

THIS TEXT HAS NOT YET BEEN EDITED.

**East Art Map Romania
CALIN DAN, ROMANIA**

George Apostu – (1934-1986)

Apostu stormed the Romanian art scene in the mid 60s, with a radicalism that belongs actually to a later period in 20-century art. He invented rapidly and put at work a minimal set of procedures respectively launched a limited number of subjects that imposed him as a “brand” artist some 3 decades before that type of strategy came into works. But Apostu understood where to look for receipts of success: forty years before him, Brancusi was doing the same thing, pursuing a career based on a streamlined set of gestures and protocols.

The young Apostu reconfigured the inheritance of his predecessor, making it available for further interpretations and re-contextualizations by developing a number of morphological solutions derived from the master’s principle of “direct cut”, and then transferring them at a monumental scale. His series “Tata si fiu” (“Father and Son”), derived both from the funeral sculpture and public space offering monuments developed within the peasant culture, made him deservedly famous.

Apostu pushed further into the realm of raw aesthetics the morphology deducted by Brancusi from the Romanian peasant woodcraft (“Fluturi”/”Butterflies”; “Lapone”/”Women from Lapland”), while staying tuned to the international trends of the 60s and 70s – mainly the development of large open air sculptural environments, where art and natural shapes live by, and from each other.

Horia Bernea (1938-2000).

A painter with large disponibilites for other media, crossing the borders of the craft towards performance, object, and later graphic design and video. Mastering the sensual manipulation of the matter, but constantly supporting his skills with a zest of lyrical conceptualism, Bernea maintained for more than 30 years a dominant position on the Romanian art scene, where his high visual mobility and his easiness in playing with abstract speculation gained him unanimous respect, and a recognition going beyond the circles of the specialists and art amateurs.

The work of Bernea developed in a serial/recurrent manner, with several obsessive themes being explored in exhaustive series, only to come back years later in other shapes and with other solutions. During the '60s and early '70s, Bernea explored several visual formats that could host his repertoire of ideas: free abstraction, geometric abstraction, conceptualism, lyrical expressionism; what kept together this multy-layered research was the inquisitive attitude, the playful and yet merciless way of questioning the limits of painting as a medium, a cultural domain and a carrier of ideologies.

Bernea had a chameleonic capacity of empathizing with various types of painterly discourse - as far as it was within the borders of sensuality. Francis Bacon and Willem de Kooning come to mind, besides more unexpected associations like Ingres, or the painters from the Barbizon school. In that sense one could say that Bernea was a post-modern, a highly intuitive commentator on the crisis of the visual domain, but one lacking the cynical pessimism of mainstream post-modernism.

In that order of facts, the series "Deal" ("Hill"), a “surveillance” series of large format paintings following the evolution of the vegetation on a hill in Transylvania across the seasons, is the landmark of his career. In "Deal" Bernea built his own - brilliant - version of "Mont Sainte Victoire", positioning himself at the right spot of the confrontation with forms and ideas. A position that he unfortunately lost later to a less inspired obsession with the Christian Orthodox discourse.

Stefan Bertalan - (b. 1930 - based in Ohringen, Germany)

Operating at the border between esoteric and scientific curiosity, he combined visual interpretations of natural phenomena with a life style tuned to cosmic energies and cut radically from the mundane. Some of his more fertile years were spent in the higher education system, where he left a strong mark on the students from the Architecture Institute in Timisoara by a challenging discourse and an uninhibited way of analyzing dynamic structures of growth, and the articulation between natural and man-generated shapes. During the 80s, Bertalan withdrew progressively from the social life exercising from the seclusion of his studio a persistent influence on the freethinking intellectuals (artists but not only), without imposing meanwhile a strong visual presence. His main work was his own existence, constantly rebuild and constantly scrutinized in two aspects - spiritual growth through the active contemplation of nature, and tactical evasion from the political and economical oppression at work in Romania at that time. Cultivating his garden and talking to his sun flower were activities paralleled by a surveillance process of this sample of nature with the help of photography, and by a systematic documentation of daily routines in a prolix diary, stuffed with drawings.

Bertalan was not a political dissident, but a dissident from reality as we all experience it as social conformists, and his distancing from conformity increased through the years until complete silence.

With a body of work functioning mostly in the presence of the artist himself, Bertalan was an inspirational figure for the Romanian art scene, in ways so complex and elusive at the same time that it is sometimes difficult to recuperate them for the art history.

Sorin Dumitrescu -(b. 1946 - lives in Bucharest)

He got his minute of fame due to a complex personality, where a cultural bulimia and the fascination with old literature and religious texts were fighting with a capacity of building virtual spaces of meditation and silence.

As a second generation conceptualist, he elaborated and then imposed to the younger an appealing way of envisioning relations with text and literary discourse, while manufacturing a personal version of religious iconography, based on abstract innuendo. Spiritual, elegant, decadent, with a strong decorative component, his drawings and installations established a pattern of communication between literary, philosophical, theological concepts on one side, and gestures that leave behind just sensual, purely visual forms, on the other. The books he build together with the poet Nichita Stănescu (an absolute hero in the literary circles of the 70s and early 80s) will stay as an inspired and daring exploration of the difficult border between the cerebral and intuitive aspects of language - that so much occupied the cultural minds from Valéry to Eco a.s.o.

Unfortunately Sorin Dumitrescu's capacity of invention dimmed quickly, and has been replaced by an obsession with Christian Orthodox dogma, which he translated (after 1990, when religion became the token ideology replacing Communism) into lame replicas of Russian Byzantine icons.

Ion Grigorescu - (b. 1945, based in Bucharest)

His intellectual radicalism, expressed in lonely performances delivered for the camera is quite unique due to the extreme cultural sophistication lying beneath the very crude images of (fake) self-mutilation and autistic sex. While his paintings and photographs, although feeding from the same sources, put more emphasis on surprising cultural associations, radiating an atmosphere of old documentation for an anthropological study of some alien cultures. Accessible mostly for private gatherings, his films from the 70s made him ideologically dubious to the authorities, and therefore a long period of (self) banishment ensued, generating a hiatus in his career between the early 80s and 1990. After that he became for the international curators visiting Romania the impersonation of the intellectual surviving in the margins of oppression while documenting this unique experience in the most suggestive way.

Combining poverty of materials, technological improvisation, subliminal cynicism, religious humbleness and free mythological associative thinking, Grigorescu built for more than three decades now a paradigmatic image of the human condition under political oppression. His discourse appeals to a wide audience due to a vocabulary developed on the border of pop and arte povera, with a (sometimes too heavy, unfortunately) touch of mysticism. Mixing efficiently minimal gestures and using modest media solutions, he is always interested in the mythology of the every day man, a character that he himself impersonates brilliantly. A well-defined stylistic touch - using poverty, ugliness, and decay as carriers of deeper feelings of redemption - makes his eclectic works highly efficient in terms of emotional as well as conceptual communication.

Wanda Mihuleac - b. 1946 - based in Paris)

She made the transition between the first and the second generation of Romanian conceptualists, by working her way through several topical themes, and also by using alternately all kind of old and new techniques, from printing, sculpture and artist books to photography, film, video, performance, and installation.

Through her art practice and her curatorial initiatives Wanda Mihuleac played a considerable role in promoting theoretical trends (mainly deriving from semiotics) and media that were new for the local visual culture, thus positioning herself as one of the most active mentors for the generation that climbed on scene in the 80s. Another role-play of paramount importance for the upgrading locally the thematic focus was her obstinate work with and around the concept of female body, seen as a source of endless visual metaphors and optical speculations. Wanda Mihuleac's artistic strategy was actually a constant repositioning through various media in relation to age old topics such as: the body as a landscape, the landscape as a container of concepts; the intersection between the previous two and utopian architectures.

Her capacity to team with all kind of specialists in order to forward her ideas helped building an entrepreneurial model that started to be trendy and accepted locally only a decade later. In all her work Wanda Mihuleac perpetuated a calophilic aesthetics where realistic props were forced into symbolic relationships, building worlds saturated with literary metaphors, heavy, colorful, and sometimes with a zest of kitsch.

Paul Neagu - (b. 1938 - based in London)

With the "Gingerbread Man" series, he established a set of analytical procedures for dealing with the human figure as a space and with space as an object, which influenced for about two decades the development of Romanian sculpture. Neagu's vision of the universe is technological, analytical and monumental. His human figures are reinterpretations of the Egyptian osirian anthropomorphism, cumulated with echoes from the pre-robotic Golem utopia.

Later, the "Hyphen" series engineers a universe of expectations, with shapes lying on the ground, predominantly horizontal, and yet curved by inner tensions and external stimuli, like predators at watch for the pray. Actually Neagu is not really a sculptor, but a drawer of frozen animations; his steel works are more contour than volume, and share with his performances the same type of motion: elegant, cold, distant and highly intelligent.

When he left Romania for a life in exile, Neagu was not necessarily making a political or economic choice, but mostly a spiritual one: his anti-sentimental view on art and existence had to develop elsewhere, far from a culture indulging in nostalgia, emotional relations with "the tradition", and the natural landscape. Neagu's art is anti-natural and anti-traditional by structure, and therefore it has its own naturality, non-committal and rather discrete. His work is one of the most accomplished furthering of the visual legacy left behind by Marcel Duchamp, and the hyphens are actually a distilled version of the "malic molds" from "La Mariée ...". Art is in Neagu's case a set of designed products that are suspended in a subtle desperation between a lost functionality and an impossible freedom.

Sigma

The group's meteoric existence (from late 60s till the early 70s) was compensated by an extremely fruitful activity, at a period of time when the whole visual culture in Romania was experiencing a short blossoming due to ideological relaxation. Remarkable was that Sigma appeared in Timisoara, thus far from the gravitational point of Bucharest, and also that its members (Stefan Bertalan, Constatin Flondor, Doru Tulcan) could use, beyond collaborative work strategies, a strong social instrument - the Art School, where they were all teaching. Therefore Sigma was not just another gathering of personalities, but a phenomenon that survived the group itself, precisely due to a complex strategy where educational practice, interventions in the public sphere, and the building of multi-media products were closely inter-related.

In a brake through attitude, Sigma managed to impose a new sensibility in dealing with the relation between the industrial object, the natural elements and the human body, and implicitly to extend the concept of art beyond the cultural limits it had at that time in Romania. Typical for the handicaps that had to be overcome in a country where modernism had never had a strong position, the members of the Sigma group developed a discourse based on a strange combination between the theoretical and spiritual principles of Bauhaus and the free experimental work of the organicist/utopian avant-garde architects active in the 60s in Western Europe. While the education processes imposed by the group (not for too long, it has to be said) belonged to the 20s, their artistic practice had the lightness, the happiness and the free spirit manifest in the utopian trappings of Hollein, Archigram or Coop Himmelbau.

subREAL - (established 1990, based in Bucharest and Amsterdam)

After a five years period of tactical work, when they were busy on one hand with a psycho-analysis of their totalitarian experiences, and then with the media perception of Romania as a sort of Draculaland, subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif Király) started in 1995 working with an archive of photo art reproductions, shaped chaotically around the only art magazine of Romania between 1953-1993.

The resulting project - "Art History Archive" (shortly A.H.A.) - unfolded successfully over a period of 3 years between 1995-1997, only to give then birth to a spin off coming from the same source material, and called "Serving Art". In short, those two medium term projects were dealing with topics as massification of art via reproductive protocols; authorship in old/new media; archiving as a creative/oppressive strategy.

Following a path that seems now logical but was probably by and large the result of spontaneous research processes in and around the art world, a third step was taken in the same direction with the project "Interviewing The Cities" (started 1999), which is using (besides inspiration from the formal structures of the previous) the relation between photography, performance and optical illusion in the build up of a new approach to art history.

Atypical for the spirit characterizing the Romanian visual culture in the previous century, subREAL didn't appear out of a void, but by putting to work the lessons learned by its members in the underground art scene of the 80s. Still, and due to the economic and ideological struggles defining the country in the 90s, subREAL worked mostly internationally until 2000. The local scene accepted the group only recently, when a paradigm shift introduced through the globalization of themes and ideas, resulted in a new and more radical generation of artists, keen in spirit with subREAL's dryness and irony.

subREAL uses photography as a conceptual platform, where reality, cultural heritage, and media confusion are mixed in order to attain a manipulative product, always aiming at institutional recognition. The systematic seriousness of their discourse is mainly tactical, although beyond and under the objectual outcome (always imbued with a certain formal beauty) lies an aura of thought that is at least as important.

Marian Zidaru - (b. 1956 - lives in Bucharest and Pucioasa)

Formally, Zidaru is a sculptor staging installations with colorful, playful volumes and setting them in dialogue with aggressive, dramatic large-scale black-and-white drawings. But this visually impressive performance cannot be cut from its social/theological aspects: in the mid 80s, Marian Zidaru, together with his wife Victoria (they actually act as an artists couple, in the line of Christo and Jean-Claude) retired from Bucharest to the little spa town Pucioasa, where the life and sufferings of a mystical figure (Veronica) has generated an underground religious movement with communal aspects. Zidaru developed in that period the manicheist style that he still perpetrates at this moment (a combination of Christian symbols and demonic bravura) and became involved in the works of the community. Since in 1990 religion became the official substitute for the former ideological instrument of national communism, Zidaru and his wife could come on stage and perform, through exhibitions, amateur theatre performances, publications etc. An interesting economy is surrounding the activities of the couple, who are never claiming clear authorship of their production. The Zidarus are employing (in a barter system) the members of the Pucioasa community to execute their design for wood sculptures, furniture and clothing, and also to perform in the public performances. The revenues coming from this business that seems to be successfully flying on the local and international art markets is allegedly put back into the community. Meanwhile at Pucioasa a monastery has been built, to host in seclusion the followers of Veronica. All the wood works of the afferent church are done by Zidaru. The Romanian Orthodox Church did not acknowledge yet Veronica as an official martyr.

Internationally, Marian Zidaru is a typical case of contextualization: his art is marginal due to its suspicious ideological extremism, while that extremism is precisely what makes it appealing for a public that sees something exotic in his mixture of daring modernity and muddy archaism, while largely ignoring the social and cultural realities that underlie this case. Locally, his representational function operates differently, since the Zidaru phenomenon is just one among the many faces that religious movements (schismatic or official) take in a poor a country struggling to understand its position in the world.

While progressive intellectuals are by and large ignoring or rejecting Zidaru, he stays nevertheless as a flourishing example of artist who found his public, and enjoys recognition.