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Romania – Exhibition Practice in the
90s

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Romania



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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.

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.

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.

Judith Angel

Romania—Exhibition Practice in the 90s

Seen in retrospect, the processes that have shaped Romanian art in the 90s can be summed up just by mentioning a few main aspects. These are a re-evaluation of the artistic attitude, of language and of means of expression, and a re-definition of the position and role of art and the artist within a society undergoing transition - that is to say, the proposal of alternative solutions for the orientation of artistic practice. These processes are usually defined by focusing on the production of art in relation to the social context. The framework of this very relationship—the exhibition or the artistic manifestation—is thereby accorded a neutral position, that of a chronological, thematic and documentary landmark. Inasmuch as exhibitions are regarded as mediums to address the issues of the present, they go beyond the mere presentation of art. Considered as forms of practice, as actions directed according to motives and intentions, exhibitions are no longer neutral: they respond to the needs of the social-artistic context through the way they select and approach issues they consider topical, assert certain positions while questioning others, challenge things and install alternatives to the situations, facts and visions they challenge.

There is a relatively small number of significant exhibitions and a lack of coherence in the artistic field, because the relations between the several elements involved in the production, spread and reception of artistic values are not well-structured. So, there are few guarantees that an analysis of exhibition practice in the contemporary Romanian context could be efficient. But there are reasons for such a discussion to take place. Even if the form of intentions and alternatives proposed by certain artistic manifestations has not been clear enough or sufficiently brought to awareness, in the long run it has had important effects. In the case of the exhibitions that have been perceived as a means for an active involvement

in art and society, the interesting thing is not only the implicit positions and points of view to which the events have claimed to offer an alternative. The idea of a project-type exhibition has spread, which has had an impact not only on the curator's mentality, but also on the artists' minds, training them in both the methodology of strategic project-making and the evaluation of results. Apart from the experimental nature of such an exhibition, a significant aspect is that the organizing institution took over the role of the producer by financing or acquiring the necessary means to build works of art. Born out of the initiative of several groups of artists, the exhibitions **Filocalia**, 1990, Bucharest and "Mood Without A Title", 1991, Timisoara, came from the need to regroup the artistic forces to re-establish the communication both within their own community and with the audience. But this is where the similarity ends, as the two shows had different artistic orientations, often perceived as being in conflict. **Filocalia**¹ started out as a retrospective of the New Orthodox tendency, but it later became an important event for the transformation of the movement's theoretical basis into an ideological program. In the previous decade, the New Orthodox direction had been a form of "resistance through culture," but later it became an alternative solution to the present culture crises in Romania. The spiritual-aesthetic model promoted by this movement sought to offer a stabilizing unity and to transcend the conflicts of a de-structured society, undergoing a full identity crisis. What the **Filocalia** attempted to summarize in one chapter of art history was continued in the repeated series of exhibitions at the **Catacomba** Gallery (The Art Collections Museum, Bucharest.)² Without having a coherent program, the directions inaugurated by the Mood Without A Title pointed clearly enough to larger ethical, social and political areas, to a renewal of artistic language and to a redefinition of the role played by the artist and the audience within interactive communication models. The challenging of the collective mind's common attitudes, the exploration of fringe zones, not specific to Romanian society's self-image, the use of new technologies as identity-building landmarks and as instruments to access the international art circuit are the directions of a curator's thinking developed according to a program in a series of Bucharest exhibitions: **Mozart's Sex** (1991), **Ex Oriente Lux** (1993), **010101... Exhibition** (1994). Seeking to investigate the way certain concepts, such as genius and sexuality, function in the Romanian world, the subREAL group, as organizer of the first exhibitions, applied its own artistic model, devised to operate according to the principle of therapy by challenge and to test the versatility of the artistic community and of the audience when faced with unconventional requirements. The

¹ Filocalia (curators: Alexandra Titu, Sorin Dumitrescu

² Sorin Dumitrescu

encounter of the cultural institutional policy (CSAC Bucharest) with the individual theoretical program (Calin Dan) is relevant for the orientation of the other two exhibitions. Choosing the new technologies and an art directly involved in society, the curator of the two exhibitions rose against the conservative attitude and the idyllic serenity supported by part of the Romanian art world, making a commitment at the same time to synchronize art to local needs and to the requirements of integration in the international network where artistic values circulate. The fact that what could have been obvious became a strategic goal suggested the existence of a conflict area, where different positions fought for legitimacy as alternative solutions. The so-called dispute created around the new and old circles of the Romanian artistic world in the 90s opened debates on such conflicts as traditionalism-avant garde, synchronism-protocronism, isolation-opening, a cultural identity divided between east and west. The activation of these controversies at the level of artistic language as polemics between supporters of new technologies and the representatives of the New Orthodoxy did not happen by mere chance. In the early 90s these two tendencies were the only ones that had clear-cut artistic programs, so they could claim they provided alternatives for the orientation of Romanian art, because artistic language as a means of cultural production proved to be fruitful for the competition between the interested spheres.

The interpretation of art as a “medium,” influenced by ethical, religious, social and political factors, shows those controversies went far beyond the aesthetic. Looking back, it seems that it was not so much a competition of the artistic programs, but of their functioning modes in the Romanian world. The New Orthodoxy was labeled conservative, backward, and this fact cannot be separated from certain coincidences between the model supported by this movement and the reactionary tendencies in official cultural policy today. On the other hand, labeling other currents as choices for progress and democratization is pertinent only as long as it does not seek to be exclusive. The phasing out of the hierarchical and contrasting perception of artistic circles, the staged replacing of the unifying synthesis model with the acceptance and cultivation of the co-existence of languages was a natural consequence of the diversification undergone by the Romanian art world in recent years. The perception of this mutation shaped Ileana Pintilie’s thinking in her exhibition **East-West** (1994, Timisoara), which questioned the recurrent dualisms in [the history] of modern and contemporary Romanian art, but without embarking upon a de-constructive road. Centered around an obvious fact—media manipulation—the **MediA CULPA** exhibition (1995, CSAC, Bucharest) favored in its turn subversive

action to undermine manipulation codes from inside rather than to engage in open polemics.

The proliferation of performance in Romania in the 90s is another significant development, which can be linked both to the requirements of the artistic-social field and to the emergence of a constant organizational interest for this artistic genre. In a space where art is still marginal, performance proves to be an efficient means to establish a faster, more direct communication with the audience, the main roles of the artist being that of a social actor or experience programmer. Equally, for local organizers, performance festivals have been a means to involve foreigners, which is easier to do in this way, given the modest financial resources, aggravated by the red tape of official structures.³ The successive festivals of the St. Ana Lake (1990-1996), organized by the **Etna** art group, have continued an underground tradition (initiated by Imre Baasz) within a long-range program seeking to create a permanent forum for living art events, as well as to connect this festival to the global network of similar events. The Timisoara Art Museum was turned into an international framework for performance festivals on the theme of the East-European identity; this was the foundation for the program designed by Ileana Pintilie (The **Eastern Europe Zone**, 1993.) The lack of flexibility and openness of the institutions led, however, to the temporary interruption of the project, as the 1996 festival was to take place outside the museum.

The meanings of an exhibition depend on the context where they take place, and the recognition of this fact was successively visible in events like **Podul Mogosoaiiei** (The Mogosoiaia Bridge, 1991, Bucharest)⁴, **Pamantul** (The Earth, 1992, The Timisoara Art Museum, Ileana Pintilie), **Art Unlimited, Ltd.** (1994, the Arad Museum, Judit Angel), **Inter(n)** (1995, the Arad Museum, Judit Angel). The first two exhibitions focused on reactivating the lost meanings of semi-ruined buildings, the former—a private house, the latter—a prestigious Baroque palace, now the headquarters of the Timisoara Art Museum. **In Art Unlimited, Ltd.**, the metaphorical identification of the exhibition with a business concern established a fictitious partnership, intended to question the status of art in a post-totalitarian society, as well as the very condition of the cultural institution itself. **Inter(n)** considered the city as a web of space-time connections that were readable through their visual and textual codes. By asking artists to get involved in producing images of the city, the exhibition

³ The successive festivals of the St. Ana Lake (1990-1996), organized by the **Etna** art group, have continued an underground tradition (initiated by Imre Baasz) within a program

⁴ Podul Mogosoaiiei, 1991, Bucharest

suggested a certain methodology of artistic thought and action, based more on reflection, rather than on the direct impact of art on the public space.

Looking back requires a symmetrical look ahead. The current financial crisis, the new centralizing and collectivist tendencies of official cultural policy offer few opportunities for the exhibition to mature as a form of cultural action. The continuity of the initiatives of recent years will depend to a large extent on the influence of individual or group micro-strategies to apply coherent programs, designed according to the dynamics of the ratio between the private dimension of the exhibition gesture and its public destination. The legislation currently in place does not stimulate sponsorship, and Romanian art management is still a notion to be implemented in the future: all this adds to the difficulties already experienced by those involved in organizing exhibitions. Apart from some sporadic coincidences, getting sponsors involved will necessitate much conscious effort in order to transform sponsorship from a kind of charity into a form of participation in the production of culture.