

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A FINE ARTS MEDIUM *in the Post-Communist Countries* *The Case of Romania*

MARIA OROSAN-TELEA
West University of Timișoara, Romania

[EN]

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the most important trends in the post-communist Romanian photography, emphasizing those which are based on a critical dialogue with the inheritance of the dictatorial regime. Recording with a lucid eye the industrial urban landscape or the everyday life of the transitional society, the results of photography practice are an important depository of the collective memory.

Even though during the socialist period, photography was not taken into account very much by Romanian artists, after the fall of the dictatorial regime, in the early 90's, this medium integrated itself rather quickly in the new artistic discourses, as did other forms of art that had been suppressed before. The first visible reaction of the artistic environment after the release from the censorship was to recuperate very fast the trends that succeeded in the Western art in the last 40 years. In order to harmonize with the European educational system, the four Romanian higher education institutions of fine arts established new photo-video departments. A whole new generation of artists with major interest in photography was emerging.

Keywords

Photography, Romania, post-communism, urban landscape, transitional society.

[PT]

Resumo

Este artigo tem como objectivo proceder a uma análise das vertentes mais importantes da fotografia romena pós-comunista, enfatizando o tipo de trabalhos que se baseiam num diálogo construtivo acerca da herança do regime ditatorial de Nicolae Ceaucescu. Relembrando a paisagem urbana e industrializada que ilustrava o dia-a-dia de uma sociedade em transição, o conjunto das peças apresentadas resulta num importante depósito da memória coletiva de outros tempos.

Apesar de durante a era socialista a fotografia não ter sido uma vertente muito utilizada pelo núcleo de artistas romenos, depois da queda do regime ditatorial no início dos anos 90 esta técnica começou a ganhar forma e rapidamente se integrou em novas intervenções, tal como aconteceu com outras formas de arte anteriormente suspensas ou proibidas. A primeira consequência no ambiente artístico após a queda do regime foi a vontade de aproximação ao ocidente com a recuperação de vertentes que se teriam multiplicado no decorrer dos 40 anos anteriores em países europeus fora da cortina de ferro. De forma a garantir a harmonização com o sistema de educação predominante na Europa, as quatro principais escolas de Belas-Artes da Roménia fundaram departamentos de aprendizagem e investigação de vídeo e fotografia. Uma nova geração de artistas com interesse em fotografia começou então a surgir e evoluir.

Palavras-chave

Fotografia, Roménia, pós-comunismo, paisagem urbana, sociedade de transição.





Under the conditions of a totalitarian regime when the state used to control artistic practices, photography was a marginal phenomenon within the Romanian artistic environment. It was an underground form of expression used only by few artists such as Ion Grigorescu in the 70s and 80s. The *Union of Artists*, the unique organization existing in that period, which was directly linked to the state power, was not interested in promoting that kind of artistic discourses. The *Union* network of galleries was exhibiting only works of art using traditional media. After the fall of the communist regime, as photography departments were established within upper education institutions and due to the appearance of exhibition spaces and photography events, such medium shall become more and more promising.

The research starts from the premise that the main topics approached by the Romanian artists activating after 1989 are strongly related to the communist period and its influence on the Romanian society, to the still present individual and collective traumas. We will analyse the work of artists or artistic groups which, starting right after 1990, shall appeal to photography in order to record visual data and the tenebrous atmosphere of the transition society. As well for this period of the 90s, another strategy, therapeutic in some sort, is that of irony and cynicism. Not even the generation of younger artists, active at the beginning of 2000, remains fully unprejudiced by the communist inheritance. The traces of immediate past, the national identity related issues, but as well the questioning of specific situation to the new geo-political arrangements becomes the raw material for conceptualistic photographic projects.

The article starts with defining the status of photography during the postmodern period, its work methods and its integration in the artistic creation, in order to show that Romanian artists from the 90s are also evolving from the postmodernist photography paradigm.

The following chapters contextualize the Romanian photographic practice after 1989 by firstly relating to the communist period, and then, to the evolution of institutional environment. Besides the exhibition catalogues and the official websites of the artists, one of the main bibliographical sources was the volume *Photography in contemporary Art. Trends in Romania, after 1989*, published in 2006 by Aurora Király. It included texts written by Irina Cios, Cosmin Costinaş, Raluca Ionescu, Anca Mihuleţ, Mihnea Mircan, Cosmin Moldovan, Raluca Nestor and Cristiana Radu. As well, in 2012 a number of *Arta Magazine* was fully dedicated to photography and published articles both on the history of photography, and on contemporary photography.

Photography in the Postmodern Art

In his work, *Art Of the Postmodern Era. From the Late 1960's to the Early 1990's*, Irvig Sandler argues about the essential role photography has within postmodernism with special fundaments on the importance this visual medium is granted by the art criticism of the 70s. Rosalind Krauss and the group of theoreticians gathered around *October Magazine* oriented their investigations on photography and tended to place it both in the epicentre of the complex operating mechanisms of post-industrial, consumerist society, and that of contemporary artistic orientations and tendencies (Sandler 1996: 344-346).

Such consideration starts from the premise that the photographic image is to be understood as main type of communication, due both to the technical reproduction possibilities and to the significance force it has. In the terms of semiotics theory drafted by Charles Sanders Peirce, which classifies the signs in icons, symbols and indexes (Peirce, & Buchler 2001: 98-115), Krauss defines photography as the perfect possible index in relation to the object it signifies (Sandler 1996: 344). In other words, the *October Group* supports the type of photography directly related to social reality.

The art critic and theoretician, Abigail Solomon Godeau, distinguishes between modernist and postmodernist photography debating precisely the reporting element to social reality. The aesthetic self-sufficiency specific to modernist photography is opposed to the subordinated character of social and political or anti-political purposes encountered in postmodernist photography (Conner 1999: 139). Therefore, the limit between photographic art and the mass culture photography becomes quite permissive, with the occurrence of a continuous mutual transfer.

This perfect *index* character postmodern art theory assigns to photography may become a trap in certain social contexts, as the extreme case of totalitarian regimes, which use the credibility and objectivity of this visual medium in order to manipulate. And this trap is more dangerous as, according to W. J. Mitchell, photography is defined by an apparent and deceiving reality and transparency which may hide an «opaque, deforming and arbitrary representation mechanism» (Hucheon, 1997: 129). In order to read such photographic images belonging to such historical periods, one needs to appeal to a more complex mechanism, and that is, inverse decoding.

The same conclusion related to the definition of photography as perfect postmodern vehicle is also reached by Linda Hucheon in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (Hucheon, 1997: 128). This inference comes from completely different arguments, and that is, from an analysis of postmodernism seen from the perspective of the contradictions and paradoxes defining it. According to the author, the photographic environment is one of the most prolific in creating theoretical paradoxes. One of the essential paradoxes of postmodernism — originality by quoting — is magisterially illustrated by the case of the American photographer, Sherrie Levine, who re-photos works of famous photographs and exhibits them as her own (Conner, 1999: 140). The artistic act becomes extremely innovatory in essence, precisely by getting to the extreme of postmodernism specific practice. In this case, the quoting takes the shape of plagiarism, the artist's intention being to question the authenticity and originality quality a work of art must hold or not.

Another contradictory element for the photographic environment Linda Hucheon discusses is that of image subjectivity generated by an apparently quite neutral technology (Hucheon, 1997: 129). The assumed objectivity of a photographic image is disrupted, as Vilém Flusser also shows in his essay, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, by the intentionality of that producing such image. The filter becomes therefore extremely selective, starting from the primary decision whether to make an image or not, to the choice of the multitude of the technical possibilities a photo camera program offers (Flusser 2003: 30-31).

Photographic Practice in Communist Romania

During the communist period, artistic practices and photographic practice were two fields which almost never crossed each other. Photography was practiced in large scale, but not within artistic movements, but due to the existence of a rich network of amateur clubs organized within the *Association of Photographic Artists*. This Association shall also have lucrative purpose, providing orders to its members. There is a real exhibition infrastructure artists had no connection with. The lack of the Romanian artists' interest as related to this *medium* may also be explained by the fact that there were no photo-video departments in the upper education institutions and the *Artists' Union*, the only form of institutional organization of the Romanian artists, had no special photography department.

Despite all this, starting with the 70s, a phenomenon characteristic for postmodernist photography shall be felt in Romania as well. As shown in the first chapter, photography involves itself in most of the artistic practices characteristic to postmodernism. The ephemeral manifestations, inaccessible to the public, like the happening, body-art or solitary actions use the photo-documentation as storing method, perceived as well as integral part of the artistic act itself (Sandler, 1996: 344).

A series of experimental artistic projects developed during the 70s-80s in the Romanian artistic environment use photography (Titu, 2003: 129-131): the solitary actions of Ion Grigorecu, *The Kitchen or Art in One Room*, *Body Art Inside the*

House, Ritual Bathroom (Pintilie, 2000: 44-48), the actions *Towards the White* and *Self-Portrait Towards the White* of Geta Brătescu (Pintilie, 2000: 50-51), the action *I lived 130 days with a Sun-Flower* performed by Ștefan Bertalan (Pintilie, 2000: 30-31), the action *The Tree* of Dan Perjovschi (Pintilie 2000: 74), the action *Cancellation* of Amalia Perjovschi (Pintilie, 2000: 76).

Therefore, it is understandable that the few exhibitions exclusively dedicated to photography shall be initiated by experimentalist artists. Ion Grigorescu organizes, from 1976, a series of exhibitions at Schiller House in Bucharest, where he invites his friends to exhibit photography (Radu, 2012: 52).

The Institutional Framework after 1989

After the fall of the communist regime and the liberalization of artistic activity, a first visible tendency in the Romanian artistic environment of the 90s was that of quick recovery of the neo-avant-garde movements arisen in the Occident during the second half of the 20th century. Thus began to appear *performance* festivals and exhibitions exposing video art, installations, conceptual art and relational art. The photographic practice shall highly develop in such background. Through artistic activity which used photography experimentally before 1989, such *medium* shall be gradually integrated to new artistic discourses.

The first upper education institution which shall establish a photography department is the University of Arts and Design Cluj-Napoca. Photography was being studied here since the 60s, within the department of graphics. In the 1990s the university establishes a different section, dedicated to photography, which shall subsequently become the section named Photo-Video and Computerized Image Processing (Găină, 2012: 22). The University of Arts from Bucharest shall establish a Photo-Video section in 1995, followed after 2000 by the other two upper artistic education institutions: “George Enescu” University from Iași, in 2007 and the Faculty of Arts and Design from Timișoara, in 2008.

A very important role for the promotion of photographic genre was held in the 90s by the GAD Gallery, established by Mihai Oroveanu and Ruxandra Balaci and supported by the Artexpo Foundation. It operated in Bucharest between 1992 and 2002 (Király A, 2012: 44) and presented various artists which worked during such period with photography: Ion Grigorescu, Dan Mihălțianu, Teodor Graur, Gheorghe Rasovsky, Iosif Király, Dorel Găină, Matei Bejenaru, Mircea Cantor, Alexandra Croitoru, Nicu Ilfoveanu, Mona Vătămanu & Florin Tudor, Daniel Gontz, Gabriela Vanga. GAD assumed as well the international promotion of Romanian photography by its participations, between 1993 and 1996, to *The Month of Photography* from Bratislava (Cios, 2006: 34). GAD gallery had a major importance not only for photography, but also for the Romanian contemporary art in its assembly, as the curatorial activity developed here may be considered one first step for the establishment of the Contemporary Art Museum from Bucharest. After the end of GAD's activity in 2002, the two curators shall establish the Kalinderu Medialab Space, a preamble of the MNAC, opened in the People's House in 2004.

Between 2001 and 2008, in Bucharest, there was established, under the aegis of the International Contemporary Art Centre (former Soros Centre) and of the Pro Helvetia Foundation, the New Gallery (Guță, 2008: 113). Coordinated by Aurora Dediu (Király), it was the first gallery in Romania oriented towards following the photography evolution in its report with the new environments: video-art, animation, installation and multimedia. Many artists represented at GAD, but also active especially after 2000 (Vlad Nancă, Ioana Nemeș, Ciprian Mureșan, Dan Acostioaei), shall be included in the exhibition projects of this institution.

Artist's Discourses Through Photography

One of the most active Romanian artistic groups, during the 90s, was *subREAL* which worked with photography in two distinct ways: as recovered object, which became raw material for ample installations, or in the specific manner of this medium. As related to the first of the aforementioned methods, a good example is the

use of the archive of photographic scrap of *Arta* magazine, the only art magazine which appeared before 1989, in order to create the installation gathered under the general title of *Art History Archive*. The photos used for one of such installations, *Serving Art*, have accidental framings as joint element which transposes the full improvised mechanism of image generation. Anonymous characters, which hold up the canvas on which background art objects are photographed, contributes to the illustration of an entire inclusion mechanism of art in the communist ideologising process.

Such “art servant” positions inspires the two artists from the *subREAL* group in designing the photographic series *Framing* (Cios, 2006: 202-212), by which they investigate the urban landscape from the same subordination posture as related to the photographed object. Therefore, the two members of the group appear in the hypostases of the persons having prepared the art work photographing for *Arta* magazine. They hold in their hands a black canvas cut in its centre, so that it frames an excerpt of the background landscape. In the same time, by association to the photographic scraps from *Serving Art*, the landscape seen through the cut canvas seems a work art on black background.

In 2006, by using quoting as work method, Daniel Gontz remakes one of the photographs of this series, in order to mark out the stagnation of the landscape immortalized after a distance of several years. Gontz’s attitude to *subREAL* creation is emblematic for the quick canonization of a recent work of art, which is at the same time strong enough to enter the artistic consciousness (Mircan, 2006 b: 116-118). Like Gontz, Ciprian Mureşan uses quoting to set a dialogue with a famous work, *Leap in to the Void*, made by Yves Klein in 1960. Mureşan imagines in his *Leap in to the Void, After 3 Seconds*, the real hypostasis of the jump and appears photographed lying on the street in the position Klein would have landed. The comparison between the two images operates as a distance of half a century: the Paris of the 60s and the Cluj of 2004. For the contemporary Romanian artist, the metaphoric jump into the void can be only finalized by a damaging fall (Nathan, 2011).

For the group *Euroartist București*, consisting of Olimpiu Bandalac and Teodor Graur, and active between 1994 and 1995, the photography is the method by which they ironically relate to the historical, cultural or political identity of Romania. For the two artists, public space is full of references offering the possibility to enact burlesque situations. This is the case with one of the copies of Capitoline Wolf from Bucharest whose children, Romulus and Remus, were repeatedly stolen at the beginning of the 90s. This tragic-comic situation is used by *Euroartist București* in its work *Ginta Latina*, where the two replace the mythical heroes, connecting to the wolf's breasts with the aid of two hoses. The work refers to the Latinity of the Romanian people, obsessively exploited by the Romanian historiography.

Luncheon in Bucharest (1994) transposes in the context of Romania's 90s a famous painting of the universal art history: Eduard Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*. The scene of Manet's painting, very controversial at its time, is reconfigured in a devastating urban landscape, a desolated site. The female nude is replaced by male, sit in a rigid culturist posture, and the original static nature consists here of alcohol bottles and empty cigarette cartons.

Another goal achieved by this group through photography was the derision of iconic elements, images or spaces of the communist past. Such is the photographed action titled Ceaușescu's *Dolphins*. Bathing with lifesavers and inflatable dolphins in the public fountains of Unirii Avenue, the two artists defy the solemnity and greatness of the architectural plans of the entire urban project around the People's Palace. In order to build this megalomaniac structure, Ceaușescu ordered the demolition of a great area of the old town, destroying its identity.

Iosif Király is one of the most important Romanian artists using photography as main expression medium. His artistic career started in the 80s, when he was part of the international mail-art network. After 1990 he was part of the subREAL group, together with Dan Mihălțianu and Călin Dan, group occasionally integrating photography in the large artistic projects like installations (*Draculaland* and *Art*

History Archive series). Independent from the activity of this group, he shall have a solo career, divided in several major photographic cycles: *Indirect B&W* (1990-1999), *Indirect Color* (1998-present), *Tinseltown*, *Reconstructions* and *Open Sky*. The general concept on which his entire work bases on is the «report between perception, time and memory» (Király, s.a.), but each and every series develops this concept in a particular manner. *Indirect*, with its two parts: black and white photography for the 90s and colour photography for the 2000s, is based on catching glimpses in the daily life of a Romania, where the transition is read in the appearance of buildings, peoples' attitude, paradoxical associations of details. Some of such snapshots are used as well in digital collages which compose the *Reconstruction* series. Király introduces here in the same image several points of view on one single space, which is, as well, photographed in several temporary sequences (Király, 2009: 4). The image, discontinuous and fragmentary, has however a certain spatial coherence.

In *Tinseltown* series the artist follows the evolution of a controversial architectural phenomenon: that of the palaces built by the Romanian community. They illustrate a type of megalomania and a stylistic aberration deeply challenged by the public opinion. But, on the other hand, it is as well the result of a lack of clear state policies related to urban coherence.

The project *Open Sky. Revisiting public space* brings a new perspective on public space, as it integrates aspects of the political system, in a critical manner. The artist works with the images found in the archives of the Communist Security, where the followed persons were photographed in public space. Such photos are attached, within digital photomontages, to the current image of the place where such subjects were shot. The artist follows, on the one hand, to mark out a symptomatic phenomenon for the communist society: that of the Security's monitoring a very large part of the civil population. Another thing regarded by the artist is related to the transformations of the public space appearance during the two photo shootings.

In 1995 Iosif Király was amongst the founders of the Photo-Video

Department from the Bucharest University of Arts, within which he is still activating as a professor. An ample photographic project, performed with collaborators from the University during the period 2007-2010, is *Ro_Archive*. It had the purpose to lucidly follow Romania's visual identity during the period right after European integration. The team included young contemporary artists like Michele Bressan or Bogdan Gîrbovan, career of which was already built on a documentarian-realistic approach to photography. Bressan documents aspects of the Romanian post-communism through street snapshots aesthetically similar to the images made by Király in *Indirect (Passato Prossimo, Vita, morte e Miracoli, Pilgrimages series)* or architectural landscapes (*Landscape Studies series*). Bogdan Gîrbovan develops projects where he follows the relationship between an individual and the space he/she lives in (*10/1 and Chambre d' Amis series*) or that of an individual and the clothes his/her profession imposes (*Uniforms and Vestments*). In the project *Ro_Archive* the two produced the photographic series *2 Star Trip* which explores the two stars hotels from the Black Sea and from the wellness resorts in Romania.

The two large photographic projects made by Irina Botea focus on two places with strong symbolic loads for the recent history of Romania (Mircan, 2006 c: 66). One is the People's House, and the other, Arcuș House, one of Ceaușescu's former hunting residences. The investigation on the edifice of the People's House consists of the image of relocating it in various landscape backgrounds, some of them, totally unexpected. The artist will not appeal to digital photomontage in order to do it, but builds a small model which she integrates in a certain space and photographs it in order to «make it more accessible and less powerful for everybody and to reverse the process of humiliation and manipulation» (Botea, 2004: 128). As related to Arcuș House, the reporting method of the artist is different. She uses the insides and the props found here in order to enact various symbolic situations. In her work *Up and Down* (2005) the attention paid to the extravagant scenery of the bathroom, where the faïence reproduces a landscape and creates the optical illusion of a bath into the wild,

is a recapture of the former regime of megalomania. The photo presents the artist in this extravagant bathroom, in a stance that recalls the famous painting *The Death of Marat*, by neoclassic painter David. The artist's relation to the space, which acts as symbol of an oppressive political period for the freedom of thought, is given new meaning due to the allusions to political assassination in David's painting.

Alexandra Croitoru, artist career of whom is as well profiled after 2000, questions by photography several essential matters: on the one hand, the stereotypes and issue of national identity, and on the other, the mechanisms and manifestation forms of power at state and individual levels. In her series of portraits and self-portraits *ROM_*, made in 2004, the artist and the other photographed persons wear a hood coloured in the colours of the Romanian flag. This posture, by which personal identity is poached by the national identity, represents a symbolic type of assumption of a condition (Croitoru, 2004: 46).

The images exhibited in 2006 as well with the title of *Another Black Site*, represent impersonal architectural spaces in default of human presence. Seen both from the outside and from the inside, such buildings wilfully ambiguously presented by the artist, appeal to the rumours related to the establishment of CIA based in Romania (Mircan, 2006: 82). The issue discussed by the artist here is obviously related to the control and exercise of power in a world of globalization.

Conclusions

The social-political condition of the last two decades and half in Romania decisively influenced the evolution of artistic creation, the way artists relate to the reality around them.

The reestablishment of the contacts with the occidental world and the democratization of the speech shall lead to the tendency to oppose to traditional techniques, the only ones accepted during the communist period, alternative

expression mediums. Under such conditions, the photography shall be gradually integrated coherently in artistic practices. The institutional framework which built a favourable climate for such integration was offered by the activity of an international organization or foundations and by the presence of cultural centres of Western States in Romania. The appearance, within upper education institutions of the photo-video departments, shall lead to the increase of the number of artists which choose photography as a form of expression. In the 90s, they shall be part of the exhibition programs of GAD Gallery, and after 2000, the New Gallery is that mainly dedicating its activity to photography.

For the post-communist period, some of the constancies in the steps of the artists who use photography are represented by social investigation, interest for the public space, following up the inheritance left behind by the communist regime as related to urban architecture, deconstruction or re-discussion of identity symbols. Artists question all such problems by establishing a most of the time critical dialogue to the social-political reality.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863. Project ID 140863 (2014), co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.

REFERENCES

- Botea, I. (2004). House of the People, in *MNAC Catalogue*. București.
- Cios, I. (2006). Beyond Photography—subREAL, Catalogue *Photography in Contemporary Art. Trends in Romania after 1989*. București: Unarte.
- Connor, S. (1999). *Cultura postmodernă. O introducere în teoriile contemporane* [Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary]. București: Meridiane.
- Croitoru, A. (2004). ROM_, *MNAC Catalogue*. București.
- Despre noi (n/d). *Research team statement*. Retrieved from http://roarchive.ro/index.php?option=com_content&id=47&lang=ro
- Flusser, V. (2003). *Pentru o filosofie a fotografiei. Texte despre fotografia* [Towards a Philosophy of Photography]. Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design&Print.
- Hucheon, L. (1997). *Politica postmodernism ului* [The Politics of Postmodernism]. București: Univers.
- Iokira (n/d). *Artist portfolio*. Retrieved from <http://www.iokira.com/>.
- Király, A. (2012). Fotografia în arta contemporană românească după 1989. O cronologie [Photography in Romanian Contemporary Art after 1989. A Chronology], in *Arta Review*.
- Király, A.; Oroveanu, A. (2009). Reconstructions, Catalogue *Reconstructions*. București: Unarte.
- Mircan, M. (2006) (a). Alexandra Croitoru, Catalogue *Photography in Contemporary Art. Trends in Romania after 1989*. București: Unarte.
- Mircan, M. (2006) (b). Daniel Gontz, Catalogue *Photography in Contemporary Art. Trends in Romania after 1989*. București: Unarte.
- Mircan, M. (2006) (c). Irina Botea, Catalogue *Photography in Contemporary Art. Trends in Romania after 1989*. București: Unarte.
- Nathan, E. (2011). *An Interview with Ciprian Mureșan*. Retrieved from <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/nathan/ciprian-muresan-7-20-11.asp> (Accessed 06/08/2013)
- Peirce, C., & Buchler, J. (2001). *The philosophy of Peirce*. London: Routledge.
- Pintilie, I (2000). *Acționism ul în România în timpul com unism ului* [Actionism in Romania during the Communist Era]. Cluj-Napoca: Idea.
- Radu, M. (2012). Dialog cu Ion Grigorescu [Dialogue with Ion Grigorescu]. *Arta Review*.
- Sandler, I. (1996). *Art of the Postmodern Era*. New York: IconEditions.
- Titu, A. (2003). *Experimentul în arta românească după 1960* [Experiment in the Romanian Art after 1960]. București: Meridiane.