



Exhibition views from "Touch Nature",
courtesy of /SAC Bucharest, România,
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INTERNACIONAL

THE STATUS OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN ROMANIA: BETWEEN REMEMBERING SOCIALISM AND THE IMAGES OF RECONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT: The article explores how contemporary Romanian artists are incorporating socialist imagery into their artworks, reflecting on the complexity of Romania's communist past. By juxtaposing historical visual elements with contemporary aesthetic practices, the artists are engaging in a debate about identity and memory. The article presents the transformation of former communist buildings in Bucharest into contemporary cultural spaces, showcasing art galleries like /SAC Bucharest and institutions such as The National Museum of Contemporary Art.

The article starts with a short presentation of Șerban Savu's artworks, the artist that represents Romania at 2024 Venice Biennale, and in his artworks, we can spot influences from former Romanian socialism. The use of comparative and narrative methodologies in the article allows an exploration of the subject matter from a personal cultural point of view.

KEYWORDS: realism, socialism, deconstruction, reconstruction, identity of artworks.

At the 60th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Romania showcases “*What Work Is*”, an exhibition by Șerban Savu, which reinterprets socialist propagandist imagery, focusing on the portrayal of labor, socialist thematic frames and emblematic structures built for workers. Curated by Ciprian Mureșan, the exhibition presents a contemporary perspective on the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of these historical representations, inviting audiences to reflect on the evolving narrative of work and its significance in Romanian society. In the context of the biennale’s theme “*Foreigners Everywhere*”, Șerban Savu’s artwork features murals that mimic the style of communist propaganda images while depicting individuals with generalized characteristics rather than explicit details.

Under the socialist regime in Romania, cultural narratives emphasized the glorification of labor, portraying it as a central pillar of society and progress. Artistic representations frequently focused on industrial and rural landscapes,

reflecting the regime’s ideological stance that celebrated collective work and productivity. From the end of World War II until the fall of communism in 1989, Romanian art underwent various phases of (re) definition, (de)construction, and (re)



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construction to adapt to the changing political landscape. The gradual decline of identity, selfishness, and personality in art can be attributed to propagandistic idea of a state that is controlling each individual. The constant erasure of an artist’s



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individual identity in favor of conforming to new aesthetic rules of socialism reflects broader political and cultural propaganda agendas, aiming to forge a unified artistic vision that aligns with communist ideology. This well thought social and political approach suppressed personal expression, leading to a homogenization of art that prioritizes political necessity over artistic freedom. The emergence of the proletariat as a new social class marked a significant shift in the prevailing ideology as they challenged the dominance of the bourgeoisie and sought to redefine their historical circumstances. This shift reflects a broader societal transformation where collective identities and struggles took precedence over individual traits and personalities.

Șerban Savu takes the details from realism and chooses to present post 1990 images with individuals having a barbecue at the countryside, people repairing an old Dacia car¹, people in a waiting room decorated with socialist mural glorifying work and raising children, new industrial capitalist

images from Romania, a person sleeping on a chair in an austere chamber but with a huge religious picture hanged on the wall. Also, we can see a garage full of old wood materials and an individual dressed in fake expensive sport clothing. One of the paintings



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that got my attention was “*Electric man 2*,” an artwork in which we can see an individual painted in a socialist style, carrying electric cables in a deserted and industrialized environment. “*The Thorn*” presents the status of capitalist Romania, where the old industrial building is demolished to make room for other buildings and also trees are cut to make room for living spaces. The exhibition culminates with a small and artistic sculptural version of a communist building where workers came to sleep and work. The construction of multi-unit structures during the socialist era aimed to address urbanization and housing shortages by providing affordable living spaces for workers forced to migrate from rural areas to heavy industrialized cities.

Șerban Savu alongside a series of artists in Romania are seeing communist images and icons as objects that can be reinvented, reused and redescribed in order to present their artistic statements. The iconic building of Bucharest, a statement of communist power, (*Casa Poporului*), *The House*



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of the People, was redescribed in a photographic intervention by Vlad Nancă as a future big church. What is quite peculiar about *The House of the People* is the fact that it also accommodates the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, which holds several artworks implied to be against what communism and socialist ideologies were². The transformation of spaces originally established during communism for cultural consumption reflects a broader trend of adapting historical contexts to meet contemporary artistic needs. Industrial sites evolve into cultural hubs that not only preserve the memory of their past, but also foster creative communities, becoming dynamic centers for art, performance, and public engagement communities. This reimagining invites critical reflection on the legacy of communism and highlights the power of restoring and assuming not only the buildings but the iconography of Romanian communism. In a society in which over 44 years of propaganda and political art (1945 - 1989) are missing from national museums and

art history books, artists embrace a retrospective approach to create active dialogues about the/ their past while reflecting on present realities, using historical and personal references to critique or contextualize their contemporary artworks. Artists are recreating the images of socialism, the images from their childhood and are exhibiting in spaces that used to be industrial factories in order to understand their past and use their history to create their specific narratives.

The Malmaison building in Bucharest carries layers of historical and cultural significance. The building was a military school, a military court, a communist investigation and detention center, and today is a shared space for a technical research institute, a medical center and a cultural space for an artistic community. Entering the exhibition space of Malmaison we often assume identities that reflect our personal backgrounds, expectations, and the narratives of the exhibition itself presented in a former communist investigation and detention center

transformed in an art gallery. This can lead to engaging with the space, not just as passive consumers, but as interpreters and participants in a dialogue between a terrific past and the present that is trying to assume its history. The identities we see are shaped by the interplay of the space's purposes during the communist era in Romania, the contemporary curated contents and contexts, and our individual experiences.

Alex Radu is one of the key cultural managers that has a cultural space / SAC, at Malmaison, and during his projects, he addresses the questions, “*Who are we when we enter an exhibition or start curating one?*”³ And that’s when the curatorial experience and the site-specific needs come in use. / SAC in its curatorial program managed to enhance the site-specific needs of Malmaison by integrating artworks in specific curatorial narratives. “*LADAM, L’Année dernière a Malmaison*” curatorial project was created to display dynamic exhibitions and performances dedicated to Malmaison multiple identities. With three performative installations— “*Sleep Volume,*” “*F_ _ _ .*” and



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“Isolation in a series of liminal states”—that collaboratively create cohesive experiences by using video projections, elastic materials, and interactive elements, the curatorial program presented multifaced themes from confusion, claustrophobia, and political oppression, resonating with the historical context of communism. During the exhibition *“Touch Nature”*, that took place between 30 April - 29 June 2024, /Sac Malmaison became an archive laboratory, a collector’s room, where 192 plants were placed on white opened Ikea cabinets, and integrated video-works, sculptures, mixed media artworks, paintings and photographs on the topic of ecological crisis. The *“Touch Nature”* exhibition was curated in two locations that /SAC has in Bucharest. The first one was at Malmaison, and the second in an old building at /SAC Berthelot where it was curated a utopian future of a standard Ikea house (from the tables, chairs, to kitchen cutlery and vases) with vegetal artworks that can sustain themselves and the life of the individual living there. At /SAC Berthelot the artworks from vegetal ones, to paintings, video

art and sculptures exhibiting a possible future for a standardized and utopian life after the ecological crisis. Both exhibitions can be considered immersive installations where the public accessed diverse emotions from climatic anxiety and activism, awareness of individual impossibility to stop the ecologic crisis, to melancholy, depression, abandonment and possible hope in a sustainable future.

Contemporary artists and curators unfolded in the article reflect on their own identity and memory. Reconstruction can mean reusing socialist images for creating contemporary arts (see Serban Savu and Vlad Nancă), restoring buildings, assuming their past and transforming them in contemporary cultural places (Malmaison), or founding a contemporary art museum in Romania’s iconic communist building The House of the People (The National Museum of Contemporary Arts).

FOOTNOTES

1 Brand car made in România.

2 Mihai Oroveanu, Catalogue, The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 2004, p. 19.

3 Alex Radu, L’Annee derniere a Malmaison, Ed. Vellant, Bucharest, 2023, p. 212.

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She is a curator, cultural manager and art researcher based in Bucharest. Since 2021, she is an *AICA* member. Since 2022, she has been an International Board Member in AICA and part of the digital strategies committee in the same association. In the last 17 years, she presented papers about Communist Art, Cultural Wars, contemporary artworks at the most important conferences organized in Europe.

She collaborates with several art galleries and museums in Romania, and

she curated exhibitions in Romania, Ukraine, Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia. Her PhD thesis focused on the heritage of communist artworks. She has had the good fortune of being a grant keeper as a cultural manager in London at *body>data>space*, and in Paris, Sélestat, Strasbourg and Nancy during her *Courants du Monde* grant from the French Ministry of Culture. In 2010, she cofounded the project *Atelierul Magazine* - an international online and offline platform that creates an intercultural dialogue between the design creators and the public.