

Kunsthalle
Winterthur

Few Were Happy with their Condition explores life in post'89 Romania, a time of hope and enormous disappointment, where the desire for freedom materialized into economic uncertainty typical of the capitalist model, and profound corruption at all levels of society, from the interpersonal to the institutional, continues to this day. The weight of the communist past with its crimes and the oppression of the public sphere, and the poverty, precarity and instability of the post-communist era have resulted in a trauma that permeates most human activity and emotion, and is of course present in artistic production as well.

Focusing on the inherently contemporary mediums of video, film, and photography, the exhibition addresses the topic of discontentment in a world that is still torn between the communist and post-communist periods, affected psychologically by its history while trying to break free from it to move into the future. The participating artists, a new generation that started their careers in the late 90s or naughts, look outward with critiques of society, the political climate and social injustice, backward toward the country's dark past, but also inward, with personal narratives and reflections on the human condition.

In contrast to more traditional mediums like painting or sculpture which inevitably engage in examinations of their own materiality, video, film, and photography offer heightened immediacy, a sense of direct and instant connection between the viewer and the content of the image, eliminating the awareness of the medium from the experience, and fusing time and space into one. Through the work in

this exhibition, that sometimes uses journalistic means and other times poetic and abstract language, the immersion of the viewer into the “reality” proposed by the image – which according to Barthes is “an emanation of the past into the present”¹ – is seamless. “Photography and the cinema...are discoveries that satisfy once and for all...our obsession with realism.”² But it is not only the viewer that experiences the immediacy of these media. The artist feels compelled to document, reveal and interpret his/her reality through the means of those media that were invented precisely for that purpose.

Since the late 60s when experimental film and video, which critiqued the ever-growing hegemony of media itself on society’s perception of a reality manufactured by Hollywood and TV, were integrated as art forms in museums and galleries, artists have increasingly relied on recorded images to continue that critique. As digital technologies became more and more accessible, artists turned to working with the ephemeral and immaterial images these technologies generated, raising questions about the nature of the art object and subverting attempts at commodification that other artistic mediums were likely to fall prey to, including analog film although on a much lesser scale due to the material’s deteriorative nature. So the mediums in and of themselves were a form of opposition that was oftentimes also reflected in the topics addressed. In the art space, film and video, which migrated out of cinemas, were no longer confined to a predetermined viewing timeframe with the seated spectators separated from the screen in an enclosed space, so new modes of reception developed. Films entered into a relationship with the *structure*

of the space in which they were projected as well as with the surrounding works, allowing the viewers the possibility to move about freely and decide what to watch and for how long. This fragmented viewing has expanded the field of cinema into sculpture and installation, but also diminished viewers' attention spans, who are more likely to quickly consume images rather than devote the necessary concentration to longer sequences or narratives. Therefore, *Few Were Happy with their Condition* presents a variety of works, from analog to digital photography, short films and documentaries, encouraging various forms of reception and relation to the image.

The present and all its complexities is of course the most intriguing area of analysis, and we see the majority of the artists trying to make sense of it through various forms of study. As McLuhan observed, "the artist is always engaged in writing the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present."³ But it is not only the future that is being written when analyzing the present – the past, in a country like Romania where the transition seems to be continuing endlessly, has a powerful, oppressive, and ubiquitous presence.

¹Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

²André Bazin, *What is Cinema*, 1946


³Malcolm McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1968

Bogdan Girbovan's series *10/1* shot on a medium format camera portrays the artist's neighbors in their studio apartments in the 10-story building in which he lives in Bucharest in a block of flats built during the communist era. All of the apartments pictured have identical floorplans, while the décor of course differs, and the position of each subject is self-directed. The camera, however, is placed by the artist in exactly the same spot to maintain a consistent point-of-view, starting with himself on the 10th floor pictured in the center of the frame with his wrapped photographs leaning against the back wall behind him. A sociological study is conducted – each room tells a different story, through the décor, the subjects' placement and demeanor, the objects that they possess, indicating profession, education level, age, preferences. The communist past and the capitalist present collide in these personal spaces, offering an insight into the current situation of the country – the 60s and 70s style furniture belonging to the older generation contrasts the Ikea pieces that can be found all over the world including in the apartments of these young bachelors, signs of the globalized economy of which Romania is part.



Bogdan Girbovan
10/1, 2008

Enhanced Adhesive Synthetic PhotoPaper - Matte (Inkjet Print), fixed on dibond, edition of 5, 64x84cm each (framed)



The contemporary urban space and some issues associated with living in this alienating, anonymous, concrete environment are addressed by Vlad Nanca in his photo series, *No Parking*. Most of the photographs are snap shots taken with his camera phone of parking spots claimed by city residents through the placement and arrangement of found or everyday objects meant to cover as much surface as possible. However, because the objects are the focus of the photographs while the context and relationship to the surroundings are secondary, they begin to exhibit sculptural and semi-monumental qualities although they would otherwise go unnoticed. The struggle to assert the self over the increasingly controlled and privatized public space, even unconsciously, is apparent in these modest gestures of a practical nature that take on a creative dimension, as Beuys imagined social sculpture to do. The artist rather than composer of space, is a flaneur who both presents urban life as he finds it and offers a critical perspective of the condition of the “street” through his selection of images and the connections it engenders. Nanca is a collector of images of found objects arranged by anonymous creators in the city, and the project becomes an homage to the modesty of means inherent in this mode of creation.

Vlad Nanca

No Parking, 2010 - 2014

20 b/w photographs, ultra giclée print mounted to alucobond, 20x30cm each

Monotremu
Fireworks, 2012
Single channel video, 1'56"



In its video *Fireworks*, Monotremu combines disturbing found footage of mine and land explosions from YouTube with the festive sounds of fireworks. Within the current context of renewed negotiations on Rosia Montana, the large cyanide gold-mining project that was repealed last year after months of mass protests, this short video takes on new significances. A social critique of the cavalier approach most take to environmental issues, *Fireworks* also comments on the media's reduction of serious events to mere entertainment as well as the desensitization we experience through our mode of image consumption, and the continuing cycle of destruction and construction that we engage in, which is oftentimes different sides of the same coin.



Cristi Pogacean
Untitled, 2011
Single channel video, 29"

Found footage from Youtube is also utilized by Cristi Pogacean in his short video, *Untitled*. It is the famous sequence from Tiananmen Square, 1989 that has become iconic and instantly recognizable. A line of three tanks moves towards a sole protester who makes them falter and hesitate, man against machine, the power of individual resistance against the enforcers of absolute power. However, in Pogacean's video something is missing – it is that protester that challenges the tanks and the regime that they symbolize who has been digitally removed. We are left with the tanks that move uncertainly towards an empty space, then stop for a brief moment, and try to circumvent this invisible force in an almost balletic dance. Through extraordinarily simple means, Pogacean creates a powerful work that allows us to make several associations. It questions of course the truth of the image and reveals the process of manipulation, but it also refers to the construction of memory and the past, and comments on the nature of individual resistance in today's society where economic interests seem to dominate in the background and action against governments seems almost futile, despite appearances.

The relationship of the modern couple is the topic undertaken by Stefan Constantinescu in *On the Other Side*, a short film viewed as a looping projection. The camera is fixed on a locked french door that separates a him from an invisible and unresponsive her, presumably hiding somewhere in the space in the front plane suggestive of a boudoir. The only movement in the frame is his shadow from behind this door as he tries to enter, shifting his behavior incrementally from soft entreatment and negotiation to verbal and physical threat, echoing the universal oscillating emotions of hope, frustration, and resignation. The tension builds as he continues his vain attempts to reach her, yelling and banging on the door. The atmosphere becomes more and more ominous, yet he still evokes from her no response. The distance between the presumed lovers is endless and communication impossible. It is the alienation in contemporary society that leads to this existential rupture, as we constantly strive to connect yet never succeed. Love seems to be depicted as an illusion, with one projecting images and desires onto a metaphorically inexistent other, like a film onto a screen. Meanwhile, the actual projection of the film onto the wall of the museum creates a space that brings the viewer inside the suggested room, into the situation, as if it is to us that the man speaks and we are unable to respond. We are in a third space – it is neither the alluded space behind the door, nor the represented boudoir itself, but the museum space perceived as the space inside the boudoir. The viewer experiences immediacy, forgetting that it is all a mere illusion mediated by a projector. Time and space collide and we become actors in this ever-repeating life drama - the existential condition in which we are all permanently alone.

Stefan Constantinescu
***On the other Side*, 2015**
HD video, 8'

Actor: Andi Vasluianu
Director of Photography: Alexandru Timosca
Sound Design: Ciprian Cimpoi
Colour, HD
Original Language(s): Romanian





Alexandra Croitoru
The Cabbage Process, 2012
Single channel video, 35'49"

Longer films by Alexandra Croitoru, Ciprian Muresan and Dan Acosteoaiei which mandate the viewer's dedicated attention play in the cinema. In *The Cabbage Process*, Alexandra Croitoru documents Mr. Aurica making sauerkraut within the Art Academy of Bucharest, a tradition that Mr. Aurica has been following for 40 years once per year. A technical assistant to the mural department, Mr. Aurica bridges Romania's pre and post '89 history and tries to maintain through this annual ritual a certain level of humanity in an increasingly standardized educational system. The film also highlights the duality of tradition as a social behavior – on the one hand it is a force for stabilization in a rapidly changing and uncertain present, on the other it is an agent of conservatism and stagnation, also represented by the mural department's exclusive focus on church painting. It is precisely these conflicting trends that push and pull Romanian society today, creating the need for spaces where the past and the present can co-exist in a more harmonious relationship. The slow process of making sauerkraut is reflected in the slow pace of the film, taking us step-by-step through its production and ultimately the experience of sharing it, a moment of authentic social interaction where past and present really do connect.


Based on an actual event that took place near Suceava in 2011 where the tourism and finance ministers were invited to the inauguration of a newly-built ski lift for which the town mayor also invited a priest to bless it, *What Goes Around* addresses the omnipresence of the orthodox church in Romanian society and public space post '89. In this poetic film that features four middle-aged business men seated on a ski lift enacting a mysterious ritual with a withered bouquet of green plants dipped in water, Dan Acosteoaei comments on the uncomfortable intertwining of the three pillars of power in contemporary Romania: politics, business and religion with the consent of the public. The absurd, automatic, and repetitive gesture the men perform becomes devoid of meaning – it collapses into the comical as most of these actions do in their pervasiveness, once extracted from their intended, specific, religious context. And the men too, instead of appearing official as their suits would have them, look ridiculous and more like imposters repeating movements in which they too no longer believe.

Dan Acosteoaei
What Goes Around, 2011
Blu-ray video, 15'56"



Ciprian Muresan
I'm Protesting Against Myself, 2011
 (co-author Gianina Carbunariu)
 HD video, 31'

Ciprian Muresan's *I'm Protesting Against Myself* at first seems to comment on protest movements which sometimes lose their focus in the euphoria of the act, with a hand-puppet poking out of a street dumpster, repeating cyclically various slogans against himself, some absurd, some contradictory, some pointed at Romanian society and its failures. But the comic element of this staging, which through repetitive takes deconstructs the process of composing a film scene, slowly turns into a darker portrayal of the artist's inner struggle with fear, powerlessness, life challenges, and the turmoil of the human condition itself. The intonation of the voice oscillates between renewed enthusiasm, an increasing sense of desperation and fatigue, at times bordering on complete capitulation, only to start the cycle again. The puppet as alter-ego is able to express those hidden angsts and frustrations that would usually remain unspoken, also confronting us with our own weaknesses and hypocrisies. At the end of the video we are left with a final statement by the puppeteer-artist, weary and hopeless, no longer able to even hide behind his puppet or continue the charade as the camera zooms in on him inside the bin: "I protest against myself because I keep hiding in the bin while everything gets taken away from me".



The past, and this time its absence from the present is at the center of the work of Stefan Sava and Jozsef Bartha. A chapter in Romanian history that the public sphere and society prefers to ignore is recalled in *Pascani*, a photo and video project by Stefan Sava. Here the artist tackles Romania's role in the Holocaust, when Romanian authorities killed almost half of Romanian Jews either directly or through deportations. *Pascani* evokes the 1941 pogrom that took place in Iasi during which 4000 Jews were shot at cityhall while another 6000 or more were placed on death trains that transported them slowly in overcrowded wagons from town to town, a journey not more than a few hundred kilometers long that lasted more than a week, during which time no one was allowed to get off or receive any nourishment. The photographs document different locales in the town of Pascani, a town on the death trains' route, from which the same silo is visible. The photographs are of non-spaces, empty, devoid of any specificity, lacking any memory of the horror that once took place there. The only exception to these generic urban scapes is the omnipresent silo, one of the important visual landmarks during the transit, a sort of panopticon that overlooks the town and that through its mere existence embodies the memory of those events which is otherwise missing from the images, the physical space, and the accepted historical narrative. In the video this silo is located in the center of the frame, hovering over the area. We see a man in the front plane in a sort of parking lot sweeping the entrance. The repetitive, trance-like action becomes metaphoric for the decades of historic elimination of inconvenient truths. The sweeping is not a cleansing – it is not a purification or atonement with the introspection that those entail, but rather a superficial distancing from the past, continued over and over as the loop of the video suggests.

Stefan Sava and Jozsef Bartha

***Pascani*, 2010**

DVD video, 5'43" and 6 photographs 46x54cm each, digigraphie

The disconnect between past and present, in this work experienced by the artist himself and represented through the portrait is the topic of Jozsef Bartha's *Retouch/Almost Identical*. Here two light boxes show two almost identical photos of "pioneers", the communist organization to which all 8-14 year old school kids in Romania belonged. In the photograph of Jozsef taken in 1968, we see the young artist looking serenely upward into the distance, a typical gaze constructed in photography and art during the communist period representing the attitude of the people toward the „golden socialist future“. On closer inspection, we also notice that the photograph was touched up in the studio, adding eyelashes and rouge in the lips, while a rip suffered by the photography was taped over. In the photograph of Daniel, which was taken in 2012 when Jozsef's son was the same age as Jozsef in 1968, the boy looks straight at the camera somewhat bewildered and confused. His photo too was touched up, this time in photoshop, the tool of contemporary manipulation, adding the pioneer outfit, the lashes and the rouge. An identical rip was added with the software to maintain the similarity of the composition. In the two photographs that were taken forty-four years apart, we see a shift in attitude in the subjects that mirrors a shift in society. The stability of the old system is no longer. It has been substituted by uncertainty, constant flux, and disorder. A love letter of sorts, in this work Jozsef attempts to transmit to his son that experience that Daniel never had and will never grasp – it's a bridge that connects a moment of the past to an unknowing present generation.

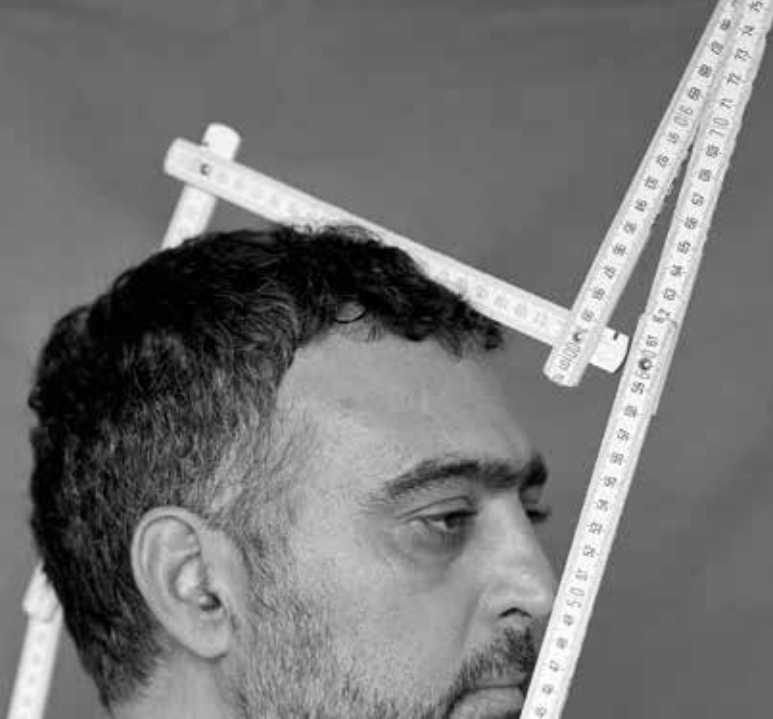


Jozsef Bartha
RETOUCH / Almost identical, 2012
2 pieces of lambda print light box, each 60x80x10cm

Alex Mirutziu
Self-portrait at 32, 2014
Single channel video, 1'



The disclosure of personal experience through the portrait is continued by Alex Mirutziu in the poetic short video loop *Self-Portrait at 32*. At the border of photograph and moving image, the video is a split screen showing the tops of two dilapidated buildings out of which sprouts some vegetation. The image remains almost motionless apart the delicate and subtle sway of the stems in the wind. Spontaneous vegetation grows in unattended areas of the urban environment, reclaiming the once controlled spaces, and their ruins. They indicate the low economic value of the empty lots and of the dereliction of the former industrial areas. Nevertheless, recently it has been shown that they actually contribute significantly to the health of the urban and rural ecosystem. As a metaphor for the condition of the artist, and a gay male in a society characterized by widespread homophobia, this piece is also a tribute to the marginalized that nevertheless constitute an essential component of the character of the whole of society. The loneliness and isolation the video evokes is an expression of the artist's own internal struggle with his position in this world, but through resilience, as we also observe in the plants that create space for themselves and reclaim what was once theirs, he succeeds in spite of environmental adversity.



The natural environment as a metaphor for the artist's condition is also employed by Claudiu Cobilanschi in his analog photo series *Microclimates* where in a set of three images we see the artist leaning against or pushing himself beyond certain urban structures, while in the other three the artist is in a photo studio utilizing various forms of measurement and pseudo-scientific devices to “recalibrate” himself, alluding to art’s long-standing association with science and its ways of operating. The title suggests that the artist embodies his own “climate” zone that differs from that of the surroundings, a trope for the artist’s individuality and distinctiveness. However, this special position as an artist also leads to a constant struggle with himself – to measure up, to live up to expectations, and to continuously move beyond limits, obstacles and failure. This inner conflict is indicative of the difficulty of survival in contemporary capitalist society, characterized by competition, hierarchies, and mad ambition, pushing people to perform better, be better and always “achieve”.

Claudiu Cobilanschi
***Microclimates*, 2015**
6 b/w photographs, 80x100cm each

Cristina David
A Voice, 2013
 Single channel video, 2'43"
My name is Cristina, 2012
 Single channel video, 2'6"



A Voice and *My Name is Cristina* are two different videos by Cristina David that are connected by their treatment of alternative or fictional autobiographies, death, and allusions to the important role math plays in the artist's real life. *A Voice*, from which the title of this exhibition is inspired, portrays the artist's alter-ego as a medium, able to speak to the dead. The video features an LCD display in a train station that runs the narrative that we are presented, with the dead being mostly unhappy about their dead state. There is one exception – a little girl that uses her invisibility to play tricks on the living. It is with this spirit that the subject becomes friends and plays chess. A metaphor for the artist's position in society, invisible and unhappy? Or maybe of the individual in general, alienated and alone, fading into anonymity. The only hope for acknowledgement is in taking advantage of this invisibility and anonymity to act through that area where you cannot be controlled. In *My Name is Cristina*, we are presented with an alternate personal history, one in which the artist has an older sister bearing her name that dies at the age of two, exactly two days before the birth of the artist. This narrative is presented in the running subtitles, while the photograph in the background shows two kids and their parents who have a striking resemblance to the artist. The narrative we read states that the death of the two year-old sister is unknown to all but the brother and parents – indeed, the picture shows these two kids. The artist takes on the identity of her older sister, while math is once again a tool for making sense of or adapting to a difficult situation.

The work in the exhibition is diverse in content, medium and mode of display and much of it thematizes time as a repetitive, cyclical phenomenon with loops that seem to have no clear end and beginning. Ranging from inexpensive video and digital technology to analog techniques, the artists use the recorded image to capture and interpret the world around them and their place in it. Some artists look to analog as the solution to the quandary of the site of the photographic image in digital media since analog photography is still an auratic object rather than immaterial data. It is also a way to maintain a distinction between the fine artist and the masses who can too now, due to rapid advances in technology, produce high-caliber work. Others choose digital technology for its flexibility and accessibility, and because it issues from the contemporary context that it then mirrors. And while expanded cinema is *de rigueur*, the exhibition also pays respect to traditional cinema, where the viewer's attention is dedicated and uninterrupted.

Romania's economic woes, the lack of institutions that support artistic production, and the meager means at artists' disposal might also be visible in the modest production value of some of the projects, which focus on a search for profound meaning rather than on exercising technical sophistication. And yet, the frustration with this modest mode of working imposed by circumstance is evident as well. As Muresan states in his video, 'I'm protesting against myself because I accepted to be thrown in a garbage bin....' Therefore for some, production quality seems to be married to the reading of the work as a reaction to the penury of their situation. The diversity of themes and modes of production notwithstanding, the work in the show presents a post '89 generation working in media that have been largely absent from the focus of attention that Romania has received

of late, one largely concerned with painting. It is a generation consumed by an existential struggle, an oscillation between optimism and resignation and a desire to build despite the many obstacles it faces. It uses the tools invented for the purpose of documenting and bringing order to bear witness to this time of uncertainty with its unique perspective formed by the transition. As a counterweight to the current image of Romania as a country of important painters, we felt that the time was ripe to allow this generation to also present a different, more critical position.

Olga Stefan

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