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Negotiating Artistic Identity through Satire: subREAL 1989-1999

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Negotiating Artistic Identity through Satire: subREAL 1989-1999

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Abstract | ii |
| Introduction: Post-Cold War “Eastern Europe” | 1 |
| Chapter One: The Prevalent Monolithic Western View in <i>Beyond Belief</i> and <i>After the Wall</i> Exhibitions | 8 |
| Chapter Two: An Overview of Satire in the Romanian Literary and Artistic Tradition / Satire in subREAL | 23 |
| Chapter Three: Aggressive Satire in the Early 1990’s Installations | 33 |
| Chapter Four: Social Satire in the <i>Draculand</i> Series | 45 |
| Chapter Five: <i>The Art History Archive</i> Series and Satirical Critical Distance | 62 |
| Conclusion | 70 |
| Bibliography | 76 |

Negotiating Artistic Identity Through Satire: subREAL, 1989-1999

Anca Izabel Galliera

ABSTRACT

The focus of this research study is on major art works produced during the nineteen-nineties by the Romanian collective subREAL, composed of Calin Dan and Josif Kiraly. The thesis is an alternative to the literal-minded and politically biased Western view typified in two major exhibitions of art from Eastern Europe: *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (Chicago, 1995) and *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Sweden, 1999). Both exhibitions presented Post-Communist nations as a monolithic bloc, in which art was primarily a passive reflection of political and social events. It will be demonstrated that such exhibitions had consciously promoted this polarizing Western interpretation of the former socialist cultures of Eastern Europe.

By contrast, the argument presented here is that subREAL did not merely transmit information and facts from remote lands, but rather explored satire as the way to engage the world around them. It will be argued that an important satirical tactic employed by the artists was to juxtapose elements from 'East' and 'West' in order, first, to cope with bitter memories; second, to mock stereotypical images of Romanian culture; and finally, to disarm the ideological past and present by a critical distancing strategy. This analysis will

entail the identification of specific social themes reflecting Romanian political and cultural changes of the 1990s.

The discussion of subREAL will reveal that the artists were very much aware of the Western conventions and realized that in order to enter the international scene they had to deliver works accessible to a Western audience. Operating within a specific satirical tradition, the artists negotiated a path between their artistic identity and the Western perception of that identity.

Introduction:

Post-Cold War “Eastern Europe”

“Is there a serious interest in true plurality and mutual exchange, or are doors opened only for pre-established notions of what is accepted, valuable, and commercially viable? Or will those doors open only so that traditional Western art can appropriate all that is new and vigorous in order to renew its spent aesthetics?...”¹

During the almost half-century long Cold War period (1953-1989), the nations of Eastern and Central Europe, as satellite states under Moscow’s direct control, represented a monochromatic, distant, and off-limits region for the West.² Well-known metaphors, like the “Berlin Wall”³ and the “Iron Curtain”⁴, were evocative and expressive for they embodied the notion of the border between the Communist utopia and the Western Capitalist world.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall on November 6, 1989 instigated the historical revolutions⁵ of the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties in Eastern and Central Europe. The revolutions ended Soviet rule and initiated each nation’s individual

¹ Gerardo Mosquera, “Spheres, Cities, Transitions: International Perspectives on Art and Culture,” *Art Nexus* 3, no. 54 (2004): 84-9.

² Western Europe and America.

³ “The wall embodied the abstract border with a manifestly arbitrary physical barrier, cutting off traffic along what were busy streets. To the global metropolis it meant a shift of continents, a freezing of the compass.” Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska and Elena Gapova, “Introduction: Mapping Postsocialist Cultural Studies,” in *Over the Wall / After the Fall*, ed. Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska and Elena Gapova (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 8.

⁴ The word “iron” is expressive in that it evokes the iron fist of the communist rule, recalls the factories of the socialist states, and also “iron” is immovable and impenetrable to sound and light. The Iron Curtain is similar to a wall, protecting the innocence of those it protects and hiding them from prying glares of the west. *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ The following is a list of some of the post-communist countries and the dates of the revolutions: Albania (1991); Belarus (1991); Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992); Bulgaria (1989); Croatia (1991); Czech Republic (1993); Eastonia (1989); East Berlin, Germany (1989); Hungary (1989); Poland (1989); Romania (1989); Slovakia (1993) and Slovenia (1989). Bojana Pejic and David Elliot, ed., *After the Wall, Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, exh. cat. (Modern Museum: Stockholm, 1999), 159-205.

and uneven journey from a totalitarian regime toward democracy. The euphoria felt by the newly liberated nations celebrating the fall of the wall dissipated rapidly in the early nineteen-nineties and problems soon started to surface. For example, the Post-Cold War⁶ geopolitical map, of a “simplified” Europe, neatly divided into East and West, has shifted and became problematic, and several of the former Socialist countries’ positions in the global atlas were uncertain.⁷ Furthermore, representing and understanding the cultures of the former Communist nations within the Western scene, proved to be problematic mainly because intellectuals and critics continued to emphasize separation and had little interest in generating a true dialog between equals. Adjectives like “backward” and “primitive” when applied to the Balkans, suggested a region riddled with nationalist and ethnic conflicts, that stood in contrast to the progressive and sophisticated West.

Despite the gaps, the West was eager to discover and enter the newly freed Eastern European countries. Beginning with the early months of 1990, there was an explosion of short essays and lengthy articles in art publications on art and culture in Eastern Europe. American magazines, such as *ArtNews*, hit the newsstands with catchy headlines. It is interesting to mention a few of the titles especially since they often told a lot more than the actual article. In the May 1990 issue of *ArtNews*,⁸ an extensive report titled “After the Revolution: Art in Eastern Europe” was published. It contained separate

⁶ Post-Cold War refers to the period after the overthrow of the Communist regimes. Throughout my paper I use other similar terms like “Post-Socialist”, or “Post-Communist” or “post-1989” or “Post-Berlin Wall” to describe the same period.

⁷ According to the French *Le Petit Larousse Illustre*, (1993), the Balkans states include Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Slovenia, Turkey (the European portion) and Yugoslavia. In the *Encyclopedia Britannica CD* (1998) the Balkan Peninsula as a slightly different composition comprising all the countries mentioned above excluding Turkey. *Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia CD* (1998) defines the Balkans to include Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey- the European portion, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and Romania. Adrian Cioroianu, “The Impossible Escape: Romanian and the Balkans,” in *Balkan as Metaphor, Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, ed. Dusan I. Bjelic and Obrad Savic (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 210.

mini-reports on several nations from the former Soviet bloc, for example, “Poland: Waiting for Solidarity,” “Hungary: Goulash Democracy,” “Czechoslovakia: Theater of the Absurd” and “Romania: Suspended Animation.” In these articles the post-Communist Eastern Europe was seen as “A new Europe in its infant stage of formation.” Furthermore, each of the articles’ titles was an ironic play on words. They attempted to describe the present situation, in each of these nations, by ironically alluding to the communist past. For example, Hungary was seen as slowly replacing Janos Kadar’s “soft dictatorship” or “Goulash Communism”⁹ with “Goulash Democracy”; the presence of the theater of the absurd in Czechoslovakia referred to the dissident absurdist playwright Vaclav Havel who became the country’s president; and Romania’s “Suspended Animation” referred to the very slow almost non-existent changes within the arts.

A similar report titled “Eastern Europe: Euphoria Eclipsed” appeared a year later in the February 1991 issue of *ArtNews*, documenting the past year’s changes that had occurred in some of the former Soviet-bloc nations. The article reported mainly on issues related to the real hardships of a barely emerging art market in these nations. The subsequent titles from this publication were also suggestive: “Soviet Union: Reinventing an Art World,” “Poland: Getting Closer to the Customer,” “Hungary: After the Soft Revolution,” “Czechoslovakia: Torn Velvet” and “Romania: The Standards of Change.” The articles, as their titles suggest, point toward the cultural, economic and political instability of the former Socialist countries.

Closely following the published articles, a new literary genre, termed “journal of return,” appeared and helped maintain the American interest in the newly discovered

⁸ “After the Revolution: Art in Eastern Europe,” *ArtNews* 89, no. 5 (1990): 151-75.

cultures of the former Communist countries. The literary genre of the journal of return was developed once young émigrés returned to their place of origin after living most of their lives in the United States as American citizens. The journal of return recorded the identification of the returnee as both Eastern European and American. As Andaluna Borcila pointed out, once the Communist regimes collapsed, “the returnees were authorized, contracted, to document both their return and the political realities of ‘Eastern Europe.’ The narratives of returning immigrants participated in the production of meaning about ‘Eastern Europe’ and ‘post-Communism.’”¹⁰ Works such as Andrei Codrescu’s *The Hole in the Flag* (1991) and Eva Hoffman’s *Exit Into History* (1991) were written mainly for the Western audience and they fulfilled that audience’s demand for knowledge about Eastern Europe.¹¹

The narratives of return and the art journals (mentioned above) evoked binary contrasts between the “normality” of the West and the “traumatized” post Communist Eastern Europe. Additionally, they allowed the Western audiences to witness history in the making in a distant Eastern Europe. For example in *The Hole in the Flag*, Andrei Codrescu talked about his first hand experience of the historical events between December 1989-January 1990 in Romania. Also, it is relevant to note that the narratives of return and the art articles were written very shortly after the collapse of the communist regimes. Just as the returning immigrants were sent to witness and record history in the making, the *ArtNews* reporters were also sent to discover how the art scenes in the Eastern bloc, having been long repressed, were reinventing themselves. The “infant” and

⁹ “Goulash Communism” was a middle road between socialism and capitalism. Ernest Beck, “Hungary: Goulash Communism,” *ArtNews* 89, no. 5 (1990): 169.

¹⁰ “New Voices Conference at the University of Wyoming - Encounters with Post-Communist Sites: Trajectories of Inquiry (Notes of a Resident Alien),” *American Studies* 44, no. 1 (2003): 196.

“deformed” Eastern European nations were seen as beginning their journey towards normality - specific to the West.

James Aulich noted that stereotypically, newspapers and news broadcasts portrayed Eastern Europe “as a land of the orphans, food queues, empty shops, peasants, religious ardour, police brutality and anti-communist fervor.” For example, *Magnum’s East Europe*, a 1992 film record in still images, told the history of the region since 1945 through black and white art prints.¹² The film was a story of lost opportunity, poverty and backwardness. Also it is significant to note that the movie did not refer to individual post-communist nations but rather it considered Eastern Europe as a compact region.

Throughout the nineties the persistence of post-Cold War binary oppositions between identities of Western and Eastern European cultures was the focus of several eminent scholars of post-totalitarian studies.¹³ Slavoj Zizek and Maria Todorova were concerned with the persistence of a Western ‘Balkanist’ discourse, and of myths originating from the eighteenth century, which projected a savage and backward image of Eastern European peoples. Zizek talked about the Western perception of the Post- Cold War Europe, specifically the Balkans, as “a place where nothing is forgotten and nothing is ever learned, where the old traumas are replayed again and again.”¹⁴

Maria Todorova, in her seminal book *Imagining the Balkans*, set forth the differences between Balkanism and the Orientalism of Edward Said. She successfully

¹¹ Ibid., 197.

¹² “Through the Looking Glass: Visual Expression in Central Europe 1989-93,” in *Europe without Walls: Art, Posters and Revolution 1989-93*, exh. cat., ed. James Aulich and Timothy Wilcox (Manchester: Manchester City Gallery, 1993), 11.

¹³ An emerging interdisciplinary field of scholarship focuses on the encounters between the newly discovered Eastern Europe and the West, especially North America, after 1989. See Borcila, *American Studies*, 188.

argued that Balkanism was not a subspecies or a variation of Said's Orientalism.

Todorova cited concrete examples to support her claim: the geographical concreteness of the Balkans; a lack of exotic and sexually feminine images typical of the Orient (Harem, etc); and the "image of a bridge or crossroads"¹⁵ rather than a distant place in time and space (as the Orient is perceived). While Orientalism, according to Todorova, "is a discourse about an imputed opposition, Balkanism is about an imputed ambiguity."¹⁶

Within post-totalitarian scholarship, in addition to Todorova and Zizek, Larry Wolff offered a historical perspective on the concept of Eastern Europe. In his book *Inventing Eastern Europe: the Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Wolff showed the eighteenth-century origin and later persistence of the Western view of Eastern Europe as a "no man's land", a place both uncivilized and backward. Wolff argued that the invention of Eastern Europe as a geographically and culturally remote and barbaric location during the Enlightenment was necessary for the creation of the West as the civilized and "refined land":

"Just as the new centers of the Enlightenment superseded the old centers of the Renaissance, the old lands of barbarism and backwardness in the north were correspondingly displaced to the east. The Enlightenment had to invent Eastern Europe and Western Europe together, as complementary concepts, defining each other by opposition and adjacency."¹⁷

Similarly to Wolff's historical observation, post-Cold War Europe is (re)invented again by the West as a very distant, underdeveloped and backward region of the world.

Moreover, as Andaluna Borcila pointed out, post-1989 Romania is perceived by the

¹⁴ Zizek specifically addresses the role of the Balkanist fantasy in Western perception of the events in former Yugoslavia. *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), 212.

¹⁵ Maria Todorova, "Balkanism and Orientalism: Are they Different Categories," *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3-21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

American audience as a land of orphans, a legacy of Communist atrocities, violence and poverty. Television representations, print media and travel guides also suggested that in the Western perception the post-Cold War Eastern Europe, specifically Romania, was “an assemblage of traumatized sites and pathological spaces for the victims of Communism.”¹⁸

In summary, Zizek, Todorova, Wolff and Borcila showed that Eastern European cultures were represented as one-dimensional by the West. Their studies on cultural representations revealed the persistence of binary oppositions between the West and Post-Cold War Eastern Europe. Additionally, the art journals and the narratives of return (published in the west) portrayed Post-Communist European nations as “victims” of communism that stood in contrast to the West. As Wolff pointed out, “Since 1989, Eastern Europe has become an idea once again, no longer under the military control of the Soviet Union. Eastern Europe however remains an extremely powerful idea, deeply imbedded in the history of two centuries, so influential in its political consequences that its intellectual origins are barely recognized, hidden in historical camouflage.”¹⁹

The initial questions of this research study, then are whether the cultural representation of Eastern European as monolithic by the West influenced the Western reception of art and artists from Eastern Europe, specifically Romania. Also, how did Romanian artists attempt to participate within the international exhibition practices? The present study will attempt to formulate some answers by looking at two major art exhibitions of East European art staged in North America and Western Europe.

¹⁷ *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 5.

¹⁸ Borcila, *American Studies*, 195-6.

¹⁹ *Inventing*, 16.

Chapter One:

The Prevalent Monolithic Western View in *Beyond Belief and After the Wall*

“Contemporary Art, maybe any art and any cultural production, comes to us through the medium of the exhibition. Organizing exhibitions is writing art history.”²⁰

Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe,²¹ organized at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago in 1995, and *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*,²² organized at the Moderna Musee, Stockholm, Sweden in 1999, were two major exhibitions of art from Eastern Europe that greatly shaped the Western perception of the art and culture of Post-Socialist nations, including Romania, throughout the nineteen-nineties.

The argument in this chapter is that these exhibitions were not isolated events, but that their staging was rooted within the North American cultural representations of the concept of Eastern Europe and former Soviet-bloc countries as a uniform cultural region, a bias was revealed in the structure and curatorial approach of each. In both of these exhibitions art was treated primarily as a reflection of political and social events, as if the artists and their art would have no significance without the designation of their national origin.

²⁰ Piotr Piotrowski, “Central Europe in the Face of Unification,” in *Art Margins*, <http://www.artmargins.com/content/feature/piotrowski2.html>, 22 Nov 2004.

²¹ Margaret Welsh, ed., *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe*, exh.cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995).

²² Pejic and Elliott, ed., *After the Wall*.

The present account attempts to answer two important questions: By what criteria did the curator choose which art works and artists would be represented? How much did the curator control representation?

However, besides the curators, billionaire George Soros had an influential role in staging the two exhibitions. He has been funding a network of Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in virtually every capital in Eastern and Central Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Romania opened in November 1992 as part of the general SCCA network. The organization aimed to financially support and stimulate the production of Romanian art, to promote the integration of new artistic strategies within the local arts, and to ensure that the Romanian art scene has access abroad. All of the centers were coordinated by a hub office in New York (called the Open Society Institute and the Soros Foundations Network), that represented the only major port of entry for the Westerner into the local contemporary art activity. SCCA provided logistical coordination, translations and most importantly contacts with a set network of artists associated with the Center. Subsequently, only those artists in affiliation with the Soros Centers were meant to be represented in internationally organized exhibitions, as in the case of *Beyond Belief* and *After the Wall*.

23

Rachel Weiss made a good point when she observed that the same few artists were most often represented in the internationally organized exhibitions, thus underlining

²³ Being connected to the SCCA for an Eastern European artist meant access to international exposure. Between November 1992 until February 1995 subREAL played a central role within the SCCA in Romania with Calin Dan as the artistic director and Josif Kiraly as the chief photographer for the Foundation. See Introduction in *subREAL's Files* (Kuenstlerhaus Bethanien / Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 1996).

the influence that the Soros centers had in promoting these few artists.²⁴ It is not surprising therefore to see his name mentioned before any other participant in both the *Beyond Belief* and *After the Wall* catalogues. Although the Soros Foundation had centers practically in each and every nation of the post-Cold War Eastern and Central Europe, only a limited number of artists were actually affiliated with them. For instance, in Romania, throughout the early and mid ninety nineties, the artists predominately associated with the Center were the ones who formed during the 1980s underground artistic generation and reached maturity in the 1990s²⁵, including the group subREAL, Dan and Lia Perjovschi, Calin Man, Teodor Graur and others. In general during the ninety nineties, these artists were interested in international artistic practices and wanted to emerge on the American and Western European art scene. In this sense, in the early nineties, on the local artistic scene, the Center initiated specific exhibition practices promoting the use of new technologies, video-installation art and performance aimed for synchronization with contemporary international exhibition practices.²⁶

George Soros was born in Hungary, immigrated to London in 1937 at the age of seventeen and enrolled in London's School of Economics. In 1956, he moved to the United States and began to build his financial success through an international investment fund that he founded and managed. In time he became one of the principal financial figures on the international scene, and has been an authoritative presence in establishing communication between post-Cold War Eastern and Central European countries and

²⁴ Rachel Weiss, "The March of Paradigm," *New Art Examiner* 23 (1995): 22-5.

²⁵ In the next chapter, I will offer a brief overview of the Romanian artistic underground activities of the 1980's.

²⁶ In Chapter Four, I will discuss some of the Romanian exhibition practices supported by the Soros Center.

North America and Western Europe.²⁷ However, he contributed to the perpetuation of unilateral representation of the post-Cold War nations. In this sense, it is relevant to quote one of subREAL's member Calin Dan on the complex philanthropic nature of the George Soros Foundation (between November 1992 and February 1995, Calin was Director of the Soros Center in Romania):

“I think the main cause for the frustrations the structures and the operational policies of the Soros Foundation might raise is scaling. Both Soros Foundation's projects and George Soros' personal philosophy are dealing with large scale concepts and emergencies. And large scale has to step over the scale of the individual. What George Soros is doing by his philanthropic work is compressing history into a life time project...What matters in the end is that philanthropy operates in no different way from profit. It relies on the same system of demand and offer, of punishment and reward as the oppressive capitalism itself. And at both ends of the link are the eternal enemies – the rich who provide jobs, goods, control, and the poor who provide work, profit, recognition...Soros Foundation's programs are gambling maybe on the elites of tomorrow and rely on the local societies for accepting or rejecting them on a long term. But here is another paradox generated by the imperfections of societies, be they open or closed. You cannot build an open system on the ruins of a closed one without counting on the remnants of the previous. Even more, you cannot open a closed society without making compromises with those in charge with it – that means precisely those who do not fancy the opening. This is just another relevant detail pointing at the fact that Soros Foundation is a Power structure, representing other Power structures, operating within the environment of Power and according to Power regulation. To present it otherwise is just a clever marketing strategy.”²⁸

Soros was foremost an emblem of the Western world. Within the arts, for instance, Irina Sandomirskaja pointed out “that words such as ‘identity,’ ‘subjectivity,’ ‘stereotype’ and ‘critique’ are part of an international language of critical representation in which the *After the Wall* exhibition, for example, chose to convey its own intentions.”²⁹ The same words were picked up by Eastern European artists from the

²⁷ George Soros, http://www.soros.org/about/bios/a_soros. 7 Jan 2004.

²⁸ Calin Dan, *The Dictatorship of Goodwill*, <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00050.html>. 10 Feb 2005.

²⁹ Irina Sandomirskaja, *The Wall after the Wall*, <http://www.artmargins.com/content/review/sandomirskajareview.html>. 17 Jan 2005.

package of application materials to the Soros Foundation. It can be concluded, therefore, that in general the Eastern European artist, in order to enter the international art scene, would adopt a dominant international vocabulary, exemplified by the North American contemporary exhibition practices.

*Beyond Belief*³⁰, organized in the mid-nineties, represented the first and last major exhibition of Eastern and Central European art in the United States. The exhibition focused on local cultural themes among thirteen mostly young artists from six different countries: Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia, and structured the artists' works on a country-by-country basis. Romania was represented by the group subREAL and two other artists, Dan Perjovschi and Ioana Batrinu.³¹ The exhibition was guest curated by the American Laura Hoptman, who "was sent by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago on two fact-finding journeys (in 1993 and 1994), to five countries and approximately twenty cities. She returned with a group of contemporary artists who were well known in the countries of origin but virtually unknown in the U.S."³² In Romania, Hoptman collaborated with the SCCA's Artistic Director Calin Dan who is also one of subREAL's members. According to Hoptman, Calin had set up a "very good program of studio visits as well as visits to exhibitions."³³

The works in the *Beyond Belief* exhibition were selected to represent most appropriately their country of provenance, and appear to make use of a so-called "local

³⁰ The exhibition *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East and Central Europe* opened in September 1995 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. It then traveled to Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia and Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska before closing in the spring of 1997. Judith Stein, "Out of the East," *Art in America* (April 1998): 50-5.

³¹ Welsh, ed., *Beyond Belief*.

³² Based on an e-mail correspondence I had with Laura Hoptman. 18 Apr 2005.

³³ Ibid. The choice for Calin Dan as the Soros Center's Artistic Director is not surprising since he has been an active and well known figure within the contemporary Romanian art scene, before and after the fall of Communism.

iconography.”³⁴ According to the exhibition catalogue, the artists were meant to be seen as representative of their own countries, the result being a bazaar of curiosities from different parts of the world. In the catalogue each country was illustrated by a nicely drawn outlined map, accompanied by an essay by a local curator or art critic. Despite being grouped on a country-by-country basis, the artists were seen as belonging to a compact mass, referred to as a “region” and governed by a single paradigm. Suggestive in this sense was the title of the exhibition *Beyond Belief*, which referred to Eastern Europe’s post-Communist “disbelief in the viability of doctrine, ideological structures and belief systems after the establishment and subsequent dismantling of communism.”³⁵ Although there was an essay for each of the six represented countries, the essays were meant collectively to refer to the former socialist Eastern Europe. As usual, the region was “to the West mysterious and rarely characterized,” and “had been for many decades a blank screen onto which anything can be projected. The exhibition *Beyond Belief* began to fill that screen.”³⁶ As the independent curator, writer and associate professor at the School of Art Institute Chicago Rachel Weiss rightfully pointed out:

“*Beyond Belief* was organized in response to Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art’s interest in artworks being made in the developing democracies of Eastern Europe, an interest that arose both from the newness of this work to Western eyes and from the excitement attached to art made in the midst of intense social transformation.”³⁷

Laura Hoptman, “a curious curator rather than an expert on the region” (as she described herself), elected to exhibit works that deal with social and political themes,

³⁴ Richard Francis. Introduction to Welsh, ed., *Beyond Belief*.

³⁵ Kevin Consey. Forward to Welsh, ed. *Beyond Belief*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *New Art Examiner*, 22-5.

such as nationalism (Ujlak)³⁸, national identity (Tauchmannova)³⁹, religion (Boyadjiev)⁴⁰, community and family (Libera; Janin)⁴¹ and national stereotyping (subREAL)⁴². To satisfy the curiosity of the American audience, Hoptman in her catalogue essay *Seeing is Believing*, interpreted the artists' works as always relating to the Communist past, and these were perceived as extensions of the artists' surrounding realities both past and present. For example, let us consider Hoptman's discussion of subREAL's three-part installation titled *News from Dracula*. The work featured a pommel horse (alluding to the Romania's gymnast Nadia Comineci) with a TV monitor installed within it and covered with a woolen bed cover. The pommel horse was surrounded as in a protective shield with wooden stakes (part of the Dracula iconography). Hoptman compared subREAL's usage of Dracula iconography to the Romanian Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, because just like the vampire, he too sucked his nation's blood. In offering this connection between subREAL's work and the dictator, Hoptman anchored the work within the context of the Socialist past and made it exotic and political enough to be appealing to a North American audience. Although she briefly mentioned that subREAL "humorously takes control of a national stereotype"⁴³ she did not indicate how the artists were able to do this.

Similarly to Hoptman, Roxana Marcoci, in her catalogue essay *Romanian Democracy and Its Discontents*, presented an extensive description of the contemporary political parties and their orientation, along with several references to the Communist

³⁸ Welsh, ed., *Beyond Belief*, 124-5. See color plates.

³⁹ Ibid. 122-123, color plates.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 100-101, color plates.

⁴¹ Ibid. 112-113 and 106-107, color plates.

⁴² Ibid. 120-121, color plates.

⁴³ Laura Hoptman, "Seeing is Believing," in Margaret Welsh, ed., *Beyond Belief*, 8.

past to set the stage for her later analyses of some of the Romanian artists' works. For instance, subREAL's *Alimentara (Food Store)* simulated a food store display composed of stacked jars of pickled vegetables placed in a pyramid-like formation, bottles of wine, smoked pork bones scattered on the floor as well as other food items. Talking about this installation Marcoci said that the work "mirrors the national obsession with food supplies and ethnic networking prevalent in the last twenty years of virtual famine."⁴⁴ Rather than perceiving the artists' work as challenging and entering in active dialogue with their social surroundings, Marcoci saw subREAL's *Alimentara* solely as a visual mirror that merely reflected the artists' surrounding realities. Relevant to point out is that Roxana Marcoci, Assistant Curator, Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, was not a local curator and critic operating in Romania, since she had not been living in the country for many years. The topic for the essay was given to her by Hoptman who invited Marcoci to write the essay because: "she had a level of critical sophistication and knowledge of how to write for general American audiences."⁴⁵ This was a curious choice when according to the exhibition catalogue's introduction the individual essays were written by local "curators, critics, art historians and cultural policy makers" and were meant to provide "an introductory text on issues of contemporary visual culture in East and Central Europe."⁴⁶

In addition to considering art as passive reflection of political and social events, the overall curatorial approach in the *Beyond Belief* exhibition could be seen as misleading in that it grouped six individual nations under one political umbrella. All these countries were considered to be "beyond belief" systems due to the collapse of the Soviet

⁴⁴ Roxana Marcoci, "Romanian Democracy and Its Discontents," in Margaret Welsh, ed., *Beyond Belief*, 18.

⁴⁵ Based on an e-mail conversation I had with Laura Hoptman. 18 Apr 2005.

bloc, which kept them unified under one ideology. However, this notion, or rather assumption, that all these countries were one and the same is too great of a generalization. Despite more than forty years of a shared Communist rule, these countries' internal realities were more dissimilar than similar. Throughout history, each of these nations had seen and gone through diverse political structures. Some were part of powerful empires benefiting from their ruling structure while other nations suffered extensively.⁴⁷

A significant oversight of the exhibition is that it neglected to acknowledge the awareness of artists, such as subREAL of current international artistic trends. As it will be pointed out in a future chapter, the artists were aspiring for international recognition and were aware of the North American interest in a specific type of art from a Post-Communist Eastern European artist. subREAL's success within the international scene, could be seen when we consider the exhibition *Beyond Belief* as a springboard for the artists represented. For example, following the exhibition, subREAL was included in the 1997 *Second Biennial, Truce: Echoes of Art in an Age of Endless Conclusion* at SITE Santa Fe, curated by Francesco Bonami, and another Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi, who also participated in *Beyond Belief*, had a solo exhibition *Anthroprogramming* at Franklin Furnace, New York in 1995.⁴⁸

Despite the exhibition's general framing under the all encompassing paradigm of Post-Communist Eastern and Central Europe, *Beyond Belief*, through its small and approachable exhibition's scale, was able to offer international visibility to the featured artists. Additionally, it demonstrated that "far from being isolated outside voices, young

⁴⁶ Francis, Introduction to *Beyond Belief*.

⁴⁷ Weiss, *New Art Examiner*, 22-5.

artists from East and Central Europe were very much part of the international art conversation that took place in magazines, journals, and multinational exhibition.”⁴⁹

The second major exhibition that will be discussed is called *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, which although it had a different exhibiting structure, was in its overall curatorial approach very much similar to *Beyond Belief*. *After the Wall* was first staged in 1999 at Stockholm’s Moderna Museet and organized by independent curator Bojana Pejic, in cooperation with David Elliot, director, and Iris Westermann, curator at the Moderna Museet. It comprised one hundred forty-four artists from twenty-two former Communist European countries. In contrast to *Beyond Belief*, which followed a country-by-country categorization, *After the Wall* was grouped around four major themes: social sculpture, reinventing the past, questioning subjectivity and issues of gender.

Bojana Pejic, the chief curator, in her catalogue essay, quoted Harry Nahkala, chief technician at Moderna Museet, who, when presented with the provisional installation plans of the exhibition in Stockholm, murmured “Your exhibition *After the Wall* is really going to be nothing but walls.”⁵⁰ In the following pages, it will be demonstrated the modes in which *After the Wall* exhibition represented art confined within “walls” rather than promoting emerging art after the fall of the Berlin wall.

The exhibition organized in 1999 was meant to offer closure to the post-Cold War period in European culture. As David Elliot, co-curator and director of Moderna Museet expressed: “A shorter span would not have enabled a generation to have emerged which

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Hoptman, “Seeing,” 10.

⁵⁰ Bojana Pejic, “The Dialectics of Normality,” in Bojana Pejic and David Elliott, ed., *After the Wall*, 27.

had not been directly influenced by the old system.”⁵¹ However, the exhibition’s entire framework was formulated to relate all the selected art to an ideological Communist past and the Post-Communist condition. The title, *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, was an umbrella under which all these different cultures were seen as localized to a single region and presented as a bloc. The four themes addressed in the exhibition were interpreted and related to the Communist past. For example, the theme of art as a “social sculpture”⁵² was referred strictly to an Eastern and Central European context and was related to issues such as economics, poverty, religion, nationalism, alienation and consumerism. History, or the theme of reinventing the past, was evidently understood in the context of both the pre- and post-Cold War period when “the opening of Secret Police and other archives all across the region has been a hot subject.”⁵³ The third theme, related to personal and artistic subjectivity, as well as the fourth theme, related to gender issues in art, were both understood in relation to the artists’ Communist past. They and their art were seen as carriers and translators of a past ideology.

The majority of essays in the exhibition catalogue provided limited discussions of the art per se and only explored cultural and political issues characteristic of the entire Eastern European region. Consideration of all these cultures as a uniform group from the onset was too narrowly focused. By the end of the nineties, the geopolitical borders of the early and mid-nineties vanished and a redefinition of the region took place. If at the time when *Beyond Belief* was staged, most of the post-Communist European nations were operating at a relatively similar rate of social transformation, by the end of the nineties,

⁵¹ David Elliot, “Looking Things in the Face,” in Bojana Pejic and David Elliott, ed., *After the Wall*, 11.

⁵² The term came from Joseph Beuys. It was appropriated by the artists in the 1990s when art re-entered society, *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

clear differences emerged among these countries largely due to the European Union's expansion eastward. For example, in March 1999 Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were integrated into the European Union, which meant a certain level of social, political and economic development more in line with Western European countries. On the other end of the spectrum, countries such as Romania and Bulgaria were struggling to dissolve remnants of a strong network of Communist structures. This fact alone provided enough reason to consider Post-Socialist Eastern European countries as separate cultures since their paths of internal transformation were unique.

In her essay *Dialectics of Normality*, Bojana Pejic viewed post-Cold War Eastern and Central European countries together as going through a “process of normalization” or following a “quest for normality.”⁵⁴ The goal of this process was the integration into the European Union (EU). Until these nations were able to fulfill the requirements for EU integration, they will remain, as Tony Blair said, “Europe’s Backyard”. Pejic’s discussion of the issue of normality recalls the problematic cultural representation of Eastern Europe in the West. While Todorova and Wolf drew attention to the power of the western idea of Eastern Europe as the backward and underdeveloped land, Pejic associated normality with the Western world and saw the Eastern European nations aspiring to achieve it. Furthermore, Pejic’s claimed that *After the Wall* was meant to “bypass representational models of nationhood.”⁵⁵ Interestingly, this is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, it referred to the curatorial approach exemplified by the theme based exhibition. The artists and their art were grouped together under four themes and not on their country of origin. However, on the other hand, the exhibition actually unified the represented art by

⁵⁴ Pejic, “Dialectics,” 20.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

assembling a multitude and diverse number of artists under one label: that of post-Communist Eastern Europe.

Another bias of the exhibition was the non-inclusion of any Western artists who might have fit any of the four general themes of the exhibition. Pejic pointed out that international shows, such as *Documenta X* (1997) and the 1999 *Venice Biennial*, did not include more than three artists from Eastern and Central Europe and this exclusion she insists was considered normal.⁵⁶ Thus, despite the curatorial intention to provide a platform of visibility for the Eastern European artists, the exhibition's framework of reception built more walls than it breaks down.

David Elliot, director of Moderna Museet, said that Bojana Pejic was chosen as the chief curator of the *After the Wall* exhibition mainly for her experience living "both in and outside the two different systems."⁵⁷ Because Pejic was born in Belgrade in 1948 and since 1991 has been living in Berlin, Elliot implies that, she was able to provide both an "outside" and an "inside" view on the Post-Communist Eastern European art. Like Bojana Pejic, who was chosen so that she would be able to provide an unbiased representation of the Eastern European nations, Laura Hoptman, curator of the *Beyond Belief*, was sent on two fact finding journeys in the region, in order to research and select artists for the exhibition. One significant difference between the two exhibitions was the overall scale. *Beyond Belief* featured only thirteen artists and attempted a closer look at the represented six nations with a catalogue essay written by a local art critic, curator, art historian or cultural-policy maker. By contrast, *After the Wall* grouped together one hundred and forty four artists from twenty two countries. From the onset, its large scale

⁵⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁷ David Elliott. Introduction to Pejic and Elliott, ed., *After the Wall*, 11.

made it impossible to appropriately address the various artistic themes and strategies employed by the artists. Despite the evident difference in their scale both exhibitions in the end strengthen a unilateral Western view of this part of the world. The identity and diversity of each nation was generalized under one paradigm: Post-Communist Eastern and Central Europe that isolated the artists within the political Post-Socialist condition. Rather than an in-depth look at artistic strategies employed, the art works were considered as simple mirrors of the political and social changes.

The role of the curators in choosing the artists was influenced by the local Soros Centers. For example, the same artists – like subREAL and Dan Perjovschi – featured in *Beyond Belief* were also shown in *After the Wall*. As described at the beginning of this chapter, the Soros Center represented the only major Western point of access to contemporary Eastern European art and thus the artists affiliated with the Center were mostly featured in local and international exhibition.

Hoptman and Pejic had a leading role in defining the exhibitions' general framework of reception. The exhibitions' curatorial approaches emphasized the Post-Cold War binary contrasts between Eastern Europe and American and Western Europe. Furthermore, these exhibitions were rooted in the North American cultural representations of the concept of Eastern Europe. As previously discussed, according to Wolf, Todorova and Zizek Post-Cold War Eastern Europe was perceived by the West as a remote and barbaric place. Therefore, it is not surprising that the art from this region was expected to be distantly exotic and politically charged. The curatorial approaches categorized the art within a specific ethnicity, distancing it from the intellectual discourses within the normative Western scene. As Jean Fisher said “ To be locked into

the frame of ethnicity is also to be locked out of a rigorous philosophical and historical debate that risks crippling the work's intellectual development and excluding it from the global circuit of ideas where it rightfully belongs.”⁵⁸ Thus, locked within the geopolitical framing of Eastern Europe, the individuality of the artists represented was buried under this all encompassing umbrella. As it has been described, *Beyond Belief* followed a country by country structure with each artist representing their own nation. While artists, like subREAL and Lucherzar Boyadjiev addressed themes from within their specific contexts, other artists like Roza El-Hassan and Zuzanna Janin created abstract and conceptual works that are beyond any national narrative. The exhibitions fail to give attention to the varied artistic strategies employed by the artists, and made general cultural representations of the idea of Eastern Europe in its Post- Communist condition.

However, Romanian artists like subREAL went beyond mere passive reflections of the socio-political context and operating from within a specific satirical tradition they attempted to actively engage both a local and an international audience. The next chapter will offer a brief synthesis of satire in the Romanian literary and artistic tradition as well as a brief overview of the art scene in Romania under communism in order to show subREAL's creative artistic context.

⁵⁸ Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn, Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, ed. Kocur, Zoya and Leung Simon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 235.

Chapter Two:

An Overview of Satire in the Romanian Literary and Artistic Tradition / Satire in subREAL

Beyond Belief and *After the Wall* presented Post-Communist art as primarily a passive reflection of political and social events. However, artists like the Romanian collective subREAL (composed of Calin Dan and Josif Kiraly), whose work was included in the two exhibitions, were actively satirizing– not passively mirroring– the situation in Romania. Furthermore, an important satirical tactic employed by the artists in their installations was to juxtapose elements of their Romanian identity and Western stereotypes of that identity. The artists were not merely transmitters of information and facts from remote lands, but rather they explored the role of satirical humor as a way of engaging the world around them, as seen in works such as *Alimentara* (Food Store) and the *Draculand Series*, which will later be discuss. Thus, in contrast to the usual Western view (as defined in the two exhibitions), this study offers an alternative perspective by pushing art to the forefront and playing down well-established North American cultural representation of Eastern and Central Europe.

Discussions of recent Romanian art usually ignored the distinguished tradition of satire, so it seems appropriate to reveal some of the Romanian contributions to the art of satire before subREAL. This chapter will first offer a brief synthesis of satire in the Romanian literary and artistic tradition in order to illustrate its long historical presence. Additionally, this chapter will briefly outline the working methodology followed when discussing the specific mechanics of satire in subREAL's works in the chapters to come.

In the global framework of humor⁵⁹, satire is a very complex manifestation and has received a variety of explanations and categorizations throughout the history of literature.⁶⁰ In the present study, satire is defined as the use of ridicule or scorn, often in a humorous or witty way, to expose human vices and follies and to be a moral criticism of social wrongs. The satirist's goal is to point out the hypocrisy of his target. It may also contain witty jocularities or anger and bitterness.⁶¹ Comic literary satires include Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a great satirical cry of protest against modernity, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), a savage attack on the misuse of political power in the Soviet Union. Charlie Chaplin's greatest film, *The Great Dictator* (1940) is a biting and satirical verdict on fascism and a spoof of Adolph Hitler.

In the Romanian literary tradition, satire as a critique of the social injustices of an oppressive domination has a long and diverse history. For example, in the eighteenth century the Romanian writer Ion Budai-Deleanu's epics used acidic satire to target

⁵⁹ Humor has a central place in scholarly literature across a variety of disciplines, such as linguistics and language studies (Nash 1985), sociology (Mulkay 1988), politics (Basu 1999), philosophy (Morreall 1987), psychology (Goldstein & McGhee 1972) and clinical psychotherapy (Fry & Salameh 1987). Humor accomplishes many things: relieves embarrassment, signals aggression, displays courage in adversity, serves as a coping mechanism, functions as an instrument of social influence, and lastly rehearses and redesigns the categories and concepts of serious discourse. See Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a stylistic model of satirical humor* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003), 49.

⁶⁰ Despite the diverse interpretations on the nature of satire within literary criticism and theoretical analyses, there has been a general agreement about the presence of two "golden age" periods of satirical production. One is present within the classical satirists, such as Juvenal, Horace, Persius and Aristophanes, and the second period present in the neoclassical work of the Anglo-Irish satirists of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Alexander Pope, John Dryden and Jonathan Swift. During the twentieth century, there are contradictory notions to which literary figures ought to be regarded as satirists. Pollard's introduction to satire, although published in 1970, hardly mentions three twentieth-century artists George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Oscar Wilde (Pollard, 1970). On the other hand, Clark and Motto refer to a variety of writers to be satirical, such as Franz Kafka, Gunter Grass, Samuel Beckett, William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Clark and Motto 1986). Ibid.

⁶¹ J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 827-32.

feudalism and the Ottoman domination, as in his satirical epic *Tiganiada*.⁶² In the nineteenth century, one of Romania's well-known literary figures, Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912), was a playwright and prose writer of great satirical power. His satirical comedies such as *Mr. Leonida* (1879) and *A Stormy Night* (1880) exposed the effects of the hasty introduction of a modern way of life in Romanian society and the comical result of social and political change.

Romanian artists and writers made major contributions to the satirical art of the twentieth century, but ironically they did so within a tradition in which Romanians become famous by becoming expatriates. They had to deal with the dilemma of either becoming expatriates and working in the great stimulating art center of Paris, or remaining at home in a provincial setting. Some of the Romanian artists and intellectuals who left the country became leading European modernist and avant-garde figures: Tristan Tzara, Constantin Brancusi, Victor Brauner, Marcel Iancu, Eugene Ionesco, Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade and others.⁶³

The Romanian born Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), who had gone to Paris in 1908, was one of the founding figures of modern sculpture and one of the most original artists of the twentieth century. His groundbreaking carvings introduced abstraction and primitivism into sculpture for the first time and were as important as Picasso's paintings to the development of modern art. Tristan Tzara (1896-1963) was the founder of the Dada movement (1916-1923) in Zurich. Tzara along with Victor Brauner, Marcel Iancu and other Dadaists shared a nihilistic attitude towards the traditional expectations of

⁶² *Tiganiada* (Timisoara: Editura Amarcord, 1999), 539; quoted in *Literatura Culta*. <http://www.edu.ro/rromanipen/continut/literaturaculta.htm>. 10 Feb 2005.

artists and writers. Their satirical and often absurd works protested against the social values and cultural trends of a contemporary world facing a devastating period of war. Eugene Ionesco (1912-1994) was founder of the theater of the absurd. He was a fervent believer in human rights and a longtime foe of political tyranny. His work conveyed what he viewed as man's struggle to survive in a society that he said formed barriers between human beings. A militant anti-communist, he had long campaigned from exile against the authoritarian regime of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, who banned his plays. Many of his absurdly satirical plays have become internationally known, like *The Rhinoceros*, *The Bald Soprano* and *The Chairs*.

The link between Romanian literature and European trends achieved by the interwar generation (i.e. Tzara, Ianco, Ionesco) was abruptly cut short by the onset of Communism. The isolation of Romanian artists during the cold war wasn't a matter of personal choice and went against their participation in the international arena of earlier Romanian art. Misko Suvakovic questionably said: "Beginning with the 1960's Romania began its insular path toward Communism by combining socialist and nationalist ideas. It thus became isolated in relationship to the Eastern bloc, as well, a kind of cultural void in the Europe of the second part of the twentieth century, a country 'in the middle of nowhere'."⁶⁴

Under the Communist regime, several Romanian anti-communist writers, poets and artists used satire as a dissident weapon against the dictatorship. For example, Marin Sorescu (1936-96) was one of the most original voices in Romanian literature. His

⁶³ Misko Suvakovic. "Art as a Political Machine," in *Postmodernism and Postsocialist Condition, Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, ed. Ales Erjavec (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 126.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

mischievous poetry and satirical plays earned him great popularity during the Communist era. His witty, ironic parables were not directly critical of the regime, but Romanians, used to a culture of double-speak, could read other meanings in his playful mockery of the human condition. Many anti-communists dissident writers, including Dorin Tudoran and Andrei Condrescu, left Romania and settled permanently in the US.

Despite its ongoing tradition, satire was not acknowledged by exhibition curators looking at Post-Cold War Romanian art. The argument presented here is that satire as a social critique was very much present in subREAL's works and in general in art from Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the artists' aim was to attack both the ideological power of the recent Communist past and the presence and influence of the capitalist West.

Satire was employed by subREAL in various ways and for different purposes. For example, in the early nineties (1989-1993) they used a bitter and aggressive satire in order to cope with the Communist memory and experience. Then during the mid-nineties (1993-1996) social satire was used to ridicule the stereotypical Western views on Romania's national identity. By the late nineties (1996-1999), their satire was meant to disarm the Communist ideological past and critically distance themselves from their immediate social realities.

As during the period between the world wars, Post-Cold War Romanian artists had to face the choice of staying at home and taking in the international art scene as "outsiders" or becoming expatriates and "outsiders" in a new land. Their plight was itself one of the objects of satire.

The present analyses of subREAL's works will reveal the artists' full awareness of the Western expectation of a politically specific art. The argument is that this

awareness forced a gradual negotiation between the artists' national identity and Western demands. This study's intent is to point out the strategies employed by the artists in this negotiation. The artist collective subREAL came into existence in 1990 after the fall of the Ceausescu regime in Bucharest. Today its permanent members are Calin Dan (b. 1955) who lives in the Netherlands and Josif Kiraly (b. 1954) who lives in Bucharest.⁶⁵

The name subREAL evoked the surrealist avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century. The old name "Surrealism" suggested a world above the ordinary, in the realm of the occult or unconscious. By contrast, subREAL suggested something below the surface, like a hidden underground world. Additionally, it was an ironic play on words echoing the "sub-reality" of the early 1990s. Concomitantly with the dismantling of communism the artists were emerging as a collective. The artists work in diverse media like photography, video, installation, and performance. As Calin Dan pointed out, the context in which subREAL came into being is important:

"When subREAL took shape in the depressive Romania summer of 1990, it was hard to predict that it would be more than another short-term survival operation. As lots of them have been launched in the darkness of the eighties and killed immediately by the non-exhausted political censorship. But this time we were lucky: the oppressive system in Romania was too busy elsewhere after the big shake-up of December 1989. That is why next July we can celebrate the amazing 5th anniversary of when the (old/new) Power allowed us to exist."⁶⁶

Calin Dan's reference to the failed existence of several other artist collective during the 1980s calls for a brief overview of the art scene in Romania under communism. Equally important is that subREAL had formed as artists during the 1980s generation and reached maturity in the 1990s.

⁶⁵ *subREAL's Files*.

⁶⁶ Calin Dan, "Untitled Celebration," *Imago: Another Europska Photography* (Bratislava, 1996): 31.

In contrast with the other Soviet bloc nations, Romania endured a particularly harsh dictatorial system that inflicted not only economic wounds but also profound psychological traumas on its population. Despite the tightly controlled society, an underground avant-garde culture developed there. During the first period of Ceausescu's rule (1965-1971), the people rejected the Soviet Union's control and adopted international and domestic policies open to the West. Artists emerging from the Fine Arts Academies in Bucharest fully benefited from the influx of foreign art publications, exhibitions, even rock music and hippy subcultures, and succeed in developing contacts abroad through the availability of travel grants.⁶⁷

After 1972, Ceausescu started a nepotistic and dynastic form of administration, governed by a strong cult of personality, a rhetoric of nationalism and notions of building a "Greater Romania." In this context the diversity and liberalism in the arts of the 1960's was negatively affected. However, artists like Ana Lupas in Cluj, Karoly Elekes in Tirgu Mures and Calin Dan in Bucharest were able to maintain "unofficial" communication between networks of urban centers, and support individual or group events and exhibitions. A prolific example was the artist group Mamu (1978-1984), from the Transylvanian town of Tirgu Mures, or in its old Hungarian name Marosvasarhely. A cohesive group of artists (15 to 30) formed around Karoly Elekes and the philosopher Vilmos Agoston. According to the artists' own testimonies, the emphasis within the group was on developing experimental strategies that often involved outdoors, ritualistic, Land Art activities, group happenings and actions, or conceptual, programmatic forms of drawing, sculpture and photography which expanded the traditional aesthetic canons of

⁶⁷ Tom Mulligan, "Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia: The Fine Arts and the Boundaries of Change," in *Europe without Walls: Art, Posters and Revolution 1989-93*, ed. James Aulich and Timothy Wilcox

composition and form.⁶⁸ Other important artist groups included *1-1-1* and *Sigma*, both from Timisoara. “The groups addressed neo-constructivist concerns and the pedagogy inspired by Bauhausian methodology combined with the photo-film experiment as well as land art and performance.”⁶⁹

Additionally, contacts with other Eastern European artists were crucial in the survival of the Romanian “unofficial” avant-garde art. For example, the Cracow graphic biennales and the Polish avant-garde theatre of Grotowski and Kantor were important destinations for most Eastern and Central European artists. As Mulligan pointed out, in Romania, “besides the *Arta* magazine in which Calin Dan and other writers were able to make successful and meaningful interventions in between the obligatory pages of praise of the Communist Party, the art magazines *Muveszet* from Hungary, *Sztuka* and *Projeckt* from Poland were at the time also available in Romania.”⁷⁰

By 1984, Ceausescu’s megalomania and xenophobic insecurity – the bases of his policy of nationalist communism—became so acute that international opinion recognized serious abuses of human rights in Romania. All the minority cultures felt the brutality of a steady, institutionalized discrimination. In his effort to erase minority culture and homogenize the mythical ‘Greater Romanian’ nation, Ceausescu bulldozed entire villages and placed the populations into concrete ‘agro-industrial complexes.’ The second half of the 1980s was one of the most devastating periods in Communist Romania. The political and social situation reached a critical point. Poverty, fear, the irreversible demolition of

(Manchester: Manchester City Art Gallery, 1993).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Adrian Guta, “‘Riders on the Storm’ – Performance Art in Romania between 1986 and 1996,” in *Experiment: in Romanian art since 1960’s*, ed. Irina Cios (Bucharest: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1997), 82.

⁷⁰ Mulligan, “Fine Arts.”

Bucharest's historical center, the daily fight against political oppression and international isolation dominated the nation's conscience.

Yet, despite the oppressive communist regime, the 'unofficial' Romanian art scene was able to maintain varied artistic initiatives among artists and artist groups especially in major Transylvanian urban centers, like Cluj-Napoca, Tirgu Mures, Sfintu Gheorghe, Oradea and Timisoara. Magda Cirneci pointed out that "following the mid-1980s the artists responded to their contemporary social realities by turning toward their inner world, coming together under the new expressionist artistic trend."⁷¹ For example, the Bucharest based Teodor Graur staged his performances in his apartment in front of his closest friends. As Ileana Pintilie pointed out "he employed his own athletic body to make satiric and scornful reflections on social realities of the late 1980s Communist Romania. In his performance *The Sports Center* (1987) Graur illustrated the brutal and brainless virility of the socialist man, alluding to the modernist ideal of the 'new man' with its glaring mismatch of muscle and brain. Another of his actions *Remembrance of the Ship* was staged in the huge empty cargo-hold of a ship and dealt with the frantic desire to emigrate which filed all young Romanians under Ceausescu to the point of obsession."⁷² Amalia Perjovschi also preferred her own apartment for her performances. In her 1988 body action, *The Test of Sleep*, she covered her body with writing and she then took pictures of herself, posing before the camera motionless and passive, an attitude that symbolically connoted the lack of communication of the Communist era. Another of her performance staged in her apartment, *Annulment* (1989) was directed against the

⁷¹ Magda Cirneci, *Artele Plastice in Romina 1945-1989* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 2000), 58.

⁷² Ileana Pintilie, *Problems in Transit: Performance in Romania*, <http://www.artmargins.com/content/feature/pintilie.html>, 14 Oct 2004.

social and political context of the time. She let herself be tied up by her husband, Dan Perjovschi, the only person present.⁷³

Artists groups organized exhibitions in their apartments, such as the basement shows in Bucharest and Sibiu (between 1986 and 1989), the “pocket shows” in Oradea (1988) and *house pARTY I* (1987) and *house pARTY II* (1988) the last two staged in the house of the main organizer Decebal Scriba in Bucharest. By making use of irony, grotesque quotations, eclectic combinations, withdrawal and passive participation, these artists flouted the authorities by ignoring their rules and retreating within private spaces away from the public eye.⁷⁴ An important group was *Studio 35*, which organized exhibitions for artists under thirty-five. The group functioned as an arena for artistic experimentation, and had centers in many cities in the country. In the cities in the western part of the country near Hungary, the group’s artistic activities were more experimental in nature due to the influx of abundant information from outside the country.⁷⁵

Even from this brief overview, it is clear that although behind the ‘iron curtain’ Romanian art scene was not as Misko Suvakovic says “a void in the middle of nowhere” but rather it generated various and complex artistic initiatives. Their effect continued into the 1990s when, as it will be pointed out in the chapters to come, the local art scene was characterized by a multitude of artistic trends, most in unison with contemporary international artistic trends, such as performance and video-installation art.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Neo-Orthodox or Neo-Byzantine art was another artistic trend that evolved during the 1980’s as a spiritualization of the experimental drive initiated by artists such as Paul Gherasim, Constantin Flondor and Horia Bernea. Cirneci points out that at the time of its appearance, the movement has been seen on the international art scene as a regression and a stylistic backwardness because it employed an outdated religious iconography. However within the Romanian local context, the religious inclination of this artistic trend has been felt as an alternative orientation and was considered as an act of moral courage against the communist propaganda and ideological limitation. Cirneci, *Artele*, 58-62.

⁷⁵ Guta, “Riders,” 82.

Chapter Three:

Aggressive Satire in the Early 1990's Installations

This chapter examines some of subREAL's early works and explores the role of bitter satire as the way in which they engage the local audience, and address themes from their socio-political context. The aim is to decipher subREAL's motives by contextualizing their works within the Romanian artistic and socio-political realities.

The iconography of Romanian art from the early nineties, and in general of other former Communist countries, was dominated by Communist symbols and icons. Artists working in all media referred to their Communist past with icons such as the hammer and sickle, the whole in the flag, images of Ceausescu, Stalin and Lenin, and the red star of international socialism. Fallen and broken Socialist statues were principal motifs for artists in the immediately post-Communist world. Artists were employing Socialist symbols as the subject matter of their works in order to strip them of their formerly highly-charged ideological value. For example, Romanian political cartoons created by students at the School of Fine Art in Bucharest such as *Flag* (1989) and *Hammer & Sickle / Swastika* (1989),⁷⁶ and *Tractorul* by the Romanian cartoonist Timotei Nadasan, featured in the Young Artists' Group Exhibition (1990), employ the national Socialist Party flag, the Socialist worker's factory symbol (the tractor), and the primary Communist emblem (the hammer and sickle), respectively.⁷⁷ The Communist iconography was divested of its ideological powers and ended up as empty signs by being

⁷⁶ Both *Flag* and *Hammer & Sickle / Swastika* were published in the French publication *Fonds National D'Art Contemporain*, Paris, 1989.

aggressively and overtly satirized. This was particularly evident in the cartoon *Flag* created by Romanian students at the School of Fine Art, Bucharest and published in the French publication *Fonds National D'Art Contemporain*, Paris, 1989. The cartoon mocked the communist emblem that used to be featured on the nation's national flag, by showing it on as a buckle on a belt covering the belly button of a goofy looking figure. Furthermore, the figure appeared to be nude and the flag functioned as a cover which he holds up in front of him. The flag had a whole cut out in the middle through which could be seen the buckle featuring the communist emblem. Thus, the socialist symbol was emptied of its ideological significance by positioning it in a trivial setting (the buckle covering up the belly button).

In their early works, subREAL addressed social realities from within the local Romanian context. The project *East-West Avenue* was realized in August 1990 on what is now called "Bulevardul Unirii" avenue (Union Blvd, in Bucharest).⁷⁸ This avenue leads to what used to be Ceausescu's grandiose palace, officially called "Casa Poporului" (The House of the People). On each side of the avenue and surrounding the humongous palace, there are several blocks of flats that were built during communism for high ranking Communist government officials. After 1989 with the collapse of the Iron Curtain and continuing into the present, Ceausescu's palace houses the Romanian parliament offices. subREAL's project contained one hundred and twenty iron plates, 11.8 x 19.7 inches each, mounted on one hundred and twenty stakes approximately 19.7 inches high. Each plate was inscribed with a name of a deceased person and the words

⁷⁷ Aulich, "Looking Glass," 52.

⁷⁸ Before 1989 B-dul Unirii was named Bulevardul Victora Socialismului or Socialism's Victory Blvd. To build Ceausescu's palace a vast historical part of Bucharest had to be demolished to make room for the construction and its surrounding civic center. See *subREAL's Files*.

Odihneasca in pace (Rest in peace). The plates were staked out along the avenue at intervals that allowed them to be read from a car driving at medium speed. The plates were reminiscent of small shrines erected at the spot where a violent death occurred, in order to appease the victim's lingering haunting soul. In the nineteen-eighties, the workers used them for their colleagues who died in accidents during the construction of the Palace.⁷⁹

In *East-West Avenue* project, subREAL's portrayal of a past social experience was primarily bitter-aggressive. The artists boldly attracted attention to the recent past by composing their project as a public work on the avenue known to the Romanians as the Socialism's Victory Blvd. By choosing a public location for the project, subREAL established a direct contact with the Romanian audience. The multitude of inscribed plates mounted along the highway openly paid homage to the many that lost their lives under Ceausescu, and to the painful demolition of a great part of historical Bucharest. Representation of the atrocities caused by the Communist dictator was realized with bitter satire designed to bring comfort and allow coping with the memory of a painful experience. The work, highly charged socially brought together the artists and the Romanian audience who shared a common past.

A second layer of significance in subREAL's *East-West Avenue* could be understood by the juxtapositioning of the recent communist past with the unstable socio-political contemporary situation in Romania. In order to explain the social implications of subREAL, a brief account of the political and social changes that occurred immediately after 1989 in Romania will be helpful.

⁷⁹ These plaques were considered "revisionist" by the unofficial communist officials in the early month of the nineties and were quickly removed. See *subREAL's Files*, 17.

When the cement and concrete blocks of the Berlin Wall were brought down, it symbolically lifted the Iron Curtain that separated the two parts of Europe for almost half a century. But the euphoria that followed the 1989 revolutions had started to disappear already by the early 1990s. Citizens of the newly freed countries and outsiders alike expected and hoped for radical changes on all levels of society and some countries, such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, have indeed gone through major restructuring, eliminating old Communist structures as fast as possible. Romania, on the other hand, followed a much slower transitional process, in which society continued to function along Communist lines and structures. In December 1989, when the revolutionary crowd in Bucharest invaded the Communist party's headquarters, Ion Iliescu, the Communist with liberal attitudes and the leader of the NSF (The National Salvation Front Party), took over the country's leadership. His speeches along with scenes from the street revolution were transmitted live from the former Communist television buildings, which surprisingly remained unharmed during several terrorists' shootings, while all other Communist buildings in the area were destroyed.

Ion Iliescu won both the 1990 and the 1992 free elections.⁸⁰ He personally appointed people and took control of the former Communist key positions. Iliescu created a network of people, many former Communist party members and former informers for the Secret Police (called Securitate). This network of people supported

⁸⁰ There were several main reasons for Iliescu's success on the public scene. He was the only one who had authority and openly benefited from the support of the Army, the former communist Secret Police and the working class from factories. (The latter group's support was exemplified by the miners from the coal-fields who were summoned by Iliescu to come to Bucharest and reinstate order and democracy, which had been endangered by the intellectual anti-communist demonstrators). Another significant detail is that beginning with January, 1990, Iliescu, along with his subordinates officially took over most of the former communist party (PCR) material goods (45 farms, 55000 hectares of land and 22 hunting land). By transforming the state goods into their own personal goods including the national television, FSN's victory

Iliescu mainly because they did not want to lose their freshly gained social positions. Even with a growing opposition by 1995 and 1996, PDSR (Iliescu's party, which changed its name from NSF to PDSR in 1992) and its members succeeded in creating a tight network occupying all the key positions in the financial and economic institutions, thus giving the impression of an invisible network.⁸¹

According to the Center for Security Policy, in the 1990 election, Iliescu's party the National Salvation Front received eighty five percent of the vote while the two opposition candidates from genuinely democratic parties, Radu Campeanu and Ion Ratiu, received eleven and four percent respectively. It has been shown that Iliescu's party did not permit the democratic opposition parties to have a fair opportunity to compete for votes during the election campaign. He compromised Romania's first free election. His party fully exploited the resources of the government and had unlimited use of public funds in its campaign; it intimidated and attacked opposition supporters throughout the campaign and the "Free Romanian Television" -- which played an important anti-Ceausescu role during the violent events of 1989 -- ran programming strongly favoring the Front regime and giving very little coverage to the democratic opposition parties.⁸²

Significantly, as of late December 1990 no independent commissions had investigated Securitate (The Secret Police) abuses. Moreover, the NSF had established the Romanian Intelligence Service, which employed many former Securitate members. It could be concluded that by compromising a free election, by appointing former

was completely assured. See Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Politica dupa Communism* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2002), 34-42.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² "Not Free Nor Fair: An Assessment of the 20 May 1990 Elections in Romania," 14 Jun 1990, Center for Security Policy, Washington, DC, in *The Center for Security Policy*, <http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/index.jsp?section=papers&code=90-59>. 23 Jan 2004.

communist secret police members to key institutional positions, by promoting fundamentalist religious views⁸³ and ultimately opposing democratic changes, Iliescu and his party were not only sabotaging Romania's journey towards democracy but his policies very much resembled the former communist regime. It is relevant here to note that only six months following the violent 1989 revolution, several students and intellectual anti-communist demonstrators were attacked and killed by securitate and coal miners called upon by Iliescu (who ironically became the president).⁸⁴

subREAL created *East-West Avenue* in August 1990, just a couple of months after the May 20, 1990 (supposedly) free elections. It is argued here that the artists attempted to make visible the clash between an official communist regime and the continuation of an unofficial or actual persistence of an almost identical Post-Communist regime. The recent past was still a powerful presence in the early nineties Romania, and subREAL recalled it through the one hundred twenty plaques seen as little shrines remembering some of those who lost their life under the Ceausescu dictatorship.

⁸³ After 1989 there was a revival of orthodox fundamentalism, supporters of traditional and conservative values, characteristic of the Pre-World War II period. The orthodox fundamentalists opposed Pro-Western, democratic tendencies, such as Romania's integration into the EU.

⁸⁴ According to Lucian Boia "In April 1990, protesters occupied University Square in Bucharest. For almost two months the square was the scene of marathon demonstrations; speeches were made and songs were sung against the Iliescu regime. Prominent among the people were intellectuals and students. The national television was careful to broadcast the least favorable images (i.e. groups of Gypsies) giving the impression that this was a gathering of the dregs of Romanian society: 'golani' (louts) was what Iliescu called them. A 'golan' hymn was composed. The chorus contained the lines "Better a 'golan' than an activist" (an allusion to the Communist, activist past of Iliescu and his comrades) and "Better dead than a Communist." Upon Iliescu's call, on June 14, 1990, thousands of miners from the Jiu valley arrived in Bucharest dressed in black overalls and armed with clubs, in order to dissipate the anti-communist intellectuals and students demonstrators. For two days terror reigned in Bucharest. The headquarters of the opposition parties, the University and the Institute of Architecture were ransacked. Intellectuals were particularly singled out, beaten with clubs and bundled into vans by the police (the former securitate, Iliescu's ally). The second incident in which the miners were called upon again occurred just before the 1992 election when Iliescu's almost appointed prime minister, the young and democratic, Petre Roman, decided to leave the party. A distance increased between the conservative Iliescu and the reformist Roman, ending with Iliescu calling upon the miners, who appeared in the streets of Bucharest asking for Roman's dismissal." See Lucian Boia, *Romania, Borderland of Europe*, trans. James Christian Brown (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2001), 156-8.

In their work the artists also referred to the inscribed plaques lined up along the path leading toward the Communist palace, as both a reminder and a warning of still strong socialist remnants. Thus, the genus of the satire in *East-West Avenue* was identified by the socio-political crossroads of the early nineties Romania, where one direction points towards the recent Communist past and the other toward a Western influenced regime. The impetus and what created the satirical tension in this work lied in subREAL's intention to leave the conflict of the two world views unresolved. The artists thus presumed to question, visualize and overtly attract attention to key issues from within the local context.

Alimentara or *Food Store* is another example of subREAL's early works in which they used an aggressive satire. The artists targeted Romanian's Communist regime as responsible for the lack of food in the past and present. The installation mounted at the Orizont Gallery⁸⁵, in Bucharest, in February 1991, simulated a food store display composed of sixty stacked jars of pickled vegetables (tomatoes, beans, cabbage, eggplant, spinach, carrots, horseradish) placed in a pyramid-like formation. The installation also featured twelve bottles of wine, twenty kilograms of smoked pork bones scattered on the floor, twelve heads of lettuce, sixty eggs, bacon, a spoiled chicken, three hot skillet, two trays, a refrigerator, a pot, a toilet basin and plastic curtains. Two of the hot skillet were used to prepare grilled bacon and another one for boiling water and the visitors were invited to taste from both.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Orizont Gallery is a public space and is among the art galleries pertaining to Visual Artists Union (in Romanian 'Uniunea Artistilor Plastici) that was formed in the 1950's under Communist rule. Currently the Artist Union is under Romania's Ministry of Culture.

⁸⁶ See *subREAL's Files*.

In *Alimentara*, subREAL wanted to establish direct communication with their audience, both on a physical and a conceptual level. The artists actually invited the viewer to consume and consequently be part of the work. This role of the visitor to engage with the work by consuming a piece of bacon, an act which in the context of the recent past assumed a satirical significance, given the poverty and devastating scarcity of food under the previous dictatorship.⁸⁷ Now one could enter a gallery and find an abundance of food to eat, for free. A further ironic touch was the smell of cooking bacon which penetrated the gallery space, and perhaps even stimulated the appetite.

In the *Beyond Belief* catalogue, in her essay, Roxana Marcoci reduced the work's deeper implications by saying that it "mirrors the national obsession with food supplies and ethnic networking prevalent in the last twenty years of virtual famine."⁸⁸ She fell short in considering *Alimentara* as simply mirroring the scarcity of food in Romania. Her discussion echoed the exhibition's general framework that considered the art works to be literally beyond belief due to the artists' devastating experience under the communist regime. By contrast, the argument presented here is that rather than playing the role of passive victims, the artists used bitter satire to cope with a painful experience and actively engaged their audience in the process. In subREAL's installation, the visual reminder of the recent food shortages could be perceived as a mode of disarming of the past's morally oppressive power. Both the artists (satirist) and their audience (addressee) reached a rapprochement through a shared past under Ceausescu's Communist regime –

⁸⁷ The political and social situation in the last two to three years of Ceausescu's dictatorship reached a critical point. Poverty, fear, the irreversible demolition of Bucharest's historical center, the daily fight against political oppression and international isolation dominated the nation's conscience.

⁸⁸ Roxana Marcoci. "Romanian Democracy and Its Discontents," in Welsh, ed., *Beyond Belief*, 18.

the satirical target. By overtly bringing past experiences to the surface in *Alimentara*, subREAL engaged the local audience in an emotional “penance.”⁸⁹

Contemporary with subREAL, there were other Romanian artists engaged in the idea of moral cleansing from the Communist past. In the street performance *The State with no Title*, the artist Lia Perjovschi carried on her back two large objects (one larger than the artist herself, the other a longer object that had to be dragged on the ground and both made of paper and cloth) symbolizing her penance and purification from the Communist past.⁹⁰

The performative aspect of the works created in the early nineties had a specific meaning in Romania’s socio-political context. If on the international scene performance art was popular in the 1960s and 70s, in Romania, performance art had only existed underground during that period. Only after 1989, after a long period of isolation, the Romanian public was beginning to open up to the experience of performance. According to the Timisoara based, Romanian curator and critic, Ileana Pintilie, at the beginning of the 1990s, “performance became a kind of civic attitude for several Romanian artists who felt that they had to openly participate in the construction of a new society by publicly testifying to the truth.” For example, Constantin Flondor (who did most of his work in the 1960s and 1970s) created in 1991 an installation titled *The Blind Man's Sunday*. His work was a bitter satirical account of the results of the first free elections organized in Romania after the collapse of communism. He used apples as symbols of the voting process,

⁸⁹ Ileana Pintilie, “Problems.”

⁹⁰ Guta, “Riders,” 86-90.

painting some of them black. Flondor's public performance met with a violent response from the audience which did not receive well the artist's critical attitude.⁹¹

subREAL's *East-West Avenue* and *Alimentara* emerged from this context. Their installations function not only as reminders of past atrocities, but also as warnings against strong political Communist remnants that might possibly compromise Romania's transition process to a democratic society. Through their works subREAL actively engaged and directly communicated with the local audience. The artists' intended audience plays a significant role in future discussion of some of their later works. As it will be pointed out in the next chapters, subREAL will gradually distance themselves from their local audience as the Western influence becomes prevalent.

subREAL's artistic strategy to intervene in their context was not unique, and can be compared to *AIDS Timeline*, a 1991 work by the American collaborative Group Material which follows a similar strategy. The installation *AIDS Timeline*, included in the 1991 Whitney Biennale, was formally composed in the style of an elementary school project, where the gallery space was transformed into a kind of schoolroom with posters and displays advancing the theme. The theme was the incremental increase of the epidemic that ravages the art world. The work aggressively blamed an indifferent society for the illness it aimed to represent. "It is an activist's work", Arthur Danto argues, "in that it provokes the society into doing something."⁹² Similarly subREAL's *Alimentara* transmitted through the visual language of the installation, the theme of scarcity that Romanian society had experienced not too long ago during the last years under Ceausescu. Rather than directly blaming their society as Group Material did in their

⁹¹ Pintilie, "Problems."

work, subREAL ironically engaged the audience by inviting them to consume actual food. Thus, as this comparison revealed, subREAL was aware of the artistic strategies employed by western artists.

Other works by subREAL that extracted visual themes from their immediate local context included *1000 Artists in Europe* installation mounted in the 3/4 Gallery during December 1991 and January 1992, Bucharest, in Romania. The thousand empty condom wrappers each labeled “EUROPE” were nailed in a regular grid on a black square with each wrapper containing a piece of paper with the name of a living Romanian artist on it.⁹³ One of the ironical references of the work was the theme of Romania’s integration into the European Union Community. Additionally, the installation echoed the idea of standardization which is part of EU policy. Standards helped to make life easier for consumers all over the world.⁹⁴ For example one thing that the EU attempted to standardize was the size of condoms throughout the European Union nations. However, the proposed EU standard condom size of 17cms in length and 5.6 circumference provoked controversy among some of the EU countries. German doctors reported that the EU has overestimated the size of the average penis by almost twenty millimeters and insisted other countries would discover the same. Urologist Gunther Hagler, head of the team compiling the research, said: "By checking hundreds of patients we found German

⁹² Arthur Danto, *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy and The Ends of Taste*. (Amsterdam: Arts International, 1998).

⁹³ *subREAL's Files*, 21.

⁹⁴ “Every aspect of society is reflected in the drafting of a new standard. Therefore, experts representing industry, consumers and other interests, like the environment or small and medium sized enterprises, sit around the table to discuss a new standard. Standards are decided upon by consensus to take into consideration all interests. Standards can achieve what is difficult for marketing experts and business consultants: they increase consumer trust in the safety of a product and enable cheaper production.” <http://www.cenorm.be/cenorm/news/standardsmyths/condoms.asp?wai=1&close=1>. March 12, 2005.

penises were too small for standard EU condoms.”⁹⁵ Similarly, the Italians protested that the size was too big; while in Sweden people opted for a bigger size.⁹⁶ While the debates over the EU standardized condom size were taking place, Romania in the months following the 1989 revolutions was content to even have access to condoms at all, especially since during communism condoms were absent from the Romanian market. subREAL’s installation *1000 Artists in Europe* of 1000 condoms was an ironic play on their participation within the contemporary international discourse.

⁹⁵ “German penises too small for EU condoms,” in Ananova, http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_358876.html. 12 Mar 2005.

⁹⁶ “What is the average European size,” in Peoplesite, <http://www.people.hojoster.dk/SEEEMS/2320.asp>. 12 Mar 2005.

Chapter Four:

Social Satire in the *Draculand Series*

This chapter will examine three of subREALs works from the *Draculand Series* by first contextualizing them within the Romanian socio-political and artistic context of the mid-ninety nineties. Second, the works will also be read within the North American stereotypical perception of the country's national identity. Following this dual contextualization the aim is to reveal how the artists negotiated between their national identity and the North American demand for a specific type of art.⁹⁷ Moreover, the argument presented here is that subREAL employed a biting social satire to address both the local and an international audience. It will be specifically discussed the *News from Dracula* installation, exhibited in the *Beyond Belief* exhibition, in order to recover the work's satirical dimension that was lost in the general framework of the exhibition.

When anyone thinks of vampires, or more specifically Dracula, what comes to mind is an image of a dark, underground, corrupt and decadent world. A deep irony was that subREAL became famous by satirizing the "Dracula" stereotype, there being no alternative Romanian tradition that could stir interest within the American art scene, where the obsessive examination of cultural and ethnic stereotypes are a major academic enterprise. For subREAL, Dracula became an index to how Romania was signified in Western thought, as the land of Dracula romanticized by Bram Stoker, and then

⁹⁷ For example, to feature formal qualities of an art installation project -- prominent artistic trend within the international art scene in the early to mid-nineteen-nineties -- but to retain visual elements of the non-western artists' ethnic background.

Hollywood. At the same time the artists also visualized Dracula in their homeland in the political and artistic terms of the early and mid-nineties.

Politically, Romania was a problematic instance of post-Communist society. First of all, an eradication of the former Socialist political structures had produced a strong survival of the Communist network, and allowed a disguised Communist ideology a legitimate place. Up until 1996, key positions in a variety of economic institutions were still occupied by former Communist party members; as a result the economy has suffered tremendously.⁹⁸ The number-one goal of the post-Communist elite was to stop the implementation of a free market economy, and having succeeded in maintaining an electoral base they were able to transfer private property to their political clientele.

According to Romanian political analyst Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, during the early 1990s, several publications, such as Iliescu's party official newspaper *AZI* or the national-communist weekly publication *Romanian Mare* were specially created to try to rehabilitate the communist ideology; a situation which has affected the legal culture and the moral health of society, since people did not believe that truth will win in the end. For example it was well known that the terrorists who were shooting civilians during the 1989 Revolution were still free and no one bothered to lock them up. The post-Communist network, with Iliescu as its leader, managed to create a public system with little or no responsibility of the people. The Romanian Constitution guarantees the

⁹⁸ "It's hard to believe," as the Romanian political analyst Alina Mungiu-Pippidi expresses, "that over night the communist party successors disappeared completely only by changing their names. This is especially hard to believe when we remember that 31% (4 million people) of the entire Romanian adult citizens were party members, a triple percentage in comparison with Poland and Hungary. This raises a significant question mark regarding the issue of the communist heritage. It is most improbable that the former communist party members left their positions in the universities, academies or in any other institution." *Politica*, 34. Lucian Boia as well questions the real transfer of power that supposedly took place in December 1989. He attracts attention towards the existence of the same communist elite in the post-Communism decade of the nineties. See *Romania, Borderland*.

immunity of any member of the Parliament, no matter what the nature of the accusation (criminal or political). The Justice system was dominated by Communist magistrates in positions of highest authority (Superior Courts and The Superior Committee of the Magistrates).⁹⁹

Despite the still strong communist remnants, the presence of Western influences and most importantly the need of post-Socialist Romania to integrate into the big happy European Union family had an acute impact on the country in general. Within the arts, the exhibitions were perceived as means of active involvement of art in society. There were two cultural and intellectual orientations that divided Romanian art discourse, forcing each artist to belong to one group or the other. As the Arad (a north-western Romanian city) based, Romanian curator and art critic Judit Angel pointed out in her article *Romania – Exhibition Practice in the 90's*, two major tendencies could be distinguished in the exhibition practice in Romania promoting two different artistic manifestations. On one hand, the exhibition *Filocalia* (1990) in Bucharest, curated by two Romanian curators Alexandra Titu and Sorin Dumitrescu, initiated a retrospective of the New Orthodox religious tendency that later became an important event in providing the base for an ideological program. “The spiritual-aesthetic model promoted by this movement sought to offer a stabilizing unity and to transcend the conflicts of a de-structured society, undergoing a full identity crisis.”¹⁰⁰ During the eighties the New Orthodox tendency was perceived by the Romanian artists as a form of resistance to Communist official ideology and artistic manifestations. The Communist regime

⁹⁹ Pippidi, *Politica*, 61.

¹⁰⁰ Ileana Pintilie, “Romania – Exhibition Practice in the ‘90s.” in *Experiment / in Romanian art since the 1960's*, ed. Irina Cios (Bucharest: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1997), 114. The art included in this type of exhibitions was heavily inspired by religious orthodox iconography.

tolerated to an extent and even supported the Orthodox Church, yet it forbade the laic and fundamentalist Orthodox religion. The New Orthodox movement initiated by the *Filocalia* exhibition was rooted in cultural tendencies after 1989, when some Romanian intellectuals¹⁰¹ rediscovered Orthodox fundamentalism in pre-World War II' writings, via the works by authors such as Nae Ionescu and Mircea Vulcanescu, specifically supporters of traditional and conservative values, whose works were republished in extensive editions. During the early 1990's, the influence of the fundamentalist right was not limited only to political and intellectual discourse, but extended to the visual arts, as was the case with the Romanian National Peasant Museum. At the beginning of the nineties, the museum benefited from anti-Communist currents by displaying Romanian folk art objects. However it did not reflect the Romanian peasant's life and image, but rather the Orthodox traditions expressed by the pre-World War II intellectuals.¹⁰²

On the other hand, there were the artistic tendencies initiated by *The State with no Title*, exhibition curated by Ileana Pintilie (Timisoara, 1991). It was the first exhibition organized after the revolution and showcased a series of installations and performances in which the artists commented on the latest political developments, disguised communism, the heroes of December 1989, the violence and contrasts of the moment, and explored common attitudes and mentalities. Examples of other exhibitions that were promoting such tendencies include: two exhibitions curated by Ileana Pintilie *The Earth*, (Timisoara,

¹⁰¹ Theoretically anti-communist dissidents. Throughout the 1990s, in Romania there is a fuzziness about who is or is not a communist or who is or isn't promoting communist ideologies. Initially, immediately following the collapse of the communist regime, the pre War World II revival of the New Orthodoxy religious tendency has been promoted by the anti-communist intellectual dissidents as a way to oppose the dictatorship. But by mid 1990 this tendency (which initially was seen as anti-communist) opposed the pro-western, democratic tendencies, such as Romania's integration into the EU, and its primary supporters now are the remnants of communism.

¹⁰² Irina Cios, ed., *Experiment / in Romanian art since the 1960's* (Bucharest: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1997), 114-6.

1992)¹⁰³ and *The Eastern Europe Zone* (Timisoara, 1993),¹⁰⁴ and a series of exhibitions organized by Calin Dan such as *Mozart's Sex* (Bucharest, 1991); *Ex Oriente Lux* (Bucharest, 1993); *01010101... Exhibition* (Bucharest, 1994).¹⁰⁵ By making use of new technologies, promoting art that was socially involved, and attempting for a synchronization of art with local needs and international requirements, these exhibitions went against the conservative attitude of the New Orthodoxy tendencies. subREAL's works were part of the anti-conservative movement.

subREAL's *Draculand* series was begun in 1993, and it represented an extensive project composed of ten separate installations. In these works subREAL employed satire as social critique. The artists juxtaposed the iconography of the two worlds, exploring the Western stereotypical perception of Romania as the land of Dracula in an attempt to attract attention on the international art scene. Dracula functioned as a two fold signifier. On one hand the installations addressed a variety of aspects from within the local Romanian context of the mid-nineties. Dracula iconography became a symbol for the contemporary political and cultural stagnation with still strong Communist remnants. At the same time, the Dracula symbol was part of the Balkanist fantasy which as Zizek and Todorova pointed out, was invoked by the West when representing Romania.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ The 1993 international performance festival *The Eastern Europe Zone* was organized in Timisoara and featured both local artists as well as artists from other several Eastern and Central European countries. Romanian artists explored geo-political issues related to post-Communist Eastern Europe and the visible and invisible impediments that block communication between Romania and the rest of the world. Besides performance art, local Romanian artists explored video installation as well. For example, the artist Geta Bratescu's video titled *Automatic Cocktail* was composed of short episodes of a performance integrated into a film essay where the continuous creative effort was protracted by the daily automatism. See Guta, "Riders," 88.

¹⁰⁵ Judit Angel, "Romania- Exhibition Practice in the 1990's," in *Experiment / in Romanian art since the 1960's*, ed. Irina Cios (Bucharest: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1997), 114-6. The last two exhibitions curated by Calin Dan were staged with the Soros Center financial support.

Thus, via the Western stereotypical perception of Romania, subREAL attempted to make sense of the post-communist reality for the Romanian audience. On the other hand, the artists mocked and took as a satirical target the Western stereotypical perception of Romania's national identity as the dark land of the "legendary Dracula."¹⁰⁶ In regards to the *Draculand series*, the Turkish art critic Erden Kosova rightfully expressed: "The group was combining various stereotypes on being a Romanian in utterly subversive sarcasm, or in their words, in a cynicism (operating as) an international trend in a nationalistic context." Furthermore, according to Kosova, subREAL "had two targets to displace: the rising nationalism and the negative exoticism of the European and American gaze in regard to Romania."¹⁰⁷ To illustrate this, as example it will be closely analyzed three of the installations: *Draculand 2*, *Draculand 3* and *News from Dracula*.

Draculand 2 was installed in four rooms of the Art Museum in Bistrita, Romania in March 1993. In the first room, the artists satirically employed elements from the Dracula repertoire. For example, black-and-white photographs representing the buttocks of the then three members¹⁰⁸ of the group were projected onto the ceiling and beneath

¹⁰⁶ Historically Prince Dracula (1431-1476) was a typical Renaissance despot possessing cruel and morbid impulses. His infamous tortures and atrocities were directed against the Saxon communities living within Transylvania. These Saxons communities, besides being the main producers of weaponry in the region, were also in tight connections with the German printing house in Nürnberg and thus had a monopoly over the circulation of printed material. As a form of attack and revenge against the cruel actions geared towards them by Prince Dracula, these Saxon Transylvanian communities composed and circulated frightening and evil stories about the prince, which over time gained him the fantastical association with being a vampire. The modern Dracula emerged from Bram Stoker's novel, and films by Germany's Murnau and others. See *subREAL's Files*.

Vampires are known in many world cultures including India, China, and Indonesia, but is typically a Slavic concept associated with Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Greece, Romania, Albania and Hungary.

¹⁰⁷ Erden Kosova, *The Problematic of National Identity and Social Engagement in the Contemporary Art Practice in the Balkans*, (Dissertation manuscript).

¹⁰⁸ Mihai Mihalteanu left the group in July, 1993. *subREAL's Files*.

them ironically poking them were one hundred wooden stakes¹⁰⁹, with the accompanying sound of religious Turkish music.¹¹⁰

In the second and fourth room, subREAL engaged the local audience by making reference to specific aspects of the Romanian context. For instance, the artists featured traditional Romanian dishes such as “mujdei” (peeled garlic mashed with salt and diluted with warm water), placed in a wooden trough in the middle of the floor. Surrounding it, projected on the walls there were slides of news headlines from local Romanian newspapers, commenting on Romania’s economical, cultural and political problems. Another traditional dish “mititei” (literally meaning “the small ones”, and are actually minced meat of mainly beef and lamb, spices and garlic) was featured in the fourth room.¹¹¹ Each piece of meat was pierced with a toothpick for anyone interested to consume. The entire setting was lit by spotlights which were connected to a timer regulating their alternating exposure pattern. The installation was accompanied by brass music performed by railway strikers in front of the government building, and recorded live by the artists.

The use of traditional dishes, slides with local news headlines and the sounds of a brass band specifically referred to the Romanian context. *Draculand 2* was shown in March 1993, thus its conceptualization must have begun several months earlier.¹¹² This was the time shortly after Ion Iliescu, one of whose main goals was to stop western influence and the implementation of a free market economy, was elected the nation’s

¹⁰⁹ Seventy-eight point seven inches high each. Ibid., 39.

¹¹⁰ subREAL purchased this music tape in Istanbul, the Turkish city where Prince Dracula spent his youth as a guarantee of his father’s faithfulness toward the Turkish sultan. Ibid.

¹¹¹ The meat divided into one hundred ten pieces, was placed on three chests arranged in a row and covered with white fabric. Ibid.

president. At the same time, ironically within the art scene, Western influence appeared within the arts with the Soros Foundation staging the first art exhibitions. In their works, subREAL's use of newspapers headlines for example was a way of commenting on Romania's current socio-political and economical problems. The artists went further and closely involved the audience who was invited to consume the food exhibited on tables.

The third room of the installation featured two floor maps: one of Romania (approximately 70.9 x 78.7 inches) made of garlic and the other of the United States (approximately 38.4 x 118.1 inches) made of corn flour. The US map was positioned above and adjacent to Romania, as if they were neighboring countries. On the maps there were projected the names of four cities: Bucharest, Bistrita, New York and Hollywood. The choice of the cities and their iconographic significance in the installation provides a deeper understanding into subREAL's use of satire. Bucharest is the capital city of Romania. Historically Bucharest had been a cosmopolitan city with abundant and varied cultural, political and social activities. Since the late 19th century and early 20th century Bucharest had been known as the "Little Paris" of Eastern Europe, complete with its own Arc de Triomphe. A lot of the city's architecture and recreational parks, such as Cismigiu, retain French architectural designs. **Furthermore**, Romanians consider French culture and language as part of their own cultural heritage. That was why Ion Luca Caragiale, the famed late 19th century playwright, mocked the middle class Romanians' emulation of French customs and language. For example, several of his plays satirized the pretentious appropriation of French words within everyday Romanian conversation, which in a snobbish way, was considered a sign of intellectual sophistication. Besides its

¹¹² Although I have not the video material or the slide projections according to *subREAL's Files*, an account published by the artists while in residence in Berlin with support from Philip-Morris Foundation, the artists

cultural assets, Bucharest has been well off economically. In subREAL's installation, Bucharest was positioned to be the equivalent to New York, a contemporary replacement for Paris as a sign of Romanian sophistication and worldliness.

The city of Bistrita on the other hand had a different function. The county of Bistrita-Nasaud encompassed some of the most beautiful, untouched mountain scenery in the entire Carpathians. It was the place where myths and superstitions abound and were passed on from one generation to the next. Bistrita is a town of about 50,000 in northern-central Transylvania, established in the 12th century. It was on the main rail line from Vienna and Budapest, and was the route that Jonathan Harker takes in the first chapter of Bram Stoker's novel. Harker stays at the Golden Crown Hotel before traveling eastward to meet Count Dracula. While there was no hotel by that name in Bistrita when Stoker wrote the novel, one has been built to accommodate the interests of visitors who come to the area having read the novel. Today, it is possible to drop in at the restaurant and have the very meal that Harker has in the novel - the "robber steak". Built in the late 1970s Hotel Castle Dracula resembled a real medieval castle and stood on the 'Borgo' Pass where Bram Stoker situated the Vampire Count's castle in his novel. While this hotel catered to tourists looking for the vampire Count (it even had a crypt complete with coffin), it had the advantage of being in the "right" fictional location, and the view of the Pass was magnificent. The hotel also featured the "White Apartment" where the former communist dictator Ceausescu spent some of his holidays.¹¹³ The fact that this hotel catered mainly to tourists could be considered in the larger socio-cultural and political context of the time. When the hotel was built in the late 1970's high level contacts

address their surrounding realities.

¹¹³ *Travel in Romania (2)*, <http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~emiller/tours2.htm>. 11 Apr 2005.

existed between the United States and Romania throughout the decade of the 1970s, culminating in the 1978 state visit to Washington by Nicolae Ceausescu.¹¹⁴

Thus, if Bucharest was equivalent to New York, then Bistrita was the Romanian equivalent to Hollywood. If we considered that Bistrita's Castle Dracula Hotel was built because of the tourist demands generated by Bram Stoker's novel, it could be said that Bistrita was one of Hollywood's most fantastical creations. subREAL was stressing the tension between myth (Hollywood/Bistrita) and reality –economic and politic—(New York / Bucharest).

Besides the satirical view on cultural affinities between Romania and the US, the installation satirically addressed the nation's striving for recognition within the cultural and political international scene, i.e. the NATO integration. In this sense it is relevant to briefly discuss the political relationship between Romanian and US in the early 1990s. After welcoming the revolution of December 1989 with a visit by Secretary of State Baker in February 1990, the U.S. Government expressed concern that opposition parties had faced discriminatory treatment in the May 1990 elections, when the National Salvation Front won a sweeping victory. The slow progress of subsequent political and economic reform increased that concern, and relations with Romania cooled sharply after the June 1990 intervention of the miners in University Square. Anxious to cultivate better relations with the U.S. and Europe, and disappointed at the poor results from its gradualist economic reform strategy, the Stolojan government undertook some economic reforms and conducted free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections in September 1992. Encouraged by the conduct of local elections in February 1992, Deputy

¹¹⁴ "Background Note: Romania," Feb 2005, US Department of State: Bureau of European and Eurasian

Secretary of State Eagleburger paid a visit in May 1992. Congress restored Most Favored Nation (MFN, the Jackson-Vanik amendment that links MFN to a country's performance on emigration). This status was renewed yearly after Congressional review of the presidential election in November 1993 in recognition of Romania's progress in instituting political and economic reform. In 1996, the U.S. Congress voted to extend permanent MFN graduation to Romania.¹¹⁵ Additionally it is relevant to note that Romania was admitted as a full member of the European Council in October 1993 and on 1 February, 1995, Romania became an associate member of the EU. In June 1995 Romania submitted its formal application to become a full member. Although explicitly set as the prime goal, Romania was, and still is unlikely, to enter the European Union before 2007. In January 1994, Romania became the first country to join the Partnership for Peace program. France, Italy, and Canada supported Romania's bid to become member of NATO in the first wave of accession. However, in the first round in March 1999, Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary joined NATO, so Romania's NATO-membership could take place in a later round of NATO-enlargement.¹¹⁶

subREAL's installation gained a deeper meaning when seen within the larger socio-political context of the time. As seen above, during the early 1990s, Romania eagerly aimed toward NATO and EU integration. Additionally, despite the relative good

Affairs, Washington, DC, in *Romania (02/05)*, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35722.htm>. 11 Apr 2005.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ *The Political Landscape in Romania*, July 2000, European Forum, <http://www.europeanforum.bot-consult.se/cup/romania/develop.htm>. 11 Apr 2005.

The country's highest foreign policy goal, NATO membership, was attained in November 2002, when Romania received an invitation to join the Alliance. Romania officially became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on March 29, 2004 after depositing its instruments of treaty ratification in Washington, DC. President Bush helped commemorate Romania's NATO accession when he visited Bucharest in November 2002. On that occasion he congratulated the Romanian people on building democratic institutions and a market economy following the fall of communism. President Iliescu paid a

diplomatic relationship between US and Romania following the local election in 1992, the work satirized the impossibility of the two nations' actual "closeness." Furthermore, the real cultural and geopolitical distance between the two countries was visually manifested in inconsistent material of the two maps one made of garlic and the other of corn flour, which can disintegrate at the smallest jostling. Garlic was part of the Dracula iconography, and as seen in Hollywood movies of Dracula and vampires, it was used to ward off vampires. subREAL made use of garlic to draw the map of the country on the galley floor as if to further ridicule the Western stereotypical view of the geographical location of Romania as the land of Dracula. The corn of the other hand was associated with the US. American Indians cultivated corn, which later in 16th century was imported into Europe. Traditionally and historically corn was a symbol of Western wealth and prosperity. It is very much present in the contemporary American culture under different forms, ranging from pop-corn, corn on the cob, corn dogs, corn muffins and cornbread at Thanksgiving. subREAL is expressing the myths about both cultures. The presence of corn and garlic may have also symbolized the confrontation between life (corn – prosperity—symbol of the US) and death (garlic – the world of the dead vampires—Romania). Finally, the two maps, one representing the 'West' and the other the 'East' satirically invoked the political confrontation existing in Romanian local context. As previously discussed, the conflict was manifested between the traditionalist group with conservative values and the more progressive group with Western orientations and supporters of Western values.

return visit to the United States in December 2003, permitting both heads of state to reemphasize commitment to shared political and economic goals. See "Background Note: Romania."

In summary, in *Draculand 2*, subREAL employed the visual language of installation, performance, photography and video, media manifested on the international global art scene. The complexity of this work emanated from the tri-facet satirical target chosen by subREAL. Its satirical social mockery was created by the juxtaposition of the stereotypical Western view of Romania as the land of Dracula and the satirical geographical closeness between Romania and the US. Additionally their social mockery engaged the conflict manifested within the local context between the conservative, traditional view and the views open towards the Western international cultural discourse.

Draculand 3 (1993) was the first installation from the series to be exhibited in an international exhibition. Between June and September 1993, *Dracula 3* represented Romania at the Venice Biennial, Aperto, Corderie dell' Arsenale. The work consisted of a TV monitor showing an approximately twelve minute video. Around the monitor (with the volume turned to maximum), there were fifty stakes mounted on fifty metal stands. For the Western audience, familiar with "Dracula" movies based on Bram Stoker's novel, the presence of the stakes was a recognizable symbol of embodiment of the sadistic nature of the king-vampire, originating in Romanian national history.¹¹⁷

According to an account¹¹⁸ of subREAL's works, the filmed material featured public spaces in Bucharest, a city devastated by forty-five years of communism and invaded in the nineties by Western consumerism. The rapid cuts alternated with long sequences taken from an old empty trolley car traveling at night, and with inserts from Romanian newspapers, Bram Stoker's "Dracula" movie and Saxon chronicles about the

¹¹⁷ As in Bram Stoker's book *Dracula* or vampires in general are killed with wooden stakes to the heart.

¹¹⁸ *subREAL's Files*. This account was composed by the artists in collaboration with Kunstlerhaus where they were in a year long residency. Although I personally contacted the artists, I was not able to obtain and

Prince.¹¹⁹ As exhibited at the Venice Biennial in *Draculand 3*, the relationship between the artists (or the satirist) and the addressee (or the audience) was indirect, mediated through the filmed material seen on the TV screen. The local realities appeared distant as they unfold in the filmed material and the audience became less engaged and less disturbed by its viewing.

subREAL's bid for international recognition as seen in their mid-nineties works was further exemplified by the video installation *Draculand 9*, with the subtitle *News from Dracula*. This work was included in *Beyond Belief* organized at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1995.

News from Dracula was a video installation with the TV monitor placed within a gymnast's pommel horse (alluding to the Romanian Olympic champion Nadia Comaneci, a stereotypical western symbol of the country) and covered with a woolen bed cover. The Romanian word for pommel horse is "capra" and is a verbal pun in Romanian referring to both the gymnastic device and the animal sheep. The pommel horse was surrounded, as in a protective shield, with a hundred wooden stakes (two hundred centimeters high) in wooden stands, mounted aggressively forward, at an angle of forty-five degrees. The monitor showed a thirty minute color video tape with sound. The video is looped with three minute clips of sounds and images of dioramas from the National Museum of Military History in Bucharest. The four dioramas on the museum walls featured crucial historical battles: two against the Ottoman Empire, one episode from WWI and one from WWII. The frozen full-sized figures, properly dressed and heroically posed, were made

view the video material because, according to Calin Dan (member of subREAL) it is not yet available on tape for public viewing. Based on a personal e-mail conversation (November 10, 2004, 9:28 AM).

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 54. There is no evidence of which Dracula movies based on Stoker's novel is used by subREAL in their installation.

dynamic using sophisticated lightning techniques and sound tracks, which combined memorable songs, speeches and poems recited by famous actors.¹²⁰ Through the aesthetics of historical documentaries, subREAL brought forth images of Romania's recent atrocious Communist past as seen through the three minutes clips of sounds and images of the dioramas from the National Museum of Military History. Yet the recent past became distant by its simple association with historical events from Romanian national history, such as the two battles against the Ottoman Empire fought more than three hundred years ago. The artists critically distanced themselves by placing their memories of the Ceausescu dictatorship within the historical context. These historical images were intercalated among images of current TV news, reflecting the constant and rapid changes within the local Romanian context under Western presence and influence.

In *Draculand 3* and *News from Dracula*, both exhibited internationally, the artists had in mind Western European and American audiences. Significant is the fact that their works have English titles; they were not translations from Romanian. As an art medium, they employed the visual language of the video-installation, popular during the mid-nineties within the international art scene. At the same time, the artists preserved the specificity of their national identity for the Western eyes, by appropriating universally recognized Dracula imagery. Thus, subREAL's works were determined by the context in which the installations were exhibited and consequently by the viewing audience. In *Draculand 2*, exhibited in Romania, there was a direct involvement with the local audience. In *Draculand 3* and *Draculand 9*, both exhibited outside Romania, the direct

¹²⁰ Ibid.

relationship with the audience and the themes commented upon became distant and were indirectly manifested through the filmed material.

Under the all encompassing umbrella of Eastern Europe, *Beyond Belief* was structured on a country by country basis, with the artists identified by their ethnic background. For instance, the Bulgarian artist Luchezar Boyadjiev made dense use of the religious iconography, specifically illustrating Bulgaria's traditional identity. The curatorial approach in the exhibition posited subREAL's *News from Dracula* as emblematic of Romania. Within the American cultural perception, Romania, particularly its north-western region called Transylvania, is synonymous with Dracula and medieval haunted castles. Ironically, the photograph of the work in the exhibition catalogue was not an image of how it was installed at the Chicago Contemporary Museum of Art. On the contrary the photograph appears to have been taken in a different venue. This photograph was important because it retained an exotic setting, with the arched windows and ceiling, columns, and aged walls. This representation of the work in the catalogue further emphasized the exhibition's general structure that manifested the western expectation of an exotic and ethnically specific art.

By contrast, the argument presented here is that *News from Dracula* was a negotiation between the American demands for a national identity based art and the artists' desire to enter the international scene. subREAL was fully aware of the international desire and they capitalized on it in order to enter the global art market. The success in fulfilling American expectations could be seen in the artists' presence in international exhibitions and several artist residency programs. On the other end of the spectrum, contemporary with subREAL, there were other artists, who purposely ignored

the trendy issue of “identity.” For example, Roza El-Hassan’s *Untitled* (1993) resembling a piece of ordinary stone and Zuzanna Janin’s *Untitled* (1991) featuring a sheet of silk with a lamp illuminating from underneath it were abstract and conceptual works, which were beyond any national narratives.

In speaking of black or non-European artists and the Western desire for an exotic “other”, Jean Fisher said:

“The exoticized artist is marketed not as a thinking subject and individual innovator in his or her own right, but as a bearer of prescribed and homogenized cultural signs and meanings. To be locked into the frame of ethnicity is also to be locked out of a rigorous philosophical and historical debate that risks crippling the work’s intellectual development and excluding it from the global circuit of ideas where it rightfully belongs.”¹²¹

Similarly, the intention of the *Beyond Belief* exhibition was to represent the artists and their art as “bearers of prescribed and homogenized cultural signs” as is the case with subREAL’s *News from Dracula*. However, as the above analyses had shown the artists were fully aware of the mainstream international appreciation for the exotic, and thus they entered in a negotiation between their national identities and the North American interest in an ethnically specific art. Furthermore, the artists used satire to juxtapose the iconography of two different worlds and to address both a local and a Western audience.

¹²¹ Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn, Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 235.

Chapter Five:

The Art History Archive Series and Satirical Critical Distancing

subREAL's year long residency,¹²² from 1995-1996, at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany initiated a new phase in their work: the *Art History Archive* series. It was based on five hundred twenty-six and a half kilograms of photographic material (black-and-white photos and slides) from the photo archive of the Romanian art journal *Arta*, the only art publication (1953-1989) that appeared during Communism in Romania. The state controlled art magazine was published by the Visual Artist Union (in Romanian Uniunea Artistilor Plastici, UAP), according to a well known Soviet pattern of institutionalized culture, imported in all the countries of the Eastern bloc during the early ninety fifties. The *Arta* publication featured pompous propaganda art, heroic statues of heavy industry workers or posters stating "Victorie Socialismului" (Socialist Victory). Heavily surveyed by the authorities, the artists had to succumb to the party officials' demands. As Geert Lovnik says:

"This art is not merely expressing the Will to Power of a few second class party individuals, this art tends to disappear and can no longer distract our attention, let alone subvert...No expression, no pain, no desire. Instead, we have taken on an endless journey through blurry, impressionist landscapes, advanced forms of meritocracy, from which we will never know what is perhaps hiding behind these masks of oppression."¹²³

The magazine collapsed after the political shifts in 1989, and the archive, accumulated since 1953, remained a "floating depository" of photographs.

¹²² The residency was founded by Philip Morris Foundation. See *subREAL's Files*.

¹²³ Geert Lovink, "Navigating the Normalcy: A social history of art reproduction," in *Blast the Bots - Praise the Databases*, <http://www.thing.desk.nl/bilwet/Geert/Essays/review.html>. 12 Mar 2005.

How did subREAL engage the photo archive, a significant repository of the communist past? The variety of installations and performances, revealed a multi-layered understanding and engagement of the artists with the archival material. An in-depth analysis of their works will illustrate why and how the artists approach their Communist past through the photographic archive. Furthermore, it will be argued that the artists make use of satire as a way to critically distance themselves from their Romanian context and to address a primarily Western audience.

subREAL's first installation, titled *Art History Archive. Lesson 1*, with the subtitle *How to Change Your Wall Paper Daily*, was composed of about ten thousand black-and-white photographs of various sizes that completely covered the walls and ceiling of a room. The artists took this photo archive from its original context (i.e. as evidence of the existence of a powerful Communist regime) and simply utilized it as wall paper in their installation. Wall paper is a trivial (and politically harmless) form of decoration that is usually not considered a serious artistic medium. The completely covered walls and ceiling created a claustrophobic feeling both on a physical and emotional level. The reality and physicality of the room dissolved under the multitude of the photographs and became one with the archive. Also the artists became part of the archive by actually living in the room for two months. In this work, the archival material was meant to be perceived from a distance rather than by a close examination of each photograph on the walls. The title as well, *How to Change Your Wall Paper Daily*, indicated the artists' conception of the photographic archive as a whole by comparing it to wallpaper.

The satirical target was announced in the installation's title, comparing the regimes' existence (seen in the accumulated evidence of this photo-archive) to mundane

wallpaper that required to be changed. Thus, they re-visited and re-represented the Communist past out of its original context. How did subREAL engage the conceptual meaning of the archive? Did subREAL re-visit the past to inquire what's left after something as powerful as the Communist regime disintegrates? Or did the artists employ the archive to comment on the current political situation? Or rather engaged the archive as fashionable strategy, part of the mainstream?¹²⁴

According to Derrida the concept of archive was on one hand “physical, historical and ontological, there where things commence” and on the other hand it was “nomological”, in the sense that the archive had a legalistic status, commanded and exercised by an authority, institution or a social order.¹²⁵ When considering subREAL's work, the “nomological” sense of the archive applied. The authority that controlled or commanded the archival material that the artists employ had dissipated. The Communist structure, which created this archive and therefore controlled it, was no longer in power. By making use of this material in different forms in their installations, subREAL became the new controlling authority over this accumulated photographic archive, similar almost to a transfer of power from the Communist regime into subREAL's hands.

The artists' power of selection over the photo-archive was revealed in another installation created a couple of months later, titled *What does a project mean?* For this work, the artists selected only certain photographs. The installation consisted of ninety black-and-white photo reproductions of sculptures cut and pasted on plywood. The life size sculptures were placed on ninety pedestals, and thus exhibited in an illusionist way

¹²⁴ I believe it is important to remember that the artists were actually away from Romania when they embarked on this project. They must have been familiar with what has been going on within the mainstream international art scene.

as if they were real three-dimensional objects, giving the impression of an out-of-scale solo art show. On a wall there was a portrait of the sculptor, Ion Irimescu, whose work was “exhibited”, surrounded by other photographs documenting his social and political activities as an artist favored by the Communist party officials. A comprehensive biography, an application letter addressed to the director of Kunstlerhaus Bethanien and a recommendation from subREAL was also posted on another wall of the exhibition space.¹²⁶

The sculptor Ion Irimescu (b. 1903) was an official figure of the Romanian art scene for more than sixty years before and during Communism.¹²⁷ In subREAL’s installations, Irimescu’s sculptures were seen as index for the Communist past. The visual representation of the installation was satirically both playful and critical. The artists mocked Irimescu’s sculpture by degrading them to flat photographic reproductions, which were further emptied of any suggestive power by being mounted on cut plywood, like mere toys. subREAL ridiculed Irimescu through the posted documents, which instead of honoring him, actually satirized him. The artists wanted to bring him down from fame’s pedestal, as the reigning Communist sculptor, whose name every Romanian knows well. The documents on the wall provided further information to the viewer so that the satirical target was identifiable. The artists control the archive’s representation and their central purpose was to mock the oppressive Communist past. They did this by

¹²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever, A Freudian Impression*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1-6.

¹²⁶ *subREAL’s Files*, 107.

¹²⁷ He embraced artistic styles that were imposed by the governing Communist ideology. Between 1978 and 1990, he was the president of the National Artists Union, the publisher of Romania’s official art magazine *Arta*. This publication covered his activities extensively, both as an artist and as a political figure. The biography of the sculptor is reproduced from one of the monographs dedicated to Ion Irimescu, an elaborate comparative study which places the artist in an international context. *Ibid.*

both associating it with worthless wall paper and ridiculing a well know communist sculptor by representing his sculptures on two dimensional surfaces of banal plywood. The artists' approach to the archive was also to bring forth insignificant details and anonymous individuals from within the photo reproductions.

In *Serving Art*, 1999, exhibited in the *After the Wall* exhibition, subREAL chose to reproduce two thousand black-and-white negatives showing only the lateral, insignificant details. Examples were the assistants who, while helping with the process of photographing the art works by holding dark backdrops, were also captured in the photograph even though they were not meant to be seen. These negatives were meant to provide reproductive material for printing (in the *Arta* magazine) and relied completely on the final cropping in order to eliminate these peripheral insignificants and concentrate on the art reproduction themselves. What saved those images from being just flat reproductions of uninteresting art works was precisely the fact that they all framed the subject in a wrong manner. "By this process, art becomes just a centered element, dominated by an aura of events, objects, and people all speaking about the flux of history perceived as a flux of data. What subREAL did is to print these forgotten negatives, but they were printing only the messy details".¹²⁸ The photographs were visually powerful because of their large size, multitude and mode of presentation, recalling large billboards ads that one might find along highways or subways.

By reproducing only the peripheral aspects of the negatives, subREAL removed these workers from their original context (seen only as anonymous helpers in a Communist regime) and placed them in a new context that allowed them visibility and

¹²⁸subREAL, "Serving Art," in *subREAL*, http://www.plueschow.de/fellows/subreal/frame_serving_03.html. 14 Oct 2004.

individuality. Each individual was visually reproduced in one single billboard panel. Concomitantly, subREAL's reproduction of these anonymous workers provided a behind the scene visual tour into the constructive mechanism of how the Communist regime delivered its ideology (the *Arta* magazine).

One facet of the satirical target was made visible in this behind the scene tour into the world of the past regime. In *Serving Art* as well as *What Does a Project mean?*¹²⁹, subREAL disintegrated the regime's powerful ideology by bringing forth its actual indoctrinating mechanism. The presence of anonymous assistants holding up backdrops for the art work transmitted a reality that was not meant to be seen. Thus, one facet of the satirical target was identified in the artists' intention to mock the past regime by revealing part of its hidden mechanism in individualizing anonymous workers that were meant to fade away.

Another facet of the satirical target made itself visible in the visual representation as billboards of the edited photographs. In *Serving Art* subREAL juxtaposed the iconography of two worlds: the Western consumerist world made visible through the visual presentation of billboard-like panels, and the Socialist past recalled through the edited and recycled images. Each of these worlds became the satirized target, seen almost as the two sides of the same coin. In the first instance, the Socialist ideology was satirized by subREAL featuring the insignificant workers and thus giving them individuality. In the second instance, the Western world became the satirical target in that the vertical panels recalled the structure of huge billboards and was in visual consonance with one another. The effect was a uniform mass of images. In this representation, the figures each

¹²⁹ In *What Does a Project Mean* subREAL satirically removed from the fame's pedestal the emblematic figure of the Communist sculptor Ion Irimescu, seen as an index for the Communist ideology.

within one panel lose their individuality and once again merged into a uniform mass. Thus subREAL targeted the ideology of two worlds seen in an open confrontation, one canceling the other within the same work.

After the Wall grouped together one hundred and forty four artists under the all encompassing label of *Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*. The curatorial approach followed a structure based on four themes, with subREAL's work fitting under the history theme. Bringing forth an archive of fifty years of history was appealing for the Western European viewer in that it gave the illusion of insight into a world that had been kept locked for almost a half of century. Thus, as in the *After the Wall* exhibition, a Post-Communist Eastern European artist was expected to deliver political art mirroring the post-communist condition. However, subREAL was fully aware of the interest in such art, awareness that was not acknowledged by North American and Western European curators. For example, the artists embarked on the *Art History Archive* series while in residency in Berlin, and aimed to enter the international art discourse. Also, the artists were fully aware of the mainstream artistic trends. The use of the photo- archive is fashionable and employed by well known artists, like Gerhard Richter, Christian Boltanski and others.

In *Serving Art*, the artists reproduced the communist archive by focusing only on the side details, as if satirically alluding to their own condition as artists. subREAL and in general the post-communist Eastern European artists were the minority and the peripheral, just like the anonymous workers that ironically were elevated from anonymity and individualized in the billboard like panels. Satire was vital in subREAL's works because it allowed the negotiation to happen. Thus in contrast with the homogenizing

tendency of the Western curators, as seen in the two exhibitions, my reading of subREAL's works offered an alternative view. By contextualizing their works within the Romanian context as well as within the Western stereotypical perception this study was able to reposition these artists' works from being a simple political mirror to a complex process of negotiation.

subREAL's awareness of a specific Western demand, and their subsequent negotiation with it, was generally used by artists in minority or peripheral communities. For example, Cuban, African, Middle Eastern or Asian artists, for reasons of artistic visibility and economic survival, were determined to question and find a common ground between their own identity as artists and what is expected from them in a global context.

Conclusion

This study attempted to find answers to questions like the following: Was it sufficient to posit Eastern European art as simple visual mirrors of the local political context? Practically speaking, how and by what strategies could the artists critically distance and deal with their surrounding realities and national identities? For the dissemination of a certain work, how did curatorial and institutional frameworks transform and manipulate critical views?

Maria Todorova, Slavoy Zizek, Larry Worlff and Andaluna Borcila pointed out that the Balkanist fantasy of remote and barbaric cultures was constantly invoked to emphasize binary contrasts between the “normality” of the West and the “traumatized” Post-Communist Eastern Europe. Consequently, the curatorial approaches in both *Beyond Belief* and the *After the Wall* manifested hegemonic perspective on art by artists originating from former Socialist nations. The exhibitions’ frameworks along with their financial supporters were structured in unison with the overarching Western cultural representations of the idea of Eastern Europe. In this sense, the identity and diversity of each nation was grouped together under the general Post-Communist Eastern and Central Europe geopolitical trope and the artists were considered as passively mirroring their local socio-political context.

In an indirect way, these exhibitions could be seen as emerging from the curatorial approach initiated by the 1989 international show *Magiciens de la Terre* or *The Whole Earth Show*, on view at the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette and the fifth floor of the Centre Pompidou, in Paris. In this controversial exhibition, the leading

curator Jean-Hubert Martin ambitiously grouped fifty Western artists or of the “centers,” (including Jeff Wall, Daniel Spoerri and Richard Long) and fifty non-Western artists or of the “periphery,” (including Cheri Samba, Bowa Devi and Eflambelo) in an attempt to establish a dialogue among different cultural traditions.¹³⁰ Yet, the exhibition reinforced the superiority and centrality of the West over the marginalized and romanticized “other.” Despite the obvious difference from the 1989 show, *Beyond Belief* and *After the Wall* had a very similar outcome. Rather than initiating a dialog among artists of various nationalities, they maintained the powerful and long standing binary opposition between the sophisticated West and backward East.

This study’s close analysis of the two exhibitions furthers the need to explore different curatorial approaches when staging exhibitions of art from specific cultures. Furthermore, it is even more important to initiate alternative readings, especially when we consider that recently staged exhibitions like *In Search for Balkania* (curated by Eva Kernbauer at the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Austria, 2002); *Blood and Honey, Future in the Balkans* (curated by Harald Szeemann at The Essl Collection, Vienna, 2003); and *In the Gorges of the Balkans, A Report* (curated by Rene Block at Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Germany 2003) were still based on the structure and approach developed by *Beyond Belief* and *After the Wall* by making use of the all inclusive yet too generalized geo-political label of “the Balkans”.

As alternative approaches, it would be fruitful to avoid all encompassing socio-political framings, such the “Post-Communist Eastern Europe” or “Art from Latin

¹³⁰ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “The Whole Art Show, An Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh”, *Art in America* (May 1989): 150-159.

America” as well as possibly initiating comparative studies emphasizing specific artistic strategies employed by artists with varied national backgrounds.

The approach followed in this study, demonstrated that satire was employed by the artists as a way to cross rigid stereotypical categorizations and national boundaries. Furthermore, this paper illustrated that subREAL took for granted Western expectations and delivered works loaded with visual iconography easily recognized and understood by American and Western European audiences. The best example is *News from Dracula*, especially since Dracula’s image has been immortalized in the West thanks to Bram Stoker’s novel and many film versions of the story.

The discussion of subREAL’s installations revealed that the artists were very much aware of current North American and Western European artistic trends. They realized that, in order to enter the international mainstream art circuit, they were to employ contemporary techniques embedded with a local or ethnic iconography easily deciphered by a non-specific audience. Subsequently, the artists enter a complex process of negotiation between their own identity and the Western perception of that identity. Satire as an artistic strategy was vital for the negotiation to happen.

The working methodology followed in this study was to address subREAL’s works by contextualizing them, first within the Romanian socio-political and artistic context of the mid-ninety nineties, and second, they were also read within the North American stereotypical perception of the country’s national identity. Following this dual contextualization, the differences between the various installations conditioned by the different addressed audiences have been pointed out. For instance, if in the early installations, such as *Alimentara* and *East-West Avenue*, subREAL engaged specific local

themes and addressed the Romanian audience, in later works such the *Draculand* series, which ironically have English titles, the artists had in mind an international audience.

subREAL's installations were more deeply understood when approached in correlation with the Romanian socio-political context of the early to mid-ninety-nineties. Unlike several other countries from the former Soviet block, Romania followed a much slower transitional process (from a totalitarian regime towards democracy) in which society continued to function along Communist lines and structures. For the most part of the ninety-nineties, in the local Romanian art scene, strong Socialist structures functioned, which were resisted by subREAL and few other artists. The art academies were still dominated by figures with old Pre-World War II mentalities and teaching methodologies. The government and the state funded Artists' Union provided limited or no support for the local arts. There was no commercial gallery system or grant program supporting the arts. The local commercial art market was obsessed with acquiring works by dead painters from the Pre-War World II period. As Matei Bejenaru pointed out "no Romanian artist living in Romania is represented by a prestigious contemporary art gallery abroad. Moreover, I personally have no record of a Romanian gallery participating in an international art fair."¹³¹

In such a situation, the presence of peer financial figures such as George Soros was seen as a divine salvation. During the early and mid-ninety-nineties, the local Soros Center promoted the artistic scene by funding the staging of several exhibitions including: *The State with no Title* (Timisoara, 1991), *The Earth* (Timisoara, 1992), *The Eastern Europe Zone* (Timisoara, 1993), all curated by Ileana Pintilie. In addition, there

¹³¹ Matei Bejenaru, "Now and Then" in *Periferic 6: Prophetic Corners*, ed. Anders Kreuger (Suceava: Musatinii Publishing House, 2004), 13.

was a series of exhibitions organized by Calin Dan: *Mozart's Sex* (Bucharest, 1991), *Ex Oriente Lux* (Bucharest, 1993), *01010101...Exhibition* (Bucharest, 1994).¹³² Without a doubt, this was a positive influence on the local scene with artists benefiting from its financial support. On the other hand, however, not supporting alternative gallery spaces or not initiating critical cultural discourses within academies or conferences beyond the geo-political borders of the capital city and the country itself, the Soros Centers limited its funds to safe and critically invisible interventions. Coordinated from a hub office in New York, George Soros funded a complex network of Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in virtually every capital in Eastern and Central Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. These centers represented the only major port of entry for the Westerner into the local contemporary art activity, and thus they contributed to the perpetuation of unilateral representation of the Post-Cold War nations. This was especially visible when for the most part, exhibitions staged in the US and Western Europe featured the same artists over and over again. Interestingly enough, artists such as subREAL on one hand employ artistic languages and techniques manifested within the international art circuit – like the site specific installations of the photo-archive – and on the other hand the artists address themes from their local context, so that they maintain their ethnic specificity, appealing to an American and West European audience.

Future exhibitions ought to challenge clichéd notions on Post-Cold War Eastern Europe and focus more on initiating comparative studies as well as on addressing specific artistic themes and techniques shared by artists of varied nationalities and geopolitical

¹³² See Magda Cirmeci, "The 80s in Romanian Art," in Irina Cios, ed., *Experiment in Romanian art since the 1960's* (Bucharest: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1997) 62.

locations. For instance, a future exhibition concept could include a curatorial investigation into video-based art as employed by various artists working within different contexts. The artists could, for example, address universal ideas such as socio-political violence and individual or personal obsessions. Thus, by grouping artists working within different contexts, yet approaching the same issues through the visual language of video-based art, their artistic and cultural specificity will be evident. Within this curatorial approach the exhibition would become a space able to initiate and sustain both a visual and critical discourse on specific current issues among artists with varied national backgrounds.

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