

Name of project

The Neighbours

List of Participants

Curator: Vasil Vladimirov

Artists: Krasimira Butseva, Julian Chehirian, Liliya Topouzova

The Neighbours excavates the silenced and fading memories of survivors of communist political violence, shedding light on repressions that unfolded between 1945 and 1989, and explores its troubling legacy into the present. Krasimira Butseva, Julian Chehirian, and Lilia Topouzova employ modified objects, video, and sound design to tell the stories of those who endured Bulgarian Gulag camps and prisons. The project is of immense importance, blending artistic research, oral histories, fieldwork, ethnography and technology. In creating a space in which to bear witness to those marked as foreigners within Bulgaria's borders in the past, it takes seriously Adriano Pedrosa's call to examine "Foreigners Everywhere".

At the core of this multidisciplinary study are 40 interviews with survivors of state violence. The authors recreate the survivors' homes and evoke the material and psychological spaces where the interviews took place, inviting audiences to inhabit them. Reimagining the politics of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Groys, 2013), it extends the materiality of post-war installation art (Kienholz, Kabakov, Bucher, Whiteread, Salcedo) towards a novel approach to documentary installation, harnessing advanced technologies. The exhibition weaves together moving excerpts from 9 survivor testimonies, ambient sounds, and field and video recording from the locations of former camps such as Belene and Lovech. The project's emphasis lies not in the reenactment of survivors' experiences, but rather, in the intricacies of how individuals recall and articulate their memories in the context of profound and traumatic events. In this way, instead of sensationalising trauma or violence, it turns its gaze towards small, everyday moments of silence drawn from the intimacy of memory and conversation.

Lilia Topouzova's theoretical framework forms the conceptual backbone, studying the diverse ways in which survivors continue to embody trauma and repression. This exploration is manifested spatially and symbolically in the objects that signify fragments of three rooms – a living room, bedroom and kitchen. The voices of the living room are of those who remember, who are open and vocal about their experiences. The bedroom reflects the survivors who remember but do not speak, either out of fear or simply because they have

never been asked. The third room, the kitchen, painted in white is dedicated to those who do not remember and remain silent or never had the chance to speak – the deceased.

The Neighbours spatially evokes how communism and socialism are “construed as public recollection” (Koleva, 2022), but also shows how these processes unfold in private spaces. As Simine writes, museums are the primary contemporary institutions in which the collective nature of remembering is acted out in public. Such spaces refer to “a realm of significance that is invisible and absent”, such as the past, but also mediate spectators’ access to it by making it “visible and present” (Pomian, 1991). Given the absence of institutions that interpret the legacy of political violence in Bulgaria, *The Neighbours* takes on a vital role of unsilencing. By centering personal storytelling, it also reflects on the museum’s “newly perceived function of providing a forum for an individual fate, for victims of atrocities and for minorities who find it difficult to make themselves heard” (Simine, 2013).

Drawing on “languages of absence that speak to and of resistive politics”, the project enacts a zone of care and collective healing (Copeland, 2013) while relating a Bulgarian narrative to global conversations on truth, reconciliation and collective memory. The space illustrates a form of inquiry: we invite audiences to enter, sit, and bear witness to survivors’ trauma but also to their resilience and refusal to be written out of the historical record. The installation not only encapsulates fragments of domestic spaces, mirroring the survivors’ homes, but also employs sound and technology to evoke presence. Lights flicker, a sewing machine comes to life, a coffee maker slowly brews, and a vinyl player intermittently plays and pauses. Ambient sounds, derived from oral history interviews, fill the rooms with subtle noises of daily life. Scattered items recovered from the camp sites, such as stones, water, and plants, visually connect the material world of the camps to domestic spaces, illustrating the permeation of traumatic memory into everyday life. Projections from the sites evolve as viewers progress through the space, initially featuring detailed documentation of vast landscapes and empty buildings, and culminating in close-ups of plants illuminated at night.

Responding directly to the Biennale’s call to reflect on the category of the “foreign”, *The Neighbours* stages untold stories by a series of “domestic foreigners” who faced persecution, trial-less imprisonment, and endured forced labour camps for reasons ranging from political beliefs to appearance. It documents systematic persecution that extended well beyond political dissidents, to leftists, peasants who wanted to hold on to their land, artists, queer people, Turkish, Roma, and Muslim minorities, youngsters who listened to jazz, and ordinary people who deviated from the regime’s narrow ideals. The project not only serves as

a poignant memorial for the victims but also offers a critical reflection on the oppressive political climate of the past and the current institutional hesitancy to confront its legacy.

In the context of current political and geopolitical conflict, the installation serves as a reminder of the enduring impact of political violence. The interdisciplinary nature of the art collective behind the project ensures a nuanced exploration of complexities, embodying the spirit of innovative art practices that engage with the intricate realities of our world.

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