

# Ivan Moudov's Museum in Fragments

by Steve Lyons



On April 26th, 2005, hundreds of artists, collectors, critics, news reporters and government officials congregated at the old Poduyane train station in Sofia, Bulgaria to celebrate the opening of *MUSIZ*, the nation's first-ever museum of contemporary art—or so they thought. Instead of a trendily remodelled art museum, visitors found what appeared to be the same old train station. No ribbon-cutting ceremony, no renovations. This false alarm, so to speak, was a frustrating reminder that Bulgaria remained the only country in the European Union without a museum or even a permanent collection of contemporary art. However, it was quickly revealed that the various billboard advertisements, posters, invitation cards and newspaper articles, as well as the official press release distributed throughout Sofia prior to the event, were all part of an elaborate media hoax orchestrated by local artist Ivan Moudov, with the aim of conjuring false hope and instigating dissatisfaction about the Bulgarian government's neglect for the nation's cultural heritage since the fall of Communism in 1989.



ABOVE  
Ivan Moudov, documentation from opening of *MUSIZ*, Sofia, 2005  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

BELOW  
Ivan Moudov, *Fragments box #1*, 2002/2007,  
hand-made box, stolen fragments  
PHOTO: ESA LUNDEN; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

This seemingly minor fact—that Bulgaria was the only nation in the EU without a museum of contemporary art—fuelled Moudov's practice in the 2000s and inspired a body of work that turns the well-worn Western tradition of institutional critique on its head. In the artist's words, "we don't even get the chance to hate the museum."<sup>1</sup> Moudov has spent much of the past decade expressing this particular complaint, not through direct critique but *vis-à-vis* a series of parodic gestures related to the foundation of musiz, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sofia. The artist has assembled an extensive collection of fragments stolen from contemporary artworks exhibited throughout Europe, has illegally duplicated a carefully selected series of museum audio guides and wall labels, and has produced several vintages of wine and champagne dedicated to celebrating the museum's potential, eventual opening. By exhibiting the various items necessary to create his own museum of contemporary art at an array of international institutions, Moudov envisions a new kind of museum, a decentralized museum constituted not by its fixed address but through the slow dispersal of its constituent parts. Musiz is thus a museum in fragments, an unofficial ambassador for Bulgarian culture that humourously derides the inefficiencies of bureaucracy.

### IT STARTED WITH THEFT

Three years prior to his musiz opening hoax, Ivan Moudov began his first art collection. Framed as an unofficial substitute for a real collection of contemporary art in Bulgaria, *Fragments* (2002–2007) consists of four wooden suitcases, each of which opens to display a series of small objects, paintings, photographs, slides and ephemera by a variety of the art world's most recognizable figures: a vacuum attachment from Jeff Koons' *New Shop/Vac Wet/Dry* (1980) faces a remote control from a Pipilotti Rist installation; a Marcel Broodthaers eggshell sits beside a thread from a Daniel Buren textile; a bronze bird by Annette Messager is surrounded by fragments of work by Francis Alÿs, Tracy Emin, Robert Barry and Douglas Gordon. Of course, Moudov's collection is not the product of shopping but shoplifting. Travelling from gallery to gallery, from museum to museum across Europe, the artist stole bits and pieces from artworks that were not adequately monitored by security staff, occasionally damaging the works in the process. Moudov's sneaky gesture transforms contemporary artworks into collected artifacts. Curator Dessislava Dimova suggests that in this work, Moudov takes on the role of the "educated savage, a foreigner who is attracted by the world of Western high art but does not quite understand its principles and shows little respect for its institutions and the artworks themselves."<sup>2</sup> Exhibited as a full collection for the first time in the Bulgarian pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale, and more recently in curator Christopher Eamon's 2011 exhibition *Rearview Mirror* co-organized by The Power Plant in Toronto and the Art Gallery of Alberta, Moudov's *Fragments* are easily reintegrated into the same museum/gallery system from

which they were stolen. "Educated savage" or not, Moudov is surely conscious enough of the history and theory of the avant-garde to know that waging an iconoclastic intervention against the dominant institution of art is the surest path towards art world consecration.

*Fragments* is but one of many contemporary revisions of Marcel Duchamp's famous *Boîte-en-valise*. Between 1935 and 1940, Duchamp built a series of custom-designed suitcases that open to display miniature reproductions of his earlier artworks. Doubling as three-dimensional *catalogues raisonnés* and playful reflections on the reproduction and circulation of 20th century artworks, his portable museums function as miniature monographic exhibitions, thus affirming the artist's ultimate authority and control over the dissemination of his oeuvre. In fact, Duchamp experienced the separation of one work from the whole oeuvre as a kind of violence: "I always felt that showing one painting in one place and another somewhere else is just like amputating one finger or a leg each time."<sup>3</sup> Moudov's *Fragments*, proudly presenting the severed fingers and legs of others, may constitute the ultimate antithesis to Duchamp's miniature monographic collections. Moudov seems to only appropriate the surface—the form of presentation—from the *Boîte-en-valise*.

Studying the historical conditions surrounding the production of Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*, T.J. Demos warns against precisely this type of ahistorical instrumentalization. For Demos, reducing the *Boîte* to its generic form risks discounting the geopolitical conditions that led to its production.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most famous myth surrounding the *Boîte-en-valise*—that, "disguised as a cheese merchant in order to cross through Nazi checkpoints and their travel restrictions, he [Duchamp] shuttled a large suitcase containing material for the *Boîte*"—underscores how the portable structure of the *Boîte-en-valise* anticipates the artist's displacement and exile during World War II.<sup>5</sup> If Moudov risks obfuscating the historical complexity of Duchamp's portable museums, he does so in order to productively engage with his own conditions of cultural production.

### BLACK MARKET OPERATIONS

Over the past several years, the black market antiquities trade in Bulgaria has become an international concern. Once part of ancient Thrace, modern-day Bulgaria is home to some of the largest ancient ruins in Europe. However, soon after the fall of Communism and its strict mechanisms of social control, Bulgaria's unpreserved archaeological sites were aggressively and mercilessly mined by out-of-work treasure hunters wielding metal detectors, pickaxes and bulldozers. As a report for the Bulgarian Center for the Study of Democracy describes, "Looters, middlemen and smugglers practically had free rein, going about their business unpunished throughout the late 1990s as well."<sup>6</sup> According to the Center, the antiquities rush in Bulgaria continues to this day and has now entered its "golden age" as powerful criminal organizations identify a lucrative market in international antiquities dealing.<sup>7</sup> This, of course,

is not without immense consequences for the cultural heritage and potential tourism industry that the adequate preservation of ancient ruins could bring.

What is perhaps most relevant in relation to Ivan Moudov's practice is the way in which illegally excavated antiquities are legalized once they are smuggled out of their countries of origin. While the excavation and trafficking of undeclared antiquities out of Bulgaria is considered a black market offense punishable by law, their subsequent sale and acquisition is an accepted practice in many Western nations, where artifacts can be easily registered without known provenance. Bulgaria's most valuable spoils may therefore end up in museums or wealthy private collections in North America and Western Europe without an official paper trail. Since his collection of stolen items is institutionally legitimized through the exhibition process, Moudov's *Fragments* plays on the very same slippage in legality and network of exchange.

Like the missing museum of contemporary art, the rubble left by Bulgaria's treasure hunters exposes another—albeit much more serious—blemish on the nation's Ministry of Culture. It appears that what is in jeopardy is the *preservation* of both contemporary and ancient history. The Bulgarian Ministry of Culture's apparent apathy towards black market operations and seeming inability to nurture an official culture, ancient or modern, makes one wonder whether the black market—with its disregard for authority, ownership, rights and the bureaucracy that so often paralyzes official state decision-making—may offer an effective and liberating alternative to organized state-funded cultural initiatives.

### THE DISPERSED MUSEUM

Ivan Moudov's work often makes the passage from the unofficial to the official in order to circumvent potential bureaucratic roadblocks. The artist does not rely on permission or governmental support to fulfill his creative ambitions. Instead, he takes matters into his own hands, so to speak, by disseminating musiz, his own contemporary art museum, as widely as possible and in many different forms.

In 2006, soon after the hoax at the Poduyane train station, Moudov and sound artist Sibir Vassilev exhibited *Guide*, a sort of discursive counterpoint to *Fragments*, at the Centre for Contemporary Art—Plovdiv in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. A slick aluminum case houses an audio player uploaded with a series of files illegally copied from the audio guides handed out at museums throughout Europe. The audio device is accompanied by standard wall labels providing basic material information for each described work. *Guide* presents the interpretation without the art, again pointing to Bulgaria's lack of a contemporary art collection. Words are used to conjure up artworks that are not physically present, creating a sort of imaginary museum. Moudov and Vassilev feature audio descriptions of seminal works by the usual suspects of the Western art world: Broodthaers, Duchamp, LeWitt, Nauman and Warhol, among others.



Ivan Moudov, *Bulgarian Institute of Culture-Hamburg*, 2009  
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Ivan Moudov, *Wine for Openings*, 2007, 1 of 1764 bottles of cabernet sauvignon distributed at 65 National Pavilions of the 52nd Venice Biennale.  
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Ivan Moudov, *MUSIZ (Champagne Pommery for the Grand Opening of MUSIZ Museum for Contemporary Art-Sofia)*, 2008, manufactured by Pommery S.A.  
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

The list does not stray from the familiar, and is seemingly blind to the issues surrounding gender and racial parity that are pressing to many of today's progressive institutions—but this may be precisely the point. *musiz* makes no attempt to be a great or adventurous museum. Rather, it strives to mirror the status quo of the Western art world, to be average. At least we have contemporary art museums to complain about.

In a solo exhibition at Galerie Alberta Pane in Paris this past May, *Guide* was shown alongside a collection of eight bottles of Thracian region wine. As is explained on the backside label of each bottle, these cabernet sauvignons document past incarnations of Moudov's *Wine for Openings*, a clever courtesy service invented by the artist to advertise his own museum of contemporary art wherever he may be. More specifically, between 2007 and 2010, Moudov donated cases of specially produced wine to be consumed at the openings of various exhibitions across Europe. With this gesture of generosity, the ritual sharing of wine takes on a dual function: visitors celebrate both the opening of the local exhibition and the opening of *musiz*. Every exhibition becomes a pop-up *musiz* exhibition. Similarly, *musiz* (*Champagne Pommery for the Grand Opening of MUSIZ Museum of Contemporary Art—Sofia*) (2008) presents a reserve of 150 bottles of champagne produced by the famous champagne maker Pommery. However, as the label describes, these bottles will “be stored in the Pommery caves until the time of the official inauguration of the Museum.” What might it mean to celebrate the opening of *musiz* at various exhibitions, be they in Vienna or Stockholm, to stock the bars of over 20 national pavilions at the Venice Biennale with wine for the opening of *musiz*, or to tease the visitor with a pristine bottle of fine champagne that could potentially never be opened? Both *Wine for Openings* and *Champagne* infiltrate a favourite art world ritual—the festive sharing of alcohol at openings—in order to spread the news about Bulgaria's cultural conditions. In nearly constant circulation, the bottles function as Bulgarian ambassadors gone rogue. Rather than parading traditional culture and soliciting tourism, they advertise the nation's deficiencies.

By distributing his *musiz*-related work—collection, audio guides, wine and champagne—through a pre-established international art museum/gallery/biennale network, Moudov efficiently conveys his message to the rapidly globalizing art world. At the same time, however, his *musiz* project follows the increasing demands placed on successful artist-run institutions to travel. Each year, more and more artist-run institutions go mobile: Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's Museum of Non-Participation, John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad's Reena Spaulings Fine Art and Sandra Gamarra's LiMAC (Lima Museum of Contemporary Art) immediately come to mind. The emergence of so many nomadic institutions is certainly a recent phenomenon, undoubtedly tied to both the growing popularity of art fairs and the increasing pressures on artists themselves to travel. As the

opening line of John Kelsey's latest article in *Artforum* attests: “For most artists today, the laptop and phone have already supplanted the studio as primary sites of production.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the suitcase, too, is in the process of supplanting the permanent gallery space. What distinguishes *musiz* from other nomadic institutions is the way in which it refuses to take the shape of a fully functioning institution in any given venue. Moudov disperses the various components of his museum of contemporary art, rarely showing all of them together or specifying how they relate. He sacrifices the key characteristics of a strong institution—having a unified mandate and identifiable brand—in order to create an anti-bureaucratic and formless conceptual museum.

#### OFFICIAL REGISTRATION

In recent years, Moudov has made numerous tongue-in-cheek attempts to legitimize his museum of contemporary art. As part of a 2009 public art festival in Hamburg, Germany, the artist founded the Bulgarian Institute of Culture (BIC)—Hamburg at the site of a disused gambling hall. Not surprisingly, BIC—Hamburg's first exhibition featured work from what Moudov titled the “*musiz* Collection,” this time presenting fully intact and authentic works by artists such as Valie Export, Martin Kippenberger and Anri Sala. Unfortunately for eager visitors, it appeared that the institute's administration had stepped out indefinitely; a sign reading “Coming back in 5 minutes” was never removed from the locked door. Visitors could only see the *musiz* collection by peering through its street-level window. In a 2011 statement, the public art festival's co-director Tim Voss reveals that the *musiz* collection presented at BIC—Hamburg was actually donated by a local art collector for the duration of the exhibition.<sup>9</sup> Again it turns out that *musiz* relied on false advertising to generate an audience. Moudov's ruse was over, or so it seemed.

Navigating the website for the Bulgarian Institute of Culture—Hamburg today will only further confuse one's understanding of its organizational structure. Announcements for other exciting exhibitions featuring contemporary Bulgarian and Eastern European artists and curators have appeared on the institute's website since Moudov's first stunt, and a link to BIC—Hamburg can now be found on the official Bulgarian Institute of Culture in Moscow website.<sup>10</sup> Has the parodic BIC—Hamburg Moudov founded in 2009 been taken over by the Ministry of Culture in an ultimate act of state-led recuperation? This is certainly what BIC—Hamburg's website would like us to believe:

“Bulgarian Institute of Culture—Hamburg is a state cultural institution that is financially supported and methodically guided by the Ministry of Culture. The institute is created and operates in accordance with bilateral intergovernmental agreements.”<sup>11</sup>

In the past two years, BIC—Hamburg has shed the theatrical antics of its first exhibition to become a believable online simulation. Given the programming initiatives subsequently adver-

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tised—including exhibitions about networks of power in pseudo-democratic regimes, punk attitudes in contemporary Bulgarian art, and the possibility or impossibility of happiness—it appears that BIC—Hamburg certainly fulfills the duty of a cultural institute by promoting Bulgarian cultural production outside of national borders. If Moudov's earlier work aimed to create a formless conceptual museum, BIC—Hamburg attempts to provide the semblance of an institutional structure for the museum, or at least to cloak an unofficial and subversive operation with the appearance of Bulgarian public support.<sup>12</sup>

In 2010, Moudov made his most direct attempt to legitimize the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sofia. Offered a grant from the Open Arts Foundation in Plovdiv to follow up on his previous *musiz* work, Moudov decided to hire an attorney to officially register *musiz* as a private museum in Sofia. In a video documenting this process titled *Creation of a Museum of Contemporary Art in Bulgaria* (2010), lawyer Radoslav Paroushev sits at a desk heaping with paperwork while describing, step by step, the seemingly endless number of applications, phone calls and “unconstitutional” fees required to register the museum. After numerous administrative complications and necessary concessions, Paroushev is faced with a final point of contention: in order to prove that the museum will have “cultural value” according to the law, it is stipulated that it must contain works of art created more than 50 years

ago costing 300,000 BGN (\$192,000 CAD) or more. As of the video's debut, the application was still in process.<sup>13</sup> *Creation of a Museum of Contemporary Art in Bulgaria* thus offers a scathing commentary on the inefficiency and disorganization of Bulgaria's state bureaucracy. It offers a compelling critique of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture by literally testing its standard bureaucratic procedures. Given the mountain of paperwork suffocating Moudov's poor lawyer, a black market approach to production, distribution and exhibition might just make better business sense.

In an ironic turn of events, on June 17, 2011, not long after Moudov produced *Creation of a Museum of Contemporary Art in Bulgaria*, the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture announced the official opening of the country's first museum of contemporary art as well as its plan to begin supporting a contemporary art collection in 2012. Housed in a remodelled industrial building (a disused munitions depot) and publicized in the national and international media, one cannot help but wonder if the new Sofia Arsenal Museum of Contemporary Art is yet another media hoax authored by Moudov.<sup>14</sup> The opening of the Sofia Arsenal replays the scenario Moudov rehearsed so many times, revealing the ultimate effect of the artist's incessant exploitation of the language of legitimization: anything purporting to be official, authentic or sponsored by the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture must be immediately put into question. We are left wondering if the opening of the Sofia Arsenal marks

a victory for Moudov's activist project, or if the new publicly funded museum will serve as yet another frustrating—and convenient—starting point for Moudov's sardonic critique.

The influx of government bureaucracy into the organizational structure of small artist-run institutions has been, as AA Bronson famously put it, “the curse of the artist-run space” in Canada and elsewhere since the early 1980s.<sup>15</sup> While granting agencies such as the Canada Council for the Arts have done much to nurture a mature alternative art network in Canada, they have also created the conditions for dependency: institutions are sometimes forced to choose between financial stability and full creative freedom. In a much quoted and controversial article from 1984, Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko pessimistically argues that the state's support for the alternatives produces “a total bureaucratic pacification of the intellectual creative power of the artistic intelligentsia and artistic culture.”<sup>16</sup> Whether or not we see the tension between artist-run culture and public funding as irreconcilable, it appears that, now more than ever, artists are taking on Wodiczko's challenge to organize “nonbureaucratic, small and flexible “Intelligence”-like working institutes” outside of established funding structures.<sup>17</sup> Ivan Moudov's *musiz*, a museum in fragments without a lease or a gallery attendant, adapts and responds to local concerns, humiliating the bureaucrat in the process. ×

#### BIO

Steve Lyons is an artist whose installations have been exhibited in Paris, Montreal, and Toronto, and whose writing has been published in *Border Crossings*. He participated in artist residencies at *Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 2010 and 2012*. He completed an MA in Art History at Concordia University in 2010, and is currently conducting research on new approaches to reproduction, simulation, parody and theft in contemporary artist-run exhibition spaces.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Gavin Morrison and Fraser Stables, “Interview with Ivan Moudov,” in *Lifting: Art as Theft*, Atopia Projects and Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen, Scotland, 2007. Exhibition catalogue. 29.
- 2 Dessislava Dimova, “The Cultural Learnings of Ivan Moudov,” in *Ivan Moudov: Trick or Treat*, Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2008-09. Exhibition catalogue. 135.
- 3 Marcel Duchamp, quoted in Ecke Bonk, “Make an Imprint,” in David Britt, trans., *Marcel Duchamp: The Portable Museum* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 19.
- 4 T.J. Demos, “Duchamp's *Boite-en-valise*: Between Institutional Acculturation and Geopolitical Displacement,” *Grey Room* 08 (Summer 2002), 11.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 6 Center for the Study of Democracy, “The Antiquities Trade—Dealers, Traffickers, and Connoisseurs,” in *Organized Crime in Bulgaria: Markets and Trends* (Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2007), 178.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 8 John Kelsey, “Next Level Spleen,” *Artforum* (September 2012), 412.
- 9 Tim Voss, “% Ivan Moudov,” W139, <http://w139.nl/en/article/20244/>
- 10 A link to BIC—Hamburg can be found on the website of the Bulgarian Institute of Culture—Moscow at: [http://www.bci-moscow.ru/en/about/centers/bci\\_foreign/Hamburg/](http://www.bci-moscow.ru/en/about/centers/bci_foreign/Hamburg/)
- 11 Bulgarian Institute of Culture—Hamburg, “About Us,” <http://www.bic-hamburg.de/>

- 12 Only after contacting Moudov directly could I determine that BIC—Hamburg is yet another virtual institution fabricated by the artist. BIC—Hamburg existed as a physical exhibition space for one month. It has since exclusively functioned online. The institute's website, maintained by the artist to this day, can confuse even the most skeptical visitor.
- 13 Open Arts Foundation, “Creation of a Museum of Contemporary Art in Bulgaria,” <http://openarts.info/creation-of-the-first-private-museum-of-contemporary-art-in-bulgaria/>
- 14 The Sofia Arsenal Museum of Contemporary Art is financially supported by the governments of Norway, Iceland, and Lichtenstein through the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area. The Bulgarian Ministry of Culture financed only 15% of the building and renovation costs. See Sofia Arsenal Museum of Contemporary Art, “Press Release,” <http://www.samcaproject.org/News/>
- 15 AA Bronson, “The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists,” in AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, eds., *Museums by Artists* (Toronto, Art Metropole, 1983), 36.
- 16 Krzysztof Wodiczko, “For the De-Incapacitation of the Avant-Garde in Canada,” *Parallogramme* 9:4 (April–May 1984), 23.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 25.

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