

THREE MIGRANTS IN A BOAT

(To Say Nothing of the Smuggler)



Proposal for the exhibition in the Bulgarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Curator - Giuseppe Lepore

Artist - Petko Durmana

The installation was created by Petko Dourmana, a Bulgarian artist with an international presence and global contribution in the use of technology and new media in artistic practices. The artist was chosen for his successful projects interpreting in an innovative way and through experience the challenges facing humanity such as: the impact of technology on human development, climate change, war and migration, which is the main theme of the 60th edition of the Venice Biennale in 2024.

The multimedia installation "Three migrants in a boat (To say nothing of the Smuggler)" was created in 2019 and was presented initially in Kunsthalle Röda Sten, Gothenburg, Sweden, and until the end of the same year in Svilara - kulturna stanica, Novi Sad, Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju, Belgrade and KASÁRNE/KULTURPARK in Kosice

Despite the success and the great interest, all planned subsequent performances were canceled due to the coronavirus epidemic in early 2020. The presentation of the project in the Bulgarian Pavilion will give it a new start and an opportunity to reach a wide audience through the channels of the Venice Biennale.

The performance installation was created as an imaginary journey of three migrants and a Smuggler in a small rubber boat up the river Maritsa (Euros in Greek). The trip takes place at night, because the river is a border between Greece and Turkey, and the passengers must hide from the border police of both countries during the day. Their goal is to reach Bulgaria and from there continue to their dream life in rich European countries. The river Maritsa is a very dangerous part of one of the main migrant routes to Europe and there, according to statistics, is the largest number of missing unidentified migrants in Greece.

The installation is inspired by the popular classic "Three Men in a Boat" (to say nothing of the dog) by Jerome K. Jerome, as the Thames becomes the Maritsa, the three friends become desperate migrants, the dog becomes a Smuggler, and a leisurely journey from a cheerful adventure turns into dangerous battle for survival. In the author's dialogues with visitors, many references to scenes, skits and dialogues from the book are embedded, and references are made to various film adaptations.

Because of their nocturnal journey, the installation is presented in an absolutely dark space, which can be entered by about 10 visitors at the same time. Before entering, they are given night vision devices (NVDs) with which they can observe the passengers in the boat located in the middle of the installation in the dark, and headphones with which they can listen to their conversations with the Smuggler, who invites them to sit in the boat and to join the "journey" becoming migrants instead of observers. Behind the boat on the wall is an infrared projection of the banks of Maritsa River, taken from a moving boat. This projection, like everything in the installation, is invisible without the night vision devices, and visitors are instructed how to use them and what to do inside the installation by an animation on a monitor located at the entrance. The visitors' initial feeling is that they are the watchers and in a way the border guards, but if they accept to enter the boat on its symbolic territory, they become the migrants who are hiding and running. This transition is sometimes very noticeable, because the visitors suddenly start looking around when they sit in the boat and begin to answer quietly and furtively the questions of the author, playing the role of the Smuggler, who approaches them bossily or friendly.

The artist Petko Dourmana most often starts the conversation with the visitors in the boat by discussing the preparations for the trip, involving them through details and thus always succeeding in putting them in the role of migrants. In most cases, visitors initially accept his approach as a game, but when they start to share their personal experiences, ideas and fears, they begin to experience the journey, to improvise and involve the other "passengers" in it. Perhaps the darkness and the unusual setting, the relaxed approach, the closeness and coziness inside the boat made them relax and return to their childhood, when they and the other children told each other scary stories in the dark and thus together they overcame their fears.

The author's approach worked successfully and very few remain resistant to the experience his installation offered. In his approach to visitors, the author starts from the position that every single person is to some extent a migrant or a descendant of migrants, and this includes all forms of migration, even that from one settlement to another, and almost everyone has similar experience. He aims, by sharing and recalling their own experience, to make visitors empathize and offer solutions to the problems caused by migration, somehow becoming a group therapy for the "travelers" in the boat. Through the headphones all other visitors also share those stories and this becomes an unforgettable experience.

Conversations are conducted in English and broadcast in real time to the headsets, and through an artificial intelligence software solution, visitors who do not speak English will have a choice of simultaneous translations in the main European languages. Visitors who have already been inside the installation can go out into the courtyard of the pavilion and continue to listen to the conversations with the headphones, settling in the comfortable inflatable chairs there.

"Three migrants in a boat (to say nothing of the smuggler)" creatively interprets one of the world's most important topics, migration. This topic is particularly important for countries like Bulgaria, which on the one hand was left by nearly a quarter of its citizens in recent decades, and after the wars in Syria and Ukraine has been subjected to great migration pressure.

Migration is a topic that includes Bulgaria in world processes, and the choice of the project "Three migrants in a boat (to say nothing of the smuggler)" for presentation in the Bulgarian pavilion was dictated by its successful approach with audiences from different countries in Europe, America and Asia. The presentation of the project in Venice is very special because historically the city was created by refugees after the fall of Rome during the great migration of peoples at the beginning of the Middle Ages and reached the heights of its wealth and fame thanks to many migrants from all over the Roman Empire, including from the second capital, Constantinople. Even the term ghetto comes from the eponymous part of Venice where Jewish migrants were settled.

The space of the Titian Hall and the courtyard where the Bulgarian Pavilion is located are extremely favorable for the presentation of the installation, because they allow to be adapted for its purposes very successfully and with minimal interventions, providing the opportunity for additional impact through the contrast of going from the dark room to the bright courtyard. In $\frac{3}{4}$ of the space of the hall, a dark room will be created by means of a black fireproof theater curtain, which will be suspended with soft connections to the existing structure. At the entrance to the hall, there will be a designated space with a monitor, where visitors will receive night vision devices and headphones, and while waiting for their turn they will watch an instructional 3D animation, which will be a development of the animation in the project proposal. A relaxation area with inflatable chairs will be created in the garden where visitors can walk or sit while listening (via headphones) to the conversations in the boat. To protect against distraction or possible theft, radio tags will be installed on all devices, which will be detected by a signaling scanner at the exit of the pavilion.

Petko Dourmana will be physically present in the installation in the role of Trafficker for a total of about one month during the most intensive periods of attendance at the biennale, and during the rest of the time he will lead the conversations remotely from his studio in Sofia. Then a sculpture resembling his body will be located in the boat and he will be able to talk to the visitors through the microphone and speakers located in it, and through an infrared camera he will observe their reactions.

During the biennial, side events will be organized, such as a workshop on the technical solutions used, discussions on the topic of migration with the participation of representatives of the Orient Foundation and the #ZaDobroto Foundation, which support various groups of refugees in Bulgaria. A discussion will be organized with POV architects, authors of the project in the Bulgarian Pavilion of the Architecture Biennale in 2023. They will talk about the internal migration that led to thousands of abandoned schools in Bulgaria. An important part of the accompanying program will be a weekly podcast with a selection of talks held at the installation. An exhibition will be organized at the Bulgarian Cultural Institute in Rome with a presentation of the installation. A documentary film (for a festival distribution) will be produced about the project and the narrator is going to be the famous Italian actor Franco Nero.