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Contemporary Romanian Art in the United States¹

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Abstract

The article discusses the recent international interest in contemporary Romanian art and its growth in market share, with a focus on the United States. The theme is followed thorough in numerous museum exhibitions, increased collector following, art fair presence, gallery representation and auction activity initially in Europe and the United States. The phenomenon is discussed both in the context of the larger international movement conducive to the contemporary art price bubble, and in that of the local socio-economic changes. My chief interest lies in the factors leading up to the entry of post 1989 Romanian art in the global arena as a manifestation of market forces in the field. The analysis follows its grass roots local emergence through non-profit institutions, individual artists, small publications, low budget galleries, as well as the lack of contribution (with few notable exceptions) of state institutions, while pointing out the national context of increasing deregulation of social support systems resulting in lack of focus on cultural manifestations. The conclusion is that the recent ascent of contemporary Romanian art (and coincidentally, the award winning contemporary Romanian cinematography) is a fortuitous convergence of various factors, among which, increased international mobility and sharing. At the same time, it is also the result of the evolution of various individual artists that pursued a form of art rooted in Romanian artistic tradition but with a focus on the symbolic figurative. The result is a personal semiotics of raising the mundane to extraordinary levels that reconfigured the anxiety of entering a new system into an unmistakable and lasting visual language.

Keywords: Contemporary, art, visual, deregulation, auction, gallery, artist, figurative, symbolic, Romanian

We live in the epoch of globalization: we are all interconnected through a network of fiber optic cables, which provide the opportunity for literally

anybody to become an overnight phenomenon. The cycles of consumption and production succeed each other at shorter intervals, and our gluttonous society needs something new and sensational every minute. It is a continuous elation of the last minute information, five minute celebrity, wars broadcast in live feed and life spent online, shared by millions of users who simply own a computer and have an internet connection.

In this system, the international world of art adapted fast to this set of rules. The result is that a new type of art surfaces at periodic intervals in certain geographic areas, and it is considered to have growth potential. Sometimes it may be Chinese conceptual artists, at another time the world is speaking about the young British artists, and there are situations where simultaneous tendencies co-exist. Sometimes such previsions become reality: the artists become known to the general public, not only the niche of collectors and curators, their market share grows, they have blockbuster exhibitions in important museums, maybe even lend their name and their creativity for a merchandise line with some famous fashion house, gain lucrative public art contracts. At other times, the new flavor has no staying power after a few seasons and it is simply replaced by a different one; in that context, the market share decreases as fast and as abruptly as it has increased. In this whole equation, there is one constant though, namely that nothing has enjoyed a more meteoric rise in prices than contemporary art in recent years. As Baudrillard said, the market is a monster in permanent need of new material to satisfy its ever growing greed.

The entry in this fiercely competitive arena of contemporary art from post-1989 Romania was not a very abrupt phenomenon, even if it may look like that to the unaware observer; it was in fact a rather gradual process. The debut was modest, sometime in the 1990s, after the regime change had resulted in a more stable political situation. It started when a few Romanian galleries managed to be noticed on the international market by means of art fairs and a few artists they represented were invited by important curators to participate in various projects. A few collectors became interested and proved devoted enough to promote the artists they purchased in order to raise their prices; strangely enough for the ones who do not know the cultural atmosphere in Romania, they were mostly international collectors. This process happened without any significant

contribution of the official, state-sponsored institutions in Romania that preferred to support classical rather than contemporary art; the evolving phenomenon was ignored, undervalued and sometimes it almost seemed to be sabotaged. Romanian contemporary art developed instead with the support of non-profit cultural foundations, often on a shoestring budget, magazines published in small editions which promoted artists without an obvious cultural agenda, as well as artists who decided to speak for themselves. Romania never benefited from the existence of a person such as Charles Saatchi who understood both the financial and the cultural potential of a wise investment in contemporary art and who was committed long term to such an investment that provided spectacular results. Public relation stunts such as the 1999 Brooklyn Museum exhibition “Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection,” that represented a defining step towards global fame for artists such as Damien Hirst, Ron Mueck, Chris Ofili or Rachel Whiteread, never took place in Romania.

The reality on the ground is often different than it should have been and there are public cases of institutional abuse. It is in fact a paradox that post-1989 Romania did not evolve into an economic and social system close to the other EU member countries, but was rather torn between a tough system resembling the one proposed by the Chicago School of Economics and the attempt to perpetuate communist clientelism, with more or less explicit actors. The quick and dedicated privatizations, the attempt to deregulate the main systems of social support such as health and education, the sale or bankruptcy of state properties, as well as the craving for fast enrichment to the detriment of the state led to the progressive lack of focus on culture and education. In other words, most people were left to fend for themselves. In this context, preoccupation with contemporary art was obviously not a top priority. In spite of the fact that some artists still had sponsored studios, the opportunities became even more reduced in time.

Often the institutions that should have promoted contemporary art were in fact the ones driving the artists out. A widely known and in fact symptomatic cultural scandal is the 2010 eviction of the Archive of Contemporary Art from the Bucharest studio of Dan and Lia Perjovski by

the National University of Art Bucharest after two years spent without utilities. Two Romanian artists with international reputations found themselves evicted from the space that served as their studios and were also widely insulted on Romanian blogs, a space where they should have benefited from maximum support. The eviction was strongly supported by some and disapproved by many others. The archive ended up in Sibiu. The contribution of these artists to contemporary Romanian culture was not considered and neither was the fact that this archive is unique.

Another example is the notorious case of the exhibition at the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York City while Mr. Patapievici was at its helm. The exhibition, now known by the artifact that became the symbol of the issue, the pink pony, was in fact a created scandal where facts were distorted to fit the desired agenda, that of condemning contemporary art from the nationalist angle. The Romanian Cultural Institute, the only state-sponsored institution in the post-1989 period which had a coherent program of cultural management outside of Romanian borders during Mr. Patapievici's management (including exhibitions, book publishing, film festivals and many other events) and which had numerous successes, ended up treated as guilty of extreme nationalism, a charge which was subsequently hysterically inflated in order to eliminate public figures who were not towing to the party line. The whole event represented a misguided retribution for its very accomplishments.

In this context the surprising moment has come when contemporary Romanian artists are in the spotlight. It is as much a surprise as the result of years of work in the background. In recent years, there were a number of exhibitions in important galleries and museums from the United States. A few names have become recognized by the American collectors, such as Adrian Ghenie, exhibited by Haunch of Venison, David Nolan Gallery, NYC, and Pace Gallery; Marius Bercea at David Nolan Gallery NYC or Dan Perjovski at Lombard Fried NYC. Other exhibitions took place in museums, such as Dumitru Gorzo's at the New Jersey Museum of Contemporary Art, Adrian Ghenie at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver and the exhibition *Six Lines of Flight. Shifting Geographies in Contemporary Art* at the San Francisco Museum of Contemporary Art,

which included Adrian Ghenie, Victor Man and Ciprian Mureșan. Dan Perjovski created an installation in the Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium of the new building of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. At the art fairs, the presence of Romanian artists has become an event collectors look forward to; galleries such as Plan B are a constant presence. The prices are on an ascending trend, and the artists' work is already surfacing on the secondary art market. "Untitled" by Adrian Ghenie was auctioned at Phillips for \$32,500 in May 2013 and "Fragile" was sold for \$32,500 in September 2013, both in New York City. Success stories in Europe with strong US echoes were sales such as the auction at Sotheby's London of the paintings "Dr. Mengele" by Adrian Ghenie for over £120,000 (estimated £30,000 to 40,000), "The King", June 2013 (sold for £218,500, estimated £70,000 – 90,000). Tajan Paris auctioned "Pie Fight Interior 11", estimated € 50,000-70,000, for €150,498.

What is the explanation of this phenomenon? Should it be only the need of the market to permanently find new material in order to enable self-regularization? In the epoch of fifteen minutes of fame heralded by Andy Warhol, time runs fast and novelty becomes old rapidly. After all, it is a phenomenon that repeats itself periodically in recent years. The explanation can be more nuanced: it is more likely that it is a fortuitous convergence of a series of factors. One of them is the gradual appearance of an independent system of galleries, non-profit institutions and cultural publications which function without preferences and without an ideological agenda and that have a program of artistic management which provides results. The publications were often printed with small grants and with tremendous financial efforts in Bucharest and other cities. The artists and the future art managers traveled, studied, and then returned to apply the lessons that could be adapted to the Romanian reality, and attempted to create a new system in the hope that in time it may actually generate a new reality. The appearance of this fragile system of support, which is absolutely necessary, coincided with the real integration of Romania in the system of cultural globalization, which allowed artists from this geographical area to export an object, not only ideas, and offered them the opportunity to be found both online and in person in the relatively opaque world of art.

The first acts of artistic sponsorship have also taken place, such as the exhibitions of the Mircea Pinte collection at the Museum of Art Cluj Napoca in collaboration with the Gallery Plan B. Such exhibitions, even though considered sometimes controversial because they are seen as instruments of the market for purely promotional purposes, are still events that strengthen the trust in certain artists and propose a cultural model: the collector who endorses a certain artist and implicitly raises the market value of his/her work by promoting it as part of an established collection. The prestige of the owner often reflects on the selection of artists, and such models are accepted at face value elsewhere; famous examples are the collections of Saatchi and Ahmed Ertegun.

Then auction houses have started to support artists. Modest in the beginning, this support became direct in 2008 when an exhibition was organized at Espace Tajan during FIAC Paris by Rodica Seward, the owner of the auction house Tajan. The Romanian-born business-woman and collector discovered contemporary Romanian art at the Armory Fair in New York City and supported it constantly since, with results that became obvious both in the United States and internationally. It all coincided with the preference of the world of collectors and curators in this period for the symbolic figurative style that characterizes contemporary Romanian artists. It is not accidental that the success of the Romanian visual artists became manifest more or less during the same period when the names of Romanian actors and directors started to become known in the United States, and Romanian cinema was awarded numerous international awards for movies that focused on themes from the same area of the mundane. This is the result of years of exploration, which resulted in finding a unique voice.

This symbolic figurative vein stems from experiences specific to the Romanian communist space and especially to the Ceaușescu years, when most of the artists currently gaining fame were teenagers and undergoing formative experiences. Even though some of the artists who are successful nowadays were too young for the communist experience to have affected them long term, the influences were of a different and perhaps more profound nature. The reason is that after the end of that era, the post-communist landscape and the results of the brutal implementation

of the market economy had consequences that were often destructive for the cultural paradigm due to the lack of both government funding and private interest in contemporary art, as well as the disintegration of civil society and other systems of support that had to be rediscovered. Besides the gray universe of ideology, there were influences that were less visible for outsiders but equally important: persons who were their mentors, another generation of artists that is being reevaluated in the context of an increased international interest. Just as Romanian cinema productions have appropriated these experiences and developed them by conferring them global relevance, visual art succeeded in going beyond the superficial layer of the communist experience to touch a vein of meanings with universal relevance. Frustration has been reshaped into a need to restructure the opaque areas, and what unites these artists working in a variety of media was discovered while this restructuring was underway: the need to understand the history and Romanian present not only by means of clichés, but by means of their personal reconstruction and deconstruction, a process that imbued them with universal value.

There is hardly any doubt that this favorable convergence of factors provided results. The issue remains their durability. Will the Romanian artists resist the huge and apparently insurmountable pressures of a commercial society which cannibalizes and regurgitates its subjects permanently in its search for novelty? The most probable answer is that they will, because there is something which is already part of history and cannot be overruled: contemporary Romanian art has developed a personal semiotics, images and motifs that integrate Romanian tradition with the imagery of global contemporary art and which has become recognizable and has managed to reconfigure the anxiety of entering a new system and of adapting to it in a visual language that is unmistakable.

Notes:

¹ A Romanian version of this article appeared in *Sinteza, a Romanian culture and strategic thinking review*, in January 2014.