

**Calin Dan**

The aesthetics of poverty

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the [info@institute.hr](mailto:info@institute.hr).

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I\_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, [www.institute.hr](http://www.institute.hr).

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

## Calin Dan

### The aesthetics of poverty

1. The experimental sector of a culture is as developed as the non-experimental sector allows it to be. 2. Culture is a machine cloning the social-political environment where it is supposed to function. 3. A conservative society is reflected in a conservative culture, and the amount of freedom in the two systems is relatively equal. 4. Cultural and technological experiments are closely connected.

**Some background.** At the peak of its economic development (i.e., the mid 30s), Romania was still an agricultural country with a majority of its population living in small, almost self-sufficient communities, and with towns dominated by a suburban mentality. Conditions changed after 1947, with the imposition of the communist regime which imported from Russia, along with other oppressive techniques, forced industrial development, thereby displacing large segments of the population from villages to urban areas. This internal migration gave birth to a new class, alienated from both peasants' and workers' conditions, and trying to obtain economic benefits by commuting between a permanent job in the factory and agricultural work at the weekend. This was a class with an ambiguous relationship with technology, which it accepted on the functional level but rejected on the symbolic one, as representing a lifestyle which destroyed traditional values.

In that context of a schizophrenic relationship with modernity, the new media were seen by the intelligentsia as entertainment tools, with no

significant cultural role. In the period between the world wars, for instance, only a few intellectuals dedicated any effort to the production and analysis of cinema as a carrier of a new aesthetic. Even for the Romanian avant-garde movements of that period, technology was just an exalted metaphor to be used in literary discourses. And if my information is correct, we have here the only case of a European avant-garde that ignored photography and film as instruments for artistic research.

After World War II, the new political power organized cultural entertainment to its advantage, undermining the development of new media seen from now on by the oppressed intellectual class as principally a vicious tool for deliberate manipulation. The mediocrity of photojournalism and the aggressive propaganda use of film, and eventually television productions, further encouraged the perception of the old media, rather than the new, as the only means of expressing political opposition. This accompanied the Romanian cultural gestalt which can be defined as fundamentally pessimistic: that all permanent truths belong to the "past," and the only motivation for current creative activities is the revival and/or protection of that heritage.

Another explanation for the underdevelopment of media-based art in Romania lies in the total control the communist government had over all the means of expression, with a special concern for those subject to technical reproduction. Solitary activities such as painting and sculpture were harmless because they were basically remote and available publicly in a limited way. But from photography and film to printed materials (literature - the big "enemy" of the regime but also the more innocent art of engravings), everything was submitted to close surveillance via regulations, ideological censorship, economic pressure, and, last but not least, a network of hidden informers.

**More background.** The expanding gap between Romanian intellectuals and the media was not entirely replicated in the attitude of the masses. During the mid 60s and 70s, imports of B and C-rated movies were well-received, as was the entertainment provided by local television: Western European movies, American soap operas, international soccer games, local cabaret, as well as some neutral cultural documentaries. When film importations were drastically reduced and the national television broadcasting limited to a daily show of two hours focusing on the image of the dictator, the media harmony vanished. Alternatives emerged, however.

First, an industry of pirated videotapes, either dubbed or subtitled in Romanian, resulted in the replacement of the boredom of movie theatres with more exciting private screenings. Next, the booming development of illegal cable networks along with the use of satellite allowed television addicts to receive broadcasts from the stations of the neighbouring countries (Hungary, the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Russia) and more B and C movies. In a more private and individualized sphere, a black market of videocassette players and video cameras enabled the wealthier upper class to engage in the recording of home life and family events. Consequently, with the political opening of December 1989, Romania was prepared, at least on the level of consumers, to handle the impact of the new media.

**The aesthetics of poverty.** A history of the moving image in Romanian art has to start with the production of Super 8 mm and 16 mm film. Private ownership of such equipment was exceptional. If my information is correct, there were only two cases: Constantin Flondor and Doru Tulcan from the group "Sigma" in Timisoara, and Ion Grigorescu in Bucuresti. The latter offered his skills as a cameraman to some of his colleagues: Geta Bratescu, Stefan Kancsura, Eugenia Pop. Exceptions to this early production format were Wanda Mihuleac and Alexandru Chira, who were able to organize the production of films on 35 mm, with professional equipment and assistance.

Apart from Flondor, Tulcan, and Grigorescu, no-one was able to establish a sustained and direct contact with the relevant technology, and therefore to go beyond the mediated transcription of ideas into a closer questioning of the medium itself.

On the other hand, the amateur filming techniques and poor editing conditions gave those films a genuine quality, similar to what impresses us in old wooden objects from the peasant household. Although made some twenty to thirty years ago, those films seem to belong to an even earlier period - their true kinship is with films of the silent era. The fuzziness; the flickering black-and-white images or the crude colors; the long sequences of inaction justified only by fascination with movement; eventually the absence of sound are all characteristics that make these films both mysterious and superficial, serious and naive, in the ambiguous manner of children's games of secrecy. They belong, in fact, to the childhood of cinema, possessing their own dualism of seeming old and fresh, outdated yet vivid, exciting and dull - oppositions which can be found in most super-8 and 16 mm films when seen in the hyper-visual reality of the 1990s.

Still, the aesthetics of poverty in Romanian experimental film was not just mimed but dramatically genuine, due to the scarcity of materials. The problem with the productions of those "heroic" years is that they can address only a limited audience, one which understands the codes and enjoys the understatements, beyond the unstructured narratives. But the "Multivision" performance-projection of the Sigma group and the films of Ion Grigorescu and Geta Bratescu are pieces of considerable value, worthy of more careful re-evaluation, both locally and internationally.

A different story is that of the "Kinemaikon" club from Arad, where in the 80s a few outsiders (poets, critics, bohemians without academic qualifications, and some art college graduates), under the supervision of Gheorghe Sabau, pursued research on the alternative possibilities of 35 mm

film. Their approach was rather systematic, and several years of individual and collective efforts resulted in a series of movies with a variety of approaches to this medium, including surrealist scripts, actuality shots, lyrical fictions, and abstract essays. The technical solutions were quite sophisticated for the conditions, including original soundtracks, animation effects and careful editing cuts. "Kinemaikon" was actually more than a production facility and a workshop - it served as a platform for debates concerning the language of the moving image; an interface with domains such as philosophy, literature, music and the visual arts; and also as a place for the promotion of ideas subversive to the mainstream of official art.

**Pieces of history.** The public screenings of experimental films in communist Romania were marginal events, almost always facilitated by others (such as exhibitions and symposia), bringing together the same group of intellectuals who were, at different levels and by various means, opposing the cultural policies of the regime. Exhaustion in the fight with the oppressive control via economic and political censorship and perhaps lack of invention in finding alternative resources make those events difficult to reconstruct in the absence of comprehensive catalogues and accurate media coverage. It is still necessary to mention some theme-oriented exhibitions which also promoted experimental movies: "Arta si Energie" (Art and Energy) at Galeria Noua, Bucuresti - a place which rapidly attained fame in the early 70s, before being abusively closed by the authorities; "Studiu" (Study) 1, 2, at Galeria Bastion and other venues from Timisoara; "Om, Oras, Natura" (The Human Being, the City and Nature), at Galeria Cupola, Iasi; "Medium '81", Sfantu Gheorghe; "Scrierea" (Writing) and "Spatiul Oglinda" (The Mirror-Space), both at the Architecture High School, Bucuresti; and "Artistii si Fotografia" (Artists and Photography), a yearly event at the "Friedrich Schiller Kulturhaus", tolerated in Bucuresti under the "excuse" of cultural activities of the German minority.

Given the lack of projection equipment, private screenings were hard to organize. They were also subject to inquiries from the political police who, yet again, seemed to have greater understanding than the artists of the potential danger that could result from uncontrolled production and distribution of moving images. Despite the carefully selected circle of people allowed to attend, screenings were inevitably followed by interrogations and demands for written statements as to the "purpose" of the event. Such actions became increasingly aggressive during the 1980s and played a prominent role in the reduction and finally complete cessation of such activity during the last years of the dictatorship.

**Motivations and failures.** Experimental film production in Romania was motivated by an increasing interest in the human body, and a new approach to the relationship with nature. The first motivation is one which has played a role in the history of experimental films (video) internationally, whereas the second, developing under the influence of Conceptual art, is actually more closely connected to the Romanian tradition of landscape painting.

Testimonies related to the crisis of the body were a sensitive topic for communist censorship, which responded to it in terms of the same principles of morality used by the orthodox church, both before and after communism. As a result, the films of Ion Grigorescu - films in which Tantra symbolism, the aesthetics of the movement from Vienna, Aktionismus aesthetics, and other cultural references, were combined to produce a personal ideology - led to his suppression as an undesirable figure, completely banned from the local art scene in the 80s. At the same time, Constantin Flondor and Doru Tulcan, the most representative names from the nature-revival trend, returned to landscape painting, frustrated by the media-hostile environment of the period.

**Ex nihilo.** The owners of video cameras before December 1989 were, apart from some members of the secret services or people related to that system,



either cameramen trained for filming on 35 mm, or employees of the national TV company. Because of the expense, and because those professional groups were basically unwilling to mingle with the dubious alternative scene, video art was a luxurious dream with no practicality in that period. Nevertheless, some attempts were made to provide video documentation of art events. For example, "House Party" 1 and 2 - a series of short performances organized by Nadina and Decebal Scriba in their house, garden and annexes, with the participation of some artists/friends; and some clips made in the installations of the exhibition "Spatiul Oglinda." On both occasions, the equipment and the technical assistance were provided by Mihai Bojor, a botanist who developed his video skills while studying the flora of the Himalayas. The "parties" were attended, besides the hosts, by Wanda Mihuleac, Josif Kiraly, Dan Mihaltianu, Calin Dan, Andrei Oisteanu, Teodor Graur, Dan Stanciu. At "Spatiul Oglinda," Arina Ailincai, Mircea Florian and Petru Rusu performed in front of the camera.

After December 1989, Geta Bratescu and the film director Alexandru Solomon started a collaboration which resulted in two videos, adapting to this new medium themes and rhetoric used by the artist some twenty years earlier. The same Alexandru Solomon, together with Radu Igazsag (coming from the visual arts field and with experience in animation movies) has written several films ("Ciaccona" and "Babel" among others) with high professional standards, as well as a few well-received, award-winning documentaries.

Ion Grigorescu continued his personal involvement with the moving image, this time using a cheap SVHS handycam. The new medium didn't alter Grigorescu's primitive aesthetics, and although the subjects lost some of the wildness of his youth, the whole production has the same anti-narrative structure, with long, occasionally unfocused, and seemingly unstructured camera angles. Even the scratches on the film have been replicated by the drop-outs of the low quality tape.

Also noteworthy is the video "Draculaland 3" by subREAL, a group which aimed to use video as a minimal tool for the exploration of the chaotic realities in post-December Romania. Recorded with a Hi 8 handycam, but edited in a professional studio, the movie makes an implicit statement against any pretentious attempts at image manipulation, avoiding at the same time the clichés of poverty characteristic of previous experimental film productions.

A break-through for the development of video art in Romania was the exhibition "Ex Oriente Lux" (Sala Dalles, Bucuresti), which joined the energies of ten local artists and an international advisory team with the financial support of the SCCA, Bucuresti. The immediate result was a set of video-installations with a reasonably high level of artistic accomplishment. On a longer projectory, ExOL proved that, beyond the financial handicap, a new technological approach to artistic production was both possible and necessary. Artists such as Alexandru Patatics, Sorin Vreme, Dan Perjovschi, Lia Perjovschi, Jozsef Bartha, László Ujvárossy (all participants in the exhibition), Sándor Bartha and Marilena Preda-Sânc later developed a more sustained relationship with video, either as an independent medium or as an element in their installations.

The studio Fundatia Arte Vizuale (The Visual Art Foundation) played an important role in the process of accomodating the new medium in Romania. FAV offered the new video artists (and also the video documentarists) a generous infrastructure, assisting with the production of almost all the art-related videos and video installations realized in the last six years.

An interesting case is that of Horia Bernea, a middle generation painter who, at another media-based exhibition of the SCCA ("010101..." Muzeul Taranului Român, Bucuresti), produced a video commentary for one of his easel paintings. The artist put himself in the ideal position of a movie

maker, writing (actually drawing) the script, directing the cameraman and supervising the editing of sound and image, all in cooperation with a professional crew. The result is consistent with the lifelong obsessions of this difficult artist, paying at the same time "a cynical tribute to the idea of actuality and objectivity" (H. B.) as expressed in video clips, video documentaries and advertising.

An opposite situation is represented by Matei Bejenaru, a fresh graduate of the art college in Iasi, who uses the medium at the low technical level, while maintaining a strong hold on the conceptual side. Until now he has combined a narcissistic use of his own body (common to all beginners in video-performances), with a more sensitive reflection of his social environment - the typical new urban area populated with frustrated refugees from a destroyed countryside.

**Emergency.** In Romania, new technologies have always been distant, psychologically and economically, a factor which places them beyond doubt for people who believe in them, somewhat in the same way that God, the Church, the Fatherland, and the Army tend to be beyond doubt for much of the populace. This may be a central danger, however, for Romanian media arts - the presence of a submissive attitude, deriving from a longstanding complex of technological and political inferiority. But the new media have the potential to carry more information and to reach a broader audience than the old. In that respect, the extension of computer networks in the country may provide a turning point in the interrelationships of the visual arts, technology and politics, a triad which has yet to find its place in the local environment. Electronic developments such as the World Wide Web, to the extent that they penetrate Romania, may well remain little more than instruments of consumer manipulation if visual artists are not prepared to encounter and use this graphic and interactive interface. The exhibition "010101..." was, in this sense, an attempt to direct computer storage and communication technologies toward social and political

awareness and use. More informal and more direct methods must be found to bring together programmers, designers, artists, and the public.

**Farewell.** "The lessons of the 90s have been multiple and they've been harsh: not the least of which is that data will find a way, and its way is not necessarily about becoming human." And somewhere before that: "Like all cultural movements before it, tech charisma lasts for only one brief, shining instant, and then it fades away into the grim sociology of rationalized technology..." (Arthur & Marilouise Kroker, "Johnny Mnemonic: The Day Cyberpunk Died", in A. & M. Kroker, *Hacking the Future. Stories For the Flesh-Eating 90s*, 1996, Montreal)

When our decade the 90s began, cyberpunk became a tempting metaphor in the ruined landscape offered by the freshly liberated Romania.

Implementing new media in collapsed societies and providing them with the contrasting glamour of electronic machines looked in the end like a more realistic possibility for reaching cyberpunk than waiting for the capitalist colossus to collapse into a cyber-Babylon, as suggested by Gibson, Sterling and other Blade Runners.

New media as the magical equalizer of the unequal (primarily of the East with the West); as the gatherer of the isolated weak into the united strong; as the healer of such mortal diseases as provincialism, fear and violence; new media as a provider of democratic values and as a carrier of essential information. ...these overly ambitious goals, advertising video and computers as the ultimate solution for too many and long-lasting weaknesses, are now fading, together with the last echoes of the worldwide cyber-enthusiasm of the 80s.

Maybe this loss of illusions is the moment of truth for marginal cultures such as the Romanian one, cultures which have to make room for alien influences but at the same time define their autonomy in a wider context. If the pressure of this context is losing some of its aggressiveness, the

developments can become, if not actually pleasant, at least less artificial. "Money for some, freedom for all" sounds as convincing as "Information wants to be free," with the difference that it is a more realistic statement for the 90s.

Experimenting, and gathering the conclusions of your experiments into a new lifestyle, are two different things. But cultures, like life itself, do not follow a unique set of laws. A conservative society which accepts its condition by openly promoting a conservative culture shouldn't be discriminated against by others, who are hiding the same tendencies under more sophisticated facades. Accepting the rule of the majority is at least a method of keeping the peace, if not a carrier of change. And there are still places where peace is considered the most valuable thing.

More information on the subject in "Ex Oriente Lux", a special issue of "Arta" magazine, November 1993, and also in my texts: "Ungewisses. Junge rumänische Künstler in den 80er Jahren", *Neue Bildende Kunst*, 1/1991, p.34-36. "Erste Schritte. Kurzer Überblick über die rumänische Kunst in der 90er Jahre", *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen Katalog*, Stuttgart, 1993. "The Enemy in the House. About the Moving Image in Romania", *The European Media Art Festival Catalogue*, Osnabrück, 1993, p. 124-132.