

## OPINION

by Prof Svetozar Benchev

on dissertation work for the award of

scientific degree Doctor of Science

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The presented dissertation work entitled *Beyond the Borderline: Spaces and Areas of Contemporary Art* contains a 216-page exposition arranged in three separate sections, a bibliography and a name index. The illustrative material consists of 13 catalogues of the National Autumn Exhibitions (2008, 2013/2024).

The first section includes texts focusing on theoretical problems in art. They explore both issues of classical aesthetics and receptive theory, as well as the contemporary Bulgarian art historical practice of recent years with its professional units. This section outlines the acute crisis of the theoretical knowledge and poses fundamental questions about the meanings of each contemporary work.

What is happening to art? What is happening to authorship? How is the perception of the work of art changing? What are the trends? Questions raised in the 20th century and still increasingly relevant today. Schools, authors, followers, antipodes.

Part of this essential debate taking place indirectly in the years between names such as Werkmeister 1989, Heidegger, Danto, Ulrich are summarized in chapter one. The German-language school prevails, perhaps because of Prof Lardeva's deep knowledge of the language and her grasp of the subtle nuances in the texts, so important in art in the original.

The study also includes "Max Imdahl's Contribution to a Comprehensive Archaeology of Vision" - a methodology particularly suitable for the training of young specialists in the broad field of visual culture.

A special highlight is the text "Roles and Languages in Contemporary Bulgarian Art". Starting from the global view of the processes in contemporary aesthetics, Prof Lardeva shifts the focus to those in Bulgarian art. She explores several approaches to the issue, represented respectively by names such as Chavdar Popov - "Paths of Theory" 2021 and the two-volume "About Art" by Assoc. Prof Ruzha Marinska, Asiniya Dzhurova: "The Language of Memoir Presence in History" from 2020. As for the processes in contemporary Bulgarian art, the names of Prof Svilen Stefanov, Prof Peter Tsanev, Vesela Nozharova and others are cited there.

Lardeva has her biases and she declares them categorically, and she also categorically marks groundless and unfounded claims for "understanding" and "interpretation" of the processes in Bulgarian art. Prof Lardeva has her arguments because of the serious insight into the artistic processes and the criteria that meetings with erudite world authors form.

This peculiar scanning of the situation in the Bulgarian art is not just a theory. It has consequences. Prof Lardeva strives to influence the formation of an enlightened aesthetic consciousness for contemporary art, through her students and through the specifics of the National Autumn Exhibitions.

The second part includes 6 scientific articles on specific topics concerning the boundaries of aesthetics, ideology, and the work of individual authors – Boris Mihaylov, Andrey Daniel, Georgi Bozhilov. Methodological factors in the formation of meanings. Particularly impressive is the study of Andrey Daniel's work; in two separate texts, Lardeva analyzes in depth the processes, motivation, and reaction of the artist to modernity, his constant references to history, literature, cinema, and biblical motifs, commented on with the sharpness and sometimes irony of a highly erudite artist.

Personal meetings and conversations focus on important details not touched upon in other art historical works. No less analytical is the attitude towards the work of Georgi Bozhilov – Slona. An author who moves parallel to the processes in art, but who always refracts them through his own point of view, complex and authentic in his art.

Extremely relevant for today is the study “Degenerative Art” – problems from a historical and contemporary perspective. The memory of recurring processes is very important and the modern man should maintain his sensitivity and reaction to the processes.

The third part is dedicated to a significant project for the Bulgarian art – the National Autumn Exhibitions – Plovdiv. It can be said that Lardeva identifies with this project, which under her leadership includes 12 editions. From (2008-2013-2024).

This is a practical curatorial work, applying deep theoretical training in an extremely interesting concrete concept – always containing borderline values that give opportunities for subtle interactions at different levels, for sometimes elusive connections uniting the authors included in each edition.

The topics chosen by Prof Lardeva are contemporary in their implications, deeply philosophical, in sync with the aesthetic problems of the 21st century.

Concepts of the Image (2008); Forcing up the Choice (2013); Estranged Systems (2014); En passant (2015); Mirror (2016); Placebo (2017); Beneath the Surface (2018); Poetics of the Image (2019); Spaces, Poste-restante (2020); Thresholds and Scars (2021); Shared Space (2022); Functions of the State (2023); Back to Earth (2024).

The National Autumn Exhibitions are a powerful factor for analyzing trends for rethinking the processes in Bulgarian art in the context of contemporary perceptions, conceptualizing and implementing the artist-audience relationship.

Each edition has its own look, based on certain benchmarks and trends and conceptually substantiated, searching for common ground between the leading theories in art and philosophy and aesthetics, which Lardeva knows in detail, and the Bulgarian art scene with its specificity.

The selection of the participants is very precise – their individuality is in sync with the dominant idea. Along with established names, young artists who received their education in Bulgaria and abroad, who are currently forming their artistic identity, are also exhibiting.

Artists are often provoked by the direction that the curator sets for the respective edition.

This approach has several goals at once. It makes a cross section of the modern processes in understanding the role of art and especially the visual art. This section is done with surgical precision, it goes through the comprehensive understanding, knowledge of the material and its mastery on a global scale, then cuts through the layers superimposed by the perception of the artistic reality in our country, in order to reach points that are painful, but their treatment is imperative.

As a restorative procedure, the National Autumn Exhibitions rely on young artists, who are expected to have a new reading and interpretation of the contemporary processes in the visual arts.

Thus, these exhibitions are a powerful factor, both for popularizing the artistic achievements of the contemporary Bulgarian artists, and for building a vision, forming values, opening the minds of the young artists to the global processes, rethinking traditions and views instilled over the years.

In this sense, one of the scientific contributions of this dissertation is the complex portrait of the National Autumn Exhibitions forum, covering its organization for more than a decade. Over this period of time, more than a hundred painters and visual artists have participated in the forum with solo exhibitions. The texts that introduce the Exhibitions establish their own style with the way in which the topic is treated, as well as with their plastic language.

The other scientific contributions listed by the author, whose opinion I agree with, are:

Significant contribution of the dissertation work is the successful combination of the in-depth study of important theoretical and specific art history problems with observations and analyses of works of contemporary art.

Another general combination is the author's role as a researcher - theorist and art critic, curator and teacher, who discovers and brings out educational priorities and projects, directing them towards artistic practice.

A specific contribution is the theoretical rethinking of the place and role of aesthetics as a scientific discipline and its connection to works of the visual arts.

A significant contributing feature in the course of the theoretical rethinking is the emphasis on the historical placement of phenomena and – in connection with it – the complex inclusion of the achievements of receptive aesthetics in the work – something that Bulgarian art history has not done until now.

The thematic choice of the individual texts (second section) is original and consistently reconsidered. It illuminates issues previously untouched in the Bulgarian art studies (such as the articles

with focus: Max Imdahl, Jean Baudrillard, Boris Mihaylov), while at the same time being directed towards the general conceptual messages of the dissertation.

Standing behind the viewfinder of her camera, through which she observes the processes (I use this metaphor because of Lardeva's marked interest in photography), she changes the optics - in the first part the telephoto lens gives the overall picture, the macro lens in the second analyzes the processes by looking deeply into the detail, and the wide-angle lens in the third part closely follows both the contemporary artists and the space in which they function. Thus, the internal logic unites these points of view, creating an author's interpretation of the observed subject to analysis and comprehension.

Prof. Lardeva's work is significant, profound and relevant. It shows not only the author's erudition, but also her specific point of view – one could even say her mission – this is the conscious message to the young generation of artists, art critics and students.

Lardeva is not only a theorist, she is an active curator, educator and visionary.

These qualities, supported by the undoubtedly high level of the dissertation work, give me reason to recommend with conviction to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award the scientific degree of Doctor of Sciences to Prof Galina Lardeva – Minkova, PhD.