

"To be radical is to go to the root of the matter. For the artist, however, the root is the artist himself".

Kandy Marxhol: *Critique of Philosophy of Art* from A to B

Les enfants de Ceaușescu et de George Soros

Portrait of Bucharest in 'the 80s

As a result of the construction site open for more than a decade during which time half of the historical center was demolished, the city was permanently covered by a dust cloud, reducing visibility to less than a couple of hundred meters. From the early stages of construction to the last days of the Socialist regime, the building of the People's House was wrapped in a veil of mysterious mist. In the streets, a layer of mud permanently covered a large area of the city. As a result of detours and poor road conditions, traffic congestion was constant and public transportation over-crowded. Street lighting was scarce in the center and barely present in the suburbs.

Since food supplies were rationed, only those officially registered in Bucharest could buy oil, sugar, flour, butter, meat and a few other basic necessities, according to monthly allowances and after endless queuing. A new range of food products entered the everyday vocabulary under funny names like "Computers" (pork heads), "Adidas" (smoked pork feet), "Takimuri" (chicken claws) and a few other hard to describe delicacies of the time, meant to blur the truth that they were barely comestible. As finding food became a mass psychosis, people would wander around the city during the day looking for opportunities to buy goods, leaving the streets dramatically deserted after sunset.

A systematic reduction in providing inhabitants with electricity, water and heating was an established practice of the regime, designed to manage the huge energy demands of industry. In order to reduce petrol consumption, only half the total number of private vehicles could circulate during the weekend, alternating the restriction according to odd or even license plate numbers. TV programming was reduced to only a few hours a day, entirely dedicated to propaganda. Most TV antennae were turned to Sofia, since Bulgarian television was considered more liberal and entertaining.

After the large demolition campaign, stray dogs increased in number taking over streets, parks, public spaces and urban wastelands. In a city of two and a half million inhabitants they became the second large population, after humans. At the end of 1989, the Civic Center was like a ghost town with still uninhabited blocks of flats alternating with hollow concrete structures in the early stages of construction. The People's House, though already inaugurated, had large unfinished areas inside and did not yet function as a building intended to house all the institutions of the Socialist State.

Artistic Practices

Despite the apocalyptic image of the Socialist Republic of Romania in its terminal years, artistic life developed according to its own rhythm and environment - a closed-circuit art scene with no apparent spectacular events and no superstars, apart from

Artistic Practices

those designated by the state. The major player in that game, the Romanian Artists' Union, founded in the late forties following a Soviet model, was the only existing professional association of visual artists. Under this umbrella, several major artistic practices were developed:

Official Art - produced by artists related, in one way or another, to the system, was designed to give an artistic face to the national communist propaganda. Over the decades, official art constantly changed, following changes occurring in the official political discourse. Already in the sixties and seventies, in order to highlight the human face of socialism, it included not only the strict aesthetics of Socialist Realism inspired by Soviet art, but also hybrid forms. Experiments in colour, form and composition influenced by various international trends were combined with local aesthetics, traditions and practices in an attempt to create a sort of new national school of socialist expression.

Double Discourse - many artists constantly practiced a double-faced attitude in order to survive politically and financially. This trend became notorious in the eighties when socialist propaganda retaliated. Doing commissions for the state, works usually related to Ceausescu's cult of personality, but simultaneously, continuing to produce works that could be considered subversive from the official point of view and showing them in personal exhibitions at home or abroad, was a current practice among many well-established artists and others who aspired to a better social and financial position. The construction of the People's House and its complex environment, as the *Apotheoses of Socialism in Romania*, was a gold mine for artists due to its enormous volume of artistic components and details: sculptures, columns, capitals, curls, ornaments, artesian fountains, mosaics, frescoes, paintings, tapestry, furniture, ceramics, metal, glass and interior design. Many artists signed contracts for millions of Lei while pretending they had nothing to do with propaganda.

Outsiders - a relatively limited group of artists chose to occupy a marginal position in relation to the prevailing official art of the time. They attempted to develop an independent artistic discourse free of stereotypes and ideas persistent in the official aesthetic line. It was a kind of art that did not properly fit the demands of socialist society, but was ignored or tolerated as long as it did not generate public interest or become a threat to the art academies and entire new generations of artists. To produce art and art events under such conditions was nothing more than an attitude related to the *creative instinct* and an interior need for expression, but nevertheless avoiding an external contribution towards creating accessories for a political regime that dictated rules and values in all its social spheres.

Artistic Education

The artists' place within the socialist society was a privileged one. Even though their social and economic status diminished constantly over the years, being still able to think, create and act in a different way than the large masses of working people afforded a freedom that was out of reach for all other social categories.

The artistic educational system enjoyed in its turn a privileged

status, as its structure and the relationships between teachers, students and the administration were very different from the other branches of academic education. The limited number of admissions and the large amount of candidates gave rise to a competition that was almost impossible to overcome for those coming from poor social environments. The unofficial coaching system, functioning as a network parallel to the art institutes, was the only chance of success at the admission examination - this system has survived the political changes in 1989 and continues to exist even today in more or less diminished scale. Once admitted, which could have taken many years of trying and failing, things began to relax to a certain extent. In some respects and referring exclusively to the 70s and to the city of Bucharest, the atmosphere did not seem radically different from that of several similar Western institutions. Obviously, the professors were not personalities like Beuys, Paik or Lüpertz, but there were still a few examples to follow among the professors, and especially among the artists that were active in those days and whose names continue to be relevant even today: Bertalan, Neagu, Bernea, Bratescu, Grigorescu and a few others.

One should not conclude that art academies enjoyed an absolute freedom; as Romania was advancing towards cultural, political and economic closure, there began several campaigns meant to restrict the freedom of academic activity and of the students' way of life. The professors, most of them educated during the Stalinist era, were not (with very few exceptions) capable and open-minded enough to understand the recent developments of art. Political education, inoculated through disciplines like Scientific Socialism, Political Economy and Marxism-Leninism, among others, made it very clear that from the viewpoint of the Romanian Communist Party, free-lancers (artists, writers, musicians) were a social category doomed to disappear in a very near future; their place was to be taken by a large mass of amateurs that was going to reach a national scale and gradually absorb the professionals.

Circulation of Information and Ideas

As remnants of the short period of normalization of the 60s, up until the beginning of the 80s the art sections of libraries in Bucharest and probably also those in other large cities, still had subscriptions to art magazines like *Artpress*, *Artforum*, *Domus*, *Projekt*, *Bildendekunst*, *Iskusvo* or *Arta*. Recent volumes dedicated to art history and theory, as well as to the new media: photography, film, video, installation art, land art or performance art, could still be found on the shelves and seen in the special displays advertising the newest acquisitions. And if the titles in the libraries of The Fine Arts Institute, of The Art History Institute, of The Artists' Union, of The Central University Library and of The Library of the Romanian Academy were not enough, you still had a few alternatives: the American Library, the Goethe Institute, the French Institute, the Italian Institute, as well as the similar institutions from other socialist countries.

Even though the exhibition programming did not bear comparison with what was happening in most capital cities in the Western world, every year there were a few exhibitions that deserved attention. Many of them were itinerant or were produced in other cities of the country; they focused on Romanian contemporary artists and major themes: *Art and the City* (Bucharest), *Study*

(Timisoara), *Writing* (Bucharest), *Expression of the Human Body* (Bucharest), *Object Space* (Bucharest), *Mirror Space* (Bucharest), *Mobil Photography* (Oradea), *Medium* (Sf. Gheorghe). At the same time, one could see regularly enough a series of large exhibitions from abroad, following the tendencies of international art at work in the United States, The Federal German Republic, France or Scandinavia, and, obviously, in other socialist countries. Yet all these were not considered as being the priorities of artistic education and of socialist art and were all carefully thought out so as not to eclipse the propagandistic enthusiasm that was manifesting itself in all its fervor in laudatory, commemorative, annual, republican, municipal exhibitions and the *National Festival Celebrating Romania*.

Even though many students and artists did not visit the libraries, did not pay very much attention to important artistic events and showed fear, justified or not, of visiting foreign cultural institutes, the minimum information necessary for making up a fairly clear image of what was happening on the international artistic stage was still available.

Atelier 35

A policy of austerity, centralization, cultural standardization and ideological intolerance was intended to lead to the edification of the *Socialist Multilateral Developed Society*, a concept and program launched by the so-called *Thesis from June 1971* of the Romanian Communist Party, through a long process which extended to every social activity and lasted until the system's collapse. It was in this context that, *Atelier 35*, formerly a series of *Creative Circles of Young Artists* initiated around the *Romanian Artists' Union*, became in the 80s a centralized organization within the *Romanian Artists' Union*, although financiall, logistically and ideologically supported by the *Union of Communist Youth*. Despite being platforms dedicated to artistic creation (literature, visual arts, film, music), in socialist society, *creative circles* were functioned as an organized system for control, surveillance and ideological guidance.

Members of *Atelier 35* were chosen among the graduates of art institutes and could activate until the age of 35 under this umbrella, while waiting to become members of the *Romanian Artists' Union* and acquiring full professional artist status, as required in State-Socialism.

Young artists benefitted from stipends, exhibition spaces, studios, material and financial support for publications, excursions, documentation trips or participation in art symposiums, all of this according to availability, without major embarrassing compromises, obviously, and within the limits imposed by everyone's own conscience. The temptation to acquire a more comfortable social and economic status by producing artworks and accessories for the *Ceausist Propaganda* was always an alternative for many artists.

The progressive deterioration of material conditions and the intensifying control over artistic creation on all levels led to increased restrictions on freedom of expression. Artistic activity became limited to just a few official channels: national, regional or municipal exhibitions that followed a strict program and adhered to the approved propaganda topics imposed by the *National-*

Communist tendencies of the régime. Although the galleries of the Artists' Union were still available for solo and group exhibitions organized by artists and art critics, their program was closely watched by the leadership of the Artists' Union, the Council of Culture and Socialist Education or by the propaganda departments of the Communist Party and the Union of Communist Youth.

Alternatives

There are very few artistic events that can be classified as underground; therefore, we cannot talk about any proper underground movement within the field of the Romanian art during state-socialism. There were only a few small nuclei of artists that functioned independently from one another and were scattered in Bucharest and other cities in the country. The aspiration to freedom of expression, the passive resistance to the Communist propaganda and the spirit of rebellion had a more or less individual character. Those who were motivated and strong enough to fight it could have overcome any kind of political, economic or social pressure; evasion, subversive action and the ability to use the system were practices that one could have tried out more or less successfully.

Nevertheless, by their own nature, many of the events that could have aspired to such a status took place in exhibition spaces, art-symposiums, artist-residences or studios that were connected one way or another to the Artists' Union, the Atelier 35, the Councils for Culture and Socialist Education or the Union of Communist Youth; therefore, the term is inadequate, although some may think they had been acting underground. Artistic life survives and goes on in any social system, may it be an oppressive one. The inner need to reach a high level of artistic expression is as acute as the need to reach a high social and economic status, leading sometimes to confusing the two components, which do not necessarily derive from one another.

Mail Art or Never

The Mail Art wave reached the Romanian art scene at the end of the 70s, even spontaneous forms (connected or not to the international movement), could be traced before. The trend has gained popularity in the early 80s - up to the climax of the events from December '89 and gradually disappears almost entirely after, when internet took over. Exchanges of forms with artistic potential, documents and information by post were increasing, while the Romanian society was isolating herself from the rest of the world by restricting freedom of expression, information, communication and circulation, a strategy imposed by the National Communist regime in its terminal stage. The Mail Art *frenzy* gained its apogee together with the project Mail Art / Arta Postala, initiated by Mircea Florian, Dan Mihăltianu and Andrei Oisteanu in 1985. Conceived as a platform for artistic and social interaction, with the aim of launching, consolidate and extend a national alternative network connected to the international mail art movement. Communication with the international art world was a vital need for alternative Romanian artists in that moment and the flux of mail art exchange was one of the few channels to signalize their activity and existence.

Intelligentsia - Priviligentsia - Emergentsia

Even if, theoretically, they seem to represent diverging interest and functions, the *Intelligentsia* and the *Priviligentsia* are the two components of the cultural and political elite that continually flirt with each other in Socialist Society. The former plays the part of 'social critic', obviously within the very narrow limits, legal or illegal, imposed by the system, while the latter plays the part of the guardian, manager and beneficiary of the established régime. The *Intelligentsia* played a certain role in the implementation of Communism, however, after the consolidation of the regime it could only play the part of illustrator or analyst of socialist reality, which it did with a wide range of attitudes, from emulation to servility and even daring "constructive criticism" or "cultural resistance", dissidence being extremely rare and rather singular.

After WW2 the Romanian *Intelligentsia* was slaughtered in work camps and prisons by the régime implemented by the Soviets. It was only after Nicolae Ceausescu came to power that, through a general amnesty of political prisoners in 1965, we could talk about a *New Romanian Intelligentsia* which brought together existing elements from the left with apolitical thinkers and even elements from the right, all of whom had survived the Gulag and re-conciliated with the new status quo. The *New Intelligentsia* practised, as a declaration of faith, *Oppositional Consciousness*, as Georg Lukács called it, an exquisite version of *Class Consciousness* that enabled the intellectual elite to think, reflect and act differently from the majority (the proletariat or the working class, in this case).

The *Priviligentsia* consisted not only of the members of the *Nomenklatura* (high-ranking Party and State officials), but also of the whole cultural, educational, economical, commercial, industrial, diplomatic, intelligence and defence system of the Socialist State, and subsequently, people who would hold key positions within these systems as well as their extended network and entourage (apparatchiks, subordinates, acolytes, family). Due to the fact that they were in control of the flow of information about the stockpile, production and importation of cultural and material goods, they were the first to have access to them, to make use of or to distribute those commodities according to the conventions established by the Socialist Society, according to the Party guidelines of the moment and sometimes according to their own free will.

The permanent reciprocal fascination between the *Priviligentsia* and the *Intelligentsia* follows the classical pattern of attraction between "Power" and "Spirit". On one side, the "Ruling Class" would, as a mark of prestige, cultivate a wide range of exotic characters from buffoons to philosophers. On the other side, the "Cultural Class" would be permanently looking for protectors and sponsors. The relationship is made even more complex by the *Intelligentsia's* constant need to hold functions within the structures of power and reciprocally, the tendency of the children of *Nomenklatura* to follow a cultural rather than a political career.

Despite the tensions of the coupling over time, the symbiosis *Intelligentsia - Priviligentsia* was in fact the force that finally led to the fall of Communism in Romania, when the system became no longer viable (efficient). There was then the emergence of a

new system using the same human raw material, which in the sense of natural selection made survival possible for the most adapted specimens, perhaps as an illustration of theories of *Social Darwinism*. Representatives of these survivors, the *Emergentsia* were included in those who took hold of the leading positions (cultural, political and economical) from time zero (December, 22, 1989) in the *New Romanian Society*.

Templet Revolution

In retrospect, it becomes obvious that what happened in Romania in December 1989 was like a blueprint for all that followed and that will come next in the social upheavals that occurred in the world from that time on. That is because the *Romanian Revolution* included the whole range of revolutionary practices, from non-violence to vandalism, from political lynching to murder, and from social unrest to coup d'état. Romania was the theatre of social experiments and a testing laboratory of new revolutionary techniques that would later become a *Revolutionary Knowhow Kit*, ready to be exported according to the free market rule of supply and demand.

By December 1989 Europe had already witnessed the *Velvet Revolution / Gentle Revolution* in Prague and Bratislava, and the collapse of the *Berlin Wall* under civic pressure on November 9, preceded by the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria in March which had led to major changes in the Hungarian political system, while most of Communist Parties in the Eastern Countries were undergoing a process of reformation. All of this took place under the watchful eye of Moscow. Thus the bloodshed, the material and social losses that took place in Romania were senseless. The transition towards a new political direction could have been done more efficiently, the more so because the main actors knew very well the nature of the international scenario of the play. It goes without saying that the confusion and chaos that was generated, maintained and manipulated by those in control was intended primarily to legitimate the new power elite and to refresh a new beginning by cultivating the same clientele.

Present Shock

Shortly after the execution of the presidential couple in December 1989, the nation was confronted with a horrible inheritance – too big a House for such a poor People. National opinion was divided between, on the one hand, admiration, pride, satisfaction or approbation and on the other, bewilderment, surprise, embarrassment, disgust or anger. Previously, everyone had tried to cope with the situation as well as they could, either by ignoring the existence of the huge construction site in the middle of Bucharest, or by trying to take advantage of it by becoming actively involved in the process.

The deep and irreversible changes brought to bear on the social, economic and cultural fields of Bucharest and of Romania as a whole, by the construction of the Bucharest Civic Center and the People's House, can never be properly evaluated. The impact was in the order of a nuclear explosion, which left behind an indelible mushroom cloud of concrete that cannot be blown away by the wind, washed away by rain or buried. Its radiation will not diminish

Present Shock

as time goes by. No one can tell whether its effects will be harmful or benign. What can be observed for the time being is the division of Romanian society, which nevertheless continues the struggle to occupy new territories that have opened up after the collapse of communism.

More than two decades after Ceausescu, many of the features I have mentioned are still to be seen behind huge billboards covering the facades of buildings in Bucharest. Other aspects of daily existence during the last decades of *Real Socialism* in Romania - the fear, the humiliation, the confusion, the alienation, the duplicity and opportunism - did not fade from people's consciousness. They were merely covered over by a thin layer of new attitudes and behaviours in a rapid attempt to adjust to the new economic, political, social and cultural environment called "Transition".

Open Transition

Since December 1989, the immense majority of members of the Romanian Communist Party considered themselves absolved of any responsibility concerning their belonging to the Party that had led Romania for half a century. It is thought that at least at the beginning of their party memberships, Romanian communists were true believers, or at least well intentioned and not merely opportunists, something that is obviously difficult to verify. As a consequence of the fall of the régime their past was wiped out of the *Collective Memory*.

Declared illegal and abolished by a government decree shortly afterwards, the Romanian Communist Party did not engage in illegal activities, as was expected from a party with the highest membership of any country in the Eastern Bloc (16% to 18% of the population, after some estimations), its members scattered throughout all the newly-created political formations.

Almost two decades later, in December 2006, the *Communist Régime* was officially declared illegal and criminal. It was not a secret that the *Communist State* had been mostly implemented through criminal means, and Romania, most of all, was an example up until the end. What makes it absurd and tragic at the same time is that, somehow, an important part of the population suffered, and took advantage, simultaneously or successively, of the communist régime. In almost every family there are people persecuted, victims, persecutors, accomplices, followers, collaborators or associates of the régime. Sometimes, the same person would experience several or all of the situations mentioned above in a lifetime.

As Romania belongs to a conglomeration of states led by communist régimes that were formerly sponsored by Moscow, the conviction of Communism should be an international joint platform, an effort whose impact should be not only symbolic and local, but also effective and global, similar to the worldwide condemnation of Fascism. Of course many socialist and communist ideas are still considered to be progressive, only the injustice and the crimes committed in the name of those ideals should be condemned and this is not an easy task.

It is significant that the members of the Communist Party, except

for a few special cases, the Ceausescu family, close collaborators and high-ranking officials, had no difficulty, after 1989, embarking upon political, economic or cultural careers or even becoming champions of the denunciation of communism if that could advance their career in any way. Of course criticism can be most effective when it comes from *connaisseurs* (people that were inside of the inner circle) and their right to exercise criticism could not be denied, but rather welcomed.

The transition from *Socialism to Officialism* - a state of grace, where *Meritocracy*, *Plutocracy*, *Profitoracy*, and *Kleptocracy* seem to be institutionalized and officialized as part of the generalized corruption - has been successfully implemented. If in *State-Socialism* the very existence of those components and the corruption itself were denied - there existed a kind of permanent hysteria about the eradication of corruption, which was defined in different terms: lack of socialist consciousness, ideological backwardness and even undermining of the socialist economy - in the *Post-Socialist Romanian State* they become part of the system and the war against corruption, an already-lost battle.

The 1990s was a tumultuous decade of transition in Romania and was marked by significant social disturbance that began immediately after the fall of the Ceausescu Regime. There was a three-month occupation of the University Square by pro-democratic and anti-communism forces, followed by several brutal invasions by the Jiu Valley miners in Bucharest, designed to obstruct the democratization process, permanent conflicts between official power and opposition groups, between different fractions of the main political parties, between different fractions of the former and the actual secret police. This somber atmosphere, enhanced by astronomic inflation, the collapse of industry and devastating unemployment rates, was the hostile environment for the new, fragile institutions of a fledgling democracy. The fact that Romania has managed to overcome all those difficulties is nothing short of amazing and in the end, all the forces involved in this process seem to have played a constructive role.

Democracy

It would have been a positive fact if the philanthropist George Soros, the American multimillionaire of East-European origins, had remained true to his reputation of *Robin Hood* who takes from the rich, through spectacular financial speculations on the international stock-market, and gives to the poor from the former *Socialist Camp* and the *Underdeveloped World* with a view to consolidate *Civil Society* and the building of *Democracy*. Many of his initiatives, like, the *Open Society Foundations* and the *Soros Centres for Contemporary Art*, had an immediate positive impact on the strengthening of a democratic spirit and a new cultural climate in Eastern Europe.

For the time being, Soros' name remains most often connected with US institutions involved in exporting democracy and financing political changes around the world, enterprises that may have destabilized and endangered global peace, the very motivation of those actions. Gene Sharp, the theoretician of nonviolent action and George Soros, the financial guru, seem to be the mentors and

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sponsors, among others, of *Otpor* the Belgrade-based civil youth initiative, instrumental in the overthrow of Milosevic. Since then, *Otpor* has developed the *Center for Applied Non Violent Actions* and *Strategies (CANVAS)* as a training and inspirational platform for the many revolutionary events happening globally, from *Colour Revolutions* to the *Arab Spring*, not to forget the *Occupy Movement*. This is just the tip of the iceberg of a strategy ignored by most analysts, (deliberately or not), and until relatively recently, completely absent as a topic of international public debate. Taking into account the versatile character of American foreign policy, it remains to be seen how all this will evolve in the future.

Scene Shift

To understand recent developments in Romanian art is not an easy task since the last two decades have been severed from the previous ones by the events of December 1989, considered the year zero of the *New Romanian Contemporary Art*. Whatever of significance that occurred in this field before 1989 is now considered to be purely accidental and contaminated by the communist régime in power for half a century. Moreover, there exist few efficient attempts in analyzing, discussing and underlining the continuation of the "outsider" artistic research that now forms the ground for current developments and trends. The hiatus that occurred in the realms of social and political life is assumed to have had the same impact on artistic life. We should keep in mind, however, that artistic development is a long-term process, which has its own mechanisms that can withstand rapid social change. There are multiple layers of reality and everyone involved in this process has his or her own personal version.

The shift from a unique and centralized art institution, the Romanian Artists' Union, that represented artists' interests and dealt with all aspects of production, exhibit and criticism, to the current multitude of institutions, associations, foundations, private galleries and magazines dealing with professional art, has happened gradually. It started with the *Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts*, as part of a network developed across the entire former Eastern Block with its headquarters in New York, under the auspices of the *Open Society Foundation*, which acted as a model for the new art scene in Romania and the other former satellites of the Soviet Union. While it is still too early to judge whether the considerable resources involved in this enterprise - financial, artistic expertise, logistics and lobbying - have played an essential role in the formation of an entire new generation of artists, it is by this time quite clear that certain artists and art-operators have already greatly benefited.

Despite this, or maybe because of all of this dysfunction and inherited discontinuities, the *New Romanian Art Scene* which emerged in the new millennium is divided and fractured on multiple layers between generations, between political and aesthetic issues, between social and economic topics, between institutional platforms and institutional critique. Irreconcilable positions and radicalization are the principle trends and this has produced a state of permanent contestation as the new normal, which is perhaps the very engine of art itself.

text revision Anne Ramsden

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Cover: Les enfants de Ceaușescu et de George Soros Index Box, 2007, wood, plexiglass, laser print, 35 x 14 x 10 cm

Poster: Le Dégeuner, 1982-83 black and white silver print, dimension variable

