

REVIEW

for the scientific and artistic contributions of Mariana Todorova Dafova, PhD for occupying the academic position of Associate Professor in a professional field 8.2. Fine Arts, specialty Photography, for the needs of the Faculty of Fine Arts of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" Plovdiv

I. Information about the competition

The competition for the occupation of the academic position "Associate Professor" in a professional field 8.2. Fine Arts, specialty Photography, is promulgated in the State Gazette, No 63 of 25.07. 2023. Documents for participation in the competition have been submitted by only one candidate – Mariana Todorova Dafova, PhD. The submitted documents show that the candidate covers the required minimum of points for the position of "Associate Professor": all the filled-in data in the scientometric table are correct and supported with evidentiary material. For the purpose of the competition, with Rector's order No. RD-27-122/ 21.09. 2023, a scientific jury is appointed. There are no procedural violations.

II. Information about candidate

Mariana Todorova Dafova graduated Photography (Master's degree) at AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" in 2006. She is a teacher at the Academy in the disciplines History of Photography, Photographic Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries, Applied Photography and Management and Presentation of Photography. In 2022, Mariana Dafova successfully defended her doctoral thesis *Time and Transformation in Photography*.

As a practicing photographer, she is the author of numerous solo exhibitions, among which *Mom, How Are You, Mom* (October 2021), *Time and Transformation of a School in the village of Hvoyna* (2017), *Plovdiv - through My Heart* (2012) and *My Big Friends* (2009/2010). Among her more important participations in group projects at home and abroad are a number of representative exhibitions such as *Plovdiv - the Oldest Living City in Europe* (Leipzig, 2020), in the exhibition *Ancient Plovdiv - a Heritage of Millennia* at the Bulgarian Cultural Institute in Warsaw (2017), as well as her participation at the Plovdiv International Photographic Meetings since 2006. Her photographs were published in the luxury book *Plovdiv - Ancient and Alive* by "Letera publishing house.

Along with her work as a teacher and photographer, Mariana Dafova actively participates in the drafting of the concepts, in the preparation and participation in the student exhibitions of major Photography. Together with her colleagues, she develops internal projects aimed at the development of the specialty and its public visibility. These projects received targeted funding from the Plovdiv Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts and were precisely executed by the candidate and her colleagues from major Photography.

III. Description of the candidate's work

The work of Mariana Dafova PhD, related to her participation in this competition, covers artistic and creative, scientific and teaching activities. She has highlighted in her portfolio five solo exhibitions within the last fourteen years. These are *Mom, How Are You, Mom* – an exhibition within the framework of International Photographic Meetings, Plovdiv (October 16-31, 2021); *We Were Here* (5-16 December 2017) - exhibition at the Boris Hristov House of Culture; *Plovdiv – Through my Heart* (May 2012) in the BARAKA space; *Hvoyna in Four Seasons* in the village of Hvoyna (2012); *My Big Friends* (2009) in Trakart Gallery. These professional achievements outline well the profile of Mariana Dafova and her artistic interests in the fields of documentary photo-narrative and photographic portraiture, as well as the problems of temporal distance as an essential feature of the photographic image. To this should be added other characteristic accents, which are related to the possibilities of the exhibition as a complex work of art: concepts of the individual participations, correspondences with the exhibition environment (especially in the case of the village of Hvoyna), presence of returning leitmotif constructions, traces of intertextuality, etc. – Here I will make the remark that the individual photographs should have been clearly identified in the portfolio (including separately), not only for the external members of the scientific jury and not only for the purpose of reminding those who have probably already seen the exhibitions, but in the first place because of the integrity of the application and the unity of its achievements.

Using as basis her doctoral thesis, Mariana Dafova has published a book with the same title: *Time and Transformation in Photography*. The monograph links separate focuses from different moments in the history of photography, on the one hand, and statements from the theoretical reflection on the photographic image (Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Roland Barthes), on the other. This is an issue related to teaching, but also delineating an important boundary space between "theory", historical manifestations and "practice". Therefore, the experience with the dissertation work is essential both for the candidate and her scientific growth, as well as for her students. A third body of text in the monograph collects separate interpretations, dedicated both to characteristic problems related to the dimensions of time in the photographic image, and to specific observations on the work of some authors (Thomas Hauser, Joachim Schmid, Sonia Stankova, etc.). Among the good hits here, it is worth mentioning the section on the problematization of the concept of "found photography", derived directly from the post-Dada notion of *objet trouvé* – in itself a cornerstone for monographic developments, which provoked many analytical and cultural-historical views – a territory, where the ideas of Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag have already met.

It is safe to say that by collecting and adjusting the individual segments of this work, a much denser picture could have been obtained – deeper in its theoretical basis, more coherent in its substantiation in the modernist project of photography (not least because of the visibility of Benjamin's footsteps), more inventive in her own analyses. But it should be borne in mind that achieving such

density and depth is a very difficult task, which, at least in our country, has not found its solution. Within the parameters of its particular (or partial) solutions, the main scientific work of Mariana Dafova offers completely satisfactory and – especially importantly - applicable results in the teaching practice of the author.

Mariana Dafova's new scientific searches are outlined in her article *The Modern Visual Concept in Photography: Photographic Challenges for Photography Students*, written on the basis of her report in this year's Spring Scientific Readings at AMDFA (with an attached certificate that the material will appear in an anthology). In it, the author continues to build on her observations on the nature of the photographic image by linking the presented notions of conceptuality to the work of her students. At the same time, the contribution and presence of the teacher, who directs the eyes of the young artists in relation to the discussed problems during the classes, appears as a natural transmission between the two units. Further research in this direction requires a clearer definition (including reliable scientific sources) of the concept of conceptual photography.

Mariana Dafova's work as a teacher is described in section II. Here, in view of what has already been said, I will only add the role of the teacher's involvement as a significant mediator between creative and scientific communication, as well as in the dialogue between generations.

IV. Scientific and artistic contributions of the candidate

- Photography in Bulgaria continues to develop – regardless of some individual efforts and achievements – as a markedly practical (and pragmatic) field. In this context, any effort at conceptualization and theoretical reflection can be seen as a contribution. Her consistent involvement in the field, making a daily effort to spread the knowledge of photography among young practitioners captivated (if not blinded) by the rapidly developing technologies, is an undoubted success.

- The attempt to write the territory of the reflection on the photographic image requires a lot of courage and dedication, at least as far as humanities around the world have achieved a lot in this field, while at the same time managing to be at the level of a remarkable artistic practice. However, in our country - it is not superfluous to say - we lack both a thorough and inventive humanitarianism, as well as a penetrating and impactful practice. In this regard, the contribution of Mariana Dafova consists first in the awareness of this deficit, then in its delineation as a necessary intermediate link between "theory" and "practice", and last but not least in the gradual work to fill this deficit – both with the creation of scientific developments and with practical classes and tasks looking for the nature of the photographic image;

- The monographic work of Mariana Dafova has contributed to the connection and mutual discussion of different areas of the photographic problems: historical problematic cores (for example, the problem of shortening the exposure time); perspectives of reflection on the photographic image that place exemplary emphasis on historical cornerstones (example with the relationship of photography to

the culture of surrealism); interpretive attempts, combining approaches established in the scientific literature and own analysis.

- The artistic works of Mariana Dafova also contribute to the process of the important mediation between "theory" and "practice". They not only show students possible directions, but also delineate the boundaries of an intense discussion field, which also includes problematic talk about the nature and the historical development of the photographic image, about the different roles and functions that this image assumes and fulfills in different social and cultural conditions.

In **conclusion**, based on the contributions of Marianna Todorova Dafova in her teaching, scientific and artistic pursuits, I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award her the academic position of "Associate Professor" in professional field 8.2. Fine Art, in major Photography, and I vote "in favor".

Prof Galina Lardeva, PhD

2 November 2023