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Freedom of Interpretation

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

Freedom of Interpretation

By Georgi Ivanov, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University. Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012.

Major Directors:

Paul Thulin, Interim Chair, Department of Photography and Film

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The photographic series *Ideal Cities* that I started in 2011 is inspired by the conflict between my idea of the “west” and my evolving experience in the United States. What struck me was the popularity of what I see as model experience – a spatial experience controlled by the Spectacle. In the terms of the Situationist International and its most prominent figure Guy Debord, the Spectacle is the collapse of reality into the streams of images, products and activities sanctioned by centralized monopolist business or state bureaucracy. Thus, personal experience is replaced with preconceived notions, which control the way people perceive and understand their surroundings.

Introduction

Does freedom of speech matter if there is no freedom of interpretation? In a free society no one can imprison you for a thought. However, there isn't much freedom of interpretation where the Spectacle is heavily funded and developed. In the terms of the Situationist International and its most prominent figure Guy Debord, the Spectacle is the collapse of reality into the streams of images, products and activities sanctioned by centralized monopolist business or state bureaucracy.¹ Thus, personal experience is replaced with preconceived notions, which control the way people perceive and understand their surroundings. The notion of place, which is the personal perception and interpretation of spaces, becomes uniform and less personal due to the Spectacle. Under such conditions, the ability to interpret spaces is restricted to two aesthetic categories – beautiful and ugly. The inability to employ categories beyond “ugly” or “beautiful” in the analysis of space forecloses the possibility of the individual launching a critical inquiry into the social functions of spaces. How do different entities, the person versus the corporation for instance, define the function of spaces? What is the importance of public spaces in relation to personal experience unmediated by the Spectacle? What are the things that make a space social? What is the relation between formal aesthetics and experience on personal level?

Preliminary Research

These questions are central to my current body of work and began forming while working on a photographic series on the tourism industry in my home country of Bulgaria. During the 2000's Bulgarians associated tourism with overbuilding. The accelerated development of vacation homes and hotels was driven by the ever increasing price of real estate and by weak regulation

and building codes. This state of unsteady growth changed dramatically when the recession of 2008 hit the market. The situation reversed: the usual foreign buyers of vacation real estate were then eager to sell. The landscape of the seaside resorts was saturated with unfinished construction, missing infrastructure, for sale signs, gated communities, tightly packed developments and concrete. However, the story was not the same everywhere. Some properties were well maintained and became profitable by turning the physical facilities into an easily digested vacation experience, while others were only trying to sell square footage. Property for sale and unfinished construction accounted for the empty housing littering the Bulgarian seaside. Vacation homes, apartments and hotels were made with no consideration of the experience of their possible inhabitants because the developers had only the ratio of Euros per square meter in their minds.



fig. 1) and 2) Georgi Ivanov, *Nessebar* from *Vacation Industry: Bulgaria*, archival pigment prints, 24x30, 2009

Of course, there was a whole array of in between cases and making one concise statement using images turned out to be difficult for me. Was my series about imposed order versus chaos; environmental versus legal issues; aesthetics versus kitsch? What is the truth about Bulgarian resorts?

It was much easier for me to photograph these natural locations unspoiled by the

developers. They are indeed beautiful and I succeeded in elevating them to the sublime in my photography. On one of my shoots in the Rila mountain, relatively well preserved from development, I came across the saying that “the real hiker is a person who finds the most difficult way to a place where they have no business.”



fig. 3) Georgi Ivanov, *Vihren* from *Vacation Industry: Bulgaria*, archival pigment print, 30x40, 2009

This is a great summary of the drive to look for experience beyond the preconceived, consumerist reality of the all-inclusive vacation experience. Regardless of the specific state of the Bulgarian resorts and the corruption involved, the true dilemma for me turned out to be why people are attracted to fabricated experience when getting away from the structured life of their jobs.

Bulgarian resorts were started in the late 1960's by the communist regime. These towns were planned and built by the state as centralized projects with clearly defined goals and methods of achieving them. The spaces created were not only vacation backdrops but also a means of hiding the rest of the country. Foreigners from the “western” communist countries were a big number of the visitors of the Bulgarian resorts and their perspective of Bulgaria was different than the people living in the country. These sea resorts, Albena, Zlatni Pyasatsi (Golden Sands), Slunchev Bryag (Sunny Beach), were indeed well made. Buildings and infrastructure coexisted with well preserved nature, public spaces, parks, gardens and scenic landscaping. All of these projects seemed (today as well) foreign to most of the Bulgarian landscape. Staying at these sea resorts was a privilege for loyal employees of state companies, the foreign and Bulgarian nomenklatura. The regime saw these undertakings as critical enterprises and took pride in them. For example, the 5 BGN banknote from the 1970's and 1980's has a rendering of the Golden Sands beach front.



fig. 4) Bulgarian National Bank, Five Bulgarian Lev bill issued in 1974

The utopian vacation towns were famous across central and eastern Europe and left a trace in the memories of generations. Czech artist Kateřina Držková, who grew up in the last two decades of the communist regime, created several bodies of work dealing with the difference between representation and experience in the Bulgarian resorts. Based on postcards from Albena in the 1970's, she constructed a scaled down model of the resort. The side of each building depicted on a postcard is white while the sides not photographed are black. The exhibit *Albena* in 2009 comprised the models, the postcards and a contemporary video of the artists visiting the resort after the fall of communism.



fig. 5) Kateřina Držková, *Albena*, found postcards, architectural models and video, 2009



fig. 6) Boby Dimitrov, Areal Photograph of Albena, Bulgaria, jpeg file 1600x1067 px, 2006

Pieces of the “happy soetz” projects that put a human face to the regime, did exist outside of the big resorts in Bulgaria. For instance the construction of recreation centers linked to state companies serving only the employees of each own company. Having such a restriction of choice, Bulgarians could only accept what they were forced to cope with and dream of a better place existing in the culture of the capitalist west. Many young Bulgarians regarded the “west” as a gateway to freedom. Hippie culture had a socialist agenda in the context of the US, but in Bulgaria the same movement was regarded as anti-communist because communist authorities had banned it. This situation continued into the 1970’s when western music was not banned anymore, but simply unavailable to Bulgarians.

MFA Thesis Research

The photographic series *Ideal Cities* that I started in 2011 is inspired by the conflict between my idea of the “west” and my evolving experience in the United States. I was born in the mid 1980’s during the communist regime and grew up during the period after the fall of the regime. I moved to America in 2006, and first lived in Baltimore, Maryland. What struck me was the popularity of what I see as model experience – a spatial experience controlled by the Spectacle.



fig. 7) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 40x50, 2008 (MFA Thesis Exhibition)

Seemingly given the freedom to choose their own living realities, many people had picked rather restrictive options for living – prefabricated selections offered by centralized corporations. The backdrops for experiencing American life are not only the vacation resorts as it was in communist Bulgaria. Indeed, all aspects of American life appear to be coordinated by centralized authorities. Part of this systematization results from the constant concern with reproduction and images: things are good if they look good on paper. Due to the difficulty in expressing experience (for instance happiness) people prefer images of happiness. A smiling portrait is always a smiling portrait. Socially accepted signifiers of well-being have not only supplanted lived experience but have also delimited the understanding of experience.



fig. 8) Georgi Ivanov, *Facades*, archival pigment prints, 40x40 each, 2010

The Thesis Exhibition and the Larger Body of Work

My MFA thesis exhibition consists of 6 pieces from the *Ideal Cities* series, labeled here as MFA prints and illustrated with other pieces from the series. They are large scale color photographs of corporate or government architecture in America. I photographed the structures as monumental and idealistic but at the same time they look like architecture models. People are not present in the photographs to avoid any reference to scale or narrative. The emptiness in the photographs alludes to utopia and dystopia in the same time. The structures in my work are designed not only to control movement through space, but also (and more crucially) to channel the perception of space. The goal of this kind of planning and design is to formulate social interactions and to convey a uniform sense of place. One reoccurring element in these works that I emphasize is the playground. Such an archetypal facility creates a unified notion of play that is designed to develop motor skills in the safest and most uninteresting manner. The standard play sets are part of day care centers and are, of course, surrounded by tall fences, sometimes with added barbed wire. These areas are also often situated in less desirable spaces such as parking garages and roof tops or even corporate plazas - spaces initially intended as public. The restricted playgrounds are an allegory of institutional existence: life from the cradle to the grave as a passage between different institutional levels defined by their spatial clusters. Another major topic in the *Ideal Cities* is the public space or the lack thereof. Some of these spaces are the parks, streets and squares in the cities. The question posed by my work is whether such “public” areas are open to people to encounter others with no need to buy or sell, or whether these spaces are backdrops for a positive experience that does not remove individuals from the consumption-production cycle.



fig. 9) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 34x34, 2012 (MFA Thesis Exhibition)



fig. 10) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 38x50, 2011



fig. 11) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 24x30, 2012



fig. 12) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 30x40, 2011



fig. 13) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 30x40, 2012

Theoretical Basis and Field Work: American Urban Planning

Furthermore, this photographic project relates to theories of urban planning. One valuable source for my research was William Whyte, who is a brilliant scholar on the issue of social spaces. His work is valuable as it comes from a person who has not received formal education in his field - he is neither a sociologist nor an urban planner. Whyte primarily observed the social behaviors of people in New York City, and simply asked the right questions. His research as well as activism culminated in the book *City: Rediscovering the Center* published in 1988 and the film *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1989). Both of these works are concerned with the urban planning of the American downtown of the 1970's and the result of this development. The focus of Whyte's research is not the resulting urban decay but rather the infrastructure and planning that caused such collapse. His main concern is the deprivation of chance encounters. According to Whyte, spaces that enabled chance encounters used to be the best aspect of American cities before the 1950's. In the second half of the 20th century urban experience was largely replaced by suburban existence.

"Suburban shopping malls are not the new town centers. They lack or forbid many of the activities of a center: soapboxers, controversy, passing of leaflets impromptu entertainment, happenings, or eccentric behavior of any kind including persistent non buying."²

I found many answers to the confusion of my initial urban experience of America. The fact is, American downtowns were not designed as cities. Referring to the 1980's Whyte wrote:

"Now coming of age is a whole new generation of planners and architects for whom the formative experience of a center was the atrium of a suburban shopping mall. Some cities have already been recast in this image and more a following suit."³



fig. 14) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 40x40, 2012 (MFA Thesis Exhibition)

Following the mindset of the shopping mall led to a new type of city center that was not an urban structure. Instead these new centers deny their historical urban environment. For instance:

“At Houston Center you can drive in from the freeway to the garage, walk through a skyway to one tower, thence to another, work, shop, lunch, work and then head back to the freeway without ever having to set foot in Houston at all.”⁴ Mega structures have an affinity for convention centers and arenas and via skyways can be mated in a closed circuit. The result is two cities: convention city and regular city with little intermingling between visitors and natives.”⁵

When reading *City: Rediscovering the Center* I kept finding explanations of my experience in Baltimore. I had noticed that not owning a car automatically placed me in a well-defined social group of people from all racial backgrounds but of a similar socio-economic strata.

Whyte's writing confirmed my observation that American downtowns have been designed to divide the ones who drive and the ones who do not.⁶ For the affluent members of society, the eliminated street level activities are substituted with idealized representations or simulations of such experiences. Whyte provides one striking example that is emblematic of this issue:

These environments are so dull that even proponents concede something is missing. The street is what is missing and to fill the vacuum, some managements are constructing facsimiles of streets. ... One proposal I have seen would feature multimedia presentations of aspects of the city: striking visual images from batteries of slide projectors; high fidelity tapes of street sounds, taxi drivers' colorful argot, and such. The walkways would be programmed with strolling actors done up as street people. One of them to come a full circle would be a bag woman.⁷



fig. 15) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 30x40, 2011



fig. 16) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 32x40, 2011
(MFA Thesis Exhibition)

One reason to manufacture an experience that acts as surrogate of an urban environment is the fear of what Whyte called “undesireables” in New York. These are the odd characters, the harmless people whose lack of conformity to social norms scares the “normal” people. What happens after excluding a part of the population from a social urban space is that everybody avoids this space except for the dope dealers and other criminals. Baltimore and other cities in the South have another motif for exclusion. Racial segregation used to be the law before 1968, as whites and blacks were assigned to different neighborhoods thereby preventing mixed habitation.⁸

What is more important for me is not the physical barriers, but the mental ones and, more specifically, the common notion of place. Suburban America has substituted the lived experience of spaces with mental images of places. As Peter Bacon Hales points out, “those children of the

1950's are parents now. And when they think of travel that broadens their children's horizons of all the cliches parents reconstitute from their own past, the city is central, one of the icons. There is the West. There is the seashore. There is the farm. There is the forest. And there is the city.”⁹ Compared to criticism of contemporary urban planning in the United States, social reaction to the Spectacle in western Europe was more pronounced. During the 1960's, Chadrach Woods, an American architect related to the Situationists, and Jane Jacobs, an urban activist from New York City, were both concerned with street level activity. In his analysis, Whyte addresses the same theme. Their concern was the immediate problems of the white flight, car infrastructure and urban decay.



fig. 17) Georgi Ivanov, *Baltimore*, archival pigment print, 18x24, 2011



fig. 18) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 32x40, 2011

Theoretical Basis and Field Work: The Situationist International and Europe

In western Europe, the issue of urban sprawl was not on the same scale as in the US and this determined differing approaches. The Situationist International focused on the issue of representation in spaces. As Simon Sadler notes, “If one peeled away this official representation

of modernity and urbanism – this “Spectacle” as situationists termed the collapse of reality into the streams of images, products and activities sanctioned by business and bureaucracy – one discovered the authentic life of the city teeming underneath.”¹⁰ As American critics were concerned with urban planning proceeding from centralized corporate power, French situationist Guy Debord was criticizing the system itself as the root of the problem:

“On the whole this introduction of technology into everyday life – ultimately taking place within the framework of modern bureaucratic capitalism – certainly tends rather to reduce people’s independence and creativity. The new prefabricated cities clearly exemplify the totalitarian tendency of modern capitalism’s organization of life: the isolated inhabitants... see their lives reduced to the pure triviality of the repetitive combined with the obligatory absorption of an equally repetitive spectacle”¹¹

Situationists did not identify themselves with either capitalist nor anti-capitalist systems. Instead, they sought to develop “a healthy skepticism about the East – West posturing of cold war politics, shifting attention from large party and state groupings toward the small group experiences of everyday life and space.”¹² Debord along with other situationists developed a way for reinterpreting urban spaces called “psychogeographic drift.” While difficult to define succinctly, the psychogeographic drift is a conscious effort to see underneath the prefabricated Spectacle of urban life. A typical drift would consist of wandering the urban landscape with no final destination in mind, guided by a curiosity in the un-monumental, things that are not intended to punctuate a place, the traces of personal situations and everything else disregarded by the Spectacle. While this activity might seem aimless, participants would be true drifters only if they engage with their own drifting experience on an intellectual level. According to Sadler the psychogeographic drift “would provide a society of pleasure instead of the stoicism and sacrifice of Stalinism or the peer pressure of consumerism.”¹³ The Elastic City is a contemporary organization with a practice similar to the psychogeographic drift ideas of the 1960’s and 1970’s.

Elastic City invites artists to lead groups of people in exploration of their urban environment through tasks reminiscent of art performances. One example was walking along the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City while holding hands with a stranger. Finding the person to walk with and convincing them to hold hands for the walk was part of the task. Although different from the wholly non-programmed situationist drift from the 1960's, Elastic City has a similar goal to bring a personal understanding to the urban environment beyond the Spectacle.

The situationists regarded drifting as educational activity. Their real agenda was transforming the passive reinterpretation of space into activism. Situationists wanted to alter the environment by removing the Spectacle as a mediator of spatial experience. In this way, personal interpretation of space would have been a social phenomenon instead of privilege for a few intellectuals. The situationist city was indeed designed, but never built. Probably one of the reasons for its failure is the dilemma of participation. Everybody living in the situationist city should be the builder, otherwise one uniform authority will inevitably produce a new version of the Spectacle. Another reason for not being realized was the variety of opinions among the members the situationist group, all of whom were very strong and unyielding in their beliefs.

Constant Nieuwenhuys designed the New Babylon in the 1970's, the closest to what a prefabricated situationist city would be. An environment with ever evolving spaces, it is aimed to give maximum freedom for drifting and personal experience. However, this experience would be sensory rather than directed at interpreting the cultural context of spaces. All spaces in the proposed New Babylon are geometric and rely on spatial perception of synthetic volumes, forms and colors. Likewise, James Turrel and Olafur Eliasson are contemporary artists who use the idea of the purely sensory experience in their artwork. For them, creating spatial phenomena unrelated to anything but the viewers' senses is the only way a person can escape representation

in their own spatial experience. Turrel and Eliasson have not yet created environments for habitation and the issue central for their works is that they are always seen within the elevated context of art. Even though not installed in traditional ways, their works are exhibited in art museums and galleries. Eliasson does acknowledge the limitations of art and emphasizes the personal experience of the viewer unbound by the forced meaning conveyed by art institutions. He has been involved in designs for museums and attempts to turn these containers of valuable objects into spaces for pure experience.

In order for Eliasson's pieces to function, the viewer needs to be an active participant. This interaction is physical, but not in the sense of "move and the piece does something=interaction." The viewer or participant needs to engage the piece on an intellectual level, the same way they would during a psychogeographic drift. Eliasson's artwork is about the viewer's own experience and not about interpreting artwork based on its cultural context. The titles of his pieces show emphasis on the viewer, for example *Your Space Embracer*, *Your Black Horizon*, *Your Waste of Time*, etc.

Although the situationist city exists only in artworks and the Situationist International was dismissed in the early 1970's, their legacy is quite tangible. After the situationists, it is difficult to talk about formal aesthetics as goal. The emphasis in contemporary discussions on architecture or planning is on social interactions. Good architecture enables social interactions outside the consumption-production cycle. Beautiful structures are not necessarily good and, according to Juhani Pallasmaa, formal aesthetics is simply a means of manipulation.¹⁴



fig. 19) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 30x40, 2011

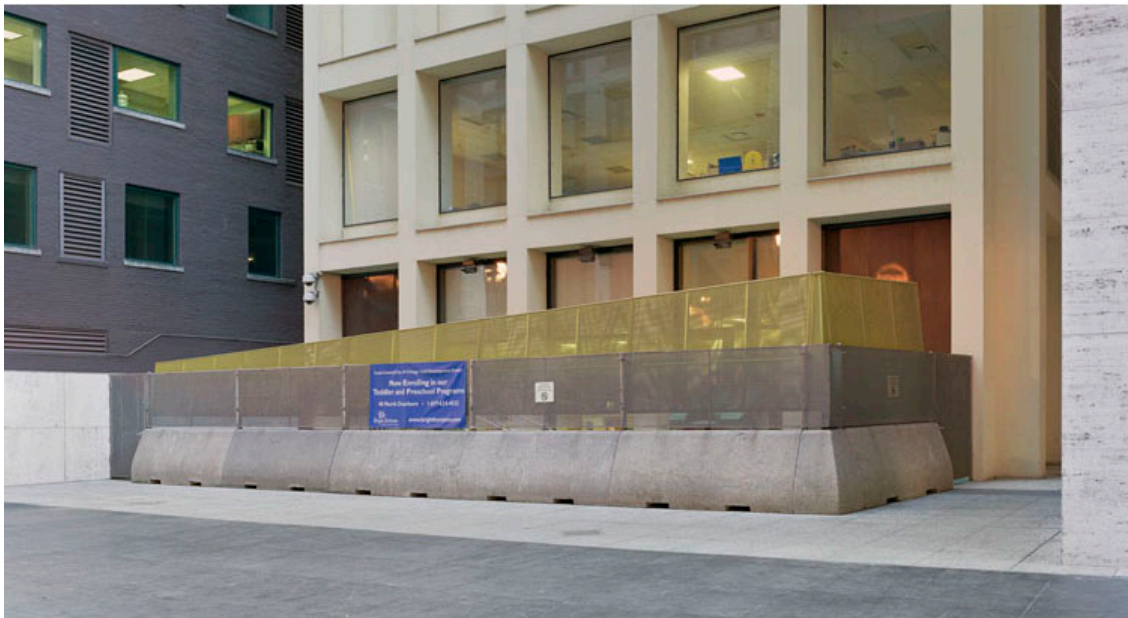


fig. 20) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 24x44, 2012
(MFA Thesis Exhibition)

The American Downtown and its Relation to My Work

In terms of downtown aesthetics, the Seagram Building in New York City, completed in 1958 and designed by Mies van der Rohe is one of the models for the development of American cities. It has a plaza, which is not only elegant but also socially functional, as people like to gather there. The Seagram's plaza was the prototype for a new American building code in 1961 that gave incentives for the creation of corporate public spaces. However, the plazas that followed are, in most cases, empty and inhospitable although they have emulated the aesthetics of Mies van der Rohe's design.¹⁵ This discrepancy of aesthetics and positive experience is very obvious in Baltimore and my observations there initiated the *Ideal Cities*.



fig. 21) Georgi Ivanov, *Untitled* from *Ideal Cities*, archival pigment print, 18x24, 2011

The visual and architectural vocabulary that I found in American downtowns is hypocritical as the aesthetic is meant to mask what is inhospitable. For this body of work, I photograph through the cracks on the surface of the Spectacle in order to expose the means for social manipulation. Unlike Turrell and Eliasson, I don't create spaces for personal experience, but instead focus on the devices that restrict freedom of interpretation. My photographs have the scale and presences of paintings, but are also subjective documents aimed at starting a conversation about the issues of space and its interpretation.



fig. 22) Georgi Ivanov, *MFA Thesis Exhibition: Ideal Cities*, Anderson Gallery, 2012

Further Research. When Functional Social Spaces are a Part of the Spectacle

Contrasting the American experience with public spaces in contemporary Bulgaria provides a good example of what happens when public spaces lack restrictions. At least a third of the people using the parks in Sofia would be what Americans call “undesirables” as they drink alcohol in public. Contrary to common sense, the lack of regulation on drinking alcohol in public does not encourage drunkenness or violent behavior. This demand created a specific market in the post communist country: the squat shops, named so because they operate from basement windows. The benches in many parks are not secured to the ground. No one will steal them even though two people are enough to carry them. Different arrangements start to appear. There is no artistic thought behind this; it is the result of finding functional ways to accommodate groups based on their needs. In addition, the parks in Sofia don't close after dark. All these features are very democratic and result in a very diverse population in late afternoons. All age groups are there and these groups not only don't mind each other, but enjoy the openness of these spaces. This is the ideal climate for chance encounters, exactly what is missing in American downtowns. Are there shortcomings? Park spaces in Sofia are not always maintained. Just as no one prevents people from rearranging the benches, there is also no one to maintain the public restrooms. Providing services as well as enforcing the order are both limited due to insufficient funds. It may be that parks in Sofia are open and unrestricted due to financial necessity rather than conscious decisions.

However, mess is not the biggest problem. Just like in American public spaces the main concern is choice. The issue is not that parks in Sofia are dysfunctional public spaces as the lack of choice does not come from what is in the parks, but from what is outside of them.

The stagnant economy with badly paying jobs is either a reason for or consequence of an obvious lack of initiative and motivation. Thus, public spaces became comfort zones where people can engage on a small social level. While this type of engagement can be a great example for more developed countries, the park time in Sofia could be counted as a type of Spectacle as well. Based mainly on participation and to a lesser extent consumption, park time threatens to divert people's attention from social participation on other levels in the context of their city and country. If happy park time makes people too content, this will be a great victory for local authorities, government and corporations. People will have their attention fixed on something different than the reasons for their own poor economic situation. This way no important questions will be raised and no real activism will occur. These spaces seem to be lubricating the class divisions in the country and forestalling class conflicts. Surprisingly enough, public spaces in America with all their restrictions were recently used by the Occupy Movement to make a statement about the economy in their country. While I love Bulgarian parks, this type of activism is noticeably missing. My fear is that these great social spaces are inhibiting freedom of interpretation rather than enhancing it.

The only way to overcome this danger of losing freedom of interpretation is undertaking artistic interventions, political ones if possible. One example is the painting of the western frieze of the soviet army monument in Sofia from the spring of 2011. This happened overnight and (although being unknown) the artists achieved enormous popularity by stirring controversy about the monument. Why have a 37m (122ft) tall monument to an army that did not fight or lose troops in Bulgaria? If this structure was not meant to commemorate, then it was made to intimidate. The anonymous artists turned the figures of attacking soviet aggressors into attacking Super Man, Capitan America, Santa Claus and Ronald MacDonald

(heroically carrying a starless American flag). The excellent work of the sculptors had never been so emphasized since they made the propaganda bronzes back in the 1950's. The blending of symbols of American corporate globalization and the soviet invasion entertained most of the public, however, some people were outraged. Unfortunately, the bronze piece was cleaned overnight by an organization close to Russian interests. This form of activism did not change the social order in the country, but it did expose the Spectacle of Bulgarian politics. By seeing who got upset, and how upset they were, it became obvious who are the people serving foreign interests.



fig. 23) Monument of the Soviet Army, Sofia, Bulgaria, photo Nikola Mihov, 2009

The reason I use the photographic medium is because I want to use true environments as my subject matter. There is so much to show and discuss that I feel obliged to not fabricate images or objects. My own practice of drifting in the landscape and interpreting spaces is what matters the most and my body of work is the result of this interest. I make photographs in order to interpret the environment on my own terms and overcome the obstacles discouraging

interpretation. If I do not try to overcome these obstacles, I will become desensitized to them.

What is Next

In future shows, the *Ideal Cities* will also consist of stereoscopic photographs. I have already made hundreds, but so far have not been able to find a good way to present them so far. The stereographs depict small-scale vernacular structures typical for America but overlooked for their everydayness. At the same time, they are significant for imposing a uniform and limited idea of place. These structures are the places where a daily consumerist rite of passage occurs.



fig 24) Georgi Ivanov, *H&R Block*, stereo card, 2.25x5, 2012

Some examples are automatic car washes, drive through ATMs, shopping plazas, tax offices, empty storefronts or diners, etc. These structures are unmonumental and I transform their perception to models by photographing the separate stereo images with a very wide base and also by choosing a high vantage point. Thus I give the viewer an illusion of looking at the scene up close. The tension of looking at something real that is transformed as to appear as a miniature resonates with my concern about the model experience. Ideally, I will present my stereographs as large-scale print couples seen through oversized mirror periscope systems.

The goal of this presentation is to bring the viewer closer to believing that the spaces depicted are really three-dimensional. This will help to elevate the stereographs above the common notion of trick photography.

Another idea for my current series is photographing the Spectacle in countries other than the United States, for instance in Bulgaria. What first comes in mind are communist monuments. However, this might be a new project. I am currently examining the cracks in the Spectacle of developed capitalism, while in Bulgaria I will encounter the ruins left by the communist Spectacle. However, I have been away from my home country for 6 years now and defining the result of possible work there is limiting. After all, so much has happened in Bulgaria since the fall of communism in 1989.



fig. 25) Georgi Ivanov, *Shumen*, archival pigment print, 40x50, 2012

Conclusion. The Importance of the *Ideal Cities* Project

Because both built and natural environments are constantly modified by centralized powers, interpretation of space will never be an obsolete topic. If we take Baudelaire's interest in cities and flaneurs to be a starting point of the modern concern with spatial perception, this topic has been constantly reinvented over the course of more than century and a half. What should be brought to the public is more than awareness of specific issues concerning environment. Rather, the issue of interpretation, or the lack of thereof, should be examined. This examination has to be personal and arise from first hand experience. While theory and art are instrumental for understanding the issues of lived experience, getting out in the field and being in the physical world cannot be substituted. Otherwise the ability to interpret is brought to minimum. Media and art cannot be the basis for interpretation, but only tools. A society cannot be granted freedom of interpretation, instead the people need to want such a liberty. Such freedom would only be achieved on a personal level through the active engagement of each individual. The role of good artwork is to stress the significance of this participation.

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