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# CROSSING THE CULTURAL DIVIDE: THE COLLABORATIVE PUBLIC ART PROJECTS OF AUSTRALIAN SCULPTOR VELISLAV GEORGIEV

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the role of Bulgarian-born artist, Velislav Georgiev (1957 –), in transforming both his local and the wider Victorian landscape through his accessible and interactive artworks which invite the audience to experience the art object by engaging all five senses. Georgiev’s art practice in Australia stretches over 30 years and encompasses sculpture, painting, public art, furniture and architectural detail. Georgiev has created more than 28 public sculptures through which he engages in ongoing dialogue with a broad audience of all ages and backgrounds. These include a number of ‘play sculptures’, which encourage people to touch, feel, and immerse themselves in the pieces and also a number of collaborative pieces with a variety of ‘communities’ in which children, senior citizens, and members of disadvantaged groups have participated in the creative act. A current ongoing project in his home town of Ballan in western Victoria aims to bring the invisible to visibility by drawing attention to the workings of the wind. Georgiev is a founding figure in Ballan’s ‘1000 Weathervanes in Ballan’ project which has the ambitious aim of setting up 1,000 pieces of wind art in the draughty town. In March 2011 Georgiev’s Omnibus studio/gallery participated in a joint exhibition with the National Museum of Earth and Man in Sofia, which grew out of the notion that Bulgaria and Australia are at the ‘opposite ends of the earth,’ so that if one were to drop a stone through the centre of the earth in Bulgaria, it ‘would most likely land in central Australia.’

**Keywords:** Velislav Georgiev, Bulgaria-Australia, sculpture, ‘play sculptures’, creative act, interact, public environment.

Born in Bulgaria in 1957, Velislav Georgiev spent much of his childhood in his ancestral village of Zabelski Han, looked after by his maternal grandmother, whose resourcefulness, creativity, and support for his artistic aspirations, were major influences on his development. Dissatisfaction with the then prevailing cultural climate, a spirit of adventure, and a confluence of circumstances brought him to Australia as a refugee in 1980. Georgiev landed in Melbourne, unsure

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Her PhD research examines the personality cult of Iosif Stalin and takes an iconographical approach to Stalinist propaganda, focussing specifically on visual topoi in the image of Stalin on propaganda posters of the Soviet era. While firmly entrenched within the discipline of art history, the research also traverses the domains of history, political science, political economy, psychology, theatre studies, sociology and literature.

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whether he would stay beyond his initial two year contract. Despite the initial culture and climate shock in coming from bustling Vienna in Spring to suburban Melbourne moving into Winter, the huge expanses and open skies of Australia persuaded him to stay.

Although Georgiev completed some tertiary studies before leaving Bulgaria, he did not train there as an artist. Entry to art school was limited in the late 1970s, and Georgiev studied Chemistry until he caused an industrial accident in class, and moved on to the safety of Civil Law instead. On coming to Australia, Georgiev studied Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Melbourne. His studies in Philosophy contributed to his ability to realise the relative nature of the ways in which we see things and that there is a certain ‘fuzziness’ to life. Accepting this puts your mind at peace, and contributes to a tendency to ‘not get worked up’ about things<sup>1</sup>, an approach which held him in good stead for the insecurity of life as a professional artist in a country where only a handful of people are able to make a living solely from their art.

In 1993 the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) offered a part-time sculpture stream in their Bachelor of Fine Arts degree for the first time and Georgiev, who by this time had a partner and three children, was able to study sculpture under renowned Australian sculptor Robert Owen, while he continued to earn an income. Georgiev says that he has only really come to appreciate the full value of this education in hindsight: “I thought I was learning nothing. I didn’t realise it at the time, not till ten years later, that we were being taught to see, to see things differently and to be creative”<sup>2</sup>. Owen advised students to watch out for expanding opportunities in public art and to tender for commissions. After graduation, a career in public art began for Georgiev and has flourished over the ensuing decades to the point where he is now able to engage in his art practice on a full-time basis.

One legacy Georgiev brought from Bulgaria was the ability to carve wood. His uncle had been a cabinetmaker, and while Georgiev was able to observe the techniques involved in shaping and carving wood, his uncle had a strict ‘look but don’t touch’ policy, so Georgiev taught himself the skills involved. Although a highly treasured skill in Bulgaria, Georgiev found Australians less interested in wooden art objects, where the skill was generally regarded as fitting into the crafts and trades, and Georgiev supported his early art practice by creating unique pieces of furniture on commission<sup>3</sup>.

Invention, design, the ability to use materials in new and unconventional ways and the creation of new techniques would all become part of Georgiev’s methodology and inform his public art practice. His work not only conforms to stringent Australian safety standards, but also consciously incorporates ‘usability’ features grounded in an awareness of how people interact with sculpture in a public environment. Thus, rather than keep a skateboarder away from a work in the main street, he incorporates a reinforced edge that allows skateboarders to glide along the piece without damaging it (or themselves). He actively invites the skateboarder to interact with the work, and the skater comes to have a personal

relationship with the piece, often developing an awareness of art that did not previously exist. Georgiev's public art has been a component in transforming both his local and the wider Victorian landscape through his accessible and interactive artworks which invite the audience to experience the art object by engaging all senses. He has created more than 30 public sculptures through which he engages in an ongoing dialogue with a broad audience of all ages and backgrounds<sup>4</sup>.

*Water Kite* of 2005, which was commissioned by the City of Greater Dandenong, expresses the uninhibited joy in kite flying and allowing oneself to be at one with the elements in the outdoors. When Georgiev undertook the commission, he found himself struggling against preconceptions about what should appear in a public park. He spoke with children, the principal users of the area and asked them first, what they normally did when they came to the park. After some typical answers such as 'throw a ball,' 'ride a bike,' and 'walk the dog,' Georgiev asked the children to think about things that could be done in the park but which they had never tried. None of the children had ever come to the park to fly a kite, and Georgiev chose kite-flying as a metaphor for reaching beyond the ordinary and expected to try new things<sup>5</sup>.

Georgiev's commissioned public art pieces include a number of 'play sculptures' which encourage people to touch, feel, and immerse themselves in the pieces and also a number of collaborative pieces with a variety of 'communities' in which children, senior citizens, and members of disadvantaged groups have participated in the creative act. *Mulga Bill*, 2005, (Fig.1) brings to life the 1896 Banjo Paterson tale of an overconfident man taking his first bicycle ride<sup>6</sup>. The man quickly loses control of the bicycle and ends up in Dead Man's Creek. He swims ashore, leaving the mangled bicycle behind him, and vows henceforth to stick with journeys on horseback<sup>7</sup>.

*Well Place* (Fig.2) of 2004 was commissioned by the City of Darebin for the grounds of the public library in Preston in the inner northern suburbs of Melbourne. Georgiev collaborated with local seniors from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to create a piece that was representative of the whole community. The piece had also to say something about Preston. Georgiev chose the horse because horses had been part of Preston's industrial history and by fusing the figures of the man and the horse together he stressed the interdependency of the two. The circular form surrounding the figure is suggestive of a well, the place where the community meets, draws water, and exchanges news, and the life source of the community. The man offers the horse water, providing comfort and nourishment, and in return the horse carries the man. The title *Well Place* also refers to the sensation of being well or healthy, in the physical, emotional and spiritual senses of the word, and reflects the objectives of the funding body, The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, or VicHealth, which aims to promote good health and prevent chronic disease<sup>8</sup>.

In 2008 the City of Monash commissioned Georgiev to create a piece for the Wellington Community Centre at Mulgrave. *Stiltwalkers* (Fig.3) is made of stainless steel and utilises a new technique created by Georgiev to etch designs

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into steel. The sculpture depicts three figures elevated above the gardens, walking on stilts. The first figure is situated in a depression in the ground which often fills with water. When a puddle forms, local staff of the Community Centre take the initiative to come out and float rubber ducks on the surface, making it appear as if the first figure has pulled up sharply to watch the ducks. The Mulgrave Community Centre has been used by a variety of community groups, including the Scouts and the Girl Guides<sup>9</sup>, and the sculpture highlights the pleasure to be gained from acquiring new skills and aiming high<sup>10</sup>.

In 2003, with prices in Melbourne rising, Georgiev and his partner and sometimes collaborator, writer Tor Roxburgh, moved out of Melbourne and into the small country town of Ballan in the western Victorian countryside. What appealed to Georgiev immediately on entering Ballan was that sheep were grazing right in the middle of the village, reminding him of Bulgaria. Georgiev and Roxburgh immediately commenced work on constructing an inspirational space which would serve as a home, a studio, and an art gallery, right in the centre of the picturesque town, and the Omnibus Studio/Art Gallery was born. The gallery has not only hosted exhibitions by Georgiev and his collaborators, but also by a number of other local and international artists. Noticing how windy the town was, Georgiev and his partner conceived of an idea which over time would put the town on the tourist map, provide it with a sense of pride and identity, and create employment for locals<sup>11</sup>.

The *1000 Weathervanes in Ballan* project (Fig.4) has the ambitious aim of setting up 1000 pieces of wind art in the draughty town and aims to bring the invisible to visibility by drawing attention to the workings of the wind. Since donating a number of weathervanes for display in the town's main street, Georgiev has received a steady stream of public and private commissions to create one-off weathervanes which can now be seen throughout the town, giving it a unique local character<sup>12</sup>.

One legacy of Georgiev's Bulgarian childhood is a comfort with the collaborative process in creating art. This preference for collaboration both comes naturally to Georgiev, and is a product of the nature of his public art work. In accepting commissions from local councils, schools and landscape architects, Georgiev works closely with the client to establish their needs and preferences, with technicians responsible for ensuring that public safety criteria are met, and with installation staff and maintenance workers responsible for the site. He involves children in the design of their play equipment and also in pieces that will be displayed in their local park. In this way, the local community has a feeling of involvement in, and ownership of, their public art, resulting in his work rarely being vandalised and often protected by the locals.

A major stream of Georgiev's contemporary art practice involves facilitating collaboration between Bulgarian and Australian artists, often featuring real time interactions which span the globe. In March 2011 the Omnibus Gallery participated in a joint exhibition with the National Museum of Earth and People in Sofia. *Stones and Other Earth Pathways* (Fig.5) grew out of the notion that

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Bulgaria and Australia are at the ‘opposite ends of the earth,’ so that if one were to drop a stone through the centre of the earth in Bulgaria, it ‘would most likely land in central Australia’<sup>13</sup>. This international exhibition, curated by Georgiev and Sofia-based sculptor Nikolay Stoichev, explored the notion of an imagined earthly pathway between the two countries<sup>14</sup>. Images from the Australian exhibition were projected in the Bulgarian Museum of Earth and People, while images from the Bulgarian exhibition were projected and streamed via Skype into the gallery in Australia<sup>15</sup>. Georgiev found that in Bulgaria there was considerable interest in his life in ‘remote and exotic’ Australia, while an interest in Bulgaria is reciprocated in Australia<sup>16</sup>.

In 2011, Georgiev also created a public sculpture for his native village of Zabelski Han. *The Dog and His Artist* is a tribute to Georgiev’s Uncle Petar Vasev, a distinguished bassoon player in the Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra who, with his faithful companion Elsie, lives in the tiny village. Georgiev felt that the discarded roof tiles littering the village would make an ideal sculptural material and after working with Tor and Petar to create a frame, he covered the surface with the Turkish-style tiles. Georgiev expected the work to be ephemeral, believing it would not survive the local weather beyond a few weeks, but visitors to the tiny village can still see the statue on the road running from the town of Tran and the Bulgarian-Serbian border crossing. In 2014 Georgiev commemorated the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the village when the soldiers blinded by Basil II at the battle of Belasitsa brought seeds from the battlefield and planted them in the forest, by installing a number of semi-permanent wooden sculptures on the site<sup>17</sup>. Georgiev plans to continue to create new public art for Zabelski Han whenever he visits<sup>18</sup>.

The success of the joint *Stones and Other Earth Pathways* project and the interest it generated in both countries led in 2012 to an invitation to Georgiev from the Resonance Gallery in Plovdiv to participate in the Night of Galleries and Museums. Georgiev, with fellow artists Zandie Acton and Tor Roxburgh, involved the local community in the creation of a huge *Serpent* in Belashtitsa Woods (Fig.6) as part of Global Resonance, an international project of Resonance Gallery. The serpent was created from discarded plastic bottles, which Georgiev says are abundant in Bulgaria<sup>19</sup>, and speaks to both global unity and cultural diversity. The serpent is a potent symbol in many cultures around the world, however its symbolic meaning and associations vary across cultures.

As Georgiev points out: “A contemporary environmentalist would be likely to associate the image of a serpent in the woods with ecological harmony. An Indigenous Australian would probably remember Rainbow Serpent, the creator spirit who emerged from the earth, creating mountain ranges in its wake. A Bulgarian might recall the story of Adam and Eve and the choice Eve made in favour of knowledge and freedom. A Chinese person could be in two minds: thinking of dragons and the good luck they bring and also of the Snake as a zodiac symbol. An Indian or South-East Asian person might recall the stories of the snake deities in Hinduism and Buddhism, which are known to influence fertility,

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prosperity, water and wisdom”<sup>20</sup>.

Collaboration with Resonance Gallery continued with another joint cross-cultural project called *The New 100*, co-curated by Georgiev and Antonia Dimitrova. The inspiration for this exhibition came from the concept of the *100 Tourist Sites of Bulgaria*, a Bulgarian national campaign, established in 1966 to promote tourism among Bulgaria’s most significant cultural, historic, and natural landmarks. The *New 100* touring exhibition promotes a ‘new 100’ destinations constructed from landscapes of personal artistic territory and features 100 local and international artists represented primarily through video installations, in four international venues. The first two stages took place in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, at Resonance Gallery beginning in January 2013<sup>21</sup>. The third stage took place in Venice, Italy. The fourth stage took place in April 2014 in the Half Church Gallery in Greendale, Australia<sup>22</sup>.

Georgiev’s work has appeal across a broad spectrum and is characterised by accessibility and genuine inclusiveness. While his public art has a distinctly Australian flavour, designed for the Australian landscape, employing local motifs and using local materials, his outlook is multicultural and global as he explores ‘pathways’ between cultures. Georgiev works across a variety of media, incorporates insights from a number of disciplines, and consciously combines aesthetics with functionality. His work frequently explores the threshold of public and private space, and he is committed to an art which demystifies the creative process. One of his primary aims in involving children and disenfranchised groups in society in his collaborative practice is to empower them to be creative and adventurous without fear of failure, and to engage with art as a cultural birthright.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev. Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014.

<sup>2</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev. Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014.

<sup>3</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev, Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Georgiev, V.* Public Sculpture. Available at <http://velislavgeorgiev.com/public-art/public-sculpture> [accessed on 25.05.2014]; *ArtAtlas.* Velislav Georgiev. Available at <http://www.artsatlas.com.au/velislavgeorgiev/> [accessed on 25.05.2014]; *Gerogiev, V.* Curriculum Vitae. Available at <http://velislavgeorgiev.com/cv> [accessed on 25.05.2014]

<sup>5</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev, Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014

<sup>6</sup> *Paterson, A.B.* (*‘Banjo’*). Mulga Bill’s Bicycle. – The Sydney Mail, 25 July 1896. Available at <http://www.middlemiss.org/lit/authors/patersonab/poetry/mulgab.html> [accessed on 17.03.2015]

<sup>7</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev, Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014

<sup>8</sup> *VicHealth.* What we do. Available at <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/about/what-we-do> [accessed on 25.05.2014]

<sup>9</sup> *City of Monash.* Mulgrave Community Centre. Available at <http://www.monash.vic.gov.au/Leisure/Community-Halls-Centres/Halls-for-Hire/Mulgrave-Community-Centre-Small-Hall> [accessed on 25.05.2014]

<sup>10</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev, Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014

<sup>11</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev, Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014

<sup>12</sup> *Visit Moorabool.* 1000 Weathervanes in Ballan. Available at <http://1000weathervanesinballan.blogspot.com.au> [accessed on 25.05.2014]; *Visit Moorabool.* 1000 Weathervanes for Ballan.

Available at <http://visitmoorabool.peptolab.com/profile/detail/profile/6> [accessed on 25.05.2014]; *Georgiev, V.* Weathervanes in Ballan. Available at <http://velislavgeorgiev.com/international-local-arts-projects/weathervanes-in-ballan> [accessed on 25.05.2014]; *Highway Traveller.* Ballan Attractions. Available at <http://new.highwaytraveller.com.au/towns/vic/ballan/attractions> [accessed on 25.05.2014]

<sup>13</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev, Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014.

<sup>14</sup> *Georgiev, V.* Stones and Other Earth Pathways. Available at <http://velislavgeorgiev.com/international-local-arts-projects/stones-other-earth-pathways/> [accessed on 25.05.2014]

<sup>15</sup> *ABC Ballarat.* Ballan and Bulgarian artists just a stone throw away. Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/local/videos/2011/03/25/3173835.htm> [accessed on 25.05.2014]

<sup>16</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev, Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014.

<sup>17</sup> *Georgiev, V.* Blind with seeing eyes. Available at <http://velislavgeorgiev.com/international-local-arts-projects/blind-seeing-eyes/> [accessed on 25.05.2014]

<sup>18</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev, Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014

<sup>19</sup> *Pisch, A.* Taped interview with Velislav Georgiev, Ballan, Australia, 25.03.2014

<sup>20</sup> *Georgiev, V.* A Serpent in the Woods. Belashtitsa Forest, Bulgaria: Artist's Statement,' 2012. Available at <http://velislavgeorgiev.com/international-local-arts-projects/serpent-in-woods/> [accessed on 25.05.2014]

<sup>21</sup> *Balkan Resonance Project.* Projects. Available at <http://www.resonancegallery.com/#!/projects/cpqu> [accessed on 25.05.2014]

<sup>22</sup> *Podcasts.* Interview with Antonia Dimitrova. Available at <http://www.sbs.com.au/podcasts/Podcasts/bulgarian/episode/328154/Interview-with-Antonia-Dimitrovainterview> [accessed on 25.05.2014]