

Exhibitions as Points of Artistic Contact in Romanian Art during the Cold War (1965 – 1989)

Introduction by **Cristian Nae***, Associated Editor

The articles comprised in this thematic folder explore the agency of art exhibitions in Romanian art during the Cold War, more precisely, between 1965 and 1989, in creating transnational communicational networks and pathways across the Iron Curtain. Based on both archival research and oral history, they attempt to reveal the complexity of interrelations between art, social and political fields, questioning the common misperception that the Iron Curtain was a sharp cultural and political division that isolated the countries from the Eastern Bloc from the Western art world. This way, they not only challenge the ideological division of 'East' and 'West', but look at visual micro- and macro-histories through the lens of internationalism.

Inspired by recent influential works in the field of transnational art history in Central and Eastern Europe,¹ these studies contribute to an in depth understanding of the particular position of Romania within the Eastern bloc, and illuminate its chronological disparities in relation to other neighboring countries. Therefore, they offer new information for further comparative researches on the dynamic art histories of the Eastern European bloc, understood not as a monolith, but rather as an inherently unstable political construct. Artists from Eastern Europe (understood here only as a geographical positioning) participated in various degrees to the international artistic exchanges that shaped contemporary art as we know it today, due to the different degrees of political tolerance and progressive cultural policies that varied from country to country.

Daria Ghiu's contribution provides context for the other three articles comprised in this issue of the journal, which share a common

interest in epistemic decolonisation. Ghiu maps the presence of Romanian artists in international art exhibitions that were facilitated by the brief period of "cultural détente" that lasted in Romania roughly between 1968 and 1971. On a more charitable view, it may be extended from the moment Nicolae Ceaușescu took power in 1965 until 1972-1973, when the cultural directives announced in July 1971 were implemented on a massive scale, affecting at the same time Romania's international relations and cultural policies. Cristian Nae's text explores the local impact of the travelling exhibitions of American art that were shown in Romania during the same time frame, focusing on the influence of Pop art in the works of several Romanian artists. The author endorses the view that notions such as cultural transference and adaptation, borrowed from post- and decolonial studies, are more suited than the traditional notion of influence in analysing such examples of international cultural contacts, arguing for the construction of multiple modernities and, in particular, of local species of realism in different parts of the world. While Nae focuses on particular alterations of the Western idiom, Mădălina Brașoveanu pays attention to examples of transnational communication that circumvent the Western idiom. Her contribution explores the network of mail art practices in Romania in the early 1980s, focusing on two artistic groups – Atelier 35 from Oradea and MAMŪ group from Târgu-Mureș – and on the contacts and collaborations they established with the wide international and/or regional mail art networks. The article argues that the local mail art practice was strongly shaped by specific local and regional characteristics – such as a rather "isolationist" tendency. As such, the local mail art practices seem to describe "transversal movements of cultures" (Lionnet, Shih, 2005), processes of hybridisation which, though not fully separated from the "major", were actively generating a non-Western idiom of mail art. Magda Radu brings an equally important

¹ 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).

contribution to the unwritten history of artistic migration and exile during the Cold War, bringing to fore various issues pertaining to cultural transfers and diasporic subjectivities. Minutely reconstructing from oral testimonies and archival documents the difficulties to adapt to a different artistic system encountered by those Romanian artists who preferred to flee the

country and settle in Western Europe after the political imposition of the cultural restrictions that affected experimental art in Romania after 1971, Magda Radu questions the self-understanding of the “West” as a “free world”, thus undermining its “centrality” and dominance in the global art world.

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Biographical note

Cristian Nae works as an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design at “George Enescu” National University of Arts in Iasi, Romania. He is currently coordinating the research project “Crossing the Borders: Transnational Collaborations and Institutional Critique in Exhibitions of Eastern European Art during Late Socialism (1964-1989)” financed by the Romanian Research Council (CNCS-UEFISCDI). His research focuses on exhibition histories, especially in Eastern Europe during and after state socialism, as well as on critical art theory and decolonial art history. His recent publications include “A Porous Iron Curtain: Artistic Contacts and Exchanges across the Eastern European bloc during the Cold War (1960-1980)” in *Art History in a Global Context: Methods, Themes and Approaches* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2020); “Whose Figuration? Varieties of Realism in Romanian Art 1968-1972” in *Realisms of the Avant-Garde* (de Gruyter, 2020) and “Basements, attics, streets and courtyards: the reinvention of marginal art spaces in Romania during socialism” in *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-based Art in Late Socialist Europe* (Routledge, 2018). He is also co-editor of *Contemporary Romanian Art 2010-2020. Rethinking the Image of the World: Projects and Sketches* (Hatje Cantz, 2020). He curated the Romanian Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale.