spaces for the people of Sofia.

As the phase of construction came and progressed (while we didn't obtain finance to realise the final production), ours became a project to preserve a memory for unique place and a social world. We hope – a counter-memory – to the official narrative of a continuing existence of a market, only updated to answer modern needs and requirements; an authority narrative of geography unlinked from people and practices.

This was a place of community without memory. As the projects of the city to impose economic hardship are realised and people depart and disperse family by family, they leave behind but a faint shadow, inscribed in their colleagues', landlords', and customers' memories: names and former presences without a pointer anymore, without a follow-up address. Other memories will soon reclaim the territory, but fragments of those gone and untransformed will stay through this project, to further contest and be contested.

The Women's Market fell prey not to imbecile architects or an evil city government, but to the general civic drive to sanitise and purify the city, removing undesirable environments as well as populations, in order to install an imagined but long-awaited here "European" law and order and beauty – as it is imagined locally. It is this overarching drive that the artefacts of the small person collected here put in question.

I will narrate here the results of an effort to organise a group of volunteer artists to document the market just a few months prior to its demolition. The process was fraught with difficulties, as they had to merge their own interests and insights from individual exploration and fieldwork with the anthropologist's deeper desire for reflecting social analysis in the products, for emitting a subtle yet persuasive change-of-perspective message to the audiences, and for ensuring that it isn't new stereotypes replacing the old ones.

The projects' uniting characteristics were to be deconstructing the totality of the media images, or even of the preconditioned lived experience of the inimical visitor, into non-analytical components – in object, visual, sound, video and interaction form.

Eight projects in different media were born, to be exhibited as installations in an art space, as well as interventions in the urban space of the (demolished) market. The exhibition as a 'cultural event' should attract the public and media discussion lacking for the 'mundane' market's fate.

Невидимият Женски пазар | The Unseen Women's Market

Concept and coordination: Nikola Venkov

Project authors: Nikola Venkov, Slav Georgiev, Desislava Ivanova, Liliya Sazonova, Tsvetelina Panova

Exhibition curator: Zdravka Kantareva

Design and illustration: Michaela Kasabova, Slav Georgiev

The Unseen Women's Market | Letters | Dreams | Traces | Mapping | Sound | Apiece | Kids | Farewell

Писма | Letters

Author: Slav Georgiev

Idea:

In the case of the Women's Market, the postbox was an authentic way of expressing views and sharing stories, befitting the authentic way of goods exchange and socialising. Looking at this wooden box, inside it I see a tiny democratic forum, a platform for the opinion of everyone on a given topic, which should be part of every government building, city hall and municipality. In the box we found letters of children, of senior citizens, of Roma...

Intervention-research:

In the period of April-May 2013 an especially produced object – a post box was placed on a shop corner opposite the market. The shop owners decided to take it inside every night and install it back on the morning. Finally, 57 letters were found in the box, most of them handwritten: on sheets torn off from school notebook, on pieces of packaging paper or on the back of a receipt from Lidl. Written out in a careful hand or with untrained curvy letters, filled with protest, suspicion or children drawings, the collection of these letters is a witness to the variegated social trajectories and sensibilities mixed at this place. The letter-objects carry a hyper-authentic expression of those sensibilities, from the discursive content down to the curls of the writing and the texture of the material paper.

Curated installation:

The conserved letter-objects hang on strings from the ceiling, forming a cloud of divergent and fragmented opinions, a few metres across. The visitor has to enter amid them, and at a height of 1.20m, she is forced to pick them up one by one to be able to read them. The act of picking up is appropriating them, it makes her feel the object's texture and detail and to appreciate how small and marginal are the objects that carry the perspectives of the ordinary people. Additionally, there are two objects in this cloud that stand out by their size, as they are reproductions of whole pages of a newspaper. Those are two interviews for the press published years before the urban conflict flared up. One is with the city councillor who is the main driver behind the market removal, and the other, with the Architect-General of Sofia. In those articles they outlay their visions for the future of the area with a disquieting candidness.

The article-objects impose their presence physically, as well as through their clear-cut and authoritative discourse, on the whirl of diverse and confusing real people's knowledge and emotions.

Urban space intervention:

As part of the exhibition's promotion campaign, selected letters are multiplied in cheap copy-machine style and stuck to trees and public transportation stops in the neighbourhood, in the manner common in Bulgaria for spontaneous informal advertisement. The citizens are trained at examining such advertisement but their gaze is confronted by a message that is quite out of the context, yet its meanings are very recognisable. The 'tear-and-take-with-you' parts of the ads, instead of offering a phone number for a contact, squeeze info on the exhibition time and (nearby) venue.

Мечти | Dreams

Author: Desislava Ivanova

Additional team: Alben Kostadinova and Alexander Petrov (camerawork), Daniela Stoimenova (fieldwork).

Idea:

The redevelopment of the Women's Market is about to begin. The vendors live and work there in expectation and insecurity for years now, under the threat and with the hope for the future. During the many years of setting up the redevelopment project, the vendors were ignored in so natural way. They themselves took it without question that they are of no importance. I want to give them the opportunity to think and express themselves about what a development of the market should look like. It is a radical act to demand from them to formulate expectations and dreams for the future project.

Intervention-research:

A series of 5 video interviews with market vendors, shot in April-May 2013. Their attempts to construct an ordered vision for their own future fail, as they cannot transcend the too diverse and overbearing dynamics of their everyday. What we see repeated with everyone is the hesitance and the words 'there should just be work'.

Curated installation:

A static camerawork produces video clips that resemble portrait photographs of each person as situated in his or her immediate work setting. The viewer could appreciate the visual abundance as well as the pleasure and specific order in their work environment, realising that it is far from the public image of the market as a disgusting and ugly place. These 'portraits' are projected simultaneously, arranged in a row some 1.5m apart thus impressing the feeling for a classic exhibition. However each video's sound could be overheard when the visitor comes close to the respective projector. As one wanders around the exhibition different portraits gain and lose one's attention, different statements become discernible, overlay each other and then fade in the murmur. One would accidentally be finding the similarities and contrasts in the parallel (non)dreams.

Urban intervention:

Two semi-dark places, old house entrances and recesses that are viewable from the street are selected for a day-long projection of two videos. They'd attract the attention of the random passers-by and vendors.

СЛЕДИ | Traces

Author: Tsvetelina Panova

Idea:

Part of the negative image of the Women's Market comes from the physical setting itself: the old housing stock, destroyed pavements, old kiosks. Therefore the redevelopment: Bulgarian society today generally desires to part from the old and replace it with ordered, shining, spotless, as if to cover the traces of hardship and the past. The new is unembarrassed and spotless but also sterile and lifeless. Objects gain life with their use; with the myriad tiny traces of human touch. The living object is beautiful, it gains soul, it could make you imagine and dream.

The market kiosks have gone through uncounted repairs, modifications, as well as unintentional changes; through them have passed tonnes and tonnes of produce. All this is impressed on them, on their every surface, layer after layer and day after day. They are a witness to the super-intensive life of the Women's Market. On first glance they are dirty and shabby, but that is their value, and in fact, they are beautiful.

Research-intervention:

Photographic study of the physicality of the Women's Market (the market without people, work was done in the very early mornings), on the traces of time, on the layers of human use, on the strength of their material. More than 150 photographs document the infrastructure of the market a few days before it was destroyed in August 2013.

Curated installation:

A photographic exhibition, which goes through different scales – from panoramas of the linear outlay of the market kiosks down to micro-fragments, which turn into abstract paintings. The visitor's gaze shifts between the scales, and dwelling on the material and shortening of the distance is provoked.

Urban intervention:

A self-financing print of postcards, to be distributed to souvenir shops and other places where postcards of Sofia are sold to tourists. In this way the Women's Market would quietly join the important sights in the city, while the self-representation of Sofia would start to transform. The monopoly of pictures of cathedral "Alexander Nevski" and similar nationally pure urban spaces would be broken.

[The urban interventions of the photographic projects "Traces" and "Apiece" unite and exchange content from both projects.]

Картография | Mapping

Authors: Nikola Venkov, Slav Georgiev

Additional team: Michaela Kasabova (illustrator and design); Lyubomira Derelieva, Tanya Daskalova, Anya Yordanova (fieldwork)

Idea:

The marketplace is not an object or a place. It is a concentration of threads, a crossing of trajectories and lives. A series of maps show the invisible geographies of the market, inscribe it in local and larger contexts: from the micro-trajectories of visitors between

different types of goods up to the neighbourhood links to other countries. The maps not only visualise data, they strive to share some of the subjects' own words.

Research-intervention:

Four spatial studies were done in the period May – July 2013, and a further photographic archiving of the building stock in the neighbourhood in August 2013 – April 2014. They look at social processes placed at different spatial scales:

1. In the scale of the marketplace, we were motivated by the context of strong descriptions of the Women's Market that is not good for shopping, because one is always swindled. Therefore we wanted to understand, what do all these visitors do there? Objectively. So we followed 18 persons from their entrance to market's street and plotted their trajectory and interactions in it. We chose the characters spontaneously but we strove that they differ maximally from each other. Overlaying these trajectories makes visible both the diversity and the ordinariness of the experience there.
2. At the scale of the neighbourhood, a detailed photographic study of the housing stock documents the decay and renewal (connected with gentrification) in the area before the coordinated effort of the city council to cleanse and to change the investment climate had picked up speed.
3. At the scale of the city we show that the Women's Market is a meeting place for entire Sofia! To this end we conducted a poll with nearly 50 random visitors to the market, asking them about the neighbourhood they come from, usual mode of transportation, regularity of visiting of the market, etc.
4. To show the connectedness at a national scale, we conducted a poll with the market vendors. The Women's Market is a refuge from unemployment for people from virtually the entire country. All collected also other sorts of data connected with the migratory and precarious life of people at the market: how many years ago they came to the market (an argument used to exclude them from the future of the place), where they live in Sofia, what are their plans for the moment when the market is closed.
5. At a global scale, we didn't have the means to look at goods trajectories: instead we interviewed the holders of several places for cheap internet calls in the neighbourhood. In the area near the market concentrate many foreign migrants and refugees, and they use those shops to call home and elsewhere. The Women's Market thus becomes the main geography of Sofia and Bulgaria that is known in those wide networks abroad.

Curated installation:

Four of the designer maps based on the researched data are printed out at size 180x120cm to allow both a quick glance from a distance over the statistical impression, and a sinking into the detail of information coding human fate.

1. The visitor trajectories are presented as a book of transparent folia (80x120 cm), each page containing single character that can be viewed separately, or overlaid on the rest to reveal the diversity and business of the market crowd.
2. For the study of building condition, to focus perception on the material texture and abstract away the boundless variegation of the streetscape, one element is taken from each building, a type of element that reintroduces some degree orthogonal sameness: namely, window frames. The window frame could show maybe the widest spectrum of distinctions concerning the tastes, aims and resources of its owner: from the broken windows of the abandoned house, through the long unpainted or freshly so wooden

frames, to new PVC replacements , or the blue glass façade of new business construction... On the map the neighbourhood's street topology is still preserved in the orthogonal mosaic imposed by the artist.

3. The city map of visitors, displays Sofia with bunches of visitors plotted in every neighbourhood. Additional to the visiting data there are short extracts from their reactions to question, “Why this market of all?”
4. The map of vendors explicitly links three different scales, showing the distributions of types of vendor (vegetables, clothes, parts, etc., self-employed, worker, informal), info about the years they've been here through bundles of trajectories that relate that data with a clustering in the market space, in turn connected with places of origin across the whole country and with the neighbourhoods of settlement in Sofia. Finally we share extracts from the interviews reacting to the question “What are you going to do when the market is closed?”
5. On the global scale the Women's Market “imprints” itself on entire continents and thus it is shown as a stamp on the regions where people would hear about it.

Urban intervention:

Two large panes (180x120 cm) showing a map of the neighbourhood are to be erected at both ends of the (former) market. They take the role of tourist orientation signs, incl. the spot “You are here!” These panes are prepared from the map of in-market trajectories of shoppers and thus they show what one could buy from this or that place, what types of characters are suggesting routes (bananas, pumpkins, toilet brush) – but by now it will be all wrong and discrepant from reality.

Звук | Sound

Author: Nikola Venkov

Additional team: Pavel Terziyski (recording); Martin Lukanov (editing and mastering); Stefan Dontchev (interactive hardware and software)

Idea:

The typical noise of the big city changes in this area. Car engines give way to human hubbub and the vendors' shouts; the pounding of Sofia's construction boom here recedes to the dominating whisper of the those selling illegal 'cigarettes, cigarettes'. Yet the great noise of the marketplace is one of the arguments for closing it down. We decided to document the unique liveliness of this place through its sound, to separate that from the visual and sensory experiences, and to reconstruct it in an artificial setting.

Research-intervention:

Professionally recorded sound atmosphere in the thick of market life, with two booms in May 2013: 56 min raw material. As the team moved slowly, the periodic shouts of some vendors become closer and then recede, conversations of shoppers and hangouts overlay in multitudes, while some enter into interaction, making jokes and banter.

From this, a bank of sound-mastered vendors advertisement cries can be prepared (plus variations). Every vendor is roughly mapped along the market's length.

Curated installation:

An interactive audio installation in a 11x11m hall will share space with the photographic expositions. Nine independent modules, each combining a movement sensor set at 1.5m radius, controller, simple player and a speaker, are arranged uniformly in this space. They emit the separated ‘background noise’ that blends all of them in the undefined din of the market. As a module’s zone is entered, it start to blare out a specific vendor’s voice repertoire. Thus the project rebuilds the Women’s Market, replacing however ‘the dangerous’ vendors with safe soulless automats. The chaotic liveliness of the market is can be recreated by a mechanised empty shell.

As every repertoire comes from a different point in space, the visitor would localise the sources by ear, some closer others farther away, and would be attracted to explore and play. The market envelops one and attacks the senses just like the real market, even if now it is unseen and nonmaterial. As one moves more intensively or more people explore the space, the hubbub of vendors increases from different spatial points: onion, garlic, turnips, mushrooms and so forth. As visitors leave, so would advertising activity gradually fade.

Urban intervention:

Also, re-establishing the market in the dead space of the new street, by populating it with the ghosts of its former liveliness. Several vendor repertoires would be repetitively played out (no sensors in this case) along the street, 20-30m apart from each other and according to their place of recording. The passers-by hear them from a distance and are confused. As they come to seek for the nearest vendor shouting ‘three salads for a buck’ they find a memorial plaque: “Vendor of green salads, The Women’s Market, 1998 – August 2013”.

To this mix will be added some international guest vendors from Madrid, Sevilla, London, (with the respective plaque) by using the free archive of the ethnomusicological expeditions of Allen Lomax in Europe in the 1950s. This puts the Woman’s Market in the European context, that is so much sought after by the redevelopment project. The noisy direct trade would be divorced from its shameful Oriental image.

На парче | Apiece

Authors: Nikola Venkov and Tsvetelina Panova

Additional team: Michaela Kasabova (graphic design)

The Women’s Market is photographed and filmed very often – but almost always from the outside visitor/journalist/tourist who is seeking either exotic scenery and othering (the tourist gaze)), or to demonstrate the area’s criminality, squalor and Oriental image (the moral gaze). Bulgarians have met these two visual discourses so often that they’d automatically conceive the market through one of them. In this photographic project we try to break away from them, to dis-integrate the market from the sensory wholes in which it is impressed. We attempt this by introducing in currency entirely new visual perspectives – specifically towards the constantly taking-place meeting between the belonging to the market space and those coming from outside it.

Research-intervention:

We document and reiterate through series of visuals on specific 4 themes. They were taken in 2012-2013 and add up to 110 pictures.

1. Products. The visual identity of markets is very typically expressed through photographs of nicely arranged fruit and vegetable. Often these pictures won’t be from real markets in Bulgaria or from markets at all. On the other hand the Woman’s Market

carries the connotations of rotten and cheap produce, of chaos and squalor, and untrue market, a place where “bras and lingerie are hanging in the wind” instead of the appropriate agricultural nomenclature. Tsveti looks carefully at what really is being offered here and cuts away all the context beyond the goods themselves. Playing with the advertising clichés, she finds that the Women’s Market can do no worse than the Swiss vegetable shop downloaded from I-stock Photos. On the other hand, the amazing geometry and symmetry of the “bras and dressing gowns” takes them out of the zone of the shameful and links them to aesthetics. The photographic series is accompanied by textual extracts from Bulgarian media that contrast with the images, In this way both destabilise each other’s inherent truth.

2. Inside-out perspective. These are maybe the first images of the market with a perspective from the place of the vendor – towards the arranged goods, the waiting customers and the street beyond. It overturns the established hierarchy of the visuals of the Women’s Market, where the observing subject is situated in the middle of the street (journalist, tourist) and “the indigenes” are objects that are merged with the background of stalls, wear and tear and untidiness.
3. The market people(?). Series of photos of the shoppers and visitors to the market (would we classify them as “indigenes” as we easily do with the vendors and hangouts, or they are not exotic enough?) that manage to capture them in the intensive energy of the market (buying, surveying, carrying) without entering the established visual discourse of the market crowds or the background of stalls and goods. We see the market as a place of vigour, of authentic presence of man.
4. People Invisible. Series of portraits of “indigenes” who pose for the camera in the genre of private family photo (Nikola was often asked to make and print such photos). The subjects are however cut out here, leaving empty silhouettes. Thus the function of those visuals as personal memory is removed, offering instead a study of the setting in which people have been put by their social status, or choose themselves to be photographed in (in each case the surroundings are a complex combination of desire and external necessity). Removing the usually significant opens a window to direct our attention to the daily unnoticeable, to the background of our lives. However the background of memento pictures is not insignificant. Every time we are about to pose we go through some fussing about – “where exactly to stand?” – that is what kind of identity I want to construct through my relation with the surroundings? This is true also about those most marginalised in our society. To underline their agency in composing the memento-background, I’ve added a second series of photos that were done by the photographer’s wish. Those are in the settings and postures through which the middle class photographer perceives their lives and identities as interesting: as exotic, authentic, minority or characteristic for the Women’s Market. The subject typically didn’t like those photos after that. Since here I document marginalised social groups – those “indegens” who have no devices of their own for production of photographic mementos and thus ask for my services), the deletion of their direct visibility from the scapes performs one more important function. It cuts short the tendency for automatic racialising/ethnicising of their bodies by the trained gaze of the privileged visitor to the exhibition. The settings of marginalised life remain, but their inhabitants are white human silhouettes.

Curated installation:

Photographic exhibition, altogether ~60 with size 40/60 and 19/28 cm.

Urban intervention:

Part of the exhibition will be presented to the community during the screening of “Farewell”. People Invisible would be printed also with the same size and frames (and the initiative’s logo), but without the removing the people and will be gifted to the respective families. Thus this artistic work would reach back to the photographed homes and support their need of memory.

[The urban interventions of the photographic projects “Traces” and “Apiece” unite and exchange content from both projects, except for People Invisible.]

Сбором | Farewell

Author: Liliya Sazonova

Additional team: Alex Samunji, Milen Pushnikov (camerawork)

Idea:

My idea for such a film was born as a fore-felt nostalgia months before the redevelopment project to transform the atmosphere of the market. “Farewell to the market” aimed at preserving a memory for this contradictory urban space. My conceptual narrative is inspired by Zygmunt Bauman’s statement that in era of globalisation we see the thinning and disappearance of traditional public spaces as settings for exchange and socialising: they are privatised and replaced by spaces aimed mostly at consumption. This documentary studies the Women’s Market before this stage of final transformation, as an economic space of the old type, in which the social interaction and communication are still part of commerce.

Research-intervention:

Almost two months of preparatory fieldwork and filming on site (July-August 2013) interrogate the acts of social interaction at the market. In 8 hours of video material we tried to capture a narrative for the exchange between the various actors: colleague vendors, passers-by, buyers and sellers. It could be verbal or through body presence and behaviour, visual, etc.

Curated installation:

A finished documentary film of 40 to 60 min length.

Urban intervention:

An evening film showing at the market on an improvised open stage in the garden. It would give an opportunity for the local community to see itself from outside and as a significant actor, and to discuss our work and their position in city politics.

Деца | Kids

Author: Nikola Venkov

Idea:

The Women’s Market is one of the few places in Sofia where children are still everywhere, free and fearless. Here play continues on the street until late into the evening just like the childhood that we remember: not constricted by the automobile and by parents’ paranoia. In my view, the kids’ look at the market is both the most important and the most marginal!

Research-intervention:

This project collects diverse small items that I have collected in the course of my fieldwork, coordination of this initiative, and during a volunteering initiative that I and others organised for education-through-play with market vendors' children (initially in partnership with the local school until it was closed down as part of the push against minorities).

The collection includes a series of photographs made by 'market kids' (this term might indeed be appropriate as they grow up in the market, alongside their working parents) of age 4 to 6 years old: this is the most unexpected, unrecognised, and indeed 'marginal' perspective towards the market. It is free of clichés in any regard.

It includes audio recordings of a spontaneous meeting with our sound-recording team, results from workshop for creating mental maps of the neighbourhood by kids 6-13 of age and else.

Curated installation:

The multi-genre exhibits are arranged in a small room to draw the impression for a family home.

Urban intervention:

Some of the kid-produced items will be exhibiting in market garden before the film projection (see 'Farewell') for the community.