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Stavros S. Niarchos Travel Report 2006

BORDERS OF THE BLACK SEA

The Black Sea is a large body of water (area of 422.000 km² and a maximum depth of 2210m) essential to the Greek world from the time of the Argonauts. Its navigability is of great significance to Greek culture as well as to the local cultures that have flourished around it. The Black Sea is almost completely enclosed. The access to it controlled by the Bosphorus. The waters of the Black Sea that separate the coasts and cultures of the region have long been the main medium of exchange between them. Traders, colonists, adventurers, pirates, warships and tourists have crossed the Black Sea for centuries. I wanted to create a snapshot of this exchange in 2006 and focus on art and the artists of the area as my subject.

Last year, while working on my projects in the Yale MFA Program I was fascinated with the notion of closed systems and boundaries. This concept inspired me to go on a trip, which physically drew a spatial circle of clockwise movement from one place to the next. It became like an obsession to me to do this trip in an absolute circle. Rather like the Orthodox notion of a Tama of pilgrimage or vow, I would start in Bulgaria and go around the Black Sea through Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Turkey. I wanted to search for analogues between spatial artistic and conceptual values and geo-political relations, playing with the idea of scale and using art as a lens to look at the region, its history and present reality. Here is a list of some the ideas I wanted to explore:

- compositional elements such as the relations between metropolis and periphery

- divisions, lines and border regions, the space between spaces
- self-generating points; dynamic versus static elements of cultures
- movements towards separation and identity against overall form
- History and the new (how even radical breaks are built on previous experiences).

After crossing the first borders I decided to challenge my obsessions and go the other way around – anti-clockwise, starting from Bulgaria, going to Turkey, Georgia, Armenia and the Ukraine. It was crucial to cross each border physically, using all possible kinds of transportation. I was particularly interested in those small pieces of land that exist between the countries, which do not belong to anyone and yet are shared by both countries. People coming from both ways meet in this small and narrow borderline space. They are exposed to similar inspection and have to wait to go through or to be denied access.

I. Snapshots of Borders

- **Greece-Bulgaria (Athens-Plovdiv)**

By bus. Big lines of trucks waiting for their turn. Two hours on the border for passport control. Normal amount of suspicion.

- **Bulgaria-Turkey (Plovdiv-Istanbul)**

By night bus. From four to seven in the morning for suitcase inspection and passport control. Everyone standing with our luggage wide open on a narrow long cement bench especially made for this reason. Smell of stale burnt plastic. Three men would go along the row of open suitcases and put their hands inside, searching. Any products more than the permitted amount would be thrown instantly in a smoldering fire next to us. Cigarettes and alcohol were the most common goods that were trashed.

- **Turkey-Georgia (Trabzon-Batumi)**

On foot. Crushed cars trapped between the two countries because the plates didn't belong to either of them. People were pushing behind iron gates to pass through passport control. Approximately two hours being checked, we had advantage because we were tourists. This used to be where NATO bordered the Soviet Union but now the barbed wire and observation posts in the thickly vegetated hills above the sea are rusting and economics the main motivation for crossing here.

- **Georgia-Armenia(Tbilisi-Yerevan)**

The people building the road on both sides were taking a break, the roadway had been opened but was still dirt covered. We crossed the bridge on foot. Barely any movement on this border. Almost an hour to get a visa. Many taxi drivers with old Soviet cars on both sides. On the edge of their country waiting for someone to pass to take him along.

- **Armenia-Ukraine (Yerevan-Odessa)**

By airplane. *Zvartnots* airport was an exemplary model of a science fiction future, as imagined in the 1950s. A mushroom shaped building looking up to mountain Ararat. People traveling mostly for commercial reasons carrying massive amounts of cheap luggage. In order to have more kilos permitted on the airplane the whole family was traveling along with them. Queues, petty corruption and 'departure taxes'.

- **Ukraine-Bulgaria (Odessa-Varna)**

By fast boat. Mostly Russian tourists on board. The Black Sea silvery and calm. Passed the Danube delta though we couldn't see land: the water became clay brown from the silt. Varna and Bulgaria's Riviera was the destination of most of the passengers.

- **Bulgaria-Greece (Sofia-Athens)**

By airplane. Not a very difficult transition for us with Greek passports. Difficult transition for people with Bulgarian passport.

II. Transgressing Boundaries

Traveling through these countries, I was looking for some form of unifying art that would transgress boundaries. I was also thinking whether “Black Sea art and culture” exists. The notion of a Mediterranean culture is relatively uncontroversial, if somewhat clichéd (Mediterranean history, diet, architecture etc.) and given that the Mediterranean/Aegean is called the White Sea in Turkish, it seemed fruitful to seek similar connections on a trip around the smaller Black Sea. I was, in fact, searching for a particular type of art, which I could designate as Black Sea art.

I met with a number of artists during this trip with whom I discussed where, why and how they are making art. I interviewed them with my camera and I am in the process of editing the documentary video. What triggered my interest, while the trip was evolving were the local artists, their art and environment.

Does a Black Sea Art Scene exist? Are there any connections in the way art is formulated in the countries that surround it, considering it is a place where populations and civilizations mix? Water is continuously exchanged between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, what about cultures? The links are many. The basis for these interactions is the historical exchange through the nearly enclosed open stretch of water, which on the one hand separates and on the other links the people living around it.

- **Turkey**

Not by chance, the main stop of the trip around the Black Sea was Istanbul. Art flourishes where Europe meets Asia and the two continents converge. I interviewed many artists who came from a variety of fields and backgrounds. The footage varies from artists who are professors in the University of Fine Arts and Eldiz Teknik University to artists who work on the streets and sell their work in local restaurants.

I had the pleasure to meet Ahmet Ogut, a Kurdish artist who lives and works in Istanbul and Inci Eviner, a Turkish woman who has exhibited her work in New York and across the world. Both of their work deals with contemporary issues such as displacement and identity.

On the whole, the city of 20million people imposed a feeling of a dynamic metropolis, a centripetal force for the Black Sea bringing Turkish, Georgian, Kurdish, Russian and Ukrainian people and cultures to its streets and neighborhoods. The only people who were noticeable by their absence were the Greeks. Their presence could be characterized as that of phantoms. In the shadows of the city, evidence of Greek traces could be found engraved on buildings, outdated shops and empty schools. The idea of Greek artists living and creating there now is an attractive fantasy. Greek cultural and historical presence can be seen in Turkish artists' work. One example is the video diary of Tayfun Sertas who lived and cooked in the ruins of an old house in Pera/Beyoglou.

The Greek minority was present in every country I visited in a similar way. It was not so much the living presence of Greek people but the remnants they left behind and fantasies projected onto their vestiges. There were beautiful Byzantine icons, crumbling town houses, arcades, forgotten mountain churches and well-organized museums. In Istanbul I had a chance meet a woman that owned the last Greek shop in Pera. I benefited greatly by visiting churches and monasteries, which had mosaics of astonishing beauty. Aghia Sofia and the museum of Karyes were particularly outstanding. I also visited the Soumela monastery which is located in the North Eastern part of Turkey and is famous for its frescos.

- **Georgia and Armenia**

The transition from country to country made this trip even more interesting. Countries like Georgia and Armenia, located in the area of Caucasus and amongst the 15 poorest countries of the world were surprisingly rich in art and artists. I stumbled on evidence of the peculiar marriage of art and economic globalization in Tbilisi - an artist living there, making paintings of the Golden Horn in Istanbul for export as authentic tourist souvenirs. Similarly in Yerevan an artist made prints of Barcelona and its architecture (in particular Gaudi's buildings) before sending them there for sale as souvenirs. Despite his considerable skill and

the quality of his work, he had never left Armenia and the work was made from photos. I came to see that some kind of network exists and is broadening between these two seas: though boundaries may exist for people to travel, goods and (commercial) art continues to travel.

- **Ukraine**

In Odessa, I visited the museum of Philiki Eteria and met with people from the Greek Cultural center there. Once again the Greek presence was very evident in the city's buildings and roads. I set out to search for my great grandfather's warehouse but unluckily I didn't find much. This was the last stop in my circular route before going back to my starting point – Bulgaria. This became a physical journey in a closed system, laden not only with the narratives of its peoples and the voices of its artists but also with my ancestral memories.