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Beyond Influence: On the Troubled Reception of American Art Exhibitions in Romania during the Cultural Détente (1968 – 1972)

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Abstract

The exhibitions of American art that travelled to Romania during the brief period of cultural détente, stretching from 1968 to 1972, have not been thoroughly documented so far. Departing from the dominant art historical narrative which interprets such exhibitions as agents of "soft power" and vectors of cultural hegemony, and in sharp contrast to their negative, ideologically anchored art critical reception in the local press, the article reveals and critically interrogates the effects of such indirect international artistic encounters between Romanian and American art, as they are reflected in the artistic production of the time. Contextualizing the image-making techniques associated with consumer culture in the West which fascinated several Romanian artists during that period, it also aims to question the traditional notion of "influence", understood as a straightforward transmission of ideas, techniques or stylistic patterns of vision. It analyses local adaptations and transformations of the languages of Pop Art and modernist abstraction and their distinctive integration within local versions of "sober realism".

***Keywords**: influence, cultural transfer, travelling exhibitions, American Art, Global Pop.*

Travelling Exhibitions as Agents of Cultural Influence

Studies dedicated to transnational cultural dynamics in spatial art history as defined by Piotr Piotrowski have intensified in the last decade.[1] According to Piotrowski, spatial art history becomes a critical analysis that takes into account the importance of place and geography in the construction of multiple narratives (and plural modernities) that may intersect, overlap or even run in parallel, deconstructing the implicit universalizing claims of dominant, yet parochial art historical narratives focused exclusively on Western art[2]. Publications dedicated to art in Central and Eastern Europe[3] have allowed the art of the region to be presented as a horizontal construct[4] that moves across national, cultural and political specificities rather than as a series of national narratives linked by a common social and political background. As a consequence of this methodological shift from national to transnational art histories, the travelling art exhibitions of the Cold War have enjoyed renewed attention. Travelling exhibitions played a major part in the construction of points of contact and routes of exchange. Besides promoting cultural diplomacy, travelling exhibitions subsidised by mainstream institutions (such as the Smithsonian or MoMA) also played a major role as vectors of cultural influence that permeated the social imaginary on the other side of the Iron Curtain. From an international or even transnational perspective, they may be also be analysed as nodes and points of artistic contact within the global art network, facilitating cultural exchanges and transfers across national and regional boundaries.

In this paper, I examine the artistic influence of exhibitions of contemporary art

[1] Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 15-52

[2] Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, 35-41; Piotr Piotrowski, "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History", *Umeni / Art*, 56, no. 5 (2008): 378-383

[3] Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski (eds.), *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe 1945-1989* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016); Beata Hock and Anu Allas (eds.), *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2018); Klara Kemp Welch, *Networking the Bloc. Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981* (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 2019).

[4] Piotrowski, "On the Spatial Turn", 378-383

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from the USA that travelled to Romania during the period of cultural détente, which lasted roughly from 1968 to 1972. In the first part, I will briefly review the existing literature dedicated to American cultural diplomacy of the 1950s, which revolved around the importance of abstract expressionism and its uses as an instrument of cultural propaganda, advocating the virtues of individualism and artistic freedom. Shifting our attention towards the late 1960s, I also propose to interpret travelling exhibitions as elements of a changing exhibitionary complex, which by that time posited the viewer as a self-aware consumer of mass-products and technologically reproduced images. Besides functioning as points of cultural contact, such exhibitions also supported the construction of phantasmal images of the West, already mediated by the reproductive technologies that distributed popular culture such as magazines, films and television — allowing for an imaginary identification with their underlying ideological constructs.[5]

I also believe that there are at least two histories of reception to be written: one is that to be found in the art critical accounts published in specialist magazines or newspapers, and the other, that of artistic transfers, which has more often than not been overlooked, given its multiple genealogies, agencies and points of contact. Such a history is multidirectional, and serves to "provincialise the West"[6] and question the hegemonic, "vertical"[7] narratives which suggest that art of the 1960s became a global phenomenon by expanding from the West toward its margins.

Contrasting several reviews of the few exhibitions of American art that travelled to Romania with examples of changes in the figurative representation of social reality that may be encountered in works of Romanian artists of the time, I suggest that, in this particular case, the return to figuration and the depiction of everyday life in American art of the 1960s was more instrumental for the locally developed visual language than the discourse of modernist abstraction, facilitating the emergence of a new version of painterly realism. However, such a change was actually in keeping with other changes in the artistic system in the region. In countries such as Hungary, and above all in Yugoslavia, more lenient forms of socialist realism were promoted, some of which embraced its inherently modernist ethos. For instance, a mixture of abstraction and realism, theorised as "sober realism," "socialist modernism" or "socialist aestheticism," arose in Yugoslavia after the 1950s in response to the dogmatic aesthetic doctrine advocated by Soviet-style socialist realism.[8] Even in Romania, for that brief period known as the cultural détente, usually considered to have stretched from 1968 to 1971-72,[9] figurative painting dealing with typical socialist subjects enjoyed a more nuanced treatment. Such a relaxed attitude towards figuration can already be observed in 1964, in an article by Ion Frunzetti, who paved the way for more experimental approaches in painting and sculpture.[10]

Soft Power: Travelling Exhibitions of American Art in the 1960s

With notable exceptions, international relations studies have constantly focused on the exhibitions of art that travelled to Europe from the USA above all during the 1950s. According to Michael L. Krenn, it was in the mid-1950s that American politicians first lent support to the idea of a government-sponsored international art programme that would present US art "as a powerful force against the stifling totalitarianism

[5] For a psychoanalytical approach to ideology, see Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

[6] Edit Andras, "Provincializing the West. Interview with Piotr Piotrowski", *Artmargins*, September 10, 2012, https://artmargins.com/provincializing-the-west.

[7] Piotrowski, "On the Spatial Turn...", 378-79

[8] Miško Šuvaković, "Art as a Political Machine: Fragments on the Late Socialist and Postsocialist Art of the MittelEuropa and the Balkans," in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, ed. Ales Erjavec (Berkeley: California University Press, 2003), 93; Branislav Jakovlevic, *Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia*, 1945-1991 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 96-97.

[9] This period is marked, on the one hand, by Nicolae Ceaușescu's famous opposition to the invasion of Prague in 1968, and on the other, by the so-called "July Theses", a speech making seventeen points delivered by Nicolae Ceaușescu in July 1971 and published in November the same year. The speech, soon followed by another delivered in more colloquial language, contained measures to "improve the political-ideological activity and the Marxist-Leninist education of Party members and all workers," among which, the requirement that art should have "a militant content" and "depict reality." The guiding principles expressed by Ceaușescu were almost immediately applied by the Artists' Unions, from 1972, with the subsequent subordination of the Ministry of Culture to the Council of Culture and Socialist Education. For a detailed analysis of the short and long-term effects of these theses, see Alice Mocănescu, "The 'July Theses' as a Game Changer: the Reception of the 'July Theses' within the Romanian Artists' Union", in: Caterina Preda (ed.), *The State Artist in Romania and Eastern Europe. The Role of the Creative Unions* (Bucharest: Bucharest University Press, 2017), 207-230.

[10] Ion Frunzetti, "Varietatea modalităților de expresie in arta plastică contemporană", *Arta plastică,* nos. 10-11 (1964) : 502

of the communist bloc,"[11] in response to the Soviet Union's "soft power"[12] approach of cultural propaganda. Approaching exhibitions as examples of cultural diplomacy, much research on this topic has highlighted and debated the institutional and ideological underpinnings of such programs. For example, Frances Stonor Saunders revealed the role of the CIA in promoting such exhibitions during the late-1940s and throughout the 1950s, which, in the artistic field, seems to have influenced the promotion of abstract expressionism as a tool of cultural identity. Saunders famously argued that abstract expressionism represented "the ideology of freedom, of free enterprise. Non-figurative and politically silent, it was the antithesis of socialist realism," and it embodied American virtues: vigour, energy, grandeur, free-will.[13] Saunders identifies MoMA as a key agent of cultural propaganda, citing the influence of Alfred Barr and Nelson Rockefeller, both supporters of abstract expressionism. Saunders' case was supported by Eva Cockroft, among others, and her seminal article, published in *Artforum* in 1974, argued that "the functions of both the CIA's apparatus and MoMA's were similar and in fact, mutually supportive."[14] Nevertheless, critical revisions of this position, articulated by Michael Kimellman, Michael Krenn, Robert Burstow and Jennifer McComas,[15] accuse it of being partial, over-emphasising the link between international exhibition programmes and cultural hegemony or epistemic colonisation, while neglecting the unpredictable cultural effects of such exhibitions and their often contested reception.

Although my case studies from the 1960s would perhaps fit into the framework advocated by Saunders, Cockroft or Serge Gibault, I am interested not in advocating or contesting such exhibitions as forms of cultural propaganda, but rather in showing how, despite a cold art critical reception beyond the Iron Curtain, the cultural imaginary of these exhibitions also provided opportunities for artistic transfers and local adaptations, generating in their subsequent attempts at cultural translation a multitude of versions of painterly realism, among other things. While it is true that many artists in Eastern Europe, including in Romania, were not necessarily aware of their own local specificity, aspiring to produce an "international" artistic discourse, in synchronicity with Western experimental art, and willingly letting themselves "colonised" by the anti-authoritarian phantasies of British and American Pop, as Piotrowski suggests,[16] the contextual specificity of their art is undeniable. As I will try to argue, many were often borrowing and experimenting with new artistic techniques developed elsewhere to suit many different purposes.

Initiated in 1960 and co-ordinated by the US Department of State from 1964, the "Art in Embassies" programme was one of the rare cases where diplomacy was literally employed in order to bypass the cultural restrictions imposed by the Cold War. Supported by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the programme enabled contemporary American artworks to travel to overseas embassies, which put them on public view mainly through a series of diplomatic receptions. Although the International Council of MoMA was responsible for the facilitation of loans from private collections, galleries or other US-based museums,[17] and for the transportation of the artworks to and from the USA and their installation in US embassies, the US ambassador in each country was consulted on the selection of artworks to be displayed so that they would fit their "personal tastes and interests."[18] It is remarkable that ambassadors functioned as co-curators of these exhibitions, combining museum-like displays in the embassy cum gallery space with the subjective position of an art collector who informally presents art in a private residence, in countries where the art market was non-existent and the artistic

[11] Michael L. Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 92

[12] Joseph Nye, "Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*, 80 (Autumn, 1990): 153-171.

[13] Frances Stonor Saunders, The Cultural Cold War. The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters (New York: The New Press, 1999), 4

[14] Eva Cockroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War", *Artforum*, 12, no. 10 (June 1974): 39-41

[15] Michael Kimelmann, "Revisiting the Revisionists: The Modern, Its Critics and the Cold War", in The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-century: at Home and Abroad, ed. John Elderfield (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 38-55; Michael L. Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Jennifer Mc Comas, "Reconstructing Cold War Cultural Diplomacy Exhibitions. The Case of Advancing American Art", *Stedelijk Studies*, 2 (2015), accessed on 04.03.2020, https://stedelijkstudies.com/issue-2-exhibition-histories; Robert Burstow, "The Limits of Modernist Art as a 'Weapon of the Cold War': Reassessing the Unknown Patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner", *Oxford Art Journal*, 20, no. 1 (1997): 68-80.

[16] Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 166-167

[17] Other important museums participating in the programme included the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

[18] "Report of the Committee of Art in Embassies", Annual Meeting of the International Council of MoMA, MoMA archives, collection IC/IP, VI. B. 29.

economy functioned primarily by means of public commissions.

Comprising fifteen to thirty works of art,[19] these exhibitions were meant to have "the character of a small travelling exhibition," corresponding to museum standards of display, and had to make sure that "the works of art demonstrate a variety of important aspects of American art," as well as any possible connections between American artists and their ancestors.[20] Whereas in the early 1950s, abstract expressionism was lacking international recognition, by the mid-1960s, it had become a synecdoche of the American spirit. For example, in the introduction to the catalogue of the Romanian exhibition, John Simmons, the MoMA commissioner of the project *Art in Embassies*, writes that those artworks "symbolise our belief in the value of art as an affirmation of free human spirit reflected by the individuality of the artist"[21].

While recognising the ideological scope of such travelling exhibitions, a report of the International Council of MoMA also acknowledges that, given "official restrictions [imposed] on cultural exchange" in most countries beyond the iron curtain, an embassy collection is at present the only means of sending American art to these countries".[22]

Small scale exhibitions were successively installed in Warsaw (1962-3), Belgrade (1963-4), Bucharest (1966-7), Prague (1967) and Budapest (1967-8), presenting works by important American modernist artists, predominantly abstract painters (Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt, Helen Frankenthaler), some early Pop artists (Jasper Johns), and some minimalists (Donald Judd and Robert Mangold). Robert Rauschenberg's works were consistently featured in every exhibition after the Belgrade project, a possible explanation for the central position occupied by Rauschenberg being that, in the 1960s, he gained international acclaim as a result of winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1964.

A closer look at the exhibitions in Bucharest and Budapest reveals the importance of American abstract art in the art discourse of the mid-1960s. The exhibition in Bucharest comprised twelve paintings, thirteen drawings, four prints, nine photographs and four sculptures. The Bucharest selection seems eclectic today, juxtaposing works by Arshile Gorky, Jasper Johns and Franz Kline, a gestural abstract painting by Robert Motherwell, a geometric composition by Kenneth Noland, and a proto-pop collage by Rauschenberg with figurative drawings by lesser-known artists such as Larry Rivers and Gaston Lachaise. It was intended to showcase the diversity of modern American art rather than focus on any particular contemporary artistic trend. In contrast, the 1968 Budapest exhibition, contained selected artworks by the most important American abstract artists: Jules Olitsky (who represented the USA at the 1966 Venice Biennale), Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler (also selected to represent the USA at the 1966 Venice Biennale), Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Ryman.

There are few traces of critical reception to this year-long exhibition in Romania, leaving many questions unanswered: what was the actual audience of these exhibitions? How many artists and art critics attended them, besides the diplomatic corps from each East-European state? How influential were they, in the end, and for whom?

A New Exhibitionary Complex: International Cultural Exchanges in Romania 1965-1972

In attempting to answer these questions at least partially, I suggest that the *Art in Embassies* exhibition be situated within a wider constellation of similar travelling exhibitions, which were part of the "soft power" cultural strategy of the USA during the Cold War. Introduced by Tony Bennett as a counterpoint to Foucauldian disciplinary apparatuses, the "exhibitionary complex" designates the conjunction of rhetoric and aesthetic technologies mobilised by a series of exhibitions in order to control the population through spectacular displays.[23] One may describe an art exhibition, via Bennett and Foucault, as a system of social effects, the combined result of artistic discourse, curatorial display and forms of

[19] *Art in Embassies*, document in the MoMA archives dated 1969, collection IC/IP, VI. B. 29.

[20] "Report of the Committee of Art in Embassies", Annual Meeting of the International Council of MoMA, MoMA archives, collection IC/IP, VI. B. 29, 2.

[21] The International Council of MoMA, *Artă în ambasade*, American Embassy, Bucharest, 1968, 2

[22] "Report of the Committee of Art in Embassies", Annual Meeting of the International Council of MoMA, MoMA archives, collection IC/IP, VI. B. 29, 2.

[23] Tony Benett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995).

audience interpellation, which ultimately aim to transform the viewer's subjectivity. Approached not in isolation, but rather as a constellation, as a "complex"—that is, as a compound of interrelated cultural events and discourses, such exhibitions may reveal not only how notions of modernism and abstraction were introduced to the Romanian public as alternatives to socialist realism, but also how the changing American cultural identity forged a new sensibility for consumer culture, providing an alluring fantasy for many socialist countries.

While no press articles mention the *Art in Embassies* programme in Romania, its local influence may be assessed in conjunction with other travelling exhibitions of American art in Eastern Europe organised by MoMA in the 1960s. The brief period of cultural thaw, which began in 1968 after Ceaușescu opposed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, allowed for exhibitions organised by the MoMA International programme to be held in Bucharest. They included *Jasper Johns: Lithographs*, which between 1968 and 1970 travelled not only to Germany, Switzerland and Belgium, but also to Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania, and *New Photography U.S.A.*, travelling between 1970 and 1973 to the same countries of the Eastern bloc, as well as to Denmark, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and France in Western Europe.

Other important travelling exhibitions that reached Romania at the end of the 1960s were organised by the Smithsonian Museum. Between 1966 and 1970, the Smithsonian became responsible for the organisation of dozens of exhibitions overseas. Among them, the *Disappearance and Reappearance of the Image: American Painting since 1945* had an astounding reception in Romania, due to its incorporation of works by Johns, Lichtenstein or Warhol. Initially shown at the Salle Dalles in Bucharest in 1969, it later travelled to Prague and Bratislava. In the exhibition, abstraction was presented as an already historicised and dated phenomenon. It was accompanied, in 1972, by another exhibition held at the Salle Dalles, entitled *Form and Creation Process in American Painting of the 20th Century*, and by the less spectacular, but nonetheless ambitious *New American Sculpture*, held at the American Library in Bucharest—a library that was equally important for distributing influential art magazines such as *Artforum* in Romania. Besides the American art magazines, the latter exhibitions may be considered influential in "transferring" the discourses of Pop art and photorealism to the existing figurative and realist pictorial agendas of Romanian artists, which, crucially, adapted them to their own purposes. But they were not the only available contacts with international art or the shifts in contemporary art taking place at that time: a major survey dedicated to French painting opened at the National Museum of Art in 1968. Between 1966 and 1974, Romanian artists were also allowed to circulate and freely exhibit, and thus they were knowledgeable of a multitude of international artistic productions.[24] Contacts with the British art milieu also intensified around that time. A Henry Moore retrospective opened at the Salle Dalles in Bucharest in 1966.[25] In turn, Scottish gallerist Richard Demarco exhibited a selection of Romanian artists at his Edinburgh-based gallery in a series of exhibitions such as *4 Romanian Artists* (Ion Bitzan, Ritzi Jacobi, Peter Jacobi, Paul Neagu), which travelled from the Bauzentrum Hamburg to the Demarco Gallery in 1969, and in the larger group exhibition *Romanian Art Today* (1971).

Two Histories of Reception

In reviewing this context, I also suggest that we critically address the traditional notion of influence, which regards artistic contact as a unidirectional process of transmitting ideas, stylistic habits and patterns of visual education from one artist to the other. Echoing Kobena Mercer's notion of "vernacular modernisms,"[26] this notion may be replaced with the more charitable notions of artistic adaptation and transformation.[27] The latter are local phenomena

[24] For example, between 1964 and 1973, Ion Bitzan represented Romania at the Venice (1994) and the Sao Paolo Biennale (in 1967 and 1969). He took part in *Four Romanian Artists* (together with Paul Neagu, Peter Jacobi and Ritzi Jacobi) and in *Romanian Art Today* exhibitions, organised by Richard Demarco in Edinburgh in 1969 and 1971; He benefited from an art residency at the Stedelijk Art Museum, Amsterdam in 1970 and 1971. Other artists, such as Radu Dragomirescu, Radu Stoica, Teodora and Ion Stendl took part in the 1969 Paris Biennale, Serban Epure, Paul Neagu and Horia Bernea, were featured in the international section of the 7th Paris Biennale (1971), while Ana Lupaș, Șerban Epure, Eugen Tăutu and Mircea Spătaru were exhibited in the 1973 Paris Biennale. In 1969, the 111 Group (Roman Cotoșman, Constantin Flondor and Pavel Bertalan), together with Pavel Ilie and Mihai Rusu took part in the Constructivist Biennale in Nűrnberg.

[25] See the exhibition catalogue *Henry Moore: Sculptură și desen din 1924 până în 1964* (Bucharest: Sala Dalles, 1966).

[26] Kobena Mercer, *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures* (Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 2007).

[27] For a discussion of these notions in relation to Pop Art in Hungary and Romania see Dávid Fehér, "The 'Pop Problem' – Pop Art and East

that occur in the global process of transnational circulation understood as a process of cultural translation. Such a process is multidirectional, and, crucially, it includes not only the circulation of artistic forms, but also the incorporation of elements of visual culture within new artistic vocabularies.

If the American art exhibitions may be considered to have influenced the artistic vocabularies of several Romanian artists, this process of adaptation occurred in an art-critical milieu, previously hostile toward both modernist abstraction and the so-called "new figuration." Defending a conservative form of realism, still entrenched in the socialist realist doctrine, Romanian critics reviewing American art before 1968 usually emphasised the mechanical coldness of the abstract modernism," abstracting precisely what is specifically human, affection, sensitivity, vibration."[28] Other art critics such as Marcel Breazu decried the lack of creative transfiguration in American "new realism," a transfiguration which, on the other hand, characterised the socialist-realist artist's quest for objectivity: "without reflecting reality through a complex process of artistic development, it cannot be a genuine realism."[29] The latter was distinguished from the naturalistic depiction, and equally from the mere subjective abstractisation of the world as experienced by the artist, becoming an attempt to essentialise external reality in search of the general (i.e. typical), injecting it with ideas and rhetoric—in other words, with socialist propaganda.[30]

Such art-critical reticence continued in 1968, when art critic Camilian Demetrescu declared that, in searching for objectivity, Pop artists unfortunately presented the *actual* object instead of forging its image.[31] Reviewing the *Disappearance and Reappearance of the Image*, influential Romanian art critic Dan Grigorescu claimed, "Pop art reflects and emphasises the atmosphere of modern neurosis, and also emphasises the disorientation that the viewer experiences when faced with the visual and chromatic exercises of pop artists."[32]

However, while American Pop art was overtly criticised, a more charitable view of the local type of "subjective realism" was advocated in these writings. An equally tolerant view of abstraction, formerly banned in the artistic discourse after 1945, was advocated at the same time, conditioned by its local grounding in folkloric motives, a discursive and artistic trend that may be equated with an equally peculiar form of socialist modernism.[33] And despite being met with understandable art-critical reticence in the mainstream discourse of the leading magazine *Arta*, given their status as agents of American soft power, the travelling exhibitions presented in Bucharest also offered resources for a new type of experimental artistic vocabulary, one that could have been adopted by younger artists in order to circumvent the prevailing doctrine of socialist realism. It is not the language of abstraction *per se*, but rather the way several elements borrowed from the language associated with American Pop Art were altered and blended with local realist figuration, answering different contextual concerns, that interests me here.

The fact that Pop art seems to have been able to circulate across the Iron Curtain and to exercise a more powerful attraction on artists is remarked by John J. Curley, who also noticed that "Pop art as a whole challenged the division, especially pronounced in the 1950s, between abstraction and figuration. Featuring recognizable imagery, the work of many American, Japanese and Western European artists – not to mention some from the Eastern Bloc – rejected the notion that genuinely modern art must be abstract. And the best Pop did not necessarily repudiate abstraction, but merely reframed it as something that was found in everyday life."[34]

Up until 1968, it is also noteworthy that the American identity already meant something else in the Romanian imaginary than the vitality of gestural abstraction: it meant Coca-Cola, blue jeans, rock and roll, and consumer culture. Benefiting economically from the newly gained political sympathy of the West, Ceaușescu

Central Europe", in Ludwig Goes Pop + the East Side Story, (Budapest: Ludwig Museum), 2015, 117-129; Cristian Nae, "Whose Figuration? Varieties of Realism in Romanian Art 1968-1972" in *Realisms of the Avant-Garde*, eds. Moritz Bassler et. al., (Berlin: de Gruyter), 2020 (forthcoming).

[28] Ana Maria Codrescu, "Pop-art or Non-art?", *Arta*, no. 10-11 (1964), 562.

[29] Marcel Breazu, "A fi modern", *Arta*, no. 8 (1964): 398.

[30] Lelia Rudașcu, *Probleme de Artă Plastică*, (Bucharest, 1955).

[31] Camilian Demetrescu, "Tehnici contemporane ale imaginii", *Arta*, no. 7 (1968) : 7.

[32] Dan Grigorescu, "Apariția și dispariția imaginii: Arta americană după 1945", *Arta*, no. 5 (1969).

[33] Ruxandra Nădejde, "Rumanian Artists in Scotland", *Art and Artists* (April 1969): 66

[34] John. J. Curley, *Global Art and the Cold War* (London: Laurence King, 2018), 94

allowed Pepsi to establish a factory in Constanța in 1969. The unprecedented circulation of images during the 1960s, facilitated by technological advancements such as television and the colour printed magazines dedicated to popular culture, also fostered a shared artistic language that defied national and political borders and permeated the Iron Curtain.[35] And while abstraction remained a taboo, new forms of figurative painting that echoed Pop Art and photo-realism eventually emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the depiction of an "imaginary west" in popular media, the way it was subjectively experienced during the brief travels of Romanian artists abroad, and the concrete artistic contacts with both French New Realism and American Pop art, the latter being presented through these series of exhibitions that travelled to Bucharest.

Nevertheless, the differences between the social contexts where such visual languages were articulated were too broad—whereas American pop art was a result of a booming consumer culture, in Eastern Europe it was mostly integrated within a shortage economy, although it may have also referenced the socialist modernist counterpoint of capitalist welfare. As Piotr Piotrowski noticed, whenever present, the use of popular images of Western consumer icons in Eastern Europe "articulated a certain nostalgia for consumer culture, within which an empty can of Coca-Cola is just a piece of trash and not a mythologized keepsake of past trips abroad."[36]

Varieties of Realism: From Influence to Transference and Adaptation

A problematic case that warrants attention is represented by a number of Ion Bitzan's artworks, such as *Portrait of Engineer Timar* (1968) and *1st of May* (1970)[37], which depict typical socialist-realist subjects in an unconventional manner. In such works, Bitzan seems to incorporate Rauschenberg's photographic collage and serial juxtaposition of images while depicting typical scenes of workers' heroism and holidays. Bitzan acknowledged having visited the 1964 Venice biennale, where Rauschenberg won the Golden Lion, and having been influenced by the latter's diagrammatic mode of visual articulation, which juxtaposed photographic visual fragments borrowed from popular culture and incorporated them in multi-layered, de-centered compositions.[38] Rauschenberg's central presence in the aforementioned travelling exhibitions of American art merely emphasised the seductiveness of his language. The collated-like images in Bitzan's mixed-media works, juxtaposed in a way that perturbs linear narratives and simplified metaphoric associations, are deeply ambivalent toward the socialist-realist tradition they subtly subvert through his bold technical approach, while at the same time exposing the constructed character of such realistic imagery. Although Rauschenberg's influence is certainly present, it occurs rather in the sense of offering an opportunity for renewing the obsolete socialist-realist figuration in a modernist way, which resorts to ready-made images.[39]

Another situation of flirting with the colourful language of Pop Art occurs in the series of works exhibited by Radu Dragomirescu at the 1971 exhibition in Edinburgh organised by Richard Demarco, as well as in Vladimir Șetran's colour-field paintings realised in 1965 and exhibited at the Paris Biennale.[40] Dragomirescu's series *The Eventuality of a Study* applies the silkscreen technique to obtain seductive, vibrant and colourful serial images (variations on a theme) that echo Warhol's interest in enlarging and multiplying fragments of advertisments (including media icons). Nevertheless, in Dragomirescu's images, the drawing of a woman's lips is set against a flattened background, composed of large colour-field surfaces that are equally reminiscent of modernist abstraction.

Vernacular modernism may also be found in the domestic interiors painted by Florina Lăzărescu, Matei Lăzărescu, and Ion Grigorescu in 1970, which also translated Pop Art topics such as the depiction of vernacular culture and

[35] Curley, Global Art and the Cold War, 95

[36] Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 166.

[37] see https://www.ionbitzan.com/catalogue/entry.php?id=501.

[38] Kristine Stiles, "Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations from Cultures of Trauma", *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys, and Political Critiques*, eds. Jean O'Barr, Nancy Hewitt, Nancy Rosebaugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 36-64.

[39] Anca Arghir, "Ion Bițan. Cîți Ion Bițan există?", *România Literară*, 1969, 28.

[40] For an excellent overview of Romanian participation in international exhibitions during this period see the research exhibition *24 Arguments. Early Encounters in Romanian Neo-Avant-Garde 1969–1971* (MNAR, Bucharest, 7 November 2019-2 February 2020), curated by Alina Șerban and Ștefania Ferchedău.

everyday life, and photorealistic reproductive techniques, and adapted them to the existing socialist realities in ways that eventually disrupted both artistic categories, that of pop art and socialist realism. The return to figuration through the painterly reproduction of photographic images and the representation of mundane realities experienced in exhibitions of American art in Romania in the late 1960s managed to provide alternative representational models that could be appropriated and transformed by young artists into critical tools against the dogmatic realist approaches advocated by the local art criticism. As acknowledged by Florina Lăzărescu (Coulin), "While I was studying painting in Bucharest between 1965 and 1971 I had the good fortune of more open, brighter times, compared to the following era of political restraints. New horizons had been made available to us through important exhibitions, such as *American Pop-Art* (...) and many others."[41] But the contact with American art facilitated by these exhibitions was never merely a form of cultural appropriation, since the contact between the two cultures remained at most phantasmal and mediated by images. This is how, for example, in a painting by Florina Lăzărescu (Coulin) entitled *Child in Park* (1972), the ghostly image of a Cadillac unexpectedly appears near the image of a child, painted in transparent, blue monochrome brushstrokes, either as a memory or as a dream-like image, while other kids play around it in a typical socialist Romanian yard unaware of its presence.

Another striking similarity can be found in Cornel Brudașcu's *Guitarist.*[42] Without considering himself a Pop artist, Corneliu Brudașcu frequently chose subjects from his familiar everyday surroundings, thus departing from and contrasting with the utopian and idealised descriptions of typical workers or work situations found in the socialist-realist paintings of the 1950s. Brudașcu's *Guitarist* was painted after a poster purportedly from the German teenage magazine *Popcorn*, in which he inserted the portrait of one of his friends.[43] It is, in a way, a depiction of the "typical," the depiction of a stereotypical image, albeit one of a different sort from the glorification of the worker to be found in socialist realism. Replacing the worker with the rock star, Brudașcu cunningly reveals the artificiality of socialist realist iconography. But at the same time, depicting his subjects *after* a photographic image, Brudașcu exposes the distance separating painting from reality. The images he chose to paint were not drawn from the immediate reality—and, as such, they did not depict the local vernacular culture—but rather from its ideologically constructed pictorial representation. To be more exact, they transfer onto canvas photographic reproductions of this reality—a feature that connects his paintings with Warhol's examination of the construction of celebrity through the media repetition of the social image. In Brudașcu's social context, however, the circulation of photographic images in popular culture served a different purpose, that of masking the political reality. When he repaints images selected from private photographs, the use of excessively saturated colours may also be regarded as a Brechtian strategy of distancing from a topic it simultaneously overly mystifies.

Many of the issues tackled by Pop Art were simply untenable in Romanian socialist society, and if any reference to consumer culture is to be found, it appears only as a private fantasy. However, presenting unexceptional fragments of family life and accurately depicting the dullness of ordinary life, the real life of anonymous people, artists like Ion Grigorescu and Matei Lăzărescu turned the tables against the presumed objectivity of pictorial realism depicted in the ideologically controlled mass-media, as well as against the generic painterly representations dubbed "realist" at the time. As practised in the 1970s, socialist realism was considered by artists such as Ion Grigorescu to be "too unrealistic" to be capable of constructing a genuine relationship with social reality as experienced at the time. It is in this sense that Romanian art critic Ion Drăgănoiu referred to Grigorescu's photorealist paintings of the 1970s as neither Pop nor hyperrealism nor socialist realism, but "realogrammes": images that preserve the imprint of the real engraved on their surface.[44] It is as if Grigorescu were performing a visual archaeology of socialist

[41] "The Hours/ Memory Images. Florina Coulin (Lăzărescu)", Ivan Gallery, accessed November 14 2019, http://ivangallery.com/index.php/the-hours-memory-images-florina-coulin-lazarescu/.

[42] The painting is also referred to as *Young Singer*. See Iulian Mereuță, "O situație a imaginii", *Arta*, no. 12 (1972): 10.

[43] Jessica Morgan, "Political Pop: An Introduction", *The World Goes Pop*, eds. Jessica Morgan, Flavia Frigeri (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 15.

[44] Ion Drăgănoiu, "Realogramele lui Ion Grigorescu", *Ion Grigorescu, Expoziţia nr. 17*, Cluj (1976).

realist painting and ideologically controlled contemporary journalism in order to excavate and deconstruct its stereotypes. The political tone of his early works derives precisely from this collusion between the ideologically fabricated "reality" that passed as documents and the "ever savage, repressed, yet baffling real."[45]

To conclude, despite their potential to function as agents of cultural domination, travelling exhibitions of American art provoked in Romania unexpected situations of artistic hybridisation. But it would be more appropriate to frame such examples of figurative painting from the early 1970s as locally developed critical versions of realism, which tactically appropriated and harnessed, sometimes for contradictory purposes, representational techniques similar to the ones employed by American Pop or photorealist artists, instead of talking about belated versions of Pop art with photorealist or even socialist-realist inflexions.

[45] Erwin Kessler, "Picture it painted... Reality Real and Realisms in Romanian art and theory, 1960-1976," in *East of Eden,* ed. Nikolett Eröss (Budapest: Ludwig Museum, 2012), 110.

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