

TRACES- Romanian Contemporary Art, Catalogue Essay

Exhibition at Selby Gallery, Ringling College of Art and Design, Robert Else Gallery, Sacramento State University, Centre International D'Art, Pont Aven, France, UNA Gallery, National University of Arts Bucharest, Romania

The art of the so-called post-media era is characterized by a multiplicity of genres, cultural forms, and artistic identities. In the Romanian context, the plurality typical of contemporary global art is heightened. The current generation not only breaks with our previously strong Modernist tradition, but also with a rigid identification based on ethnic values and social stereotypes of conformity. This results in an eclectic, ironic, energetic-type of artistic production that speaks about a variety of life-styles and community problems. The local is a mixture of cultural elements starting from archaic, pre-Christian times through the short modern bourgeois era, then through the Communist period, to a post-communist society. For the viewer who is aware of the fluidity and impermanence of contemporary art in Romania, the diverse cultural models share an ironical detachment and pleasure for play; and though particular to the local context, they consciously participate in today's international dialogue of ideas and artistic practices.

The video *Territory of Fear* by **Delia Popa** documents a slaughter of lambs, an Easter tradition, in the Romanian village of Creaesti. If this video were projected near a Romanian Orthodox church the midnight before Easter, local Christian believers would witness and confront an unpleasant aspect of reality connected to the celebration of the Christian resurrection. The triumph of love and compassion over death is coupled with a terrible and unquestioned aggression.

Ioana Marinescu's video documents of an area of Bucharest where many homes—some ancient—were destroyed to make space for the enormous so-called *House of the People* built by Nicolae Ceausescu as a symbol of his power. The video is a nostalgic, poetic-recollection of this part of Bucharest through the memories of its former inhabitants.

Emanuel Borcescu creates images of *Salvinia*, an imaginary world documented through staged photography. The photographer ironically questions realism based on an imaginary, idealized version of Romanian peasant life - which was promoted as Utopian during the Communist period - and now, through advertisements of contemporary consumer society.

Vlad Nanca's photography is an honest and detached documentation of the survival of the typical car during the Communist period: the Dacia, from the ancient name for Romania -- before the Roman conquest and before the formation of the Romanian people. The reference was common in Communist times as proof of the continuity of the inhabitants of the Romanian country and a commonplace into the Romanian nationalistic discourses.

Gorzo's gesture, an artistic intervention of a pink doll-like figure, left in public spaces where it became transformed into a symbolic presence, although not according to his intentions or actions. Newscasters recorded the interpretations based on the public's imagination or mental imprints.

Suzana Dan works with various stereotypes through vivid, joyful, humorous paintings or painted objects. Miorita is a pre-Christian myth with which Romanians identify. A narrative, Morita stresses the relationship of human beings with nature and, through it, with life and death. Miorita is a magic sheep who speaks Romanian - showing a connection with nature. However interesting and beautiful, this poem has become a stereotype often used in nationalistic, saccharine versions of Romanian life and identity - suggesting harmony, devoid of tension and drama. In Dan's painting, Miorita is slightly changed - just enough to provoke laughter and break with the stereotype. The magic sheep wears a red wig, identical to the artist's: they both seem to be ready for a cover of a trendy fashion magazine. The female stereotype of the manicure is stressed here as absurd, up to the point where, through play, it becomes too relative. The nails become little paintings and are further contextualized through documentary photographs. The political is belittled ironically in a manner similar to the ideas of Komar and Melamid.

The *Dance of the Bears* is the oldest or one of the oldest dance traditions in Romania. From pre-Christian times, it is related to magic beliefs that the bear brings good luck and health to those who receive it and see it. Usually it is part of the New Year's celebrations. In her video, *From Time to Time*, **Aurelia Mihai** is placing the viewer in the middle of such a magic dance, which makes ancient beliefs and practices immediate and contemporary?.

(**Care Cutare** and) **Lila Passima's** works are quiet and closer to traditional women's handwork, both naive and anonymous. Passima's works become personalized as each of the elements refers to a person and situation significant to the artist's life – interactions with? Memories of friends and enemies who shaped her life and identity.

Gabriela Boiangiu transforms biographically significant objects into shared cultural objects that are open to various experiences, projections, and recollections. She presents the viewer with an intimate diary through the literal yet distanced (by destruction) use of diary and letters papers torn apart or traces of personal objects in small plaster casts. Of importance is Boiangiu's awareness of her attachment to the personal objects, even beyond their initial context and value as well as the realization of their independent life as a continuation and change of the initial context and signification. Here, memory and impermanence are bound together.

Paretarulâ- the wall hanging- is another local element, a sort of stitched, surrogate painting. Typical for the middle-class house, it is placed most often in the kitchen, but sometimes also in the living room. It usually depicts -in a naive manner- scenes from the house, always explained by a text that transforms the whole scene into a moralizing tableaux. Most of the time the stitched pieces refer to a woman as a good

wife, good mother, and good housewife who takes care of her husband, children, and house with care and dedication. Flowers are always present, stressing an atmosphere of peacefulness and joy.

Stela Lie and **Ana Banica** approach *Paretarula* in two different ways.

Stela Lie is literally appropriating the objects as ready made, contextualizing them into a space of community relationships and family ties. She traces the contour of the hands of the women of the family to whom the 'paretar' belongs: those who have sewn it or are just part of the family. She imagines and tries to recreate/document the atmosphere in the house that surrounds the object. She speaks about relationships between women usually from an extended family with aunts, grandmothers, daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law . . . each one of the relationships having its particular character- sometimes tense, other times marked by solidarity and compassion - pointing towards the real that is different from the idealized version depicted in the image. She is embracing, in an understanding and yet critical way, the homely bourgeois imagery. The moralizing story is transformed into a reconciliation story of family relationships- into solidarity of women created through their work and their homes.

Ana Banica does not use the object as a ready made. Instead she appropriates it as a cultural model of an artifact, subverted by different uses. The moralizing story is replaced by a version which is situated outside the house and family, where the woman replaces the man/lover as the man replaces the wife/mother/house-wife. The home-scene is replaced by the *Motoare* bar- a popular young people's bar in Bucharest - while the cooking pots and other kitchen objects are replaced by the mobile phone, television, or motorcycle. The texts are more connected to teenage subcultures than to a moralizing middle class. [*Waiting in the parking to give you sweet kisses/I'm staying, expecting you and emigrating to the love/your eyes, my lover, bring me closer to God*]

Gili Mocanu uses a more generally significant element: ordinary chains. The limitation is liberating by allowing creation of drawings on the wall - the imagination replacing the stereotype of a prescribed functionality

Who is making art, then, in contemporary Romania? Who is making history? Who is shaping the community? It is a flux of humanity -whatever its relationship to the individual - whose identity can be done- undone and re-made in multiple, successive identities that continue and shape each other in countless human-life, particular, and peculiar situations.

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