

# Romanian Art in the Period of “Diversiionist Liberalisation”

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## Abstract

*The present text briefly maps the official presence of Romanian art in international exhibitions of the 1960s. It focuses on major art events held in the West, in particular the large-scale exhibitions at which nations are represented: the Venice Biennale, the Milan Decorative Art Triennale, the São Paulo Biennale, the Paris Biennale, and the Lausanne Tapestry Biennale, on graphic art events, and on the case of Richard Demarco and his interest in Romanian art. What is noteworthy is the recurrence of the names of a number of artists among those taking part in exhibitions and likewise the recurrence of certain collocations in the studies that accompanied the exhibitions and the creation of a discursive typology. The concept of “official” becomes a split concept, placed in-between what is exhibited abroad and how it is presented in the written discourse.*

**Keywords:** Venice Biennale, Romanian art, conceptualism, decorative arts, photography.

The present text aims briefly to map the officially sanctioned presence of Romanian art in international exhibitions of the 1960s. I have focused on major art events held in the West, in particular the large-scale exhibitions at which nations are represented: the Venice Biennale, the Milan Decorative Art Triennale, the São Paulo Biennale, the Paris Biennale, and the Lausanne Tapestry Biennale, on graphic art events, and on the case of Richard Demarco and his interest in Romanian art. Likewise, I have viewed as interesting the case of photography and the presence of amateur artists at art industry events, although in the 1960s photography was at the same time becoming an important medium for the new generation of conceptualist artists. While I have given more space to some events, others have been looked at only in passing and I have limited myself to simple lists.

From the early years of communism, systematic terror directed against political opponents, their imprisonment, their sentencing to forced labour in camps or penal brigades, “in order to cleanse the country’s most important vital centres of enemy elements,”<sup>1</sup> modelled on

the Soviet Gulag, led to the elimination of the inter-war political class, the decapitation of the intellectual élite, the annihilation of a large number of clergymen, and in general, the silencing of anybody who might oppose the establishment of the “people’s democracy.” In the early years, the new power was to control the whole of society, including the arts, permitting only a single form of artistic expression, in a language “to the understanding of the masses” and completely subservient to propaganda, and at the same time brutally liquidating the backward-looking “remnants of bourgeois art.”

In 1953, the death of Stalin<sup>2</sup> led to a process of relaxation and recuperation, “albeit with revolutionary vigilance,” of works “stigmatised”

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*concentraționare*, Onești, 2015. [https://www.academia.edu/34839247/Gheorghe\\_Bogza\\_DE%28%9AINU%28%9AI\\_POLITICI\\_DIN\\_COLONIILE\\_DE\\_MUNC%C4%82\\_FOR%C8%9AAT%C4%82\\_DE\\_LA\\_ONE%C8%98TI\\_%28%98I\\_BORZE%C8%98TI\\_culegere\\_de\\_texte\\_concentra%C5%A3ionare\\_](https://www.academia.edu/34839247/Gheorghe_Bogza_DE%28%9AINU%28%9AI_POLITICI_DIN_COLONIILE_DE_MUNC%C4%82_FOR%C8%9AAT%C4%82_DE_LA_ONE%C8%98TI_%28%98I_BORZE%C8%98TI_culegere_de_texte_concentra%C5%A3ionare_), accessed May 12, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> I have taken into consideration the periodisation put forward by Eugen Negrici in *Literatura română sub comunism* (Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 2019), 13-21, which can also be applied to the visual arts given the close connection between writers and artists and the regime to which they were subject. The five phases that constitute the framework of his study are “the phase of full Stalinism” (1948-1953), “the phase of formal de-Stalinisation” (1953-1957), “the phase of re-indoctrination and political pressure” (1957-1964), and the phase that was “one of diversionist liberalisation (a subtle movement, also initiated by the Party to enlarge its mass base and in order to legitimise itself historically)” (1964-1971), and the phase of communist nationalism and Ceaușescu-regime isolationism (1971-1989). But I cannot omit the period 1968-1971, which marked profound changes both in everyday life and artistic life.

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<sup>1</sup> *Decision No. 1554 of 22 August 1952 to establish labour colonies, forced domicile, and labour brigades*. Chapter III, Article 6, which lists “enemy elements and their relatives subject to forced domicile, is followed by Article 7, which stipulates, “Of the categories listed under the previous chapter, points a, b, c, d except great artists, sculptors, painters, composers, academicians, if they have proven that they work honestly and are useful to society,” Gheorghe Bogza, *Deținuții politici din coloniile de muncă forțată de la Onești și Borzești. Culegere de texte*

in the previous period of hardline Stalinism. This period lasted only three years, however, coming to a violent end in 1956, the year of the Hungarian Revolution, when the “witch hunt” recommenced.

The political trials launched after the Hungarian Revolution sowed panic and terror among the population. Former politicians, who had already served prison sentences under conditions of unimaginable cruelty, were targeted once more, as were intellectuals and anybody who did not think in accordance with Party dogmas. Once more there were mass nocturnal arrests of former dignitaries, this time larger in scope. Once more terror reigned. A new period of re-indoctrination and the endeavour to re-establish socialist realism began.

After the death of Georghe Gheorghiu-Dej and the arrival of Nicolae Ceaușescu at the helm of the Party in July 1965, the Eleventh Congress of the Romanian Communist Party was held. The new General Secretary attempted to create for himself the image of militant of the global communist movement and to distance himself from the mistakes of his predecessors. Within a short time, the country changed its name from the People’s Republic of Romania to the Romanian Socialist Republic, in step with the battle against the Stalinist past. In 1968, Ceaușescu vehemently condemned the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, and this brought him great popularity among the populace and in the eyes of the West. At the same time, this open criticism of Stalinist dogmatism and the repressive methods of the 1950s brought hope and confidence in the future.

After years of Proletkult and Sovietisation, the period that followed, regarded as a “thaw” in the area of culture, gradually discarded socialist realism and provided an opportunity to draw closer to the Western art of the time and to rediscover the inter-war avant-garde and modernism. The move away from servitude to Proletkult and “socialist realism” led to the emergence of a new generation of artists, who would achieve great things in every sphere of the arts.

During this “phase of relative liberalisation (1964-1971),” in which there was a “resumption of the reconquest” and “occupation of the abandoned matrices,”<sup>3</sup> the plastic arts, theatre,

<sup>3</sup> Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism*, 263.

cinema,<sup>4</sup> literature and the cultural press underwent a substantial metamorphosis, albeit still under the eyes of the censors. Contemporary artists were now able to exhibit in Western galleries and take part in prestigious biennales and triennials. The system of selection was clear: the artists were chosen by the Union of Plastic Artists and the Ministry of Culture, up until 1968, when the National Bureau for Art Documentation and Exhibitions was created, subsequently becoming a department of the Council of Socialist Culture and Education, established by Decree No. 301 of 21 September 1971, which was to take charge of organising art exhibitions at home and abroad. For large-scale exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, the São Paulo Biennale, the Lausanne Biennale, and the Milan Triennial, commissars were appointed for the task of selection. The official art was not part of the selections, “selections were passed (things were perpetuated and sometimes even accentuated in this respect into the 1980s, also valid elsewhere than in the West) that did not include official works of art, with a politicised theme, which could be viewed at the Salle Dalles or at other venues around the country on special occasions,”<sup>5</sup> as it was exhibited only in Romania, and this provides evidence that the authorities did not recognise the value of works of this type and did not wish them to affect “Romania’s socialist image in the world.”

Whereas some established Romanian artists, including Alexandru Ciucurencu (1903-1977), Corneliu Baba (1906-1998), Ion Jalea (1887-1983), and Oscar Han (1891-1978), continued to enjoy the privileges that came with decorations bestowed by the Party: Magister Emeritus of Art of the People’s Republic of Romania, Artist of the People, Order of Labour, Star of the Romanian Socialist Republic, Hammer and Sickle Gold Medal, by substantial state prizes, by official commissions, and so on, the rising younger generation was able, for a short period, to benefit from the Party’s project to cultivate “the image of socialist Romania around the world” and thereby recognition of Romanian

<sup>4</sup> Liviu Ciulei was awarded the Director’s Prize at the Cannes International Film Festival for his *The Forest of the Hanged* (1964). In 1971 he took part in the Edinburgh Festival. In 1974 he was sacked as manager of the Bulandra Theatre as a result of a scandal involving a production of Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*, directed by Lucian Pintilie. Both Liviu Ciulei and Lucian Pintilie would emigrate shortly thereafter.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Guță, “O privire asupra ‘liberalizării culturale’ (III). Arta românească în anii 1960 și în prima parte a anilor 1970,” *Observator cultural*, no. 945 (November 2018).

contemporary art outside the country's borders and participation in international exhibitions, not only inside the communist bloc, but also in the West.

A neo-avant-garde wave appeared, simultaneously with art movements in the West or at a distance of just a few years of them emerging, and defied the censors by shifting attention toward interests completely different from political ones, but which did not seem to be a threat to the political. It should not be forgotten that at the time there was still an "official," propagandistic art in Romania, served by zealous practitioners. It is interesting that in the case of the major international exhibitions in which Romania took part, at which the country was represented by mostly the same artists, the art that was sent was free and unmarked by politics, but with the sole condition that the written discourse that accompanied it consisted of politicised, nationalistic, protochronist, identity essays.

After the drawing up of the 1971 "July Theses,"<sup>6</sup> the cultural movement would gradually be resituated under the sign of the ideological and the continued threat of censorship, and the official abolition of censorship at the Plenary of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party in June 1977 would lead to increased anxieties of every kind and the phenomenon of self-censorship.

In the years that followed, nationalism was revived, the state drastically interfered in every domain of culture, forcing even the best artists to make compromises, but the ground won by the new generation and the experiments they carried out were to leave a deep mark on the subsequent evolution of the Romanian visual arts.

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<sup>6</sup> "From the ideological standpoint, the theses were sooner dogmatic than innovative: notions long abandoned in the rest of the communist bloc, such as socialist realism, were revived by Ceaușescu, who thereby put an end to any illusion of liberalisation of cultural life that may have been harboured at the beginning of his leadership. Emphasising the leadership role that the Party had to play in every field, the general secretary launched an unexpected attack against those who were trying to keep Romanian culture connected to artistic movements, cultural fashions and innovative trends from the West." (Note 16: "An unsuitable practice has developed, comrades, that of our looking only at what is produced elsewhere, in foreign countries, of relying only on imports... We are against this coddling of everything foreign." See Nicolae Ceaușescu, "Proposals for Measures to the Improve Political-Ideological and Marxist-Leninist Educational Activity of Party Members and All Working Men," 6 July 1971 (Bucharest: Politică Publishing House, 1971), 205-207. See: Vladimir Tismăneanu (chairman), "Control of Consciences," in *Presidential Commission for the Examination of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania* (Bucharest: 2006), 601, [http://old.presidency.ro/static/rapoarte/Raport\\_final\\_CPADCR.pdf](http://old.presidency.ro/static/rapoarte/Raport_final_CPADCR.pdf), accessed May 9, 2020.

After socialist realism dominated the Romanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale from 1954 to 1958, in 1960 an exhibition whose commissioner was Jules Perahim rehabilitated a classic figure, Gheorghe Petrașcu, along with an exhibition of graphic art by the younger generation, which included artists Geta Brătescu, Eva Cerbu, Marcel Chirnoagă, Ștefan Constantinescu, Cornelia Daneț, Vasile Dobrian, Emilia Dumitrescu, Gheorghe Naum, and Nicolae Iulian Olariu. In 1962, Jules Perahim created a group exhibition featuring just four artists, Brăduț Covaliu, Ion Vlad, Vasile Dobrian, and Paul Erdős, which a French critic succinctly described as "more folkloric than universal."<sup>7</sup> Both Covaliu and Vlad were part of the new generation that had come to the fore after the first decade of communism. Two years later, in 1964, commissioner Mircea Deac selected Ion Bitzan, Ion Gheorghiu, Ion Pacea and Boris Caragea for the exhibition. At a Biennale dominated by pop art, the Romanian Pavilion wagered on "sensitive realism," a realism placed in opposition to the new Western realism: Marcel Breazu hailed the decline of abstractionism and the phenomenon of the "new figuration" in *Arta Plastică*, No. 8 (1964), writing, "our realism entails not merely the calquing of objects and as has been shown so many times, is hostile to naturalism, to the dull copying of reality;" reality has to be "processed," passed through the filter of "sensitivity."

Whereas in 1966, a retrospective by Ion Țuculescu was presented and contemporary artists were set aside, in 1968 first-time commissioner Ion Frunzetti selected for the Venice Biennale a trio of young artists, Virgil Almășanu, Octav Grigorescu and Ovidiu Maitec, about whom he wrote in the same "sensitive" key. They were viewed as creators of a "modern artistic alphabet, within whose framework allusion to traditional figurative art is barely recognisable."<sup>8</sup> The three artists exhibited in the West extensively during this period: Almășanu in Helsinki, Athens, Ankara, London and the São Paulo Biennale; Grigorescu at the Paris Biennale of Young Artists, in Tokyo, Leipzig, Berlin; Maitec in Athens, Berlin, Anvers.

The 1970 exhibition was dedicated to artists Henri Mavrodin, Ion Sălișteanu, George Apostu,

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<sup>7</sup> René Durnat, "XXXIe Biennale de Venise," *Courrier de la Côte*, no. 18/20 (14 July 1962). ASAC Venice, *Rassegna Stampa*, 1962.

<sup>8</sup> Ion Frunzetti, "Tre poeți, trei modalități plastice," *Contemporanul* (June 14, 1968).

Marcel Chirnoagă, Ritzi-Victoria and Peter Jacobi and rested under the sign of a traditionally-tinged abstractionism. In the catalogue for the Romanian Pavilion, commissioner Frunzetti speaks of the Romanian people as fundamentally abstract in its approach, “ever since the most ancient anonymous works of the Carpathian-Danubian space.” In the Romanian Pavilion we encounter none of the experimental directions of Romanian art that had come to the fore in the late-1950s and 1960s. Throughout the 1960s, the Romanian Pavilion maintained the same classic direction, nurtured by a discourse eternally in search of national uniqueness.

Among those who took part in the 1964, 1968, and 1970 Biennales can be found a few names which, alongside other Romanian artists, were to draw the attention of Scottish gallerist and curator Richard Demarco, who was interested in the visual arts of Eastern Europe and who was to visit Romania in September 1968, subsequently organising a number of exhibitions of Romanian art.

A partial reconstruction of one of the events featuring Romanian artists held in Scotland more than fifty years ago, the “exhibition file” 24 arguments. *Early connections in the Romanian neo-avant-garde, 1969-1971*<sup>9</sup> “focuses on a moment when history seemed to change course and which, unexpectedly, localised, at the regional and international level, the experiences of the Romanian artistic neo-avant-garde at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.”<sup>10</sup> The works of the following artists are presented: Horia Bernea, Ion Bitzan, Liviu Ciulei, Radu Dragomirescu, Șerban Epure, Pavel Ilie, Ritzi Jacobi, Peter Jacobi, Ovidiu Maitec, Paul Neagu, Miriam Răducanu, Diet Sayler, Radu Stoica, Vladimir Șetran, the Sigma Group.

In 1969, the exhibition *4 Romanian Artists* (Ion Bitzan, Ritzi Jacobi, Peter Jacobi, Paul Neagu) travelled from the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh to Bauzentrum Hamburg. In 1970, Demarco curated the *New Directions* exhibition, where, alongside Scottish artists, works by Horia

Bernea, Paul Neagu and Pavel Ilie were shown. A year later, between 30 August and 4 September 1971, the *Romanian Art Today* exhibition was shown in Edinburgh—famous since 1947 for its international festivals, from science, film, magic, jazz, and blues festivals to art and book festivals. The exhibition presented not only works of visual and performance art, but also theatre performances, poetry recitals, and contemporary dance.

The first Romanian production to be staged was Ion Luca Caragiale’s *Carnival Scenes*, directed by Lucian Pintilie, followed by Georg Büchner’s *Leonce and Lena*, directed by Liviu Ciulei. Marin Sorescu recited poems (at the exhibition, he could be seen alongside Ion Caramitru and Ion Bitzan, holding a book of poems), and choreographer Miriam Răducanu performed the piece *Genesis*, set to music by Anatol Vieru, which was performed again in 2019 by dancer Mădălina Dan.

Alongside the artists to be found in the reconstruction conceived by the Institute of the Present today, Alexandru Ciucurencu, Ion Alin Gheorghiu, Octav Grigorescu, Viorel Mărginean, Radu Dragomirescu, Ion Pacea, Theodora Moiescu Stendl and Ion Stendl also exhibited works in the original project. This was why the exhibition was criticised as being “extremely heterogeneous” by art historian Piotr Piotrowski,<sup>11</sup> who found it difficult to reach any coherent conclusion regarding any shared artistic ideal on the part of the participants: “In short, their Romanian origin was the only common characteristic of all the artists who took part in the exhibition. What is more, not all of them came from contemporary Romanian, with its political problems, social tensions, and artistic variety, but from Romania in the strictly geographical sense of the world.”<sup>12</sup> The reason why neither Cordelia Oliver nor Demarco<sup>13</sup> raised this issue was simple: “the Romanian censors had very long hands, reaching all the way to the Edinburgh festival”<sup>14</sup>. Piotrowski also argued that

<sup>9</sup> Organisers: Institute of the Present, Romanian National Museum of Art, and the Demarco Archive, Edinburgh. Research and exhibition concept: Alina Șerban. Research and artistic direction: Ștefania Ferchedău. The exhibition was open to the public at the Romanian National Museum of Art from 7 November 2019 to 2 February 2020, and was the first event in a series conceived by the Institute of the Present and dedicated to the visual and performing arts of 1960s and 70s in Romania.

<sup>10</sup> “24 de argumente. Conexiuni timpurii în neo-avangarda românească 1969-1971,” Institutul Prezentului, <https://institutulprezentului.ro/24deargumente/despre/>.

<sup>11</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, “Nationalizing Modernism: Exhibitions of Hungarian and Czechoslovakian Avant-garde in Warsaw,” in *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)*, eds. Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, Piotr Piotrowski (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016), 217.

<sup>12</sup> Piotrowski, “Nationalizing Modernism: Exhibitions of Hungarian and Czechoslovakian Avant-garde in Warsaw,” 217.

<sup>13</sup> In the exhibition catalogue, *Romanian Art Today*, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> Piotrowski, “Nationalizing Modernism: Exhibitions of Hungarian and Czechoslovakian Avant-garde in Warsaw,” 217.

"the nationalization of the avant-garde was the price of its appearance in the West."<sup>15</sup>

Despite the very long hands of the censors, it is impossible not to remark upon Horia Bernea's label-text shown at *Romanian Art Today* and reconstructed almost fifty years later, which might serve as a sublimated manifesto of the neo-avant-garde movement and which, resorting to a defensive language, actually succeeded in communicating the lack of any mood necessary to creation and the subtle protest against the demands of official art: "I wish to express the consciousness of a 'forbidden world' outside our broadly accepted knowledge and so-called experience of reality. I need a new medium, a new language, without preconceived ideas. I need such a language inasmuch as I believe it is important that we take into consideration *the mood necessary to create an object + the means to achieve it rather than to achieve a finished object* [emphasis added]. For the artist, art entails the solving of a spiritual, personal problem and *has all too little to do with perfecting a craft*. Art interests me only when it provides the opportunity to contribute to solving the spiritual problems of our times."

Paul Neagu's artist's statement for his video work is a poem entitled *State of Horizontal Rain*, a Sibylline, parabolic text reminiscent of abstract poetry, which is not satisfied merely to communicate with the reader, but to divert her, inviting her to decrypt and contemplate: "[...] The inner crisis of life leaves only surface scars / While now / Its clear crust wrinkling amorphously, lashed deeply, / Endlessly, appears from within, / In a burning desire to contort / Its idea of truth's perimeter / It breathes like an organic pulse / or rather like the idea of comical vegetation [...]." Not by chance, in 2019, the title of Paul Neagu's poem, *24 arguments* (1984), was to inspire the title of the exhibition held by the Institute of the present.

In the same volume that includes Piotrowski's essay, in another study, entitled *On propagarde*<sup>16</sup>: *The Late Period of the Romanian*

*Artist M.H. Maxy*, Erwin Kessler remarks upon the participation at the Nuremberg Biennale of Constructive Art in 1969,<sup>17</sup> dedicated to abstract and constructivist art, of the 111 experimental group from Timișoara,<sup>18</sup> and upon the organiser's preference for the young Romanian avant-garde, despite the fact that Maxy was the oldest living constructivist. Likewise, although he knew Maxy, Demarco preferred "to promote younger Romanian artists such as Paul Neagu, Ion Bitzan, or Horia Bernea, and not Maxy."<sup>19</sup>

The Milan triennial of modern decorative and industrial arts and modern architecture<sup>20</sup> was an event in which Romania took part sporadically from 1923. Missing the twelfth and thirteenth triennials in 1960 and 1964, Romania took part in the fourteenth in 1968. The commissioners of the Romanian exhibition were film and theatre set designer Ion Oroveanu, art historian and critic Vasile Florea, and Mircea Deac.<sup>21</sup> As specified in the text included in the general catalogue, the Romanian section presented mainly non-practical items, along with thorough documentation of current trends in Romanian decorative art. The text talks of the influence of folk expression in the design of Romanian objects for mass consumption, as well as trends of renewal of expression and morphology active in production and the most various manifestations of contemporary life more generally. The objects presented were ceramics, sculptures (in wood, iron, metal), and tapestries by Patriciu Mateescu, Petre Balogh, Mimi Podeanu, Constantin Bulat, Flaviu Dragomir, Theodora Stendl Moiescu, Ioana Șetran, Costel Badea, Victor Roman, Lazăr Florian Alexe, Peter and Ritzi Jacobi, Violeta Crăciun, Dan Băncilă, Lucia Maftei Teodorescu, Constantin Popovici, George Apostu, Mihai Olos, Vasiliu Chintilă, Pavel Codiță, and Dorin Dimitriu. The list in itself does not provide many data, but it does provide us with an overview of the section as a whole: the diversity of the working methods, the

<sup>15</sup> Piotrowski, "Nationalizing Modernism: Exhibitions of Hungarian and Czechoslovakian Avant-garde in Warsaw," 217.

<sup>16</sup> *Propagarde*, term coined by Kessler with the sense of "progressive propaganda," with reference to artist M.H. Maxy: "His connections to communist ideas, to socialist realist practices and to proauthoritarian discourse were a long, paradigm-like process of turning avant-garde experience into advanced, progressive propaganda or 'propagarde'". Erwin Kessler, "On *Propagarde*: The Late Period of the Romanian Artist M. H. Maxy," in *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist*

*Europe (1945-1989)*, eds. Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, Piotr Piotrowski (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016), 165.

<sup>17</sup> Painter Mihai Rusu (1925-2013) also took part in this biennale.

<sup>18</sup> The members of the group are artists: Roman Cotoșman, Constantin Flondor and Ștefan Bertalan.

<sup>19</sup> Erwin Kessler, "On *Propagarde*: The Late Period of the Romanian Artist M. H. Maxy," 175-176. In 1969, Pavel Ilie and Mihai Rusu also exhibited at the Nuremberg Biennale of Constructive Art.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.triennale.org/it/archivio-storico>.

<sup>21</sup> Regarded as obedient to the regime, from 1954 Mircea Deac held a management position in Plastic Arts Council of the State Committee for Art within the Ministry of Culture. As we have seen, in 1964, he was the commissioner of the Romanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

juxtaposition of decorative art and sculpture. We find established names that were also to be encountered at Romania's previous exhibition at the triennial in 1957: Mimi Podeanu, a decorative artist with an impressive international career,<sup>22</sup> lauded by art critics of the time for the way in which she was able to create a synthesis of traditional elements, working methods, and motifs from contemporary painting. We also find Patriciu Mateescu, a sculptor who specialised in ceramics, regarded as one of the founders of the Romanian ceramics school, secretary of the Union of Plastic Artists at the time of the triennial.<sup>23</sup> Another artist we encounter in the exhibition is Mihai Olos, who studied at Cluj and was particularly open to other media: his work included spatial constructions, happenings, drawing, painting, and in his practice he incorporated vast and seemingly separate artistic territories.<sup>24</sup> Alongside Mihai Olos, Costel Badea and Florian Lazăr Alexie<sup>25</sup> both took part in numerous international ceramics competitions and exhibitions, and they exhibited at the triennial both in 1968 and 1973. In 1968, Romania won a Gold Medal for its exhibition as a whole. Also in 1968, there were numerous international exhibitions of decorative arts: Brazil and Mexico (tapestry), Istanbul, East Germany, Stuttgart, and Florence.

Romania next took part in the Milan Triennial in 1973, the fifteenth edition, and the commissar was artist Ana Lupaş. Romania exhibited both separately and in the international jubilee exhibition, a selection of works from the fourteen previous triennials. To the jubilee exhibition Romania sent works by Florica Vasilescu, Mia Steriadi, Teodora Moisescu Stendl, Pavel Codiţă, and Mac Constantinescu.

<sup>22</sup> Mimi Podeanu held solo exhibitions in Bucharest and Switzerland, and took part in international exhibitions (Mexico, Paris, São Paulo, Sofia, Budapest, Chicago, New York, the 1962 Prague Ceramics Biennale, the 1964 Faenza Biennale, the 1965 and 1967 Lausanne Biennale).

<sup>23</sup> Patriciu Mateescu took part in a number of exhibitions in the West. In 1962 he was awarded the Gold Medal at the Prague International Ceramics Exhibition, and in 1965, the Union of Plastic Artists Prize for Decorative Arts. He made his debut as a sculptor and subsequently dedicated himself to decorative ceramics. He made series in clay, tile, faience, and porcelain, creating abstract forms. He immigrated to the United States in 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Mihai Olos took part in Documenta in 1977, where he gave a series of lectures and demonstrations based on Maramureş folk art at Joseph Beuys' Free University. His happenings include: *Gold-Wheat Event* (Herja Mines, 1972), *The Earth* (Cuhea, 1973), *Visual Communication* (Giessen, 1978), *A Statue Walks through Europe: Encounter with Gaudi* (Barcelona, 1978), *Encounter with Beuys* (Düsseldorf, 1978).

<sup>25</sup> In 1970, Florian Lazăr Alexie won the Grand Prize of Honour at the Second Ceramics Biennale in Vallauris, France; Patriciu Mateescu was awarded the same prize at the third biennale.

Among the artists included in the Romanian section were a number of names from the previous exhibition, as well as new names: Florian Lazăr Alexie, Costel Badea, Flaviu Dragomir, Dragoş Gănescu, Patriciu Mateescu, Dumitru Rădulescu—ceramic works—and tapestries by Ariana Nicodim, Ana Lupaş and Mircea Spătaru. The Romanian exhibition should be read on two different levels: on the one hand, the presentation published in the official catalogue,<sup>26</sup> and on the other, the works in space. The unsigned text does not discuss the works for even a second, nor does it attempt to examine the status of the decorative arts at the time. What is striking is the impersonal, strongly political, propagandistic discourse, devoid of any critical observation, which claims the existence of a link between the genesis of the Romanian people and its ancestral artistic spirit. Without doubt, one of the central figures of the exhibition was Ana Lupaş, who by 1973 had held a large number of exhibitions and won many awards, including the Union of Plastic Arts Prize for Decorative Arts, 1969; the Gold Medal for Tapestry, Stuttgart, 1969; a Diploma at the First Quadrennial of Decorative Arts, Erfurt, 1970. In 1969 and 1971 she took part in the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial, and in the International Biennial of Youth in 1973.<sup>27</sup>

In the exhibition at the 1969 São Paulo Biennale, whose commissioner was Dan Hăulică and which was organised by the State Committee for Culture and Art and the Romanian Institute for Foreign Relations, the following artists took part, in the order given in the catalogue:<sup>28</sup> George Apostu, Ion Bitzan and Ion Nicodim. It is noteworthy that the same artists also took part in the Venice Biennale, and the exhibition at the Brazilian biennale gives the impression that it is a replica of the Venice one, both in terms of the art on display and its curatorial discourse, as it was also an event that

<sup>26</sup> *XV Triennale di Milano, Catalogo ufficiale*, Milano, 1973.

<sup>27</sup> I have written more widely about Romania's participation in the Milan Triennial during the communist period in an essay entitled "Twice Peripheral. Romania at the Milan Triennial of Decorative Art in the Communist Period" in "(In)Visibile Frames. Rethorics and Experimental Exhibition Practices in Romanian Art between 1965-1989", ed. Cristian Nae (Cluj Napoca: Idea, 2019), 64-82. In the present article, I have taken a number of items of information from the essay in question, where I argue that the peripheral status of the decorative arts provided artists with the advantage of being able to experiment and work very flexibly with the medium, creating installations and abstract objects in the shadow of a discourse strongly dominated by the folkloric.

<sup>28</sup> Bitzan, <https://www.ionbitzan.com/exhibitions/index.php>, accessed May 14, 2020.

wagered everything on separate national exhibitions.<sup>29</sup>

At the Paris Biennale of Young Artists, organised for the first time in 1959 by the then Minister of Culture André Malraux, Romanian artists took part in every edition from 1961 to 1973.<sup>30</sup> In 1961, the general commissar was Mircea Deac, who was also the commissar at Venice in 1964 and the Triennial in 1964. The exhibitors were Sabin Bălașa, Ion Nicodim, Constantin Blendea and Lia Szasz, Cornelia Daneț, Victor Roman and Traian Vasai—some of whom did not take part in any other events on such a scale, as was the case of Bălașa. In 1963, the commissar was Brăduț Covaliu. Three artists took part: Gheorghe Boțan, Ion Gheorghiu, and Ioana Kassargian. In 1965, the commissar was painter Spiru Chintilă. Two of the participating films were held up at customs and correspondence with the commissar was required: Erich Nussbaum’s *Alexandru Ciucurencu* and *The Romanian Folk Rug*. The exhibitors were George Apostu, Victor Cupșa, Octav Grigorescu and Vladimir Șetran. Șetran recalls the moment in an interview,<sup>31</sup> answering the question of the exhibition dearest to him: “Not the dearest, but the most important was the one in 1964 (sic), a biennale, in Paris, where I took part alongside Gheorghe Apostu, Octav Grigorescu, and a self-taught amateur painter from Cluj, a veterinarian, Cupșa, who remained there. We, the other three, went back to Romania. When I had another two exhibitions abroad, I received numerous offers to stay there, but I didn’t stay, although I had reason to, since my father was a political prisoner.”

In 1967, the general commissioner was critic Vasile Drăguț, the artists Nicolae Apostol, Gheorghe Iliescu-Călinești, and Viorel Mărginean. There were also musical compositions by Lucian Mețianu, Costin Mioreanu, Mihai Grigore Mitrea-Celarianu and Eugen Wendel, and 35mm black-and-white films by Erich Nussbaum (*Brancusi in Tîrgu Jiu*) and Adrian Petringenu (*Steps toward*

*Brancusi*), and a colour film by David Rau (*The Painter Țuculescu*).

In 1969 the general commissioner was Mac Constantinescu, the participants Nicolae Brînduș, Cornel Cezar, Corneliu Dan Georgescu, Eugen Wendel (musical compositions), Dumitru Gavrilean, Lucian Băiaș, Silvia Radu. In the “Teamwork” section, the group of artists representing Romania, with the project “Four Works in Wood Representing the Four Elements,” was made up of Teodora and Ion Stendl, Radu Dragomirescu, and Radu Stoica, won a prize, consisting of money and a month-long trip to Paris, which as Teodora Stendl recalls in an interview<sup>32</sup> they were unable to collect since they didn’t receive passports. “It was not until two years later, in the summer of 1971, that Ion and I were allowed to travel to Paris,” says the artist, and Ion Stendl adds, “From graduation in 1963 to 1969, our works travelled abroad. From 1967, we took part in the Tokyo Engraving Biennale, Ljubljana, Buenos Aires, Geneva, Barcelona, and Vienna. If you took part in one biennale, you then received nominal invitations to other biennales.”

The Seventh Paris Biennale in 1971 focused on Conceptual Art and, unlike previous biennales, which were held in the Museum of Modern Art, and, at least in Romania’s entries, had a classic look, was held in the Flower Park in the Bois de Vincennes. Șerban Epure, Horia Bernea and Paul Neagu took part in the conceptualist section, and Bernea and Neagu were remarked upon by French critic Georges Boudaille in his study “L’avant-garde en Roumanie (suite).”<sup>33</sup> In “Hybrid Conceptualism in Romanian Art,”<sup>34</sup> Alexandra Titu speaks of Paul Neagu’s entry as “a conclusive case for the flexible relationship between Romanian artists highly attentive to the theoretical side of the directions in which the art of the time was developing and the fundamentally metaphorical condition of the art preserved by the European tradition up until the revolution of the first avant-garde.”

<sup>29</sup> In 2010, the São Paulo Biennale abandoned national representation.

<sup>30</sup> Synthèse de recherche / La participation roumaine à la Biennale de Paris de 1961 à 1973 Ionela-Magdalena Predescu Recherche doctorale sur les échanges franco-roumains de 1955 à 1975, <https://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/BIENN-Participation-Roumaine-par-Magda-Predescu.pdf>, accessed May 10, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Vladimir Șetran, “Vladimir Șetran: am fost un norocos și un răsfațat al soartei și al artei”, interview by Victor Niță, *Cotidianul*, February 19 2017, accessed May 10, 2020. <https://www.cotidianul.ro/vladimir-setran-am-fost-un-norocos-si-un-rasfatat-al-soartei-si-al-artei>.

<sup>32</sup> Constantin Hostiuc, “Cu arta am fost întotdeauna europeni”, interview with Teodora and Ion Stendl, *Observator cultural*, nos. 403-404 (2007), <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/cu-arta-am-fost-intotdeauna-europeni-interviu-cu-teodora-si-ion-stendl-2/>, accessed May 9, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Ileana Pintilie, “Materiality and Dematerialization in Paul Neagu’s Work”, in *The Aesthetics of Matter: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and Material Exchange*, eds. Sarah Posman, Anne Reverseau, David Ayers, Sascha Bru, Benedikt Hjartarson (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Alexandra Titu, “Conceptualismul hibrid în arta românească.” *Arta*, no. 20-21 (2016), 10.

Launched in 1962, the Lausanne Tapestry Biennale made the city the “Venice of the mural arts” for almost thirty years, until 1995. Romania’s first entries to the biennale in 1965 were works by Geta Brătescu, who was also invited to take part in 1969, Emilia Niculescu-Petrovici, and Mimi Podeanu, who also exhibited in 1967.<sup>35</sup> “At the 1969 International Tapestry Biennale in Lausanne, Geta Brătescu took part with *Aesop Unchained*. The exercise of the textile arts diversified the register of her abstract options,” writes Adrian Guță in one of a series of articles dedicated to the history of contemporary art in *Observator Cultural*.<sup>36</sup> Aesop also appeared as a character in the animation *Aesop’s Walk* (Animafilm, 1967). With the help of Aesop (featured in twelve lithographs from 1967), the wise, cunning slave, whom the artist took as her alter ego and male muse, Geta Brătescu was free to express herself artistically.<sup>37</sup>

At the 1969 biennale, Ana Lupaș and Ritzi Jacobi took part. Works by the two artists were selected for the collection of the Toms Pauli Foundation, which preserves the memory of the biennale. Ana Lupaș also took part in the 1971 biennale, the 1973 triennial, and many other major events, but never took part in the Venice Biennale. At a round table talk on the Romanian school of tapestry,<sup>38</sup> Doina Mândru argues that Lupaș was the creator of the “first open-air fabric installations, drawing on the cloth bleached by women. [...] It is with her that the diverse materials employed in tapestry become prominent in the Bucharest school and more generally.”

In the period, graphic art was shown at international exhibitions, competitions, and book fairs. With a few exceptions, these were held in the communist bloc, as shown by Adrian Guță’s research “The Krakow International Engraving Biennale (medal for Ion Stendl, 1970); the Golden Nib International Exhibition, Belgrade; the Ljubljana Engraving Biennale; the

Bradford Engraving Biennale; the Leipzig International Book Fair (medal for Mircea Dumitrescu, 1971); Intergrafik, East Berlin; the Wrocław Drawing Triennial; the Rijeka Drawing Biennale; the Baden-Baden European Graphic Art Biennale; the Brno Graphic Art Biennale; the Warsaw International Poster Biennale; the Bratislava International Book Illustration Biennale; the Tokyo Engraving Biennale; the Florence Biennale (Gold Medal for Dan Erceanu, 1972); the Lugano International Exhibition; the Europahaus Exhibition, Vienna (third prize for Ethel Lucaci Băiaș, 1968).”<sup>39</sup>

Photography as a genre in itself rather than a tool of conceptual art presents an interesting case when it comes to international events. As early as 1956, the Association of Photographic Artists was established in Romania and a year later it became a member of the International Federation of Photographic Art. Under the patronage of the Association, a biannual salon of international photography was held in Bucharest.<sup>40</sup> There was no photography section at the Institute of Plastic Arts (today there is a photography and video section). Despite this, many artists worked with photography (as a means of documentation in the cases of Florin Mitroi and Ion Grigorescu; as a stage preliminary to the artwork in the case of Horia Bernea; in combination with other techniques in the case of the Sigma Group, Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu and others). But in the 1960s, it was photojournalists and amateur photographers who took part in international exhibitions, and to them that the prizes were awarded. In 1968, *Fotografia* magazine was founded and the first issues are revealing when it comes to the work of photographic artists. Examining the “Current Events” column of the magazine, art historian Maria Orosan-Telea finds that work by Romanian photographers was presented at international salons and exhibitions in countries such as France, Britain, Italy, the USA, Czechoslovakia, and Japan, and the participants included Mircea Faria (gold medal at the Sixth International Salon of Photography, Hong Kong), who taught photographic art at the Institute of Plastic Arts,

<sup>35</sup> Artist Info, <https://www.artist-info.com/exhibition/Biennales-de-la-tapisserie-Id381122>. Accessed May 13, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Adrian Guță, “O privire asupra ‘liberalizării culturale’ (IX). Arta românească în anii 1960 și în prima parte a anilor 1970,” *Observator cultural*, no. 952 (December 2018). <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/o-privire-asupra-liberalizarii-culturaleix>.

<sup>37</sup> Daria Ghiu, “O artă esopică,” *Dilema veche*, no. 460 (December 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Stănescu, Steluța Roșca. “Școala românească de tapiserie în ultimele 5 decenii: Interviu cu Doina Mândru, Dorina Horățu, Viorica Slădescu, Maria Mușat.” Interview by Steluța Roșca Stănescu. Accessed March 20, 2020. <http://artapringauracheii.ro/scoala-romaneasca-de-tapiserie-ultimele-5-decenii-doina-mandru-dorina-horatau-viorica-sladescu-maria-musat-arta-prin-gaura-cheii-steluta-rosca-stanescu>.

<sup>39</sup> Adrian Guță, “O privire asupra ‘liberalizării culturale’ (III). Arta românească în anii 1960 și în prima parte a anilor 1970.” <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/o-privire-asupra-liberalizarii-culturale-iii>.

<sup>40</sup> Maria Orosan-Telea, “Arta fotografică românească în perioada 1968-1978. Evoluția revistei *Fotografia*.” <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/55931/?sequence=1>. Accessed May 13, 2020.

Edmund Höffer, Hendy Löffler, Nicolae Banu, A. Mihailopol, and Napoleon Frandin.

## Conclusions

One can notice the recurrence of the names of a number of artists among those taking part in exhibitions; likewise, the recurrence of certain collocations in the studies that accompanied the exhibitions could lead to the creation of a discursive typology. I intend to return to this potential typology in a subsequent study on the subject. Finally, it remains an open question that

the concept of "official" acquired a different dimension in Romania than in the West: in the 1960s a young generation of Romanian artists became "official" for the West, by presenting their work in major international exhibitions, but the accompanying written discourse alone remained domestic and servile to the local "official", sharing a strong nationalistic spirit. The concept of "official" becomes a split concept, placed in-between *what* is exhibited abroad and *how* it is presented in the written discourse.

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