

**State Art or Sites of Resistance:
Socialist Realism in Romania: 1945-1989**

BY

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THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

It is notoriously difficult to write about Socialist Realism and Romania's case is no different in this regard. Although all writers face challenges of approach in attempting to represent recent historical facts from faraway lands, writing about Romanian Socialist Realism through its architecture, homage paintings to the ruling couple, and contemporary attempts at cultural healing through appropriation and reenactment presents some unique opportunities. First of all, there is the subject position question: how to write recent history, through which one has lived, with professional and critical distance? Second, there is the



Figure 1 *From the Central Council of the General Union of the Syndicates in Romania, 1985, Painting on canvas, Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest.*

question of whether a chronological or thematic approach would better suit the subject and the intended readership of Romania's bitterest chapter. Third, there is the confusing (and devastating) double iteration of Socialist Realism in Romania—the original version took place under Stalinist directives, while the more recent occurrence took place under Ceausescu's nationalist ideology.

Perhaps the artwork itself can tell the story of Socialist Realism in Romania. In the far background the Ceausescu's are depicted laying the ceremonial first stone for the construction of Ceausescu's Palace, or as it would later be called: The Peoples' House. (see figure 1) Nicolae and Elena flank a scale model of the Palace on both sides, backs bent to the symbolic labor of commemorating their dream house. Brutally displacing twenty percent of Bucharest's historic center, their megalomaniacal Palace would become the largest civilian building in the world.

A photograph of the actual event, widely reproduced in newspapers at the time, is used for this painting. (see figure 2) Placed on stage, under a tricolored rainbow under a large bridge under a flying dove adjacent to scenes of workers and heavy industry, the Palace—although small in contrast with the Ceausescu couple painted again in the foreground—dominates the painting through the message it conveys. It celebrates 20 years of Ceausescu as Conducator of Socialist Romania. (As much can be read on the front of the stage: "20 years" (20 de ani)).

Ceausescu's dream house—this Palace—would provide a new collective body for the New Romania. Nationalism, as it will be discussed later in chapters 1 and 3, is the common driving force that shoots through all political and aesthetic projects Romania would undertake between 1972 and 1989. A crowd of people follows Nicolae and Elena as they all seem to descend from the Peoples' House. Abstracted trilingual shapes painted underneath the



Figure 2 (Left) Detail from *From the Central Council of the General Union of the Syndicates in Romania*, 1985.

Figure 3 (above) Photograph of Nicolae Ceausescu and Elena Ceausescu laying the corner stone for the construction The House of the Republic in June 25, 1984.

platform that is holding the scale model of the Palace descend and gradually become the young bodies of pioneers saluting with both of their arms in the center and with just one arm off to the sides, awkwardly resembling Nazi youth hailing the Führer. (see figure 3)

After 1965—nearly 10 years after the Soviet Union had ceased to impose Socialist Realism—Ceausescu revived Socialist Realist tropes in the visual arts. However, I argue that this *rappel à l'ordre* taking place in Romanian artistic production during the 1970s and throughout the 1980s was not a return to the Soviet Socialist Realism, not even to the local version of it as practiced in Romania between 1948-1960s. It was, rather, a dizzying palimpsest of unstable messages exposing, from within as it were, the impossibility of transposing Socialist Reality into art as Ceausescu had dreamed of and articulated throughout his many long and wooden speeches on art. I look at these paintings as failed readymades or

ideological collages, commissioned by a patron-state lacking aesthetic discipline and theoretical understanding of the concept of Realism.

Ceausescu's return to Socialist Realism—after a decade-long reprieve—was a return to an ideal of what Socialist Realism ought to be. Neo-Socialist Realism is an improvisation on an ideology. Precisely this honesty in painting—what artists were told to paint—exposed the procedural mechanics of the ideology from inside as: paternalistic, protochronistic, Neo-Stalinist, and dynastic communism. Upon his return from visiting oppressive regimes in East Asia, there is a sudden turn in Ceausescu's politics initiating a sudden turn in the aesthetic canon. This is the moment I am most interested in because it shows the spectacular failure of Socialist Realism to make politics and art one.

Therefore, Ceausescu's detour in representation from the leader of Socialist



Figure 4 *Valeriu Mladin. Ceausescu-Romania*, 1987 oil on canvas, Permanent collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest.

Romania to the father of Socialist Romania takes unexpected turns. (see figure 4) Bursting from the belly of a larger than life Nicolae Ceausescu, a crowd of running uniformed youngsters spread on the canvas. On the horizon, bodies of children recede and turn into small doves and a white light. This dynamic painting representing metamorphosis—from doves to children, from leader to father—shows a crowd of schoolchildren running with open mouths and screaming with joy or terror.

The official art produced during oppressive regimes is often viewed as an unimportant exception to an otherwise fluid history of the twentieth century. Following this sightline when analyzing Romanian artistic production between 1945-1989, scholars tend to split the artworks into two camps: those suffering under the Soviet Socialist Realism imposition and those subversive enough to state-commissioned demands to succeed in producing emancipatory objects resembling Western Modernism. Viewed within this dyadic model, any artwork created during those decades of dictatorship appears either as badly done Socialist Realism—relative to Chinese and Russian sophistication—or as a timid imitation of Western Modernism. Either way, such stereotypical receptions preemptively discount too much of Romanian art production as poorly conceived and amateurishly executed. My research-based analysis questions the placement of Romania's state-commissioned art in the periphery of this or the other imperialistic center: Moscow to the East or Western Europe and North America to the West.

My research complicates this commonplace division between subservient and rebellious Socialist Realist art by proposing that artists, such as the following, were working within the state canon, but not necessarily against Modernist aesthetics: Ion Grigorescu, Dan Hatmanu, Ieronim Boca, Maxi, and the duo Vladimir Setran and Ion Bitan. Here, with strength in numbers, examples of state-commissioned art illustrate other possible iterations of

Modernist aesthetics that refuse to act merely as backdrop to more subversive Modernist practices. Having taken place far away from public view and intellectual scrutiny, these newly contextualized artistic practices (and products) add to our understanding of the ideological consequences of the center's force, whichever the center.

The one question historian Boris Groys considers to have dominated the field of Socialist Realism since its inception is: "Are we dealing with art here?" My dissertation argues that indeed we are dealing with art in the Romanian case precisely because I examine its here-ness while contemplating these archival materials today in the newly born democracy. The Romanian moment of Socialist Realism requires us to consider a simultaneous double consciousness: first, we must attend to the particularities of its restricted aesthetic; second, we must become aware of the possibilities not available for artists, but imagined or known about, that existed outside the boundaries of those restrictions. These are estranging circumstances to write about. (see figure 5)

To meet this complex sociopolitical moment, my research focuses on circumstantial

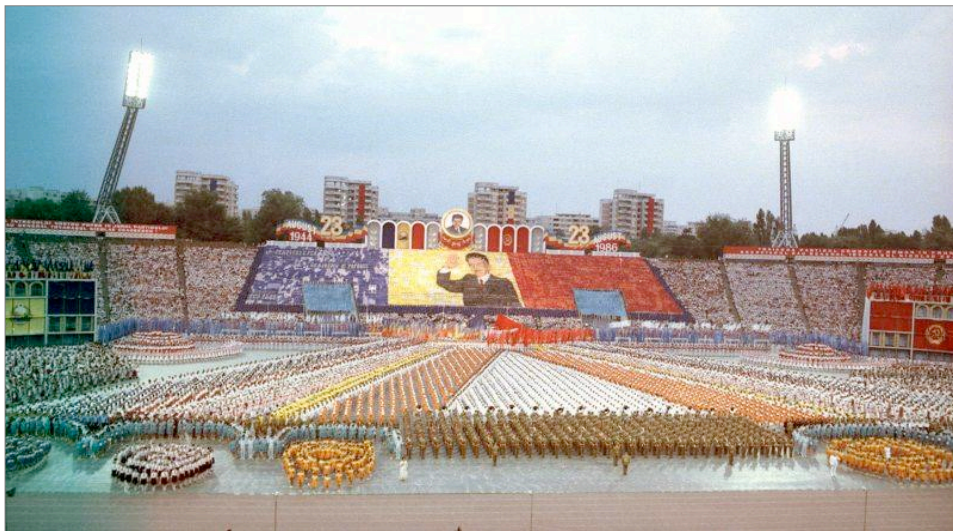


Figure 5 August 23 was a national communist celebration that was celebrated in Romania for 45 years. In August 23, 1944, Romania signed the pact with the Soviet Union and turned against Nazi Germany, fighting on the Allies' side.

details through the analysis of primary sources and points to a broader theoretical framework. Rather than narrowly labeling the art commissioned by the regime and created by the artists as autonomous or beholden to the state, I focus on the aesthetic, social, iconographical, and stylistic choices these artists made when faced with the implementation of Soviet Socialist Realism in Romania. With a brief overview of its implementation, I look at how individual artists and artists' collectives painted the canonical political portrait.

The majority of primary source images under study in my research belong to The National Museum of Contemporary Art located in Bucharest. These paintings are deposited in a few locations inside Ceausescu's former Palace, in between the walls, two underground bunkers, 3 other storages on the second and third floor of the museum and one other location outside the museum where the sculptures have been moved. The director of the museum, Mihai Oroveanu, gathered countless other objects such as tapestries, gifts, and an impressive collection of photographic negatives, which now, after his sudden death, lack proper documentation and are difficult to catalogue or exhibit or even to keep in the museum.

My research into these primary sources has taken me to several other sites in Romania. The Romanian National Museum of Art was another source of images, especially, of early examples of Socialist Realism (1948-1960). Documents were consulted in The National Archive of Romania. The Art History Institute George Oprescu has a complete collection of *Arta* Magazine and The Artists Union Archive (UAP) located on the periphery of the city in a rundown paint factory from the communist era that used to be called the Plastic Arts Plant. This repurposed old paint factory is still operational and is still called the Plastic Arts Plant.

My dissertation analyzes and responds to the two principal assumptions underlying the previous question about the place of Socialist Realism. The first assumption suggests that

artists producing under totalitarian regimes lacked agency. Here, my research expands on the definition of the “totalitarian state” as a process of negotiation between state and individual and not as the Western stereotype of a political regime shaped from above, where individual agency is erased. Second, I seek to challenge the assumption that art occupies a neutral space somewhere beyond sociopolitical action or discourse. History has often regarded as “good” countless works of art working to support and glorify political power. It is important to study the link between the process by which so-called good art is adjudicated as such and its centrality to its time, earned by its indenturedness to political or religious power. Art history abounds with examples of portraits of despotic queens and kings, monuments, and statues on pedestals glorifying cruel autocratic and aggressive empires.

Placed in this conceptual framework, I propose that regime artists used Socialist Realist paintings simultaneously to survive in and to alter the system. I consider the Romanian case to be unique in the international history of Socialist Realism because the subversive art was produced inside the official dogma, undermining the symbols of power not by mocking them but by overusing them until the visual language stopped serving the power of the State and in subtle and unpredictable ways turned that power against itself.

This dissertation presents the first scholarly research on the subject of Socialist Realism in Romania. As in other Eastern European countries, circumstances have rendered the recent artistic past inaccessible for interpretation in Romania. I was warned during my most recent research trip by a prominent Romanian Art Historian that it would take at least another 15 years before someone could ask to see Socialist Realist paintings without being met by a suspicious archivist asking: “Why do you need to see these paintings?” The artistic production of the Ceausescu era was literally moved underground, deep beneath the National Museum of Contemporary Art. Originally conceived of as antinuclear bunkers,

today these storage rooms are packed with over 2,000 Socialist Realist paintings of the Ceausescu couple—the predominant subject of accepted and archived painterly production from that period.

Although Romanian art historians such as Magda Cîrneci and Adrian Guta, and curators Mihnea Mircan and Florin Tudor have critically addressed the problems of restricted access to Socialist Realist archives and collections, this vital corpus remains in the background. My dissertation adds to the effort of East European historiography by prying open a national and international cultural debate about the recent aesthetic Romanian past through description and interpretation of artifacts found in the Museum's Archive of Documents and its collection of Socialist Realist paintings.

The interdisciplinary debates over space, power, and the possibilities of political and aesthetic agency that run through this dissertation crisscross fields such as Postcolonial Studies, Critical Theory, Political Science, and Women's Studies. Because of this overlapping, the Socialist Realist painting per se acts as a multilateral intersection between discourses about art and power, culture and politics, space and memory. Therefore, I argue, these paintings are not just the product of the general totalitarian directives imposed upon the art canon, but also a collection of particular aesthetical choices made manifest through the confluence of individual personalities, political intrigues, media, chance, and various other relative tendencies.

The three main chapters comprising this dissertation use the analytical trajectories and vocabularies of these diverse fields of study—where this debate over state imposition versus artistic choice has taken place—to analyze the functions and contents of the National Museum of Contemporary Art. This building continues to acquire new functions even today.

From the balcony of the National Museum of Contemporary Art one can see, in the same courtyard as the Palace, cranes building the largest Orthodox Cathedral in Romania, called Catedrala Neamului, The People's Cathedral. (see figure 6)

If anything can be said with great confidence about Romania's experience with Socialist Realism, it is that the architects of Ceausescu's Palace did not foresee it becoming a backdrop for another building.

The cathedral will dwarf Ceausescu's Palace since it will stand at least one meter higher. This symbolic authority over the oppressive structure would perform the cathartic role of the cathedral to cleanse the site of the Palace that had been built on top of the destruction of twenty percent of Bucharest. Ten years earlier, Romanian politicians, supporters of the opening of the Museum inside the Palace, attempted to perform a similar cathartic gesture but with -art—rather than with religion—in order to try to “clean the building of any reminiscences of the former dictatorial rule and make freedom of expression possible.”

The chapter on Elena mirrors the chapter on Nicolae because, in the draconian period of the Golden Age, their particular brand of hegemony morphed into a cult of personality relying heavily on the model of the nuclear family to control the meaning of what it could mean to be Romanians. Elena Ceausescu's portrait was constructed by continuing this analytical application of Socialist Realism as readymade or painted photo collage through visual themes such as: the ideologist of the party, the eminent scientist, and the heroine mother. Through a close analysis of selected examples I show some of the forces commissioning Elena Ceausescu's image: gender inequality, populist chauvinism, and Orthodox patriarchy.

The Romanian Communist Utopia started and ended with a promise. It was in Bucharest, December 21, 1989 when Ceausescu gave his final speech from the balcony of the entral Committee in front of over 100,000 people. There was nothing unusual about it. It was cold enough to see the aging dictator's breath as he spoke haltingly. He was wearing a black woolen hat and a dark overcoat looking down on his people. (see figure 7 and 8)

The crowd was carrying flags, portraits of him, portraits of his wife Elena, and banners with slogans. The thousands of portraits showing Ceausescu much younger than he was in actually were the most widely circulated portraits for the last 20 years before the revolution. (see figure 9)



Figure 6 View from the balcony of The National Museum of Contemporary Art. On the far left side cranes building the largest Orthodox Cathedral in Romania, called Catedrala Neamului, The Cathedral of the Nation. 2013.



Figure 9 Standard portrait carried at parades and celebrations.

These photographs of Nicolae Ceausescu—omnipresent as they had become—were as ingrained in the Romanian psyche as bikini-clad Coca-Cola drinkers were in the psyches of Westerners. This mugshot looked over public and private spaces with equally paternalistic indulgence.

No Romanian classroom was left unadorned without a version of this framed mage hanging over its doorway. No Romanian workplace was complete without this gaze



Figure 7 (left) The last speech of Nicolae Ceausescu. Ceausescu and his wife Elena Ceausescu from the balcony of The Central Committee of the Communist Party. Bucharest December 21, 1989.



Figure 8 (right) Photograph of the dictator-less balcony of the Central Committee building a few hours after Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu fled with a helicopter. It had been taken over by the protestors. Bucharest December 21, 1989.

overlooking it. No Romanian ceremony was official without placards and banners bestowing his visage over the crowd. (see figure 10) This is the way Ceausescu commissioned his fame, and his infamy.

Only a few hours after the helicopter lifted from the rooftop of the Central Committee building these very same portraits would be burned and trampled by the crowd. People who gathered to listen to his speech were there not because of a spontaneous decision to come and show support to the communist president of the country. Supporters were amassed and organized ahead of time in groups—much like the animals he enjoyed hunting. Party handlers directed individuals to applaud their leader at appropriate intervals, where they had to stand, and what sign of adoration to carry: a portrait, flag, slogan, or flowers. For one last time, the small format portraits carried by crowd member echoed the oversized portraits installed all around on building façades and street corners. Photograph of the dictator-less balcony of the Central Committee building a few hours after Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu fled with a helicopter. It had been taken over by the protestors. Bucharest December 21, 1989

As they had done for 45 years, the audience was waiting for a signal to start applauding and reciting slogans and for a signal to end the applause and wait quietly for the next round of praise. After eight minutes there was a pause in Ceausescu's speech, which should have been filled with applause and ovations and sloganeering, but this time only the front rows followed the Party handlers' directions. From the back rows of people, you could hear anti-Ceausescu slogans.

Ceausescu panicked and for minutes he repeated to the crowd one word: “Alo! Alo! Alo!”¹ Ceausescu’s absurd repetition was completed by Elena’s voice demanding silence and asking people to stay quiet and in their places, to be nice, to listen. But there was no time for listening. After a few long minutes of panic, Ceausescu deviated from the original speech and started to promise people more money. Everybody was mentioned: students, mothers and children, workers, and retired people would all receive more monetary compensation starting next year. On December 21, 1989, Romania’s utopian experiment with Communism ended with a promise: a better future for the generations to come, starting January of next year. During the revolution of December 1989, the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena were ousted from power and executed by firing squad.² Fifteen years later in 2004, the “Ceausescu Palace”, for which nearly a quarter of the old center of Bucharest had been torn down during construction, opened as the first National Museum of Contemporary Art and the first democratic Parliament.

¹ Ceausescu tried to keep the crowd under control, repeating: Hello! Hello!.Ceausescu’s last speech was transmitted live on December 21 by the national television channel *Antena 1*.

² A complete transcript of the trial can be found here: http://www.ceaurescu.org/ceaurescu_texts/revolution/trial-eng.htm

This dissertation takes as its point of departure the overlapping functions of the building as “house of the people,” house of art, and house of legislation. It explores the last two decades of state-commissioned Romanian art by focusing on the collection of Socialist Realist paintings and The Artists Union Archive. In various ways, the four chapters that make up my dissertation explore artistic agency during Ceausescu’s dictatorship in Romania. I argue that Socialist Realist paintings served the state as didactic art but also countervailed state power by serving as ambiguously coded sites of resistance.



Figure 10 Crowd during a parade in Bucharest, in 1982, celebrating August 23 the day of the victory against Fascism. The portraits of Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu can be seen among slogans such as: Out esteem and pride/ Ceausescu Romania.

CHAPTER I

FROM LEADER TO FATHER OF THE NATION: THE COMMISSIONED IMAGE OF NICOLAE CEAUSESCU

From Socialist Realism to Neo-Socialist Realism

The term Socialist Realism disappeared from official aesthetic and ideological discourse in Romania after the National Conference of the Writers Union in February of 1965 when the participants almost unanimously denounced Socialist Realism as “vulgar sociology”³ and proposed instead “humanist realism” as a new aesthetic doctrine. Three month after the conference, Ceausescu as the newly appointed General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party,⁴ held a meeting between the heads of the party, intellectuals, and artists to discuss the role of cultural production was to play in the “multilateral development of the socialist consciousness of the new man.”⁵

³ ³ Magda Cirneci. *Artele Plastice in Romania 1945-1989. 2nd edition*, Iasi: Polirom 2013, p. 72-73.

⁴ Three days after Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej (political leader of The Popular Republic of Romania from 1945-1965) died, the Prime Minister Ion Gheorghe Maurer promoted Nicolae Ceausescu as the new General Secretary. See Joseph and Nancy M. Wingfield. *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe Since World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press, Fourth edition, 2007.

⁵ “[...] dezvoltarea multilaterală a conștiinței socialiste a omului nou.” D.A.N.I.C. fond C.C. al P.C.R. – Cancelarie, dosar 68/1965, f.3-29 see the complete transcription of the *May 19, 1965. Minutes of the meeting between the new leadership of the party and state and the intellectuals and artists* published by Romanian National Archives in a volume titled *PCR și intelectualii în primii ani ai regimului Ceausescu (1965-1972)* eds. Alina Pavelescu and Laura Dumitru, Bucharest 2007, pp. 21

In this landmark meeting Ceausescu declared: “We are for a realist art, as expression of our socialist society, we are for an art that through its optimism and robustness represents our times, we are for an art in which life and the aspiration of the Romanian people vibrate.”⁶ Liberalization from the restricted Soviet-inflected Socialist Realist aesthetic seemed set to sweep through the arts and culture when the new political leader proclaimed: “the development of creative activity asks for multilateral forms of expression.”⁷ However, that was a short-lived aspiration because he was actually asking intellectuals and artists to: “always express reality, the truth about life, and to serve the people to whom the artist belongs.”⁸ Ceausescu was not liberalizing the aesthetic economy; he was bringing Socialist Realism home. The multiplicity of artistic forms that Ceausescu initially proposed would increasingly become—over the next two decades of his reign—a restricted visual repertoire of the Soviet Socialist Realism. Although Socialist Realism received harsh criticism in Romania as it did in the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death in 1953, Socialist Realism was not abandoned but revived under a new name: Humanist Realism. In February 25 1956, three years after Stalin’s death, at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the First Party Secretary of the Soviet Union, Nikita S. Khrushchev delivered his famous speech in which he denounced Stalin’s crimes and his cult of personality.

In 1957 Soviet newspapers published a series of debates between artists, art historians, and ideologists of the Communist Party debating the future of Socialist Realism after its misuse in visually supporting Stalin’s cult of personality. The tone is critical but optimistic. After a harsh self-

⁶ Pavelescu, pp.23

⁷ *May 19, 1965. Minutes of the meeting between the new leadership of the party and state and the intellectuals and artists* published by Romanian National Archives in a volume titled *PCR si intelectualii in primii ani ai regimului Ceausescu (1965-1972)* eds. Alina Pavelescu and Laura Dumitru, Bucharest 2007, pp. 23

⁸ D.A.N.I.C. fond C.C. al P.C.R. – Cancelarie, dosar 68/1965, f.3-29 see the complete transcription of the *May 19, 1965. Minutes of the meeting between the new leadership of the party and state and the intellectuals and artists* published by Romanian National Archives in a volume titled *PCR si intelectualii in primii ani ai regimului Ceausescu (1965-1972)* eds. Alina Pavelescu and Laura Dumitru, Bucharest 2007, pp. 23

criticism, artists and critics propose to restore the original function of Socialist Realism as directed Marxist-Leninist doctrine: the visual tool for the peoples' dictatorship. These debates were translated in Romanian and published in the same year by The Artists Union under the title *The Problems of Plastic Arts*.⁹ Ten years after the appearance of these Russian debates in Romania, in 1967, Nicolae Ceausescu also followed this path directing his country's artistic production away from Stalin-centered iconography and to Marxist-Leninist doctrine without of Stalin. This is what he said: "In the analysis of all works of literature and art we must start from our conception of the world and society in the light of Marxist-Leninist teachings."¹⁰ Socialist Realist artistic production in Romania would take multiple forms of expression over the next 25 years, but no matter how diversified the trajectories during the "liberalization of arts"¹¹ proved to be, the monitoring and censorship of art did not cease. On the contrary, under the name of "comanda de stat"¹² (state commissioned art) or "arta angajata" (engaged art), the Communist Party continues to follow the Marxist-Leninist ideology. For Lenin, art had the revolutionary potential to serve Socialism.

The period between the abandonment of Socialist Realism in Romania in 1965 and Neo-Socialist Realism (in 1971) is known as controlled liberalization, a control that resurfaces forcefully across all spheres of cultural production after Ceausescu's infamous speech known as

⁹ In January-February 1957 The General Council A.R.L.U.S. in collaboration with The Artists Union edited *Probleme de arta Plastica (The Problems of Plastic Arts)* compiled by texts published in *Sovietskaia kultura, Iskustvo*, in 1956. The texts, translated in Romanian, are signed by Soviet artists and art critics and discuss possibilities of recovery of Socialist Realism after the damage of Stalin's cult of personality. Authors included: V. Zimenko, S. Gherasimov, N. Gabibov, M. Semenov, M. Kagan, S. Temerin, I. Rotenberg, Z. Fogel, and A. Svobodin, Published by: Academia Republicii Populare Romane, Institutul de Studii Romano-Sovietic, Bucuresti.

¹⁰ "In analiza tuturor operelor de literatura si arta trebuie sa pornim de la conceptia noastra despre lume si societate, de la invatatura Marxist-Leninista" D.A.N.I.C. fond C.C. al P.C.R. – Cancelarie, dosar 68/1965, f.3-29

¹¹ Art historians considered the period of 1965-1971 as marking a moment of liberalization in art, when the exchanges between Romanian artists and the Occident were allowed and artists had more freedom to experiment with their subject matter and different mediums. For more on this see Carneci, Magda. *Art of the 1980s in Eastern Europe. Texts on Postmodernism*. Bucharest: Colectia Mediana, 1999. Pintilie, Ileana. *Actionismul in Romania in timpul comunismului*. Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2000, Adrian Guta. *Generatia '80 in artele vizuale*. Pitesti: Paralela 45, 2008

¹² Magda Cirneci. *Artele Plastice in Romania 1945-1989. 2nd edition*, Iasi: Polirom 2013, pp 16.

the “July Theses.”¹³ The *July Theses* (Tezele din iulie) is a name commonly given to a speech delivered by Nicolae Ceausescu on July 6, 1971, before the Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party. The talk was formally titled: *Proposed measures for the improvement of political-ideological activity, of the Marxist-Leninist education of Party members, of all working people*.¹⁴ The *Theses* comprised seventeen directives for expanding the role of the party in all spheres of activity with a special attention to the cultural and ideological formation of youth. Therefore, preschoolers were enrolled in an organization called *Motherland's Hawks* (Soimii Patriei), and when they were enrolled in first grade they were transferred to *The Pioneers Organization*, (Organizatia Pionierilor), followed by *The Union of Communist Youth* (Utecisti) at the and ending as a member of the Communist Party. This 6-year period of relaxed cultural production ended with Ceausescu's return from The People's Republic of China, North Korea, Mongolia, and North Vietnam in 1971, when he proposed a new “cultural revolution” with the East Asian model in mind. Impressed with the spectacle created around Mao and his wife Jiang Qing, Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu wanted to create a similar grand aura for themselves. This marks the beginning of Ceausescu's cult of personality.

However, the *July Theses* are not the sudden outcome of a visit abroad but a materialization of Ceausescu's efforts to centralize his power, which started as early as

¹³ see a complete transcription of document: *Protocol Nr 11 of the Secretariat Meeting of CC al PCR regarding the improvement of the political and ideological activity and of the cultural and artistic activity*. D.A.N.I.C. fond C.C. al P.C.R. – Cancelarie, dosar 85/1971, f.13-24 pps. 303-312

¹⁴ *Propuneri de măsuri pentru îmbunătățirea activității politico-ideologice, de educare marxist-leninistă a membrilor de partid, a tuturor oamenilor muncii*. In their final version of early November 1971, publicized as an official document of the PCR Plenum, the Theses carried the title: “Exposition regarding the PCR programme for improving ideological activity, raising the general level of knowledge and the socialist education of the masses, in order to arrange relations in our society on the basis of the principles of socialist and communist ethics and equity.” (Expunere cu privire la programul PCR pentru îmbunătățirea activității ideologice, ridicarea nivelului general al cunoașterii și educația socialistă a maselor, pentru așezarea relațiilor din societatea noastră pe baza principiilor eticii și echității socialiste și comuniste.) *Protocol Nr 11 of the Secretariat Meeting of CC al PCR regarding the improvement of the political and ideological activity and of the cultural and artistic activity*. D.A.N.I.C. fond C.C. al P.C.R. – Cancelarie, dosar 85/1971, f.13-24

1967. As historian Cristian Vasile specifies,¹⁵ the creation of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party in December 1967 marked the moment when the objectives of the so-called “cultural revolution” of 1971 were announced. The July Theses only clarified and installed many of these early objectives, which were certainly not conceived during the month between the trip and the proclamation of the theses.¹⁶ Vasile explains the conceptual context that influenced the timing of the implementation of these restrictive policies:

The events of 1968, the convergence between the party and the intellectuals regarding the problem of nationalism, and also the lack of activity on behalf of the Ideological omission, were the reasons that postponed [until 1971] the tightening of the cultural politics of The Romanian Communist Party and the enunciation of the ‘theses.’¹⁷

It is important to understand the sociopolitical context in which Ceausescu started to build his own Romania. Although the visit to East Asia in 1971 undoubtedly influenced his politics, the *July Theses* were not necessarily the outcome of his trip to East Asia but rather a continuation of his earlier political agenda. However, the direct influence of his trip to East Asia was reflected in a different event: the controversial ceremony of coronation of

¹⁵ Cristian Vasile. *Intellectual and Artistic Life from the first Decade of Ceausescu's Regime*. (Viața intelectuală și artistică în primul deceniu al regimului Ceaușescu) Unpublished, Bucharest 2013.

¹⁶ Cristian Vasile aligns here with other historians such as Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism pentru eternitate*. O istorie politică a comunismului românesc, traducere de Cristina și Dragoș Petrescu, postfață de Mircea Mihăieș, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2005., Umut Korkut, „Nationalism versus Internationalism: the Roles of Political and Cultural Elites in Interwar and Communist Romania“, în *Nationalities Paper*, 2006, vol. 34, no. 2, May 2006., and Mioara Anton, „Drumul spre dictatură: conducerea colectivă“, în *Un destin și o viață*, editori: Florin Constantiniu, Dalila-Lucia Aramă, Dan Cătănuș, INST, București, 2003. These authors analyze the Stalinist politics of Ceausescu as an ongoing endeavor from the beginning of his political power in 1965 and not as a sudden new direction following the July Theses of 1971.

¹⁷ Evenimentele din 1968, convergența dintre partid și intelectuali în problema națională, precum și lipsa de activitate a comisiei ideologice au întârziat înăsprirea efectivă a politicii culturale a PCR și enunțarea „tezelor“. Cristian Vasile. *Intellectual and Artistic Life from the first Decade of Ceausescu's regime* (Viața intelectuală și artistică în primul deceniu al regimului Ceaușescu) Unpublished, Bucharest 2013, 15

Nicolae Ceausescu in 1974, which proclaimed him the first Romanian president.¹⁸ (See figure 11) Thus, comrade Ceausescu was elevated to the Supreme General and president of Romania implementing policies reflecting the North Korean tradition of dynastic rule, by introducing family members to the political scene and positioning them in powerful roles. Elena Ceausescu would become the deputy premier, second in command only to Nicolae himself, his younger son Nicu Ceausescu would be the head of the Union of Communist Youth while many other family members found themselves occupying powerful political positions in the Party.¹⁹

To support Cristian Vasile's point, I would offer the political conditions in under which Ceausescu was nominated first secretary of the Romanian Communist Party in 1965. When Ceausescu came to power, he found a Soviet-style communist regime already established with the aid of his predecessor Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej who had been busy stalinizing the country since 1947. The three categories that historian Caterina Preda uses to describe the achievements of the Stalinization process in Romania are useful to understanding the directions politics would later take under Ceausescu's extended stay in power. In the first place, the economy was transformed into one that was centrally planned and state-owned through nationalization of the primary means of production. Stalinization also meant heavy industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. Regarding the cultural field, Stalinization meant the imposition of a Soviet blueprint over the Romanian cultural sphere: Socialist Realism. This is the setting in which Ceausescu assumed power.²⁰

¹⁹ His brother Nicolae Andruță Ceaușescu became chief of cadres at the Ministry of the Interior. His sister, Elena Ceaușescu, advanced from a history teacher at Scornicești High School to a head of her school and then school inspector for the whole of Olt County. In time, the nepotism continued to expand out to the extended family.

²⁰ Usually historians break Ceausescu's regime into two periods: 1965-1971 an apparent liberalization and establishment of the myth of "national-communism" by his constant declarations of independence from Moscow, and 1971-1989, the beginning and strengthening of a totalitarian dictatorship.

At the beginning, Ceausescu created the “myth of the political reformer”²¹ to distinguish himself from Gheorghiu-Dej and give the illusion of liberalization away from Muscovite influence. Gaining popularity among Romanians, he continued courting the myth of independence by denouncing publicly the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Thus, enunciated only a few years after such a liberal declaration, the *July Theses*—with its drastic censorship across all fields of activity—come as an astonishing blow to the Romanian population.

His firsthand visit to China and North Korea tends to provide political critics and cultural observers an easy explanation for his sudden policy changes. However, as the context above suggests, sociopolitical circumstances were more complex. For instance, when denouncing the Soviet influence in Romania, Ceausescu did not also denounce the central planning procedures and concepts of the communist regime. Ceausescu intended to obtain independence from the Soviets so he could build his own national version of communism. Because of the drastic conditions of surveillance, censorship, and terror underlined by the *July Theses*, this building of Romanian Communism by Nicolae Ceausescu meant—in practical terms—a return to Stalinism for historians, academics, cultural producers, legal professionals, nurses, doctors, and so on.

However, this second importation of Stalinism into Romania, now voided of any Soviet historical consciousness (other than the connection with Marx and Lenin’s teachings), is treated as a ready-made. An already used Stalinism, decontextualized from Soviet history, was applied to the Romanian space of the 1970s but not without purpose. A Stalinism translated through the lens of Ceausescu’s newly acquired dynastic tendencies would drastically shape the political and cultural environs. The artistic production would often reflect this readymade ideology,

²¹ Preda, Caterina. “Dictators and Dictatorships: Chapter 8: Art and Politics in Romania and Chile (1974-89)” in Matti Hyvarinen and Lisa Muszynski Eds. *Terror and the Arts. Artistic, Literary, and Political interpretations of Violence from Dostoyevsky to Abu Graib*. PALGRAVE MACMILLAN: New York, 2008, 65-71

when themes of Socialist Realism (such as proletariat optimism, the worker hero, and the happiness of the future communist generation) would be bathed in traditional elements such as traditional folk dances or historical figures (Dacian or Medieval) placed next to important Party contemporaries.

The *July Theses* were widely implemented through centralized enrollment of the general population in various organizations involving either classes about Marxist-Leninist ideology or patriotic (coerced volunteering) work in agriculture. Art critics, members of the Artists Union, and editors of all cultural and artistic publications had to follow the same program of ideological reeducation by mandatory enrollment for one year in the Academy *Stefan Gheorghiu*. The State Committee for Culture and Arts published a list of all-important places, historical personalities, and themes Union members in all fields had to amplify.

For example, The Artists Union had to provide documents describing specific events artists were expected to study by visiting the places where these events took place, document the



Figure 11 Ceausescu receives the scepter during the ceremony of his election as the first president of the Socialist Republic of Romania. Until 1989 he was reelected every 5 years. (Aspecte de la alegerea primului președinte al R.S.R., Nicolae Ceaușescu, secretar general al P.C.R.) (29 apr. 1974) [Fotografia #E580] @ Fototeca online a comunismului românesc Cota: 1/1974.

event, and then submit their artwork reflecting their experience with the site to the Committee for Culture and Arts for review. Artists were impelled to travel around the country to what were called “tabere de creatie” (creative camps) or “visite de documentare” (research visits) to conduct research toward the production of art reflecting the “great achievement of Socialist Romania under the guidance of the Genius of the Carpathian Mountains, Nicolae Ceausescu”²² (see figures 12 A&B).

Moreover, State acquisitions required strict pursuit of these official themes. Everything else was dismissed and destroyed: “Artworks rejected by the Approval Committee will be removed—without damage to the host structure—immediately.”²³

Included among the acceptable topics were historical events such as: battles between Romans and Dacians, the Revolution of 1848, the unification of the provinces in 1918, August 23, May 1st, and March 8th. Additionally, there was a category for the names of historical and cultural personalities which were to be commemorated with monuments and paintings such as Decebal, Burebista, Stefan the Great, Alexandru Ioan Cuza but also musicians and artists such as the composer George Enescu, poet Mihai Eminescu, and sculptor Constantin Brancusi.²⁴

Socialist Realist artworks had to celebrate many of these historical events and cultural personalities during the period of instauration of Stalinism in Romania under Gheorghe Georgheiu-Dej’s leadership (1948-1964). However, with the regime change from Georgheiu-

²² The headline of one of this trips organized in 1974 for graphic artists, painters and sculptors. Document from UAP archive, Combinatul Fondului Plastic from a file marked as Artists Visiting The Country/1978.

²³ “Operele de arta neacceptate de comisia de avizare vor fi indepartate- fara deteriorarea cladirii adapostitoare-imediat.” Document Titled: *Regulations regarding the acquisition and public exhibition of works of plastic art* “Reglementarea achizitionarii si expunerii pentru public a operelor de arta plastic.” Document from UAP archive, Combinatul Fondului Plastic marked, *Material Documentar -1960*, 11

²⁴ An example of such guidelines of approved themes was elaborated in November 1972 and includes a plan for the artistic, cultural, and cultural-scientific artworks that would be realized between 1973-1980. 333-346

Dej to Ceausescu, the Socialist Realist artists themselves began to be celebrated among the other cultural personality mentioned above.

The work of first-generation painters and sculptors (as well as their likenesses) from the Stalinization period in Romania (1946-1954) started reappearing during the 1970s and 1980s for two main reasons. Firstly, their resurfacing reflected Ceausescu's intense ambition to create a National Communism to promote Romanian identity rather than remain a political colony of Soviet Communism. Secondly, Ceausescu resuscitated the old Socialist Realist paintings because he deeply wanted to be seen as communism's great reviser, the one who saved Marxist-Leninist ideals from their errant Soviet and Stalinist manifestation.

Ceausescu needed to nationalize all spheres of activity, including the cultural one, to establish a sovereign National Communism. To do so, he appropriated these Stalinization-era artworks to aid in the political emancipation process. The Commission of Culture and

SECV, PLAN ORGANIZARE

REFERAT

Vă rugăm a aproba planul sumelor de mai jos, artiștilor plastici care vor participa la documentarea colectivă de la Lăzarea, Jude. Megidia, în perioada 15.VII-19.VIII 1975, organizată conform protecției 1m încheiată cu organele locale.

1. Sasa Marian	- pictor - resp.	2.500 lei
2. Sasa Lia	"	2.000 lei
3. Sasa Mihai	"	2.000 lei
4. Popa Magda Eugenia	"	2.000 lei
5. David Virgil	"	2.000 lei
6. Popa Jana	"	2.000 lei
7. Adoc George	- grafician	2.000 lei
8. Ciocă Dumitru	"	2.000 lei
9. Andreescu Ana Maria	"	2.000 lei
10. Mihailescu Teodora	- sculptor	2.000 lei
11. Gertler John	"	2.000 lei
12. Adoc Gabriela	"	2.000 lei
13. Bolla Ionel	- pictor	2.000 lei
14. Sasa Eugen	"	2.000 lei
15. Măgura Ionel	- grafician	2.000 lei
16. Nedelcu Eftimie	- pictor	2.000 lei
17. Sasa Paul	"	2.000 lei
18. Barabas Eva	"	2.000 lei
19. Kulesar Daria	- sculptor	2.000 lei
20. Clariu George	- pictor	2.000 lei
21. Sasa Eva	- grafician	2.000 lei
22. Sasa Francisc	"	2.000 lei
23. Rencusă Sander	- sculptor	2.000 lei
24. Pintea Vasile	- grafician	2.000 lei
25. Gell Andrei	- pictor	2.000 lei
26. Maroneș Arpad	"	2.000 lei
Total		52.000 lei

Artiștii se înadresează în regulamentul cap. II, lit. A, pct. 1.
Sumele cuvenite artiștilor din Filiale (nr. art. 13-26) vor fi însoțite de răspunderea grupului, care le va înmăna la locul de muncă pe baza de chitanță.

19.VII.1975

SECV SERVICIU,
V. Iacobescu

Figure 12A

LĂZAREA

Tabere

Pictura - grafică

1975

1. Sasa Marian

2. Sasa Lia

3. Sasa Mihai

4. Popa Magda Eugenia

5. David Virgil

6. Popa Jana

7. Adoc George

8. Ciocă Dumitru

9. Andreescu Ana Maria

10. Mihailescu Teodora

11. Gertler John

12. Adoc Gabriela

13. Bolla Ionel

14. Sasa Eugen

15. Măgura Ionel

16. Nedelcu Eftimie

17. Sasa Paul

18. Barabas Eva

19. Kulesar Daria

20. Clariu George

21. Sasa Eva

22. Sasa Francisc

23. Rencusă Sander

24. Pintea Vasile

25. Gell Andrei

26. Maroneș Arpad

1975

SECV SERVICIU,
V. Iacobescu

Figure 12B

Figure 12 A&B

Front page and 3rd page of a file documenting the cities (visible on the half cover Megidia, Resita, Slatina, Tirgoviste, etc) visited by graphic artists and painters (listed names and payments received for the trip). Document from UAP archive, Combinatul Fondului Plastic. File marked Tabere picture-grafica 1975.

Education determined—through a variety of difficult to trace but nonetheless coercive measures—that the themes and subjects of these Neo-Socialist Realist artworks not only had to be of Romanian origins, but also had to be crafted by Romanian hands. To realize this objective, Ceausescu's Neo-Socialist Realist works had to be signed by the made-in-Romania Socialist Realist artists such as Ciucurencu, Szonyi, Catargi, and Baba and *not* by faraway Soviet Socialist Realist artists such as Deineka and Gherasimov.²⁵ Ceausescu's attempt to repatriate an aesthetic by repurposing Stalinization-era Socialist Realist artworks to unyoke his country of Soviet influence would have unforeseen consequences. For instance, we can see—in a side-by-side comparison—artistic expressions created under Soviet Communist influence and Romanian Communist influence, international coercion abutted next to local coercion. For example, Alexandru Ciucurencu who painted thematically commissioned work in 1958 such as *May 1st* was once again—in 1976—celebrated in *Munca* (Labor Magazine) and *Arta Plastica*. (see figures 13 and 14)

Although communism remains for him an international movement, it originates now in Romania. The communism that Marx envisioned, Lenin tried unsuccessfully to fulfill but it was impossible to succeed because it was applied in the wrong country. Ceausescu considered Romania the place where the last stage of industrial society—described by Marx as the dictatorship of the proletariat abolishing social classes and therefore the exploitation of the worker—was to be Romania.²⁶ The return to Socialist Realism meant the return to Marx and Lenin, before the misapplication of their teachings in the Soviet Union by Stalin. The *July Theses* mentioned above and the cultural censorship that followed marked the drastic change in politics that Ceausescu needed to express that return.

²⁵ Please see examples such as: Szönyi Stefan. *Plutasii* (The Boaters), 1948, The National Museum of Art of Romania. Henri Catargi. *Muncitor* (Worker), 1960 The National Museum of Art of Romania.

²⁶ Ceausescu's new dream was to historically establish that Romania was the place where the socialist dream of humanity would finally find its materialization.



Figure 13 (left) Alexandru Ciucurencu. *May 1st, Composition (1 Mai, Compoziție)* 1958, The National Museum of Art of Romania.

Figure 14 (right) Reproduction of *May 1st, Composition (1 Mai, Compoziție)* Nr. 17, Nov 1976.

However, Ceausescu's revised communism reflects the proximity rather than the contrast to the Stalinist regime. Artists did not fail to show that unfortunate similarity.²⁷ (see figure 15) What has been severely criticized in 1957 as weakness of Socialist Realism as serving Stalin's cult of personality, was now adjusted to serve exactly that: a cult of personality of the new Generalissimus of Socialist Romania: Nicolae Ceausescu.

After 1970, the visual rhetoric had to simplify and to endlessly repeat a number of political theses of the initial Socialist Realism, but this time centered on Ceausescu and his family. Therefore, themes from Socialist Realist paintings of the 1950s such as: "the happiness of people living in Communist Romania," after 1970 transform into "the happiness of people living in Ceausescu's Romania," "the proletarian hero," becomes "Ceausescu the proletarian hero" and "the heroine mother," turns into "Elena the heroine mother".

²⁷ See Boris Ieremeevich Vladimirski. *Roses for Stalin*. 1949, Oil on canvas, 100.5 x 141 cm



Figure 15
Nănescu Constantin.
Surrounded by Children. (In mijlocul copiilor), oil on canvas, 1984.

Although there is no clear definition of “engaged realism,”²⁸ the search for a new realism began by emulating (not merely copying) the old Socialist Realism. As Magda Carneci observes in her book *Plastic Arts in Romania 1945-1965*, the period of installation of the Soviet regime in Romania was forceful and cruel and it was applied to all political, social, and personal levels of society.²⁹ In 1961, for the first time since its inception in 1954, a photograph of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej attending an art opening appeared on the cover of *Arta*. Dej’s appearance, where usually only Lenin or Stalin was shown, demonstrates a symbolic turn to nationalism. Ceausescu would continue this aesthetic routine already opened by Dej by appearing in almost all numbers of *Arta* after 1974.

²⁸ The term “arta angajata” originally appeared on the pages of *Arta*. It was used after 1989 by art historian Magda Carneci to talk about official art produced in Romania after mid 1960. Politicians and artists were trained in Moscow and upon their return, acted more as representatives of the Soviet Union in Romania than as Romanian citizens.

²⁹ Even though the communist Party, helped by the Securitate,²⁹ should have absolute surveillance of what was happening in the cultural environment, the art produced was not uniform, and artists and intellectuals made their choices. Magda Carneci, “The ideology of the moment” *Artele Plastice in Romania 1945-1989* (Bucharest: Editura Meridiane, 2000), 27.

However, more than a visual replacement of Dej Ceausescu also continues the path of National Communism that Dej had begun as early as 1956 when he declared the right of each socialist country to sovereignty. (see figures 16 and 17). Ceausescu continues this process of articulating a strong symbolic national identity, but he becomes not just the builder of socialism but also the pinnacle of Marxist-Leninist ideology.³⁰ Ceausescu believed that he rescued the Marxist philosophy misapplied by the Soviet Union and successfully revised it in Romania. Ceausescu's Socialist Romania means the end of workers' struggle and the beginning of the *Golden Age*. This re-usage of early Stalinist propaganda iconography starts after Ceausescu decided in 1968 to reduce the Soviet political influence in Romania.³¹

After 1974, Ceausescu's portrait appeared countless times in *Arta* and not just to document his working visits or to commemorate important historical holidays, but also as a celebration of itself. Homage became the new and primary function of all inhabitants of the *Golden Age*. Therefore Ceausescu's portrait moves from the inside pages of *Arta* to its cover (see figure 18) and (later) his portrait is reified to the extent that it may be replaced by a range of non-referential homages such decorous means of address, tricolored ribbons, agricultural or industrial emblems, and even buildings.

In 1974, after Ceausescu was elected the president of Romania (a position especially invented for him by his Party, the PCR) the *Golden Age* began. The *Golden Age* euphemistically encapsulates the widely acknowledged darkest period of Ceausescu's regime,

³⁰ Although GG Dej was considered one of Stalin's most loyal followers, his interest in reducing the Soviet influence in Romania was clearly articulated when he demanded that the Red Army leave Romanian land if he helps the Soviet Union to repress the Hungarian revolution in 1956. After that an intense effort of de-russification but not de-Stalinization will comprise all fields of activity.

³¹ Historians consider Ceausescu's speech from August 21, 1968 when he publicly refused to participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia as part of the Warsaw Pact, the trigger for what would be known as the "Myth of Ceausescu's Independence". As a consequence of Ceausescu's August 1968 bravado, Romanians willingly adhered to the communist party and Romania soon became the Communist country in which no opposition movement could arise either from within the party structure or from the larger society. *Archive of Pain*. Eds. Stefan Constantin, Cristi Puiu, Arina Stoenescu. (Vastervik: Ekblad & Co., 2000), 32-48.

symbolically culminating with his paternalistic claim to being the father of the nation. The crackdown on freedom of expression drastically restricted experiments in all branches of cultural production. The production of portraits and homage paintings increased dramatically.³²

³² The Stalinist model of governing the artistic production was the “totalitarian triangle” consisting of the Communist Party, the Unions of Creation, and the individual artist. This model of controlled production is reinforced in Romania with new vigor. Magda Carneci, “The ideology of the moment” *Artele Plastice in Romania 1945-1989* (Bucharest: Editura Meridiane, 2000), 111.



Figure 16 (left) Ceausescu (middle) visiting an art exhibition organized to celebrate the 50-year anniversary of the creation of the Romanian Communist Party. Inside page of *Arta*, Nr. 4-5, Anul XVIII, 1971, on the opposite page: right an article titled “Beautiful, a Militant Principle.” Document located in the library of The institute of Art History George Oprescu, Bucharest

Figure 17 (right) For the first time a photograph of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej (first row, 3rd from left) and its government visiting an art exhibition. *Arta* Nr 3, 1961, ANUL VIII

But what does it mean to perfect a utopia and, more than that, how do you paint in order to prove that that utopia is real? Any work of art exacerbates the role of the arts to the extent that it does not serve the leader and the party, selfishly serving the art as ideology in and of

itself. Art's inherent self-referentiality to its own medium presents a problem to the project of enacting an objectively real utopia through it. Therefore, gradually, The Golden Age is represented on canvas as Ceausescu's portrait. Neo-Socialist Realism increasingly restricts its subject matter to the portraits of Nicolae Ceausescu. The "videology" of Ceausescu expresses his obsession with the self-portrait, which led to the repetition of the same idealized image of the leader.³³ Sometimes the ideology itself becomes the sitter for the artists. Sometimes Ceausescu's titles replace his portrait. (see figure 19)



Figure 18 *Camrade Nicolae Ceausescu*, On the inside of the cover there is a painting by Constantin Piliuta entitled *Homage*. For just this number of *Arta*, the content page is moved to the end to make space for 11 pages of eulogies for the Ceausescus featuring his portraits and photographs alongside the homage of individual artists

Figure 19 Cover *Arta* Nr 1-1988, Anul XXXV. *Tovarasului Nicolae Ceausescu Profund Omagiu, Inalta Cinstire Si Recunostinta Partidului Si A Intregului Popor* (To Comrade Nicolae Ceausescu Profound Homage, High Honor and Gratitude from The Party and All The People)

³³ Term used by Adrian Cioroianu. "Videologia lui Nicolae Ceausescu. Conducatorul si obsesia autoportretului." *Comunism si represiune in Romania*, Ed Ruxandra Cesereanu, Iasi: Polirom, 2006

Commissioned Irony

In 1983 the Ceausescu Office of Education and Propaganda commissioned Dan Hatmanu³⁴—a well-known Romanian artist—to paint a celebratory work for Ceausescu’s 65th birthday. He submitted *Anniversary*, and the Party accepted it (see Figure 20). The official interpretation of the painting would go like this: “the glorious past reaching out to celebrate the glorious future.” In the left-hand corner there is a figure representing the country’s glorious past, Stefan cel Mare (Stephan the Great), a legendary historical figure who seems to be reaching out and over the frame with a champagne glass to cheer “the glorious future” embodied by the Ceausescus.

Anniversary belongs to a group of artworks commissioned by the Party to portray Ceausescu as the descendant of a chronological and merit-based hierarchy of legendary Romanian figures beginning on the bottom with the ancient forebears Burebista and Decebal and continuing to Ceausescu who appears at the very top. The columns appropriates a famous artwork by sculptor Constantine Brancusi called the *Infinite Column*. (see figure 21)

Over the final two decades of his dictatorship, Ceausescu’s interest in National Socialism transformed into what historians call dynastic communism. *Anniversary* seems not to belong to the Socialist Realist tradition, but at the same time it does not set itself in opposition to this tradition either. Dan Hatmanu had this to say about *Anniversary*:

This painting with Stephan the Great should be read between the lines. It was an act of irony...The Party accepted the painting because they could not understand this type of irony. Instead, another painting of mine was considered by the Party to be tendentious,

³⁴“I did not paint homage but portraits. I made a living from painting commissioned portraits. I was a portraitist and this is what I did, I painted Ceausescu’s portrait.” This is what Dan Hatmanu, a renowned Romanian artist under Ceausescu, declared in an interview for *Ziarul de Iasi* (The Newspaper of Iasi) in December 2006.

*even though I did not intend that: I painted a lot of doves around Ceausescu's head and they thought that I said through this detail that Ceausescu had birds in his head. But I did not intend to suggest such a thing.*³⁵

Even the dead are celebrating Ceausescu's birthday. *Anniversary* intended to create a congratulatory work for Ceausescu by showing even the dead Stefan the Great raising a glass. However, the irony dwells in the unexpected effect created by intently following the theme of the commission: a celebratory work for Ceausescu's birthday. By the mid-70s Ceausescu's intentions to establish Communism's rightful birthplace in Romania were manifesting as the rewriting of Romania's history. Thus, Ceausescu receives the approval of history, represented



Figure 20 Dan Hatmanu. *Aniversary*, 1983, Collection of The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest



Figure 21 Wooden column showing Ceausescu at the top. The column belongs in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest and is stored in a separate room where among gifts received by the Ceausescus.

³⁵ Ibid, *Ziarul de Iasi* (The Newspaper of Iasi), 9

by Stefan the Great, for his changes to history.

Sometimes the irony used by artists was not so subtle. When the poem *The Fate*, appeared on the first page of Contemporary Times newspaper in 1980, the connection between the poems and Elena Ceausescu were so obvious that no one told Nicolae that his wife Elena had been ridiculed on the front page of the widely read official newspaper *Contemporanul*.³⁶ Although Elena's name was not mentioned directly in *The Fate*, everyone got the joke, including the metaphors about Elena's bowlegged gait and her personification of death.

*She was so bow legged
That Caligula on his horse
passed under her
with his whole army marching triumphantly.
Was she a woman? A witch?*

*Maybe a little of everything
She had that traveling look
And her forehead was a hearse.*

In his introduction to *Secret Weapon (Arma Secreta)*, poet and translator, Matthew Zapruder tells us that Jebeleanu was a Party favorite. As a young journalist in 1936, Jebeleanu penned a sympathetic editorial propagating Socialist mythology in the person of Nicolae Ceausescu. For a while anyway, Jebeleanu placed his dream life at the feet of the Communist Party. For this, he was allowed to publish freely. And even though he signed his name to this very public and scathingly satirical poem, he was never reprimanded. Was this an act of autocratic largess or just ignorance?

³⁶ Jebeleanu, Eugen. *Secret Weapon: Selected Late Poems*. Tr. Matthew Zapruder and Radu Ioanid. Coffee House Press, Minneapolis, 2008. (The Romanian version was originally published in 1980.)

To picture *The Fate* in context, one should imagine that her name had to always be accompanied by the titles: The Academician Doctor Engineer Elena Ceausescu and never without these plaudits.³⁷ The next chapter will analyze her demand for recognition and her accumulation of unjustified titles. The poem, read widely, became a public site for private laughs, it became a “site of resistance,”³⁸ a fissure³⁹ in a megalomaniac system built by the king of communism. But more than comic relief, the poem exposed the paradoxical policy of the cult built around the Ceausescus. Although all slogans read and showed a “beloved son of Romania,” loved beyond human limits by all citizens, Ceausecu’s popularity was more based on fear, opportunism, and programmatically imposed normalization and less on love.

The poem is an example of the artificiality of language, which mirrors what Gail Kligman calls the “duplicity of power.”⁴⁰ The fact that private jokes about Ceausescu’s diminutive size or Elena being bowlegged would become part of the official discourse of power, mark moments of empowerment of Romania’s citizens during the 1980s. The poem’s ironic imagery presents Elena Ceausescu’s political power (her body and cult of personality) as “visuality” marking a moment of “counter visuality” or what Nicholas Mirzoeff’s calls the “right to look”⁴¹ by participating in the official discourse through an alternative discourse even when that means a transitory laugh.

³⁷ I am discussing more about Elena Ceausescu’s official visually appearance in political and artistic context in the following chapter.

³⁸ I am using here T. J. Mitchell’s concept Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology: Imagery, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

³⁹ I am alluding here at Jameson’s analysis of “cracks in the system” discussed in the last part of the previous chapter. Chapter 1 The National Museum of Contemporary Art: a “crack in the system”

⁴⁰ I discuss this duplicity of power more in the *From Wife to Prime Minister* chapter The last two decades of Communism in Romania show an increased duplicity of language or double-talk in the official Party rhetoric, for instance, saying one thing and meaning something else or doing one thing and contextualizing it as something else.

⁴¹ *The Right to Look*, Nicholas Mirzoeff explains how visuality connects power and authority and considers this association a given. Modernity for Mirzoeff is a continuous contest between visuality and counter-visibility. Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look*, Duke University Press Books, 2011



Figure 22 Images published in *Arta*, 1980.

Cultural productions such as *The Fate* poem and *Anniversary* (among other paintings analyzed in this chapter) mark such instances of visual ambiguity where the visibility of power collapses into the counter-visibility of the disempowered. This collapse makes it possible for the representation of the powerful dictator to coexist with a ridiculed one. Such Neo-Socialist Realist portraits, whether pictorial or literary, offered viewers opportunities *to look*⁴² at the underlying meaning of the images, by getting the irony that as Dan Hatmanu tell us “the Party did not get.”

Romania’s Cultural Revolution entailed the production of portraits and homage paintings, all dramatically increasing after Ceausescu’s return from China and North Korea in 1971. At this time, as outlined earlier in this chapter he proposed the “July Theses,” striking for its sharp increase in massive parades and rallies. Impressed with the spectacle created to honor Mao and his wife Jiang Qing, Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu wanted to create their own grand aura.⁴³ (see figure 22)

⁴² My emphasis, to point to Nicholas Mirzoeff’s use of look in *The Right To Look* as a dissident act and a subversive practice of freedom where the colonized and the victim of war become agents in the discourse of power with the potential to undermine it.

⁴³ Chen Yanning, *Chairman Mao Inspects the Guandong Countryside*, Sigg Collection.



Figure 23 Eugen Palade. *Working Visit*, date unknown, The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest

Even though the communist Party, facilitated by the Securitate, wanted to have absolute surveillance of the cultural environment, the art produced was not uniform.⁴⁴ Official art often appears as an admixture of surrealist elements and didactic narratives. This visual ambiguity reflects an ambiguous political climate. Ceausescu, the hero of the 1968 events when he stood up and publically denounced the invasion of Czechoslovakia became, in less than 4 years' time, the Neo-Stalinist of the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, state commissioned art did not have to subvert, it simply had to capture these contradictions in Ceausescu's persona.

As the next chapter will bring to the fore, Elena modeled her own persona after iconic images of motherhood, female scientists, and important political wives, just as Nicolae modeled

⁴⁴ The Securitate (The General Direction for the Security of the People, known as Securitate) was the Soviet-style intelligence apparatus implemented by the Soviet Union in the occupied countries of Eastern Europe. In Romania which had been a satellite country of the Soviet Union until 1964 when the Romanian Communist Party broke off from the Soviets, Securitate continued to function and even gain strength. The role of the Securitate was simple and brutal, to insure total loyalty of every Romanian citizen to the Communist Party; the use of informants and political prisons was just one part of their arsenal. Lucian Boia, *Miturile comunismului românesc* (București : Editura Universității Nemira, 1998), 67.

his persona after images of Mao and Stalin as viewed through the lens of his Neo-Stalinist *July Theses*, in which, as mentioned earlier, he refused all contact with the West and censored all avenues of cultural production.

Both images show the dictator surrounded by happy workers crowding him with flowers or attentively listening to his explanations and sometimes taking notes during his speech. (see figure 23) The background represents the site visited by the leader: in this case, fields of corn or wheat, although other pictures show electric panels, smokestack plumes, nuclear plants, etc. Although the same Socialist Realist logic should describe Augustin Lucaci's image of Ceausescu's visit to the car factory *Aro*, (the national Romanian car company), there is something odd and different about this depiction of the dictator and his would be happy and prosperous surrounds.⁴⁵ (see figure 24). Here too we see the leader surrounded by the products of his great nation. However, this painting shows an isolated man caught between five *Aro* cars.

The glorified dictator gesticulates, but it is unclear if he is in the middle of a speech or in the middle of traffic. He seems trapped between a generic dark blue background and a bouquet of red carnations in the foreground. Although the painter deployed the bouquet of carnations as the official symbol of gratitude, and as a compositional base for the scene, the flowers also seem to suggest an obstruction separating the dictator from his people and to block his exit from between the *Aro* cars. Like the ambiguous gesture, the bouquet of carnations resists a single interpretation, and so it complicates the didactic role of Socialist Realist artwork. Clearly this portrait functions as both successful propaganda-art, since it was accepted as such, and as a visual artifact open to interpretation.

⁴⁵ *Aro* was the name of the national car manufactured in the city of Cimpulung before 1989. *Visita de lucru la Fabrica Aro Cimpulung (Working Visit to Aro Cimpulung Factory)* 1989, oil on canvas. The collection of *The National Museum of Contemporary Art*, Bucharest.

In his *Homage to Nicolae Ceausescu*, artist Ion Bitzan portrayed a leader not so young and not so confident. (see figure 25) Here, too, the dictator appears isolated in a middle of a bluish fog lit from beneath, as though in heaven or an airport tarmac. A man past his prime, his white hair and facial expression register concern. Exhaustion more than power seems to radiate from his slightly lifted hand. Nothing grounds the leader, no symbols of power populate the desolate background; instead the pale blue engulfs his body. The suit does not fit, his body seems bloated and it is cropped above the knee. *Homage* was accepted by Communist officialdom



Figure 24 (left) Augustin Lucaci. *Working Visit to Aro Campulung, Factory*, 1989 The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest



Figure 25 (right) Ion Bitzan, *Homage to Nicolae Ceausescu*, undated The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest.

Kitsch and Utopia

Clement Greenberg would consider the artistic production of totalitarian regimes kitsch. According to Clement Greenberg, kitsch is produced in totalitarian countries not ONLY because the bad taste of one person (the dictator) is imposed on many (the masses), but because the masses are limited in understanding anything other than kitsch. Thus, kitsch is the result of the failure of the political leaders to elevate the public taste.

“If kitsch is the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy and Russia, it is not because their respective governments are controlled by philistines, but because kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere. [...] Kitsch keeps the dictator in closer contact with the soul of the people. Should the official culture be one superior to the general mass-level, there will be a danger of isolation.”⁴⁶

However, kitsch is not exhausted in Socialist Realist paintings. Sarat Maharaj comments on the duplicity of kitsch in a consumerist society. Maharaj uses Derrida's semiotic analyses of the word *pharmakon*⁴⁷ to define kitsch and its application to objects of Pop Art, but his work also suggests a rich analysis of the relation between kitsch and Neo- Socialist Realist portraits of Ceausescu. For Derrida the word *pharmakon* is not just a polyvalent word, hard to grasp because of its multiple meanings, but a word with two opposite meanings: in Greek it can mean both "remedy" and "poison." Sarat Maharaj suggests that kitsch can be both high art and low art at the same time. For him Pop Art offers a good example of how the object, the ready-made

⁴⁶ ⁴⁶ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," (essay written in 1939 for the *Partisan Review*), 47.

⁴⁷ Sarat Maharaj, "Pop Art's Pharmacies: Kitsch, Consumerist Objects and Signs, The 'Unmentionable'" in *Art History*, vol 15 no. 3 (September 1992), 332

used by the artists in their artwork, has the potential of a pharmakon that can be received as high or low art at the same time.⁴⁸

But Maharaj uses the ambiguity of Pop Art's readymade object to demonstrate that kitsch actually has a definite quality despite its ambivalence: kitsch's permanent qualities are its "indeterminateness", "un-decidability", and "delay." Therefore the aesthetic value can be applied to mass culture, kitsch, and fine art elements with the same prevalence because value itself is a "transitive—shifting, volatile relationship between terms rather than a fixed, inert thing."⁴⁹ For example, although Alexandru Ciucurencu's painting titled Nicolae Ceausescu President follows the conventions of Stalin's official portrait, it does not result in a convincing



Figure 26
Alexandru
Ciucurencu. *N.C.*
Presedinte, undates
The National Museum
of Contemporary Art,
Bucharest.

⁴⁸ Paolozzi's *Kitsch Cabinet*, and *Three American Heroes*, Koons's *Ushering in Banality*, Duchamp's *Large Glass*, Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, etc

⁴⁹ Maharaj, 339

portrait of the first president of the Socialist Republic of Romania.⁵⁰ (see figure 26)

A successful propaganda portrait should always send a clear message, even to viewers not familiar with the subject of the official painting. For example, a common practice in the visual representation of dictators would be to portray the leader alone with the sky as a background “watching over”⁵¹ the future of the nation. To do that, Stalin looks toward the right side, the left one representing the past. The background sets the stage for the only protagonist, the dictator. His serious but welcoming allure radiates confidence in the future of the Soviet Union and mirrors the peaceful land painted behind him. He wears no symbols of power other than his white tunic, which symbolized his rank as the Generalissimos.⁵²

Ceausescu wears the signs of power more obviously to supplement for the rest of the painting. It seems that the landscape and the group of children playing next to him do not enhance the reading of the painted scene as a symbol of his power. The narrative should be: The “‘Father of the nation’ watching over the country and its future represented by the young generation.” Instead, it might be read, as “members of the young generation play unaware of the presence of his eminence.” The landscape looks deserted and the scene seems set somewhere in the periphery of a large and industrial city shown in the background. The official style exemplified in Stalin’s portraits is used in Romanian Socialist Realist portraiture as a readymade. Such appropriation of the earliest forms of Socialist Realist iconography carries the possibility of demystification of the symbols of power.

⁵⁰ For comparison see Shurpin. *The Morning of Our Fatherland*, 1948.

⁵¹ Jan Plamper. *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*, Yale University Press; First Edition, January 17, 2012, p. 70.

⁵² Plamper discusses the visual conventions followed by artists when they painted portraits of Stalin. *Ibid.*, pp 54



Figure 27
Unknown artist.
Dealul Negru, 1986
The National Museum
of Contemporary Art,
Bucharest

Viewers can understand the painting as an indeterminate representation, because it tries to be obvious in its message. But because it fails to communicate that obvious message, it opens itself to more than one semantic reception. It is unsettled because, in this example and in many others, the official style in Romanian propaganda painting regresses to an almost childlike innocence. It seems that the painting should be transparent and innocent in execution in order to deliver a transparent message. If we consider this painting kitsch, then Greenberg's understanding of kitsch as the result of the failure of the political leaders to elevate the public taste does not stand anymore. Kitsch becomes instead a failure of the masses to escape the taste of the political leader. However, more so than dissident cultural production, these portraits commissioned for the official dogma circuit seem to undermine the symbols of power not by

mocking their subject through outright satire, but by overusing these symbols until the visual language of Socialist Realism stopped serving as propaganda.

For example, in dogmatic paintings such as *The Dark Hill* (see figure 27) the official interpretation should read: “Ceausescu exercising power over nature.” Ceausescu’s ambition was to have the largest collection of trophies in the world. However, Romanians commonly referred to his hunting trips as “slaughtering trips.”⁵³ Before Ceausescu’s arrival, Vasile Crisan tell us, animals such as black bears, wild boars, and bucks were herded for days toward food stands around which shooting towers were erected for Ceausescu, making it practically impossible to miss.

The Dark Hill shows the Ceausescus leaning toward each other, smiling and admiring the corpses of five brown bears lying at their feet. Their presence in the dark forest at dusk, flashlight in hand, suggests that the killing of the bears may be an intimate secret rather than a celebration of a triumphant hunting expedition executed in broad daylight. It seems like an *The Dark Hill* shows the Ceausescus leaning toward each other, smiling and admiring the corpses of five brown bears lying at their feet. Their presence in the dark forest at dusk, flashlight in hand, suggests that the killing of the bears may be an intimate secret rather than a celebration of a triumphant hunting expedition executed in broad daylight. It seems like an absconded and perverse joy.

How strange for viewers to witness only what the flashlight reveals. As though the flashlight reveals now—in pictorial time—the truth about the killing. The line of dead bears spills into our visual field, implicating us in this commissioned mythology about hunting bears

⁵³ Vasile Crisan. *Ceausescu la vinatoare* (Ceausescu Hunting), Bucuresti: Adevarul, 2010

in the forest. Usually, these hunting portraits represented a triumphant Ceausescu in broad daylight surrounded by his prizes. (see figures 27 and 29)

Matei Calinescu does not hesitate to call Kitsch an “an aesthetic form of lying.”⁵⁴ For Calinescu, the fact that kitsch is “loved” and produced over and over again in our society means that kitsch satisfies a need. Matei Calinescu, in chapter four entitled “Kitsch” of his influential book: *Five Faces of Modernity*, proposes two directions for the analysis of kitsch. One is a historico-sociological approach when kitsch is a product of modern society and of industrialization. The second direction in explaining the phenomenon of kitsch as the aesthetic-moral one, when kitsch is seen as false art, a duplicate, a false pretense. Kitsch promises something that reaches all social categories of consumers: the promise of a fast, comfortable, and democratic transcendence to the



Figure 28 (left) Photograph with Nicolae Ceausescu inspecting the corps of a brown bear.
Figure 29 (right) Ieronim Boca. *Nicolae Ceausescu Hunting*, 1983

⁵⁴ Matei Calinescu, “Kitsch” in *Five Faces of Modernity*, (Duke University Press, 2006), 229.

sublime. Beauty is not an unattainable ideal anymore but is a here and now product of modern society. Therefore, the experience of beauty is not a long-term intellectual and aesthetic investment, but a short, easy, and accessible “catharsis,”⁵⁵ as Adorno calls it. However, at the end of the chapter and throughout his argument, Calinescu asserts that these two directions do not exhaust the definition of kitsch and, in fact, they often overlap and become inter-definable.

⁵⁵ Calinescu, 228.

CHAPTER II

FROM HIS WIFE TO OUR PRIME MINISTER: THE COMMISSIONED IMAGE OF ELENA CEAUSESCU

In 1970 Elena Ceausescu ascended from the role of political wife of Nicolae Ceausescu to the Prime Minister of Romania. By looking at official paintings of this new female leader, produced during the last two decades of communist rule in Romania, several subtle themes of an operant redundancy in the dogmatic iconography emerge. To trace the commissioning of Elena's image is to tell a complex story that spans from 1970 to 1989, culminating in a semantic and social implosion contorting the power of aesthetics and political maneuvering. Through iconographic study, this chapter traces some of these aesthetic and social contortions. In so doing, I ask in what ways redundancies found in these portraits—visual hyperboles of the old Stalinist dogma—actually may have worked to subvert their didactic purpose.

Underling her transition from wife to a powerful national representative, one is tempted to ask whether Elena Ceausescu gained and exercised the command she did because of her personal lust for power and corrupted character, or because her position as the dictator's wife enjoined her to play the roles of wife, mother, and educated woman. Elena's rise to political power was her own doing and a consequence of her propagandistic objectification in service of expanding the labor force and reinforcing the model of large socialist families. This chapter shows how the process of commissioning Elena's portraits communicates both her transformation from wife to political, as well as her personal shortcomings highlighted by the difficult roles into which she was thrust by historical circumstance.



Figure 30 Front page from *Scînteia* (*The Spark*), the official propaganda newspaper under the control of Elena Ceausescu: (Oct. 22 1989). Headline reads: “Under the Presidency of Academician Doctor Engineer, Elena Ceausescu.

By the early 1970s Elena Ceausescu’s official title, Vice President-Comrade-Academician-Doctor-Engineer Elena Ceausescu,⁵⁶ had to accompany her name at all times without exception (see Figure 30). Although the party’s newspaper *Scînteia* remains a detailed and clear indicator of the making and promoting of Elena Ceausescu’s political persona, the official visual source of the fabrication of Elena Ceausescu’s public persona remained the art magazine *Arta*. In 1954 the Artists Union (UAP), together with the Ministry for Education and Culture, founded the “*Arta Plastica*” magazine, renamed later “*Arta*,”⁵⁷ the propaganda and socialist education organ for artists and their audience. Between 1949-1954, Romanian art was under a drastic program of “cultural revolution”⁵⁸ which resurfaces under Ceausescu in the 1970s as a visual and political rebranding called the “mini cultural revolution”. As any other publication, *Arta* would have to mimic *Scînteia*’s headlines with visual representations of

⁵⁶ Headline from the official propaganda newspaper under the control of Elena Ceausescu: *Scînteia* (*The Spark*): (Oct. 22 1989). Front page from *Scînteia* (*The Spark*), the official propaganda newspaper under the control of Elena Ceausescu. Headline reads: Under the Presidency of Academician Doctor Engineer, Elena Ceausescu. Oct. 22, 1989).

⁵⁷ Cîrneai, 43.

⁵⁸ “The severe group of ideologists in charge of triggering and directing “the new cultural politic” included Iosif Chisinevski, Leonte Rautu, and Mihail Roller, all originally educated in the Soviet Union. They will develop an acute suspicion regarding intellectuals and artists and consider them an opposition group, anarchist, oriented toward occidental culture, “decadent,” a group with bourgeois and liberal instincts. Against these liberal attitudes they will impose the soviet cultural paradigm.” *Ibid.*, 80

policy changes. For example, if the headline reads “Doctor-Engineer and Director of the Central Institute of Chemical Research,” *Arta* magazine would have to concoct some kind of visual translation of this abstract title. The artistic production of Elena Ceausescu’s portraits echoed her accumulation of political power. Besides the usual first few pages of the magazine dedicated by the members of the Artists Union to her and him, the artists also had to show the new titles (transformation) in their artwork. They would have to produce the image of the new Elena as doctor-engineer.

Moreover, to the Department of External Information fell among the most pressing of matters, the negotiating of Elena’s honors and accolades from prominent institutions in whatever country the Ceausescu couple were to visit. In fact, Mihai Pacepa⁵⁹ informs us that



Figure 31

Left: Ion Octavian Penda. *Portret* (Portrait of Nicolae Ceausescu holding the presidential scepter), Undated. Center: Adrian Dumitrache. *Casa Parinteasca*, Undated. Right: Natalia Matei Teodorescu. *Portret* (Portrait of Elena Ceausescu wearing her regalia and her PhD diploma). This arrangement of paintings appeared on page 3 of *Arta*, ANUL XXXI, Nr.1/1984. Personal collection.

⁵⁹ In July 1978, Ion Mihai Pacepa defected to the United States. President James Carter offered him political asylum. Pacepa was Nicolae Ceausescu’s advisor, a Romanian Securitate General acting as chief of Ceausescu’s foreign intelligence service and a state secretary of Romania’s Ministry of Interior

without the assurance of such accolades, the couple would not accept the invitation for a state visit.⁶⁰ Although even before their visit to Manila in 1975, Elena Ceausescu had begun accumulating titles such as: Doctorate in Chemistry Research, Committee Secretary of the Party at the Bucharest Institute of Chemical Research, and later of its Bureau. (see figure 31) But even with these numerous honorifics, most Romanians still regarded her as simply the “wife” of Nicolae Ceausescu.

Despite the Party’s efforts to invent and disseminate admiration for her and her work, the Romanian public responded negatively to Elena Ceausescu. When Mary Ellen Fisher wrote in 1985 about women’s involvement in Romanian politics she pointed to a theme these high-ranking political wives shared in common, namely: to occupy their privileged stations as “undeserving recipients of such praise and titles.”⁶¹ The high office becomes the husband through his merits, but the transfer of this power to the wife remains unjustified. For Romanians, Elena remained a mere beneficiary of her husband’s generosity and an “unjustified intruder on the Romanian political scene.”⁶² Ironically, despite her unacknowledged political status, Romanians never ceased blaming her for Nicolae’s blunders before or after 1989.

In *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Boris Groys notes how totalitarian communism represents all oppressed and progressive classes in history as united under a singular notion of “the people.” In other words, in a totalitarian regime, notions like “people,” “nation,” “one and many” reach such a level of abstraction that they become interchangeable. This might

⁶⁰ Prior to Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu’s trip to the Philippines, the DIE had to implore President Marcos to persuade the University of Manila, by way of a large donation, to offer Elena an honorary doctorate. Nonetheless, Elena never admitted this, and to the very DIE chief himself, who had organized the ceremony, she said: “I don’t think you know, darling, but their university insisted on giving me an honorary doctorate.” Ion Mihai Pacepa, *Red Horizons: The True Story of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu’s Crimes, Lifestyle and Corruption* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1987) 180.

⁶¹ Fischer, Mary Ellen. “Women in Romanian Politics: Elena Ceausescu, Pronatalism, and the Promotion of Women.” in Wolchik L, Sharon and Mayer G, Alfred eds. *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe* Durham: Duke University Press, 1985): 122

⁶² *Ibid.*, 123

explain why, after the 1989 revolution in Romania, the notion of “the people” no longer functioned, the transition from “the people” to the individual took an unexpected turn. Nicolae Ceausescu—the individual—became solely responsible for communist atrocities in Romania, as if he governed the country alone for so many years, and nobody else participated in his plan, or nobody else even knew about what was happening in communist Romania. Even better: many believed that Ceausescu himself was clueless, but his wife, Elena Ceausescu, was behind everything that had happened.

In Romania, the popular belief that Elena was in fact responsible for the mistakes and atrocities of her ruling husband still resurfaces more than two decades after the end of the communist regime.⁶³ In fact the reflection of the negative legacy of Elena Ceausescu was so strong that today’s women’s unwillingness to participate into politics is still attributed to a so-called “Elena Ceausescu complex.”⁶⁴

In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Slavoj Žižek chalks up the interchangeability of totalizing notions such as the ones mentioned above, to a misuse of the term totalitarianism: when this notion migrates from the communist society (where it stood for a one-party state and centralized power) to a free analysis of that society. The concept of totalitarianism, erroneously applied anachronistically and across state lines this way, would then function as a “stopgap”⁶⁵ which prevents us from thinking about the “totalitarian state” as a process of negotiation between state and individual by reinforcing the model of a

⁶³ Historian Mary Ellen Fisher mentions in her study that it is a common practice in dictatorial states to blame the wife for the husband’s actions. Fischer, Mary Ellen. “Women in Romanian Politics: Elena Ceausescu, Pronatalism, and the Promotion of Women.” in Wolchik L, Sharon and Mayer G, Alfred eds. *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe* Durham: Duke University Press, 1985): 137

⁶⁴ “The name of the dictator’s wife is so heavily engraved in the collective mentality of Romanian people, that every politician going by the name of Elena was almost immediately associated with ignorance, lack of education, primitiveness and infamy. Her legacy turned out to be a curse for aspiring female politicians like Elena Udrea and Elena Basescu.” Turcu, Anca, (2009), *Women, Political Participation and Electoral Quotas in Romania*, University of Central Florida

⁶⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 3.

political regime shaped from above where individual agency is erased. In other words, expressions such as “communism happened to us”⁶⁶ imply a top down implementation where individuals—taken by surprise—remained for over 20 years no more than passive elements of a *mise-en-scène* of injustice, which would have rained upon them during the sever storm of communism, leaving them unable to interfere and therefore not responsible for anything. Once the responsible ones, Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu, were executed,⁶⁷ communism ended—or, to use a well-circulated metaphor, the iron curtain lifted.

Homage to an allegory

Elena’s husband’s reproductive policies, including an abortion ban, in conjunction with the plummeting of daily living standards and the censorship of cultural production fed Elena’s bitter unpopularity among women. This manufactured depiction of Elena Ceausescu created a startling contrast for Romanian women, who saw a glaring gap between their daily lives and the ideology of the self-touted best Socialist country, full of heroine mothers, and emancipated Socialist women like Elena.

In 1971, the October 4 issue of the party’s newspaper *Scînteia* (The Spark) raised Elena’s status through the power of print media, and for the first time she is addressed as “comrade Elena Ceausescu.” By 1972, she had become a member of the Central Committee, followed in 1973, by the membership to the Executive Committee and culminating in 1980 with the function of Deputy Premier. Like Ceausescu, Elena was praised now as a providential personality whose birthday was: “a crucial date in Romanian history, by which

⁶⁶ Often heard in Romania in conversations after 1989, when recalling the history of communism.

⁶⁷ Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu were captured in the city of Tirgoviste while they were attempting to flee the country. They were then put on trial and in less then a few hours condemned to death and shot by a firing squad on December 25, 1989.

the nation, glorifying its chosen ones, is glorifying itself.”⁶⁸ More than just a Socialist Realist mirror to her people, Elena became the people by transforming into the “perfect personification of the traditional values of the Romanian people.” Because of that role, her place is not just next to Nicolae Ceausescu, but also “in the golden gallery of the great personalities of national history.”⁶⁹ This conditioned solipsistic ideology where people’s ontological condition is constituted by praising of their leader recalls the earlier ontological simplification of notion such as “people” and “individuals.” Artists should depict her now as “the party’s torch,” “the woman-hero,” “our tricolor ribbon,” and “the hero of the fatherland.”⁷⁰ From such examples, one can infer the ways in which the myriad symbolic and psychological machinations of the Romanian dictatorship were hard at work blurring the line between “the leader” and “the people” or between “the father” and his “children”. Such violent totalitarian abstractions of identities and responsibilities would have dire consequences in the streets.

Elena Ceausescu’s portraits become encyclopedic allegories, visual layers overlapping historical, political, and biographical symbols, creating the pictographic version of an all-encompassing persona, already exalted by 1980 in the socialist realist literature canons.

Therefore, in paintings such as Gheorghe Pirvu’s *Homage*, the pioneers come rushing from the lower left corner, extending their arms and stretching their bodies upwards in a futile effort to reach Elena Ceausescu with small bouquets of flowers. (see 262)

Elena, larger than life, occupies the center of the painting, her arms stretched carrying the torch of knowledge, her body still and expressionless looking far off into the

⁶⁸ Cristian Petre and Chiriac Samoila in *Scînteia Tineretului*, (Youth’s Spark) Suplimentul Literar si Artistic, no. 1, 5 January 1986

⁶⁹ Ibid., 42

⁷⁰ Ibid., 43

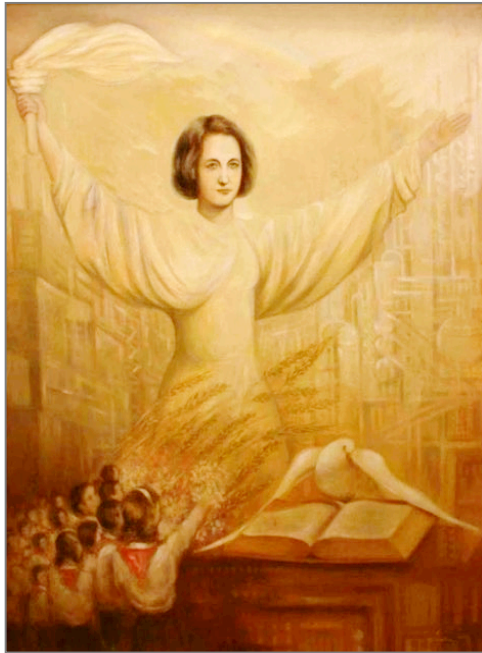


Figure 32
Gheorghe Pirvu. *Homage*, oil
on canvas, date unknown,
Collection National Museum of
Contemporary Art, Bucharest

horizon, unaware of the pioneers' presence. The pedestal in the foreground seems to serve perfectly as a base for Elena's monument as the "the party's torch." Instead, the pedestal hosts a large open book with a white dove resting on its pages, while Elena's body floats on a bed of flowers and wheat stalks.

And because Elena Ceausescu is never just Elena Ceausescu but also the The Academician-Doctor-Engineer, the pedestal is not just a pedestal but also a lectern. Therefore the pedestal/lectern ensures the iconographic allegories of Science, Maternity, and the Party embodied by Elena. Through its visuality, *Homage* transcribes not a recognizable portrait of Elena but what Elena should be: the chemist, the great woman, the mother, the pedagogue, etc. The flatness of the painting results, then, not from exaggerating her titles but by precisely painting thoughtfully the already wooden and flat hyperbolized language that describes her: "the woman-hero" and "the party's torch." One should look then at Pirvu's *Homage* as a

visual materialization of countless verses written to Elena Ceausescu, such as Virgil Teodorescu's ode published in *Scânteia* in 1984:

*Her visage lit by far-seeing eyes
her hardworking nature's beautiful gift
and the gentle energy rising through her features
this is a perpetual model for the arts.*⁷¹

Her portraits in literature or painting became, for the Romanian spectator, portraits of the symbolic Elena. Writers and painters would paint her as an allegory rather than a realistic likeness. The visual replacement of Elena with symbols of Elena could also reflect her symbolic presence in the political and academic sphere. In other words, is the idealized Elena the one the party ideology demanded, or is she the one bending party ideology to her megalomaniacal will. Similar to the praise trajectory for Nicolae Ceausescu, Elena's career was described as proceeding from her peasant background to acquiring the skills of a worker, and then rising to the virtues of a scientist, and then advancing to "an effigy of the Renaissance of our nation."⁷² The achievements of this "eminent scientific personality, the embodiment of the traditional virtues of Romanian woman"⁷³ included membership in nine academies, honorary professorships at seven universities abroad, and books published in at least twelve countries.⁷⁴ Impressive curriculum vitae listing all her national and international titles adorned with a

⁷¹ *Figura-i luminată de ochi ce văd departe / un dar frumos al harniceî naturi, / și blânda energie ivită-n trăsături, / e un model perpetuu pentru arte.* These lines comprise an ode written and dedicated to Elena Ceausescu by Virgil Teodorescu and published in *Scânteia*, January 7, 1984. The poem was not regarded as having any literary merit and hopefully the translation does not add any substance to the original poem, which is an empty glorification full of wooden and prefabricated rhyming pandering.

⁷² Fragment from a homage dedicated to Elena Ceausescu by the Artists Union of The Socialist Republic of Romania: "Cu inimile incarcate de emotii, purtindu-Va in suflete si constiinte ca pe o efigie a Renasterii natiunii noastre intre natiunile libere, independente si demne ale lumii, Va uram din cugete si simtiri un fierbinte La multi ani!" *Arta*, Nr. 1/1988, pp. 11-12

⁷³ Fragment from a celebratory article titled *Academician doctor engineer Elena Ceausescu, exemplary scientific personality, politician and statesman* "[...] eminenta personalitate stiintifica, intruchipare a virtutiilor traditionale a femeii romane." *Almanah Femeia*, 1989, pps. 12-21

⁷⁴ Despite the acceleration with which Elena Ceausescu accumulated all these titles, Elena will not overpass her husband who in 1979 had 74 more titles than her. Anely Ute Gabanyi, *The Ceausescu Cult*, Bucharest: The Romanian Cultural Foundation, 2000, pp. 88.

photograph of her receiving the honorary membership from the Illinois Academy of Science appeared in 1979 on the third page of the newspaper *Scântea*.⁷⁵

Historian Mary Ellen Fisher dates the beginning of Elena Ceausescu's individual political career to 1971, after the couple's visit to China and North Korea. Only a month after their visit to China, Elena Ceausescu is shown in a photograph printed in the newspaper *Scântea* (the party's newspaper directly under Elena Ceausescu's control) seated among other members (all males) at a meeting of a national commission on economic forecasting. She is listed alphabetically as Doctor-Engineer and Director of the Central Institute of Chemical Research. For the first time, her political identity is mentioned independent of her husband's image. For the following eight years Elena Ceausescu kept accumulating power and in 1979 Elena became the president of the National Council on Science and Technology with a ministerial status. Anthropologist Katherine Verdery tells us that just a few months after his 1971 visit to China, Ceausescu started an offensive "against culture's autonomy, condemned the liberation of 1965 and reestablished an index of prohibited books and authors."⁷⁶ In this new hostile political climate, Elena Ceausescu appeared as a visible—and visual—supporter of her husband's politics.

⁷⁵ General Pacepa describes Elena's fury in his book when she was told that president Carter could not offer her a degree from a Washington based institution. Elena complained: "Come off it! You can't sell me the idea that Mr. Peanut [Carter] can give me an Illi-whatsis diploma but not any from Washington. I w-i-l-l n-o-t g-o t-o I-l-l-i-whatever it is. I will not!" She eventually gave in and as no other institution acknowledged Elena's scientific achievements, she accepted the honorary degree that was being offered. Mihai Pacepa, *Red Horizons: The True Story of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu's Crimes, Lifestyle and Corruption* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1987) 180.

⁷⁶ Ceausescu's "cultural revolution" known as "July Theses" 1971 "reformed" the necessary sociopolitical role of intellectual production. The censorship of the artistic production changed drastically the existence of any artistic autonomy other than the state subordinated one. Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 113.

Double portraits of Nicolae and Elena, side by side as mirror images of each other, entered the state exhibitions. The double portrait would become the standard requirement for future commissioned artwork.⁷⁷ (see figure 33) *Arta*, *Scinteia* and other major publications but also textbooks and stamps show Elena next to Nicolae Ceausescu. Even for celebrations solely dedicated to Nicolae Ceausescu such as his birthday, him receiving a new medal, and him receiving the presidential scepter, the artwork commissioned for the occasion, would also represent Elena. (see figure 34)



Figure 33 Portraits of Elena Ceausescu and Nicolae Ceausescu exhibited at the Sculpture Biennale in 1984. Image appeared in *Arta*, page 9, ANUL XXXI, Nr. 7/1984

The two portraits accompanied the congratulatory messages published in *Arta* when Nicolae Ceausescu celebrated his 70th birthday on which occasion he received the supreme title

⁷⁷ Although there are no written records of precise directions for commissioning portraits of Nicolae and Elena, records show an increase number of portraits of Elena that have been acquired by.....



Figure 34 Vasile Pop Negresteanu. *Portraits*, oil on canvas, undated. *Arta*, page 11, ANUL XXXV, Nr. 1/1988, Personal Collection.

of “The Hero of the Socialist Republic of Romania.” The congratulatory letters signed by The Artists Union, appeared underneath their portraits. Elena’s letter starts this way: “It is in the tradition of the glorious epoch in which we are living, that at the beginning of each January the thoughts of our entire nation be directed to you, offering gratitude.”⁷⁸ The justification for her appearance next to her husband regardless of the nature of the occasion remains gratitude.

Reusing the Socialist Realist Portrait

Artists exaggerated. Artists guessed. Artists copied earlier Socialist Realist themes. Artists employed folkloric and religious elements and self censored their creative processes in order to produce an estimation of what they hoped would be a successful portrait of Elena Ceausescu as the New Woman. Often the outcome shows an unconvincing, flat portrait, an unsuccessful resemblance, the dogmatic Socialist Realist heroic style of the 1950s, when artists

⁷⁸ *Arta*, page 11-12, ANUL XXXV, Nr. 1/1988

were employed by the state following the Soviet model. As historian Caterina Preda observes in her comparison between Pinochet's regime and Ceausescu's regime, the arts (in Romania) had the task "to create and to do so in accord with the ideological precepts; moreover, the artists were converted into workers with a five-year plan, whereby their creativity was to be coordinated and regulated, just as in all other domains of activity."⁷⁹

After 1970 Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu's official portraits become an admixture of absurd elements and didactic narratives of Socialist Realism. For example, in order to legitimize her new political power, the past of Elena Ceausescu needed to be reinvented. Therefore, despite her advanced age and her insignificant Communist party involvement, a young revolutionary Elena started to appear on canvases and within the pages of history textbooks during the 1970s. The Party Control Committee of Romanian Workers Party written



Figure 35 Eugen Palade.
First of May, 1986, oil on
canvas, Collection of The
National Museum of
Contemporary Art, Bucharest

⁷⁹ Caterina Preda, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Chapter 8: Art and Politics in Romania and Chile (1974-89)* in Matti Hyvarinen and Lisa Muszynski Eds. *Terror and the Arts. Artistic, Literary, and Political interpretations of Violence from Dostoyevsky to Abu Graib*. PALGRAVE MACMILLAN: New York, 2008, 148

in February 14, 1951, mentions her absence from the communist party's activities in a report. The document clarifies that although she was a member of the Union of Communist Youth and that "she was in contact with the workers movement in Bucharest in 1936, while she worked as an apprentice at the textile factory Lentex," her role was minor and with long breaks from membership due to her incompetence. There are three instances mentioned in the document, which led to Elena's dismissal from the Union and the Communist Party in 1936.⁸⁰

Elena Ceausescu's visual representation employed elements of the unreal to legitimize her existence. This contradiction between historical fact and visual representation seems not to have bothered the artists or the viewers. This formed the conceptual gateway to prepare the public in accepting the incorporation of absurd and unreal elements in official State sponsored paintings.

For example, in his painting "*First of May*" Eugen Palade paints the present and the past (see Figure 35). The Ceausescu couple is painted not during the communist revolution (1930s) but celebrating the memory of the communist revolution (present). A young and elegantly dressed couple occupies the foreground of the painting, followed by a throng of men and women also well dressed and celebrating. It is a small procession with a forest in the background. So far so good, the painting seems to set up a bucolic narrative, an ideal of freedom in the forest and happy communality.

Actually the image is more complex. Images of the *First of May* recounted celebrations with crowds flooding a main boulevard in an urban setting, with banners and people waiving

⁸⁰ One instance mentions, "while a member, Elena participated on a project after which she was dismissed." The other two instances briefly describe the reasons for her dismissal. One instance was a mishandling of a project which disqualifies her from the organization. The other reason for her dismissal was her taking a leave of absence and failing to return at the required date without justification for the delay. Arhivele Naționale ale României CC al PCR Secția cadre Fd 95 Dosar 653 Filele 27, 23, 20, 19, 18



Figure 36 *Elena Ceaușescu la un bal organizat de U.T.C* (Elena Ceausescu [in polka dots] at Fest Organized by UTC Fotografia #B015 Fototeca online a comunismului românesc, (27/08/2014) (Fotografie de familie, 2/1939)

from the open windows of socialist apartment blocs. Furthermore, there seems to be a storm brewing in a misty sky and an almost unrecognizably young Elena and Nicolae inhabit the scene. As the symbol of lectern/pedestal discussed in the previous pages, *First of May* becomes a symbol for the party's participation in the fight against fascism and capitalism. After 1970 the history of the Romanian Communist Party became the “sacred history of the Romanian Communist Hero, Nicolae Ceausescu” and therefore a history that belongs to the party and that could be molded to legitimize a certain ideology—a cult of personality. (see figure 36)

After Ceausescu's coronation in 1974 all-important historical events are intimately connected with Nicolae Ceausescu. May 1st, although celebrated internationally, is depicted as Ceausescu's struggle with and victory against fascism and becomes a symbol legitimizing his power. This claim over the making of history goes as far as manipulating photographs of a crowd demonstrating and celebrating May 1st in 1939 to include Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu in the demonstration. Not to raise suspicions, another person, Constantin David—dead since

1940—also gets inserted.⁸¹ For Elena Ceausescu it was used a photograph taken in 1939 at the *Work Fest*, showing her wearing a polka dots dress. (see Figure 37 A and B). Because her polka dress appears rather awkward in a sea of male black suits the photograph is manipulated further by darkening the color of Nicolae Ceausescu's coat and Elena's dress until the polka dots were undistinguishable.

Thus, in paintings that belong to the category of *Homage* such as these (see figures 38 and 39), the title often seems artificial—a hollow gesture. Even though the painting contains the visual symbols required by congratulatory art, it may not always achieve its purpose as an



Figure 37 A (left) Original photograph from 1939, of crowd celebrating May 1st.

B (right) In 1989 the photograph was manipulated by inserting the heads of Elena Ceausescu, Nicolae Ceausescu, and Constantin David.

⁸¹Romanian director Bujor. T. Râpeanu deconstructs this fake by showing how the photographs, cut from their ID cards, were then glued into the crowd. The image circulated in 1989 on the occasion of the celebration of 100 years from the first May 1st event and of 50 years from the event [WHAT EVENT?] in 1939. This fake was commissioned and executed by what was called the The Institute of the Party's History (Serviciul Atelier Fotografic signed and executed by what was called the The Institute of the Partyeventheă CC al P.C.R.) See the photo examples of Bujor. T. Râpeanu, *1 Mai 1939, de la realitate la fals* (May 1st 1939, From Reality to Fake), in *Magazin Istoric*, no. 11, 1990, page 24. Also mentioned by Silviu Gabriel Lohon in "La création de l'ide lti officielle ddficie Ceaușescu" *Arhivele Olteniei* Ed. Cezar Avram, Bucuresti: Editura Academiei Române, 2007, pp. 11-116

honorific. These paintings had a didactic purpose: the masses should worship the leaders as mother and father to the country. In other words, archetypal visual elements such as pioneers offering flowers to the dictators, the dictator saluting a cheering crowd, or dictator surrounded by happy workers, despite their realistic depiction, sit on the surface of the viewers' consciousness as types rendered implausible as individuals. The repetition *ad absurdum* of these dogmatic images, while intended to educate the viewer, instead, potentially empowers the viewer to question the gap between lived experience and the form of Socialist Realism. The viewer of Socialist Realism might find these images unlikely examples of the genre precisely because of their over-familiarity. In other words, the ubiquitous manifestation of these localized archetypes creates a disbelief in their capacity to represent reality.

For example, a painting of Elena Ceausescu shows her at work in her laboratory depicting her surrounded by bouquets of flowers, which by official account would read: "people expressing gratitude and love for their scientist leader" (see figure 40). So the would be state-sanctioned assumption should read that the flowers were a gift. The laboratory is painted with sparkling rich colors and an abundance of light enhanced by her white dress and the flowers strewn about her. She does not engage the viewer directly but she holds a few carnations from the bouquets surrounding her. The flowers suggest not just the recognition of her merits, but also serve to affirm her new role.



Figure 38 Cornelia Ionescu Dragusin, *Homage*, 1985, oil on canvas, Collection of The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest.



Figure 39 *Homage*, Unknown author, undated, oil on canvas, Collection of The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest.

A more humorous caption may read: “because Elena Ceausescu dedicated her entire career as scientist to the building of Communism, the only relationship all Romanians can ever have to such dedicated leaders is one of eternal gratitude.” In reality, every representation of her as a scientist was an opportunity to mock her. Elena was notorious for mispronouncing the chemical compound CO₂. The way she mispronounced it was “Codoi” which became her nickname. In Romanian, Codoi also means “big tail” and this additional meaning heightened the comic effect of her mispronunciation, by concretizing the abstract association between her poor performance in school and her many underserved titles such as Academician Doctor Engineer.



Figure 40 *Homage to Elena Ceausescu*, author unknown, undated, Collection of The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest.

Homage to Elena Ceausescu the Scientist

After 1971, the party and Elena worked ceaselessly to associate her image with that of the internationally renowned scientist, while also continuously touting her as the model political leader, heroine, mother, and wife. Besides political power, Elena saw (or was nudged to see) the need to legitimize her intellectual pedigree as reflected in her titles such as: The Great Woman Scientist, Academician-Doctor-Engineer, and the Director of the Central Institute of Chemical Research known as ICECHIM (the main chemistry research laboratory in Romania). After she became the director of ICECHIM, Elena gained national and international recognition as an eminent scientist and her name was associated with a suspiciously large number of important innovations in the fields of chemistry, but also women's emancipation, and other cultural and political advancements. As Director of ICECHIM, she had taken credit for every article or book leaving the institute for publication. According to Mihail Pacepa, the conditions under

which Elena obtained her Ph.D. did not adhere to standard academic protocol. Elena Ceausescu defended her Ph.D. dissertation in December 1967, behind closed doors. People who came to see her presentation found the door closed and a note explaining that the defense took place earlier.⁸² It seems that her PhD dissertation titled *Polimerizarea Stereospecifica a Izoprenului* (Stereospecific Polymerization of the Isoprene), was written by a group of scientists Osias Solomon, Radu Bordeianu, Silvia Bittman și Dan Cornilescu, under the supervision of academician Cristofor Simionescu.⁸³

Her portraits as scientist followed the rules of the official Socialist Realist portrait mentioned earlier: obvious narrative, using symbols easily identifiable to deliver a didactic message. For example, *Composition* (see figure 41) centers her against a red background surrounded by a collage of rectangles depicting scenes from scientific research. In each rectangle one or more women are surrounded by laboratory equipment. A female researcher gazes into a microscope, mixing substances and measuring liquids or writing out a presentation. Although she appears just once in the center of the scenes, the portrait title would read: “Elena Ceausescu, the Scientist, working on new discoveries.” In other words the women we see in the small rectangles working in the laboratory, although clearly not Elena, are the embodiment of Elena. Elena is all of them by being none of them.

To help the viewer make this transition, we could argue that half of Elena’s silhouette appears in the right corner rectangle. With her back to the viewer, she is overseeing two women working in the far background. If we follow this thought we notice this time a less resembling pink silhouette of Elena appearing in an upper left rectangle, as though her body painted in the

⁸² Mihai Pacepa, *Red Horizons: The True Story of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu’s Crimes, Lifestyle and Corruption* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1987) 110

⁸³ Anneli Ute Gabanyi. *The Ceaușescu cult: propaganda and power policy in communist Romania*, Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2000, 80. Also see Cristofor Simionescu. Marcu, George (coord.), *Dicționarul personalităților feminine din România*, Editura Meronia, București, 2009

center and covering three quarters of the painting shrinks and migrates at will in all other spaces of the painting. Her pink silhouette stands behind and on the side of a seated young woman looking into a microscope. The pink shadow and her grey shadow appear around the frame of the image, suggesting Elena's omnipresence in the sciences.

To support this rather ludic movement of her power, the painter used for her silhouette the color of her clothes in the painting's center. The two top rectangles on the sides of Elena Ceausescu's portrait are reserved for images of industrial plants projecting smoking furnaces onto the blue sky, their plumes of smoke resembling the doves in the center. Although intended as a snapshot into Elena's work as a chemist the image itself is not fragmented. In other words, the viewer finds herself not in a fragmented space but within a logical space familiar visual



Figure 41
Vasile Pop Negreșteanu. *Composition*, oil on canvas, 1985, Collection of The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest

paths are created by movements from down to up, from small to large objects, and from inside space to outside space. The painter helps the viewer see this transition from the particular to the general by including one tiny rectangle with a scene of the laboratory inside each of the top larger rectangles.

This entire visual lesson aims at the image in the center. The paper she holds tells the viewer that she has a message to deliver: a new discovery, which will contribute to the future of the country. The blue rectangle and her averted gaze read not just as her contribution to an optimistic future for all of us, but also a contribution to a peaceful world. One of Elena's dearest ambitions was to discover something that was not just of crucial national importance but that would also garner her international acclaim. When visiting the New York Public Library she expressed her disappointment followed by sharp orders to correct the mistake of not finding a section of the library dedicated to her scientific and academic achievements.⁸⁴ The artists' job was to create in the minds of viewers an immediate recognition of Elena as an eminent scientist.

By the late 1980s the visual connection of Elena's portrait and symbols depicting her role as a chemist and savant were so entrenched that even her depiction in other roles, such as political figure or mother, would incorporate chemistry laboratory equipment.⁸⁵ For example, in *Homage*, Valentin Tanase shows Elena Ceausescu lecturing in front of four microphones (see Figure 42)

Given the generally oppressive atmosphere created by the July Theses, artists were well aware that Elena must always be addressed as Academician-Doctor-Engineer-Elena Ceausescu followed by other titles such as Vice President and, of course, Comrade. Therefore, Vasile

⁸⁴ Ion Mihai Pacepa, *Red Horizons: The True Story of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu's Crimes, Lifestyle and Corruption* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1987)

⁸⁵ By 1980s when this painting was commissioned, Elena Ceausescu was the president of the Romanian Academy of Science.

Tanase's painting, regardless of its subject matter, would have to tell a coherent story of the woman that has all this functions at once. As a result of this synchronicity of visual symbols of her political power the painting accumulates visual cacophonies. We expect the audience to face her and not to be placed behind her. However, the audience, an amphitheater filled with students, heads bent over their study is place far behind her. That is probably because Elena is facing us. The Academician-Doctor-Engineer Elena Ceausescu is reading for all of us as well as past and present audiences who will be paying homage to her by listening.

A Socialist Realist painter paints reality as closely as possible by focusing not on the phenomena of reality, but by focusing on the revolutionary potential of things. Notice for example the background of this picture. The background is not a real laboratory but a dreamscape. A chain of symbols and a green neon light connect the audience of represented students and imagined viewers. According to the Socialist Realist aesthetic code, the painting



Figure 42
Valentin Tanase in *Homage*, oil on canvas, 1985, Collection of The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest

depicts reality but it also fills in reality with necessary fictional elements meant to better illustrate the real situation. Although not called a Socialist Realist painting per se, this official painting abides by the initial rules of Socialist Realism as a depiction of reality but “to depict it not scholastically, not in a dead fashion, not simply as “objective fact”, but to depict reality in its revolutionary development.”⁸⁶

What Elena Ceausescu stands for spills over the edges of canvases and appears and reappears on pages of textbooks, newspapers, magazines and facades of buildings. Behind an homage painting lurk hundreds of other homage paintings. Glorifying odes, head titles, and open letters from the people are saturated with expressions such as: “there are never enough words,” or “we cannot express enough our gratitude,”⁸⁷ which suggest the expectation of an all-encompassing Elena accompanying her images. In other words, by reusing the same photograph of Elena for different portraits, the artist becomes complicit in creating a scenario in which a constructed and reconstructed Elena is born. I would argue that her visual presence as a scientist had become so ingrained in people’s minds that she had become present even in images that do not show her directly (bequest of flowers, an open book, or a woman’s gaze through a microscope). In other words, the overused symbols associated with Elena Ceausescu become somehow freestanding and self-sufficient representations of her, a kind of metonymy by force majeure. The repetition of visual symbols, as seen in the examples of the Homage subgenre, although reinforce the leaders’ power, could also undermine it. Precisely this familiarity of seeing builds a routine of overlooking.

⁸⁶ Andrei Zhdanov’s speech at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers from August 1934. He was a supporter of Socialist Realism and a powerful political figure during the Stalinist period. In Golormstock, Igor, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People’s Republic of China* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), 87.

⁸⁷ Andrei Zhdanov’s speech at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers from August 1934. He was a supporter of Socialist Realism and a powerful political figure during the Stalinist period. Ibid., 87.

Elena Ceausescu The Heroine Mother

The ideology of promoting Elena as a successful scientist and loving mother circulates through countless paintings depicting her in the company of children and books. This association would illustrate the Party's pronatalist policies, which advocated the roles of women as mothers but also as active participants in the work force.

As other socialist regimes, the Ceausescu's regime promoted gender equality, of course with all of the contradictions inherited from the Soviet political system. Women can study, work, have political and social power, but more than anything else, women can bear children. In communist Romania, child bearing became a patriotic duty, and that was how liberated women could literally help to build socialism. In 1966, just one year after the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) nominated Nicolae Ceausescu to the position of its first secretary, he declared his infamous *Decree 770*, which outlawed abortion. (see figure 43) The Romanian population is still working today to overcome the devastating effects of this decree. In *The Politics of Duplicity* Gail Kligman analyzes Ceausescu's institutionalization of Political Demography in Romania and its after-effects during and after the 1989 revolution. *Decree 770* was one of the first laws abolished after the regime ended in 1989.

As Gail Kligman sadly remarks in her book *The Politics of Duplicity*,⁸⁸ even three years after abortion became legal in Romania, women were still dying from illegally performed abortions. Probably the result of how ingrained was the terror and punishment associated with the abortion. Kligman combines case studies, testimonies of doctors, and patients with statistics and historical documents to cut through the duplicity of the Ceausescu administrations public

⁸⁸ Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), pp.148

political agenda and reveal the contradictions between the rhetoric of the Romanian Communist Party and the lived, everyday reality.

Even though central command and control of reproductive rights within the Soviet bloc may seem like an old story, in Romania the Party implemented such policies with a determination and violence that is hard to imagine.⁸⁹ With no intention to minimize the suffering of women, (or nurses and doctors) I would mention here historian Maria Bucur's view of the act of abortion in Romania as "a form of dissent."⁹⁰ Although fully aware of the risks of ending a pregnancy, women decided to end their pregnancies anyway. Between 1967-1989 more than 10,000 women died in Romania as a result of illegal abortions and

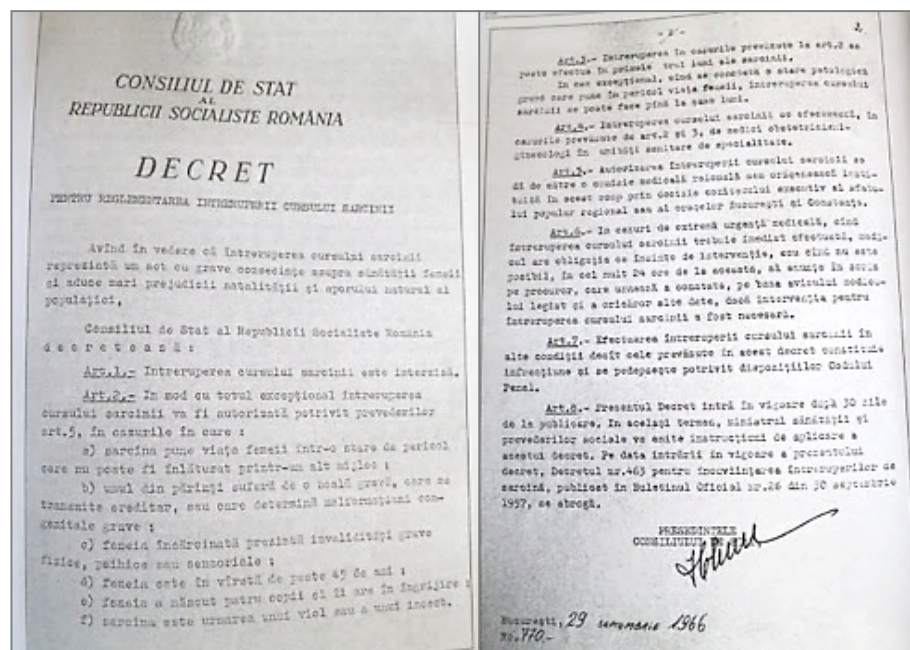


Figure 43 Decree 770/1966 for the regulating the termination of pregnancy, October 1966, (ANIC and the State Council- Decrees, file Nr 770/1966, ff.1-2

⁸⁹ Ibid., 71

⁹⁰ Maria Bucur, "Gendering Dissent: of Bodies and Minds, Survival and opposition under Communism" *OSP*, Volume 7, 2008, 22

approximately 9,452 died because of post-abortion complications.⁹¹ Some of these women were already mothers of 3 or 4 children, and were dying in the hospital because doctors could not assist them before they divulged the name of the person who provoked the abortion. Their silence cost them their lives. This silence constituted their way to fight against an absurd and violent instrumentalization of their bodies.⁹²

Therefore, after an initial boom of childbirth in the early 70's, the birthrate in Romania stagnated and even dropped despite severe policies to prevent exactly that.⁹³ Instead, Romania had one of the highest rates for infant mortality in Eastern Europe, by 1987 reaching 28.9%. And by 1989—when the regime had finally imploded— Romania found itself the motherland of an entire generation of orphans, in all 125,000 institutionalized minors out of a population of 23,152,000.⁹⁴ Although the pronatalist policies were present in other Communist states, Romania differs from countries such as Hungary or Bulgaria in the method of implementing the policy. The Ceausescu's regime did not stimulate birthrates by incentives and attractive social infrastructure to assist with child rearing, but though coercive laws involving the Ministry of Interior both as a propagandistic tool and as an inquisition and disciplining apparatus involved directly in the everyday affairs of hospitals and clinics. Therefore, medical staff could not perform abortions until the MI representative

⁹¹Corina Dobos *Politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușesc*, vol 2, Polirom, 2011, pp. 45-56

⁹²Fertility rate in Eastern Europe, 1950-1965. Data from Corina Dobos, art. cit., p. 290. The evolution of natality in Romania, 1950-1989. Data from Corina Dobos, art. cit. p. 304. Anexa

⁹³Fischer, Mary Ellen. "Women in Romanian Politics: Elena Ceausescu, Pronatalism, and the Promotion of Women." in Wolchik L, Sharon and Mayer G, Alfred eds. *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe* Durham: Duke University Press, 1985): 121-137

⁹⁴For a better understanding of how the Communist state handled the abandoned children between the decree of 1966 and 1989 read Chapter 1 by Luciana M. Jinga and Chapter 12 by Corina Dobos in *The Pronatalist Politics of Ceausescu's Regime*, vol. II Institutions and Practices (*Institutul de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului în România*), Coordinators: Lucian M. Jinga, Florin S. Soare, Editura Polirom, Iasi, 2010, pp. 195-245

extracted information from the patient. These extortionist measures reenact the Stalinist pronatalist model.⁹⁵

As a consequence of these demographic policies, the visual representation of Nicolae Ceausescu detoured from a leader to a father figure. Therefore, alongside their representation as the two leaders of the country, the Romanian population should know them as an inseparable entity: “The Great Couple” and “The Beloved Mother and Father of the Nation.” The message of these paintings had to promote family values and “pronatalist politics.”⁹⁶

Gail Kligman calls it Political Demography. Kligman’s lexical intervention points to the way women’s physical bodies were instrumentalized (put to use) as state property. Bearing children was very praised labor indeed, or as Kilgman puts it, having children was “essential (re)productive labor.” The State demanded that each family produce four or five children, and mothers who reached the “quota of five children” earned the status of *heroine mothers*.

Paintings mentioned earlier with pioneers surrounding the dictators were also intended to suggest this “ideal family.” The Ceausescu couple appears in endless paintings (see figure 44), surrounded by four or five children carrying flowers or books. The paintings also reflect a change in the pronatalist law, which in 1985⁹⁷ increased the number of children the Party desired from 4 to 5. Only a mother of 5 living children and forty-five years old (not 40 as it was before) would be allowed to have an abortion. Their clear intention to look like family portraits seems to differentiate these from *homage* paintings. The state provided positive incentives for

⁹⁵ After 1955 the Soviet Union liberalizes the access to abortion. Romania however follows closely the Stalinist model functioning in the Soviet Union between 1935-1955. For more information on the Stalinist model read Corina Dobos. Ibid., 49-109

⁹⁶ Kligman, 72.

⁹⁷ “Let’s raise the number of children to 5, in other words the abortion is admitted just after 5 children and more and not after 4 children, as it is right now. So, let’s introduce then the number of 5 children.” Extras from ANIC, fond CC al PCR – Sectia Cancelarie, dosarul nr. 82/1985, f. 17. In Corina Dobos. The Pronatalist Politics of Ceausescu’s Regime, vol. I (*Institutul de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului în România*), Coordinators: Lucian M. Jinga, Florin S. Soare, Editura Polirom, Iasi, 2010, p 152

mothers, encouraging them to have children, punishing them for illegal abortion, and even “taking care of” unwanted, orphaned, or handicapped children.⁹⁸ At the same time, women who could not (or not yet) have children and were over the age of 25 would have to pay monthly taxes to the state to help other “heroine mothers” to raise their children. To that end, hospitals and clinics were decorated with educational posters showing charts and pictures of exotic fruits, milk, cheese, and fresh fish that expectant mothers were encouraged to eat in order to have healthy babies. Those same expectant mothers had to stand in long lines to buy their monthly ration of bread, oil, eggs, and sugar.

Coercive legislation and omnipresent propaganda followed Decree 770, implementing ways *Codul Familiei*, *Revista Femeia*, *Conferinta Femeilor* (*Family Code*, *The Woman Magazine* and *Women Conferences*) would convince women that they should all strive to become “heroine mothers.”⁹⁹ Once more Ceausescu relies on the militaristic aspect of early Stalinist pronatalist politics by glorifying and rewarding maternity in military terms within a festive ceremony of the National Assembly where mothers of 4 children¹⁰⁰ and more were decorated with diverse medals according to the number of children, such as Maternity Glory,

⁹⁸ The effects of Ceausescu’s politics persisted after Ceausescu and still persist in Romania today. One of the consequences of banned abortion was the overwhelming number of institutionalized children. Once again, the Ceausescu’s Socialist Romania failed to perform its promise to take care of “her children”, her “bright future.” The Ministry of Health was responsible for children ages 1 to 3. During this age, children were categorized into normal or handicapped groups. The normal ones were transferred to Children’s Homes and the Ministry of Education and Labor would be responsible for educating and turning them into productive citizens. The handicapped labeled “nonproductive”, were ignored, or as Kligman said “were taken to where they were waiting to die.” Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu’s Romania* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London University of California Press, 1998), 224-227.

⁹⁹ With all these efforts the birthrate in Romanian did not rise and, ironically, banning abortion made abortion the number one cause of death among women. Illegal abortion became and, as Kilgman observed, remained, after 1989, the contraceptive solution of choice for most Romanian women. Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu’s Romania* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 97.

¹⁰⁰ After 1985 the Maternity Glory III which was initially offered to mothers of 4 children was restricted now to mothers of 5 children in accordance with the new pronatalist politics.

Maternity Medal and Heroine Mother and showered with flowers and patriotic songs.¹⁰¹ (see figure 45)

The visual code of representing the Ceausescu couple should again symbolize stability, health and unity of the socialist nation. Their portraits appear now as prophetic representations of an eternal, forever-young couple. In paintings such as Eugen Palade's *Homage*, (see figure 46 and 47) the representation of the Ceausescu couple as parents of their own nation is painted in a literal way. By 1986, when this painting was commissioned, Nicolae and Elena were in their late 70s. However, in a rather awkward way, a young Ceausescu holds and displays to the entire nation the future they built for Romania. A boy,

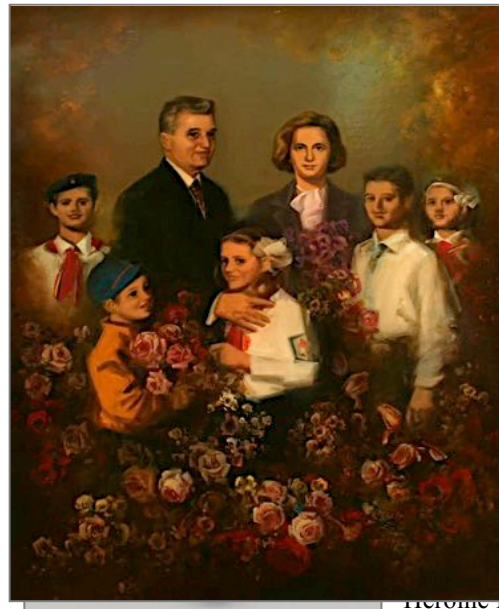


Figure 44

Corneliu Brudascu. Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu with a Group of Pioneers, Date unknown. Collection of The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest...

¹⁰¹ Women on trial for having illegal abortions. Courtesy of the Photo Department, ROMPRES Bucharest, Image from art. cit. Gail Kligman, p. 120.

dressed in white, holding on to Ceausescu's hand.¹⁰²

To recall the ambivalence of the homage paintings discussed in previous examples, Palade's *Homage*, although intended to celebrate the Ceausescu couple seems more focused on the children displayed by Ceausescu. Stripped of contextual details, so prevalent in earlier homages such as crowds of pioneers, bouquets of flowers, industrial landscapes, urban constructions and rich farmlands, Palade keeps one visual trope: the crowds. The crowd embodied by the spectator of the paintings witnesses the future of Romania. The imaginary crowd sees a young couple at a tribune decorated with just a flag and a small bouquet of flowers. The scarcity of the visual elements contains a visual meta-language by creating a new image using a sort of unconscious index of the elements already depicted once.

This work offers an example of Palade's use of this socio-historical palette, the colors

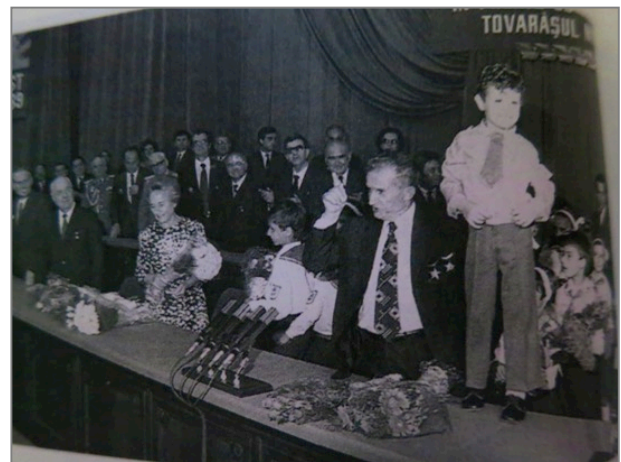


Figure 46 (left) Eugen Palade's *Homage*, 1986, Collection of The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest

Figure 47 (right) Ceausescu used the occasion of the official holiday celebration of 23 August 1989 to promote the demographic policies. Courtesy of the Photo Department, ROMPRES Bucharest, Image from art. cit. Gail Kligman, p. 122.

¹⁰² We know from photographs that Nicolae Ceausescu used to raise a child from the group surrounding them and display it to the nation with pride.

of the Romanian flag: yellow from the center of the flag in the left corner is used twice: once in the flag and again to create a second flag with the blue of the background and the red of the tablecloth. When this painting was commissioned (1986), newborns were dying in hospitals because energy shortages were so drastic that incubators needed shut down, mothers were left to bleed to death, because they refused to divulge the names of those who initiated the illegal abortion, and periodic obligatory gynecological controls were performed under the State militias' eyes in factories and schools.¹⁰³ Not intended as subversive, *Homage* paintings precisely by offering such absurd and contrasting narratives would actually reveal the plummeting standard of living, which the imaginary crowd standing in the street for long hours holding placards and flowers would know very well.

Conclusion

The cult of Elena Ceausescu was not created in a vacuum. After Nicolae Ceausescu assumed the office of supreme leader of communist Romania in 1974, Elena's appearances in public increased exponentially. Elena's right to perform the honorific roles mentioned above was associated with Nicolae Ceausescu's power.¹⁰⁴ Because of these plaudits by association, Romanians regarded the model "independent powerful woman in Communist Romania," Elena Ceausescu stood for with serious suspicion.

The representation of Elena Ceausescu in powerful roles, although not accepted, presented nothing new or shocking for Romanians, since the same visual propaganda techniques used to represent her husband Nicolae Ceausecu, were now used to portray her. The

¹⁰³ Mariana Housleitner. "Women in Romania: Before and After the Collapse" pp. 54-55 and Doina Pasca Harsanyi. "Woman in Romania" pp.44-47 in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, Routledge, 1993

¹⁰⁴ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1991) 102-104.

reapplication of visual symbols used already in Socialist Realist paintings made possible a quick transfer of symbolic power because they appeal to a public, which already recognizes the message of the paintings. She is now The Political Leader, The Ideologist of the Party, The Woman Scientist, and The Heroine Mother. Gradually, Elena Ceausescu represented the female version of all functions and roles that Nicolae Ceausescu exercised, except that of the president of the country.¹⁰⁵ This transfer of visual symbols of power often materialized into official paintings that showed an increased level of unpredictable, even contradictory, visual narratives. Could precisely the overuse of the visual symbols of Socialist Realism weaken its didactic message?

This redundant use of well-known didactic symbols created friction between the painted sign and the signified sense perceived by the community within the official Party narrative. In addition to the interpretive questions, the impossible-to-cross gulf between official rhetoric and its aesthetic representations (and everyday practice) also produced tension. As this chapter has shown, this duality between the symbolic depiction and the literal depiction of the Ceausescus sometimes translated into unstable visual effects of the dogma.

¹⁰⁵ After her husband was elected First Secretary in 1965, her accumulation of political power and her public prominence went into overdrive, intensifying in the 1970s and culminating in March 1980 with her role as a First Premier Minister.

CHAPTER III

INSIDE CEAUSESCU'S PALACE: THE FIRST NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Socialist Realism Between the Walls

Romania's failed utopian experiment with Socialism birthed one of the largest and most infamous objects on the planet: The Palace of Parliament (Palatul Parlamentului). However, I have to backtrack because, throughout the communist era before 1989, the building located on The 13th of September Boulevard was officially known as The House of the Republic (Casa Republicii). Closer to our time, however, most Romanians allude to the concrete behemoth as



Figure 48 View from the balcony of the Palace of Parliament into the former Victory of Socialism Boulevard

The People's House (Casa Poporului). All of this jockeying to name the thing has contributed to an ongoing national identity crisis. This namelessness is suggestive of Romania's ideological unmooring today, pulled as it is between its sense of national victimhood—coerced to dream in the colors of Soviet-style socialism—and its urgent desire to negotiate with the complex influences of Western interests. This crisis of allegiance continues even while in the background Romanian public consciousness struggles to grasp the scale of Socialist Realist objects such the Palace-House(s)-Museum haunted by the tragic and slow-motion realization that this monstrous house could never have served the People.

The Ceausescu couple and their communist administration originally commissioned the building to serve as their formal residence and political headquarters. The divide between the building's intended and actual functions gets murkier with the onset of the December 1989 revolution; at the symbolic culmination of which the dictator and his wife Elena were summarily tracked down, prosecuted, and executed by firing squad on Christmas Day in the city of Tirgoviste. Dragging along its identity crisis into the twenty-first century, in 2004, the building became the Palace of Parliament, the headquarters for the newly formed democratic parliament¹⁰⁶. Adding another layer of irony to the site, also in 2004, the first National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) opened inside the building. Given the literal and symbolic suffering stratified within this palimpsest of identities, what kind of cultural exchange opportunities between the present and the past do the Museum and its location provide?

The revolt of December 1989 finds the building still under construction, a brand-new ruin, uninhabited by the Ceausescus and thus not having performed the symbolic administrative functions for which it was originally designed. After December 1989, it was mostly called The

¹⁰⁶ In 1994, the headquarters of the Chamber of Deputies was relocated to one of the wings of the palace, followed by the Senate in 2004.

People's House— symbolically marking the Romanian people's move in date. The post-December collective imaginary of Romanians moves inside the brand-new ruin, claiming agency over a collective symbol of the socialist body that, ironically, the communist planners' had originally intended to represent—in Leninist-Marxist theory, anyway.

In his article "Contested Mythologies: The Architectural Deconstruction of a Totalitarian Culture," Roann Barris connects The People's House with Ceausescu's pronatalist policies which prohibited abortion and promoted the model of large socialist family as the future of Socialist Romania. Although Barris' analysis does not articulate how the House connects with the collective social body, the parallel sets up a constructive angle for looking at the collective work involved in the construction of the House.¹⁰⁷ The function of the building changes only at the symbolic level from his Palace to our House in 2004, when the Parliament and the Museum moved inside the building. This building has once again come to represent the center that administers aesthetic and political values.

Thus, the location of the Museum within the former dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's Palace has awakened lively social, political, and artistic debates, which continue to divide the cultural scene in Romania today.¹⁰⁸ The National Museum of Contemporary Art also acts as the empirical repository for over 2000 Socialist Realist paintings, sculptures, and tapestries. To this impressive collection of state-commissioned artwork, the Museum adds a collection of gifts received by the Ceausescu couple after their international and regional visits or as tributes paid to them during onomastic celebrations.

¹⁰⁷ Roann Barris. "Contested Mythologies: The Architectural Deconstruction of a Totalitarian Culture," *Journal of Architectural Education*, May 2001. Volume 54, Issue 4, pp. 232

¹⁰⁸ "If the museum itself is the first work of art in the museum," wonders artist Dan Perjovschi, then how can this "symbol of one man's megalomania host the language, techniques, and freedom promoted by contemporary art?"

In 2012, a large number of these paintings were moved in the empty space between the



old

Figure 49 Paintings of Elena Ceausescu and Nicolae Ceausescu dating from 1970-1989, stored between the walls, inside the Palace, 2013

concrete walls of the communist building and the drywall of the art galleries newly constructed for the Museum. (see figure 49). But how does one begin to understand the condition of these paintings in between the walls? Perhaps metaphors such as “semantic gap” or “political lacuna” may offer some illumination. Perhaps theory can help. The paintings seem in transition or to use French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept: they are “becoming” by losing and gaining territory under social and aesthetic pressures.

Their gapped condition propels them to create alternative discourses by “becoming minor”¹⁰⁹ understood as Deleuze and Guattari’s continuum of exposing the process of exclusion inherent in the definition of the “majority.” In other words, every time this body of artistic production is marginalized and fails to fit the mainstream discourses of: Totalitarian Art, State Art, Socialist Realist Art, Modernist Art and so on, it fails to be “majority.”

¹⁰⁹ The concept of “becoming-minor,” was developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their books *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975), and *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 234



Figure 50 *Curtea de Arges Monastery* in Wallachia. Legend tells of Prince Radu Negru (early 16th century) leaving Manole, the architect, and his 9 masons stranded on the roof, afraid that Manole will build a more beautiful monastery for someone else. Manole tried to fly from the roof with wooden wings. The place where he fell, in front of the monastery's entrance, is marked with a water fountain.

Therefore, perhaps the most productive line of sight in attempting to see these paintings—and their fraught architectural context—would be not to look at what they are, but to look at what they are not. Such a negative semantics echoes the physical circumstances of these works of art since they are situated neither inside the Museum's gallery, nor inside the dictator's Palace, but precisely where the gallery and Palace are not: in between the walls. It is precisely their peripheral and unstable location that generates alternative (or "minor") discourses in relation to the dominant ones perpetuated by the functions of the Parliament and the Museum.

It is as if the public Romanian imaginary is trapped in a loop, doomed to reenact the fable of Master Manole¹¹⁰ who was commissioned to build the most beautiful church in the world but, as the Faustian story goes, he had to bury his bride alive within its walls to ensure the immortality of the building. (see figure 50) True to script, the political and aesthetic forces retrofitting the Palace to house the MNAC collection of Socialist Realist paintings decided to bury these illustrations of the recent past alive between the walls of the old communist space and the new white cube. Manole sacrifices his loved one in order to erect a monument to everlasting beauty and power, but that process ends up leaving him stranded on the roof to die trying to fly off with wooden wings.

‘First it was a rumor, then it was too late’

The Peoples House’s transition from an authoritarian symbol to a metaphor of freedom happened without a public debate or, as a leading contemporary Romanian artist, Dan Perjovschi, put it: “first it was a rumor, then it was too late.”¹¹¹ Former Prime Minister Adrian Nastase, a self-proclaimed patron of the arts, proposed and financed “in deep secret,”¹¹² as architect Augustin Ioan tells us, the location of the Museum inside the Palace. This was worked out so that it would take place before the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2004. Romanian politicians welcomed the potentially cathartic role of art, which would “clean the building of any reminiscences of the former dictatorial rule and make freedom of expression

¹¹⁰ Meșterul Manole the chief architect together with his 9 masons built the Curtea de Arges Monastery. The legend of the Curtea de Arges Monastery is told in the poem *Monastirea Argeșului* an anonymous folk ballade, first published in Romania by the poet Vasile Alexandri in 1852.

¹¹¹ Lia & Dan Perjovschi. *Artist’s Corner*, “Detective Draft 2005” on online discussion platform initiated by artists Dan and Lia Perjovschi as an intellectual debate about the problematic raised by the location of the first National Museum of Contemporary art inside the Ceausescu’s Palace. Images and archived debates can be found to the following addresses. <http://www.policiesforculture.org/artist.php?l=a&id=37> is part of the *caa - center for art analysis* (<http://www.policiesforculture.org/artist.php?a=a&d=2005-12-20&id=37>)

¹¹² Augustin Ioan. *Modern Architecture and the Totalitarian Project. A Romanian Case Study*. Published by Romanian Cultural Institute, Bucharest, 2009, 115

possible.”¹¹³ In 2003-2004, a glass annex was built, alongside external elevators (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). It cost 12 million dollars to convert the former Palace’s baroque interior into a white cube. To build a new museum from scratch might have been cheaper, Perjovschi estimates.

Perjovschi’s critique points to how Fredric Jameson understands the relationship between artworks and society as being, above all else, a political one. On the one hand, art “replicates”¹¹⁴ society, as the Palace itself replicated the utopian dreams of a megalomaniac dictator and a despotic political regime. He commissioned himself a big white house on a hill—a large imposing square fortress—a monument commemorating a dying political regime. Hugely over-sized portraits of the Ceausescus and other glorifying artworks would have decorated the only-now-completed Palace of Romania’s communist President and his communist first-lady.

When the National Museum of Contemporary Art opened inside the Palace, this spatial recycling could have been understood as an iteration of art’s political power: art offering “opposition”¹¹⁵ to society. However, the Museum’s very first exhibition refuses any potential opposition to the ideology of the Palace via the function of the Museum inside the Palace. To encourage and challenge artists and curators to think of the Museum as a site of cultural exchange, Ruxandra Balaci the museum’s chief curator and curator of the first exhibition entitled: “Romanian Artists (and Not Only) Love Ceausescu’s Palace?!”¹¹⁶ said:

¹¹³ Adrian Nastase was an avid art collector. He argues that the inclusion of art in the proximity of art would be benefic for artists and politicians alike. Nastase was sentenced to 2 years in prison on corruption charges in 20 June 2012, which should make us think twice about what his intentions might have been in coordinating the inclusion of the Museum in the former dictator’s house.

¹¹⁴ Fredric, Jameson. “Is space Political?” in *Rethinking Architecture*, ed. Neil Leach Routledge, 1997 p. 259

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 259-261

¹¹⁶ In *MNAC Catalogue* published by The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest 2004

The exhibition takes up the way in which iconography and the symbolism of the 'big monster palace' has changed: from the official paintings during Ceaușescu's time - an oppressive totalitarian symbol, nomina odiosa - via established contemporary references such as Ion Grigorescu, SubREAL, Kiraly, Călin Dan, artists of the 90s, up to the young generation that has come to refer with a lot of irony to the Palace as a nostalgic/absurd symbol of Bucharest. It is about relocating negative memories and feelings into oblivion, it is about a whole new generation that does not feel bound to assume the past of their parents, it is about moving toward the future about forgetting [...] a disastrous past, it is about blame and shame and the need to reconvert those frustrating feelings into something more positive. [...] Museums of contemporary art have increasingly tended to become dynamic laboratories open to the latest creations, as places of creative criticism and lively visual innovation, thus anticipating developments in the social realm. [...] MNAC in Ceaușescu's Palace could be indeed an ultra-contemporary challenge.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Ruxandra Balaci, "Romanian Artists (and not only) love Ceaușescu Palace?!" *MNAC. The National Museum of Contemporary Art*, Bucharest: MNAC, 2005, pp. 36, 40, 41.

Old Socialist Realist paintings of Ceausescu and his wife, which would have probably adorned the walls of the Palace at its completion, were now exhibited not on the walls of Ceausescu's offices or great conference halls but in the Museum's white cube gallery. Contemporary artists proposed their own responses to the opening of the museum inside the Palace. (see figure 51)



Figure 51 Artists Irina Botea, participant in the first exhibition of contemporary art housed inside the palace: Romania Artists (and Not Only) Love Ceausescu's Palace?!, curated by Ruxandra Balaci.



Figure 52 (left) Aerial view of The Peoples House before the opening of the museum inside the building.
Figure 53 (right) The opening night of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC), September 2004.

Conceptually, the placement of the museum inside the former Palace accentuates the aesthetic and political spatial disruption already created by the size of the building. Not only its immensity (the third largest building in the world), but also its functions (former political space, current political space, and current art exhibition space) present strong resistance to any kind of an all-at-once understanding of the building. When part of the building is experienced as one thing (art exhibition), the other part is experienced as something else (political negotiation).

Although both find themselves under the same roof, the gallery space must be located where the parliament is not, and vice versa. The museum of contemporary art, because it is located inside The People's House, cannot escape the symbolic freight it has inherited from its time as the metonymic center of a totalitarian dictatorship. The Museum acquires the duplicity of re-purposing the House but also occluding its previous ideology. (see figures 52 and 53)

The Museum's out-of-the-blue opening inside the building reenacts the very beginning of the history of this building in 2004. Then, demolitions of houses and historical buildings were rumored and, as was the case more recently with the Museum, it was also too late. It was

too late to stop the bulldozers because, like many martial operations, they started demolishing houses in the middle of the night, too late for any acts of resistance from the population. Although the official construction inauguration of the House of the Republic took place on June 25 in 1984 (see figures 54 and 55) the massive demolitions required to build “The Victory of Socialism” Boulevard had started earlier, in the 1980s.

Forty thousand buildings were demolished to make room for the "The House of the Republic" and the surrounding architectural complex—including two large plazas on both ends of the four-kilometer-long, 100-meter-wide “Victory of Socialism” Boulevard.¹¹⁸ The idea of The Civic Center, crucial to Ceausescu’s vision of the new administrative and political geographies of Romania, started in 1967 and lasted until 1987 transforming many cities, such as Iasi, Bucharest, Craiova, Braila, Satu-Mare, and many others. The House of the Republic reifies



Figure 54 (left) Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu inspecting the final model for the House of the Republic, showing him in action: pointing, gesticulating, or speaking

Figure 55 (right) Shows Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu inaugurating the construction of the Palace. Both images appeared in the *Arta* Magazine along Nicolae Ceausescu’s official inaugural speech and the Artists Union’s homage to his invaluable guidance and achievements. (“indicatiile pretioase si implinirile marete”). ANUL XXXI, Nr. 7/1984

¹¹⁸ Celac, Mariana. “Before and After MNAC-at The People’s H ouse.” In MNAC Catalogue. The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest 2004: pp. 64-66.

at least two of Ceausescu's political directives: protochronism and financial independence from international loans. Although not initiated by Ceausescu, protochronism became his only philosophy of origins after the 1970s. Protochronism insists that Romanians are the pure descendants of Dacians, based on archaeological evidence documenting Dacian culture across present-day Romania long before the Romans arrived.

Romanian historian Lucian Boia explains protochronism as an idea born out of Romanians' inferiority complex of being seen as the descendants of Dacian slaves conquered as a Roman colony.¹¹⁹ Ceausescu insisted that, before the arrival of Romans, the Dacian state did not have a determined political structure, because the political structure would crystalize centuries later under his rule as the most superior form of socialism. Therefore, according to Ceausescu's myth of origins, the Dacian state reaches its apogee in the 1970s in Romania by bringing together all stages of communist social development described by Marx and becoming the first and only truly socialist country. To mark such achievement Ceausescu started building The House of the Republic, the major building in his architectural plan for The Civic Center in Bucharest. (see figures 56 and 57)

The Civic Center comprises a built area of around 400,000 square meters with a volume of over 2 million and a half cubic meters, more than The Great Pyramid of Giza. Seven hundred architects and about 20,000 workers worked day and night (three shifts, 24 hours a day) so that most of the building could be erected by 1989. In all, twenty percent of Bucharest was torn down to build this Palace. An empty plaza in the front—now a parking lot for tourist buses—

¹¹⁹ Lucian Boia. *De ce este Romania altfel?* (Why Romania is Different?) Bucharest: Humanitas, 2012, pp.31



Figure 56 (left) Wall surrounding the Palace

Figure 57 (right) Areal view: front of the Palace and the Victory of Socialism Boulevard.

would have allowed for tens of thousands of people to worship Ceausescu during grandiose spectacles, which became more and more grandiose in the 70s and 80s.¹²⁰

‘The biggest dead duck in the world’

The House of the Republic, as a national symbol, would use only national resources. The plan was to import nothing, in order to reflect Ceausescu’s dream of independence. At the end of March 1989, Romania announced that it had paid off all of its external debt, although

¹²⁰ Two major annual festivals intended to celebrate and promote national communism were: *Cantarea Romaniei* (The Song for Romania) and *Daciada* (from Dacia). The first one opened in 1976 and became one of the major propagandistic outlets for Ceausescu’s cult of personality. The second one opened in 1977, it initiates as a sportive celebration but it actually, along with *Cantarea Romaniei*, served as massive propagandistic manifestation.

this fact did not ameliorate in any way the harsh living conditions of the population.¹²¹ Often, today, nostalgic Romanians invoke this short-lived financial independence as a good thing, something the current political figureheads could never achieve.

The House of the Republic gave a concrete shape to Ceausescu's ideal of sovereignty, a megalomaniac one that measures 270 m by 240 m, 86 m high, and 92 m underground. Due to its sheer size, the building is second in the world in terms of area and third in the world in terms of volume.¹²² Surrounding the main building on all sides except the front, there are several other monumental buildings meant to host ministries, hotel facilities, and various other administrative functions. The Victory of Socialism Boulevard in front of the building is lined with apartment buildings designed to house political officials and their families built in the same style. The buildings' absurd scale and the devastation they inflicted upon the urban logic of the city complements the equally absurd decision to completely evacuate the apartment building facing the Palace. Elena Ceausescu complained that people from the top floors could look into the courtyard of the Palace.¹²³ On the same axis, there are several "supermarkets" and the unfinished skeletons of the projected National Library as well as of a huge concert hall meant to host the masquerade of the "Song to Romania" festival/contest (a year-round celebration of Romanian communist achievements).

¹²¹ After Nicolae Ceausescu's famous speech from August 1968 when he publically opposed and condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia and his politics of reducing the Soviet influence in Romania, Ceausescu attracted the West's trust and used this opportunity to borrow money extensively from both Western as well as Eastern countries. *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001, pps.153-177

¹²² The second building in the world in terms of area after the Pentagon with an area of 330,000 m², and third in volume: 2,550,000 m³, after the rocket assembly hangar at Cape Canaveral and Quetzalcoatl pyramid in Mexico. Celac, Mariana. "O analiza comparata a limbajului totalitar in arhitectura." In Lucian Boia (ed.). *Miturile Comunismului Romanesc*. Editura Universitatii Bucuresti, 1995: pp. 181-205

¹²³ Alexandru Panaitescu. *De la Casa Scintei la Casa Poporului*. Patru Decenii de Arhitectura in Bucuresti 1945-1989. Bucharest: Simeria, 2012, 191

The Palace has 1,100 rooms and is 12 stories tall, with eight additional underground levels. Some of the Palace halls, bigger than a football field, were designed especially for the glorification of the ruling pair (in fact, one can still see the 25 ft. tall blank walls at both ends of a hall, meant to shelter the oversized portraits of Ceausescu and his wife, Elena).¹²⁴

Architect Alexandru Panaitescu discusses the undecided eclecticism of the interior, exaggerated sizes, which created an incoherent combination of Corinthian columns and grandiose arches. These classical elements clash with traditional Romanian floral motifs present on the floor mosaics, but also with the ceiling and walls' stucco. Estimates of the materials used include one million cubic meters of marble, 3,500 metric tones of crystal, 480 chandeliers, and over 1,400 ceiling lights and mirrors.¹²⁵

The clash of classical/eclectic elements lack an adequate vocabulary and together they try to “talk” by layering symbols instead of choreographing elements of play, irony, double encoding specific to postmodern buildings. Therefore, barred such layers of signification, they function as kitsch, mass culture, or to invoke Robert Venturi, “dead ducks.”¹²⁶ The Civic Center in Bucharest, with its isolated location and mute and dumb interaction with the rest of the city, might just be “[...] the biggest dead duck in the world”¹²⁷ as architect Augustin Ioan calls it.

¹²⁴ Interior of a hall way in The Palace of Parliament. 2010

¹²⁵ Celac, Mariana. “O analiza comparata a limbajului totalitar in arhitectura.” In Lucian Boia (ed.). *Miturile Comunismului Romanesc*. Editura Universitatii Bucuresti, 1995: pp. 181-205.

¹²⁶ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas. The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Forms*. Revised Edition. The MIT Press, 2001, @ 1977, pps. 87-91

¹²⁷ Augustin Ioan. *Modern Architecture and the Totalitarian Project. A Romanian Case Study*. Published by Romanian Cultural Institute, Bucharest, 2009. pp. 142 also pp. 145



Figure 58 (left) Eugen Palade. *Homage*, oil on canvas, 1986 The collection of The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest.



Figure 59 (right) Dan Perjovschi. “A tiny people with such a big house.” Postcard, 1995.

The extravagant excesses of expensive materials, the disproportionate scale, and the utter uselessness of such a building all constitute not just abuses of the city’s heritage—not to mention the limited resources of its citizens—but, equally importantly, the materials and proportion of the building express “a world vision which has become objectified.”¹²⁸ It is a spectacle. French theorist Guy Debord described “the spectacle” as a cultural mechanism through which peoples’ desires are gratified instantly through images. The “society of the spectacle” lures the public into believing they are free to choose among options, when, in fact, these are options are limited. (see, figures 58 and 59)

In the Romanian case, the spectacle gravitated around Ceausescu and his nepotistic practices. In keeping with this nonstop self-mythologizing, the Palace was built and called The Peoples’ House. Ceausescu mandated—in numerous, gross, and subtle coercions—that the individual operate as a docile consumer to the spectacle of artistic and architectural production.

¹²⁸ Guy, Debord. *Society of the Spectacle* (Written: 1967) Translation: Black & Red, 1977; Transcription / HTML Markup: Greg Adargo. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>, Chapter I “Separation Perfected” p. 1

And that spectacle became self-replicating. Or as one of the leading Romanian poets of the 80s, the poet Mircea Cartarescu, writes: “any irony / is up to you.”¹²⁹

Dictators and their buildings

Nicolae Ceausescu proposed the reconstruction of Bucharest in a meeting convoked on March 22, 1977. He spoke in front of architects and construction sector representatives about the placement of a new political and administrative center in the middle of Bucharest, a region known as Arsenal Hill (Dealul Arsenalului) replete with historical monuments as well as building potential due to its relative elevation. Ceausescu summoned this meeting two weeks after the devastating earthquake of March 4th 1977 that had left the city in ruins with the population still reeling over the loss of lives and property. The public welcomed the reconstruction of Bucharest. Architectural institutions and architects from all over Romania, hopeful for a coherent transformation of the city, gladly responded to Ceausescu’s call for proposals for the new political center for Bucharest.¹³⁰ Arsenal Hill attracted Ceausescu not because it was in dire need of reconstruction after the earthquake, but because the buildings were barely affected by it. Many historical buildings such as Monastery Mihai Voda dating (from 1589)¹³¹ would be demolished and replaced by the House of the Republic and its adjacent administrative spaces. (see figures 60 and 61)

¹²⁹ Cartarescu, Mircea. *Nimic. How it is*. Trans. Adam J. Sorkin and Radu Surdulescu. Saranac Review.

¹³⁰ This architectural complex was intended to offer the Ceausescus a front row seat from which they could watch over the national celebrations, onomastic days, and the two major annual festivals intended to celebrate and promote national communism: *Cantarea Romaniei* (The Song for Romania) and Daciada (from Dacia). The *Song for Romania* Festival opened in 1976 and became one of the major propaganda outlets for Ceausescu’s cult of personality. Daciada opened in 1977, as a sort of national Olympic showcase but in actually these served as massive propaganda pageants. Amateurs and professional artists would join athletes in creating impressive parades and spectacles praising the dictatorial couple.

¹³¹ Alexandru Panaitescu. *De la Casa Scintei la Casa Poporului. Patru Decenii de Arhitectura in Bucuresti 1945-1989*. Bucharest: Simeria, 2012, pp. 184



Figure 60 Monastery Mihai Voda dating from 1589 demolished during construction.

Figure 61 The Palace of Parliament

Ceausescu was appointed as the Architect of Socialism and, together with his wife Elena, served as the only supervisors and principal architects of the reconstruction of Romania's Socialist capital. Anecdotal and provisional evidence—given the regime's careful management of dislocation, censorship, and propaganda—seems to be one of the tale-tell markers of Romanian Socialist Realism. Thus, although no official document unequivocally shows Ceausescu had been officially designated chief architect for the construction of the Palace, he is shown in countless images directing construction. Additionally, Ceausescu is often portrayed as the Architect of Socialism in poems and other fictional publications.¹³² It would seem in keeping with his many other titles (such as the father of the Nation, the Hero of Socialism, etc.) that this new title would also operate in a symbolic way.

This would seem so, however, the inhabitants of Bucharest did not anticipate Ceausescu literally becoming the supreme architect overnight. With no knowledge of urban planning or any ability to read a scale model, Ceausescu closely supervised the building of the Palace and the boulevard. From his open car window Ceausescu, with a sweep of the hand, would erase

¹³² Example from *Arta* with titled: "Ceausescu The Architect"

houses and historical buildings. He terrified the workers and the architects of the Palace with his “working visits” at the construction site, sometimes twice a week, more than 460 visits in less than 5 years. Following his “invaluable directions”¹³³ the architects under the supervision of the ambitious young architect, Anca Petrescu, would have to demolish and rebuilt in a few days before his next visit as well as anticipate more suggestions.¹³⁴

Ceausescu’s monumental vision of the new Bucharest lines up in parallel ways with other totalitarian visions of new worlds. The concept of The Civic Center captured the imagination of other Eurasian dictators (see Figures 61 and 62) who tended to think of themselves as architects of the new nation plotting to render the symbolic future real by using bricks and bulldozers. Igor Golormstock in his book *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China* reminds us that it is a common mistake to accuse totalitarian states of harboring a barbaric contempt for culture, and in support of this misrepresentation, to cite the popular zinger (sometimes attributed to Rosenberg, sometimes to Goering, sometimes to Himmler): “When I hear the word ‘culture’, I reach for my revolver”. Rather, the truth seems to be quite the opposite: “in no democratic country has the state valued culture so highly and devoted such constant attention to it.”¹³⁵

The dictator becomes the architect of the new nation and its future is built in a symbolic way (didactic art in service of ideology) as well as in a more material way (bricks and bulldozers in service of ideology). Along these lines, Igor Golomstok points out that, often,

¹³³ “indicatii pretioase” Alexandru Panaitescu. *De la Casa Scintei la Casa Poporului. Patru Decenii de Arhitectura in Bucuresti 1945-1989*. Bucharest: Simeria, 2012, 187-189

¹³⁴ Anca Petrescu, the main architect told stories in an interview with the National Television in 2008, about how Nicolae Ceausescu and Elena Ceausescu, usually accompanied by two ministers, would visit to inspect the plans and the site. They would always have something to suggest and they would expect the changes to be effected in a week. The following weekend they would return to check again. Petrescu, who was only 24 years old when construction started, said that you had to enact the changes since it was understood that there was no real conversation, only directions to be followed by the workers.

¹³⁵ Igor Golormstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), 91



Figure 62 *Casa Poporului*, unfinished in 1989 and still under construction today

Figure 63 One hundred Romanian lei from 1952, showing *Casa Scintei*, erected in 5 years 1952-1957, Architect Panaite Mazilui

heads of totalitarian states obsess over how history will remember them, wishing to write their legacy in architecture:

In totalitarian thinking the task of scientifically constructing an advanced society and a new man was strongly associated with more ordinary processes of construction. [...] The ideal image of the future State was that of a splendid architectural construction that would endure for centuries. It may be for this reason that enormous attention was devoted in all totalitarian countries to the development of architecture; a special role and function in the creation of the State was ascribed to it, and it was controlled in at least as centralized a manner as all other spheres of creativity.¹³⁶

Thus, The Peoples House did not appear in a vacuum. Drilling down beyond the continental context, Nicolae Ceausescu's plans for Bucharest's Civic Center also follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, who in 1948 revised several of the proposals for large construction projects in Bucharest. One of them was The House of the Spark; known today as The House of the Free Press, finalized in 1955, it housed the printing of the Romanian Working Party's official newspaper called The Spark.¹³⁷ Dej, as Ceausescu did after him, also insisted on directly

¹³⁶ Ibid., 266

¹³⁷ See the plan for Moscow's new center and the plan for Berlin's new center.

supervising the constructions of the building. However, Dej did not interfere with the production details. For instance, just after a meeting in Moscow in 1949 and under Soviet pressure, Dej directed the architects to look at the Soviet Socialist Realist architectural model for inspiration to their projects in Romania.¹³⁸ However, Dej, did not reject the scale models architects proposed as too modern, while Ceausescu did.

The House of the Free Press belongs then to the family of “radiant” constructions erected under the precepts of Stalinist architecture, such as Lomonosov Moscow State University, Hotel Ukraina in Moscow, and The Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw “Radiant architecture,” an important characteristic of Soviet architecture, remained an underlying trend for the House of the People. British architect and Russian scholar Catherine Cooke in her article “Beauty as a route to ‘the radiant future’: responses to Soviet Architecture,” identifies the quality of svetloe (radiant) as one of the Communist Party’s demands from the Soviet buildings and urban forms because svetloe materialize the svetloe budushchee (radiant future) promised to its citizens. Therefore, a tenant in one of Ivan Zholtovsky’s apartment buildings in Moscow¹³⁹ or a member of Illia Golosov’s Zuev Workers’ Club¹⁴⁰ inhabits or participates in the building of the svetloe budushchee. However, Cooke considers Socialist Realist architecture’s particular interest in originality, which is usually overlooked in the literature. It did not strive to regurgitate past architectural forms, rather it strove for constant invention of a new obrazy (images) able to transmit messages about a radiant future “to audiences who were themselves always moving forward as their political

¹³⁸ In his book *From the House of the Spark Peoples House*, architect Alexandru Panaitescu explains how the initial proposal for the House of the spark was rejected by Soviet ideologues after a meeting in Moscow in 1949 when the model was criticized “for its solutions which were heavily influenced by the Eastern cosmopolitan architecture.” Alexandru Panaitescu. *De la Casa Scintei la Casa Poporului. Patru Decenii de Arhitectura in Bucuresti 1945-1989*. (From the House of the Spark Peoples House) Bucharest: Simeria, 2012, pps. 80-83

¹³⁹ Catherine Cooke, “Beauty as a route to ‘the radiant future’: responses to Soviet Architecture,” *Journal of Design History* Vol. 10 No2 (1997): 14.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

consciousness and aesthetic sensibilities developed.”¹⁴¹ The role of the artist was to “lead forward” this mass consciousness by functioning as an active ingredient in the ideological advancement.

Cooke considers the Revolution Square metro station built in 1935-1938 by the architect Alexei Dushkin and sculptor Matvei Manizer as a canonic example of *svetloe* architecture. The Metro Station was built to celebrate and to transmit to the metro traveler the ‘revolutionary action’ of 1917. Although Stalin accorded his highest accolades for the naturalism of Manizer’s statues, which decorate the station, during its construction the Metro Station was also considered a failure since it did not achieve the Socialist Realist demands of depicting how art fuses with architecture to create the ideological possibilities for producing the building. As Cooke mentioned in her article, the critical reception of art critics and ideologist at the time of its completion considered the building and the decorative statues to be a mindless copy of classical style, failing to find a new architectural form for a new life.

The House of the Spark in Bucharest, with similarly edifying goals in mind, became an exemplar for the communist achievements in The Popular Republic of Romania. Likewise, Ceausescu’s House of the Republic marks the achievement-in-process-of-manifesting of the radiant future. For a complex set of reasons, such as fewer people spread across less land, lead to relatively easier establishment of command and control operations permitting Romania’s communist party to exercise acute autocratic control over the nation’s resources and its people.

Building on earlier architectural solutions to consolidate communist power after WWII, Ceausescu’s plans to erect Civic Centers across Romania reveals his disenchantment with the more liberal policies of the Soviet Union and of other communist countries in the eastern

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 143

bloc.¹⁴² Fascinated by North Korea and China's political structure after returning from his East Asia tour in 1971, Ceausescu sought to implement the dynastic model in Romania by combining two political models that would prove devastating for Romania's cultural life in general and for Bucharest in particular. Historian Vladimir Tismaneanu calls the last two decades of Ceausescu's regime Dynastic Communism and identifies the strategy that Ceausescu used to implement this regime as Neo-Stalinism.¹⁴³ If Gheorghe Gheorgiu-Dej had to follow Stalinist aesthetic impositions for the building of The House of Free Press, Ceausescu sought to



Figure 64 *Visita de Lucru.* Visit during the construction of Peoples House. Unsigned, undated

¹⁴² Ceausescu did not approve of the Perestroika (restructuring) model of economics in the Soviet Union initiated in the 1980s by Mikhail Gorbachev. Ceausescu thought that the market should remain strictly under the Central Committee's control.

¹⁴³ Neo-Stalinism in Romania had dramatic consequences affecting all spheres of activity. Vladimir Tismaneanu. *Stalinism for all Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003, 27

out-Stalin Stalin in the building of the House of the Republic. (see figure 64)

Extending his analysis to Ceausescu's nationalist communism by exploring its relation to the National Socialism of Nazi Germany,¹⁴⁴ Tismaneanu suggests Ceausescu would have made an equally fit rightwing dictator. National Socialism, according to Adolf Hitler, was spending colossal energy in order to create new people and to make them "stronger and more beautiful."¹⁴⁵

On March 13, 1933, one and a half months after he came to power, Hitler established the Reich Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda headed by Joseph Goebbels. The Reich Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda was responsible for the entire area of spiritually influencing the nation, and the task was to "bring Germany to a state of spiritual mobilization."¹⁴⁶ Soviet writers denounced Nazi art as a cult of the superman, which was being developed in Germany and opposed it with the image of the proletarian leader, the calm, straightforward leader with a human face.

For Alex Scobie in his study *Hitler's State Architecture*, the social and political order of the Nazi state was "anticipating the displacement of Christian religion and ethical values by a new kind of worship based on the cult of Nazi martyrs and leaders with a value close to that of pre-Christian Rome."¹⁴⁷ This new social and political order would be reinforced by the new architectural order: new gridiron towns, axial symmetry, and hierarchical placement of state structures in the urban space. Perhaps something like a reenactment of a similar set of spiritual

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 22

¹⁴⁵ "And from this strength and this beauty comes a new sense of life. In this respect humanity has never approached so nearly to the classical world as today." Hitler's quote from 1939 in: Golormstock, 84.

¹⁴⁶ When Hitler stated the laws that should govern the development of the art of the Third Reich, otherwise known as "The Principles of the Führer," he defined the aim of his leadership: something "above culture, above religion and even above politics"—the creation of a New Man, Ibid., 92

¹⁴⁷ Scobie, 137

values took place once The Peoples' House had been placed on the spiritually rich site of the Arsenal Hill involving the transmutation and destruction of monasteries and churches.¹⁴⁸

Hitler admired Rome, but above all he admired its state architecture. Albert Speer's city plan for the New Berlin and Hermann Giesler's plan for remaking of Munich's center both resembled the "Roman" plan. The same "Roman" plan was already realized in Fascist new towns in Italy, such as Littoria.¹⁴⁹ Roman architecture symbolized the power and authority of a people who dominated the ancient world for centuries. Berlin was destined, under Hitler, to become the capital of a world empire, and Roman imperial architecture was for Hitler, a perfect model for his own plan for a thousand-year Reich. Therefore, Alex Scobie concludes, "buildings like Congress Hall in Nuremberg and the Volkshalle (People's Hall), in Berlin, inspired by the Colosseum and the Pantheon, were not merely symbols of tradition, order, and reliability, but signaled a far more sinister intention on the part of the autocrat who commissioned them: a return to "Roman" ethics which recognized the natural right of a conqueror to enslave conquered peoples in the most literal sense of the word, a right already made manifest even within the sphere of architecture by the creation of concentration camps, whose inmates were forced to quarry the stone for the Reich's buildings."¹⁵⁰

Although one could easily identify the Corinthian capitals in the House of the Republic and a penchant for using durable materials as common interests between Ceausescu and Hitler,

¹⁴⁸ Analyzed by Roann Barris article: "Contested Mythologies: The Architectural Deconstruction of a Totalitarian Culture," *Journal of Architectural Education*, May 2001. Volume 54, Issue 4, pp. 229

¹⁴⁹ "Plans to systematize the chaotic center of Rome were published and discuss by Marcello Piacentini in 1925 in the first volume of the Fascist journal *Capitolium*, and in *Architettura e Arti Decorative* in 1929-1930." Scobie, 6

¹⁵⁰ In comparison with Germany, where modernism preceded Nazism and where Bauhaus architecture was not approved (although Alex Scobie considers that influences were not entirely absent either from the buildings Troost erected for Hitler in Munich or from those Speer designed for Nuremberg) in Italy, where Fascism preceded the modernist movement, there was no official ban on the use of modern materials in state buildings. By the time Albert Speer's "law of ruins" won Hitler's approval, the restriction on what construction materials were allowed to be used was very clear: durable natural materials, preferably granite stone. *Ibid.*, 137

Ceausescu seemed untouched by the mirage of Rome. Rather, his plan to systematize Bucharest's center focused more on size, national building materials, and traditional Romanian folk motifs. Probably a more evocative insight into the eclecticism of The House of the Republic would result from drawing a brief analogy with the diverse architecture under Mussolini. If in Stalinist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany an official style in architecture could be identified, Socialist Realism and Neoclassicism respectively, in Fascist Italy it would be impossible to "freeze," to use Diane Ghirardo's expression, one moment among the many as representative of the Italian Fascist style. The relationship between politics and architectural design in Italy is complex, and Ghirardo considers most post-war historiographies unsuccessful attempts to extricate Rationalism from Fascism and in the case of Rome, "to confirm Fascism as the source of the greatest evils inflicted on the city's urban fabric."

For Ghirardo, the most telling image Fascism gave of itself comes to us from the exhibition: Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista (1932) designated to tell the story of Fascism and thereby to secure its legacy. This exhibition celebrated the tenth anniversary of Fascism's rise to power in October 1922 and the march on Rome by Mussolini's black shirts. Although designed to celebrate Fascism, the exhibition did so largely by exposing what Ghirardo considers its greatest ambivalence: "the desire both to revolutionize society and culture and to remain deeply embedded in traditional and cultural social patterns."¹⁵¹

In support of Ghirardo's plea for a more inclusive consideration of the diversity and individual agency in the construction process of innovating new architectural forms in Fascist Italy, in his article "From Object to Relationship II: Casa Giuliani-Frigerio: Giuseppe Terragni Casa Del Fascio," Peter Eisenman considers the main party building, Casa del Fascio, built by

¹⁵¹ Diane Ghirardo, "From Reality to Myth. Italian Fascist Architecture in Rome," *Modulus, Politics and Architecture*, Vol. 21, (1991): 29.

Giuseppe Terragni as one of the canonical buildings of the modern movement “and its architect, to be one of the least understood of its proponents.”¹⁵² Terragni used modern materials and pictorial ambiguity to create a building that stood for Fascist ideology. Although an example of the Casa del Fascio was to be built in each new or reshaped town around Italy, they were not intended to be identical buildings.

Dennis Doordan in his article "The Political Content in Italian Architecture during the Fascist Era," discusses the contrasts between Mezzanotte's Casa del Fascio in Milan and Giuseppe Terragni's in Lissone as indicative of the varieties of ways in which Italian architects confronted the problem of creating a convincing architectural expression of Fascism. How was it possible to have such a variety of architectural forms in Mussolini's totalitarian state? Doordan explains: “because the lack of an explicit statement by Mussolini on the question of the essential characteristics of Fascist architecture, architects attempted to integrate political and aesthetic ideologies on the basis of their own individual interpretation of the essence of Fascism.”¹⁵³

Applying the same visionary strategy as these Italian architects but with no architectural or historical education, Romania's Supreme Architect's unfortunate trial and error architectural solutions end up producing the out-of-scale House of the Republic. Reminiscent more of a forbidden city than a Civic Center, the House remains a monstrous object, which swallowed up the thousands of homes, courtyards, monasteries, and churches overnight. It remains an out-of-scale monument to a spiritual razing; all that remains of the asymmetrical urban logic, dislocated, and mutilated Bucharest is a symmetrical white specter.

¹⁵² Peter Eisenman, "From Object to Relationship II: Casa Giuliani-Frigerio: Giuseppe Terragni Casa Del Fascio," "Casa del Fascio." *Perspecta* Vol. 13 (1971): 41.

¹⁵³ Dennis Doordan, "The Political Content in Italian Architecture during the Fascist Era." *Art Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Summer 1983): 124-126.

The National Museum of Contemporary Art: a “crack in the system”

An architectural competition called Bucharest 2000 took place in the Capital in 1996 attracting national and international architects offering solutions to the dilemmas presented by the monolithic People’s House. Although a project was selected, Bucharest 2000 is most often looked upon as a “lost opportunity to heal the city from the wound inflicted by Ceausescu’s Civic Center,”¹⁵⁴ since no significant changes were ever implemented (see figure 65). The overwhelming effect of the building’s scale is to make any and all of its surroundings seem invisible. Since all such a beast knows to do is swallow, how could the National Museum of Contemporary Art ever hope to offer artists and their artwork any other subject position than



Figure 65 Poster from the architectural competition called *Bucharest 2000*, which took place in the Capital in 1996. The text on the poster reads: “Bucharest. The state of the city.”

¹⁵⁴ Roann Barris “Contested Mythologies: The Architectural Deconstruction of a Totalitarian Culture,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, May 2001. Volume 54, Issue 4, pp. 236 and Alexandru Panaitescu. *De la Casa Scintei la Casa Poporului. Patru Decenii de Arhitectura in Bucuresti 1945-1989*. Bucharest: Simeria, 2012, pp. 214

one always-already performing an abject lack of agency?

Fredric Jameson posits a critique of the idea of absolute meanings and ideology in architecture, which works to explain the uphill battle architects and urban planners face in attempting to desacralize buildings like Ceausescu's Palace. Jameson proposes instead an "enclave theory"¹⁵⁵ in architecture, suggesting the possibility of subverting the grand system of ideological intentions with "islands" in the city or "cracks in the system" where architecture is freed of its ideological meaning and becomes a critical tool for experiencing the world. For Jameson, architecture still has the important social function of articulating urban and technological forces that would otherwise remain ungraspable. How could the intervention of a global perspective through curatorial practices or by other means make The National Museum of Contemporary Art function as such an "island" in an otherwise ideologically oppressive Civic Center complex.

In *Everyday life in the Modern World*, Lefebvre talks about modern rationality as an institutionalized consciousness that brings the imaginary under practical rationality's control. As a result of this transformation "fear of nature" becomes "terror of society," exaggerating the need for security. And so totalitarian regimes thrive when fear becomes institutionalized.¹⁵⁶ Following Lefebvre's reasoning about fear's role in modern society, an institutionalized identity results in a collective identity and the institutionalized "everyday life" turns into the

¹⁵⁵ "The possibility of an aesthetic practice that will give the individual subject new, intensified sense of its place in the global system is called enclave theory" from Introduction to Fredric Jameson, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology" *Architecture Theory Since 1968*. Ed. Michael K. Hays. (Cambridge and London: MIT, 2000), pp. 441.

¹⁵⁶ The aesthetic of everyday life turns into an aestheticism of the quotidian. The experience of *excess* then operates in a profit-oriented society the same way as the experience of scarcity operates in a totalitarian society. When talking about the aesthetic values both societies propose aestheticism, which places the individual in the position of the consumer of ideology of too much and not enough, respectively. Lefebvre, Henri. *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 197, pp. 44

“quotidian.”¹⁵⁷ Ceausescu’s Palace then acts as an excess of many things, including institutional ideology, operating in the quotidian. This fear persists today as a part of Romania’s collective identity and is part of the reason (in addition to its scale) why its ideology cannot be wholly appropriated.

The Palace, taken as a symptom of history, seems to follow a mid eighteenth-century architectural tradition in which a New World¹⁵⁸ masked over the “Old World” with large-scale buildings. Rem Koolhaas points out that through such overlap, large-scale buildings become a viable category of the whole. This category he calls: Bigness.¹⁵⁹ Bigness is a paradoxical category because, on the one hand, it erases the surroundings and any individual vision of the architect, but on the other hand, Bigness unites all differences into the big thing itself. However, if this category of “Bigness depends on regimes of freedom”¹⁶⁰—since it requires the inclusion of all that is different—how could The Civic Center ever have been built under such a regime of repression? Violence and terror is how. Although Bigness—as understood by Koolhaas—does not exclude the small, the individual, and the specific, it can institutionalize the individual—as understood by Lefebvre. Through such transitions of fear to terror and of the old into the new, the individual becomes the *prima facie* reason for the collective.

¹⁵⁷ “The quotidian is a philosophical concept that cannot be understood outside philosophy; it is a concept that neither belongs to nor reflects everyday, but rather expresses its possible transfiguration in philosophical terms.”¹⁵⁷ Henri, Lefebvre. *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 197, p 13

¹⁵⁸ BIGNESS is a theoretical domain at this fin de siècle: in a landscape of disarray, disassembly, dissociation, disclamation, the attraction of BIGNESS is its potential to reconstruct the whole, resurrect the real, reinvent the collective, reclaim maximum possibility.” Koolhaas, Rem. “Bigness” *S, M, L, XL*: Office for Metropolitan Architecture. NY: The Monicelli Press. 1995, pps 501

¹⁵⁹ Bigness transforms the city from a summation of certainties into an accumulation of mysteries. What we see is no longer what we get.” Ibid., 502

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 511



Figure 66
View of the front of the Palace with the Victory of Socialism Boulevard, today called Unirii Boulevard. The Palace is in the far back at the end of the axes.

Rather than look at the inclusion of the Museum inside the Palace in Jamesonian terms as a “crack in the system” and therefore as a critique of the Palace-as-such, the Museum inside the Palace might be seen not as a challenge but as just another addition to the already established ideology of the Palace. Built on terror and unjust demolition of houses, the Palace still administers the values: juridical, political and aesthetic. (see figure 66) If the Museum itself—with its glass elevators and white cubes—does not criticize the Palace, then the discourse of artistic freedom inherently entrusted to the National Museum of Contemporary Art could criticize the ideological discourse of the Palace.

Rather than looking at the edifying formal aspects of architecture, Manfredo Tafuri looks critically at the ideology-as-such behind architecture. He considers the idea of an animus “behind” the object, a metaphysical—if simplistic—appeal that, though charming as it

may be, does not stand for critical architecture.¹⁶¹ If Jameson is still concerned with maintaining “architecture’s utopian vocation in a postmodern political aesthetics as a possible allegory that could turn the political system inside out and make possible the city to be seen again,”¹⁶² it is because he still sees a place for the critical and autonomous individual in the modern metropolis.

Tafuri, however, believes that such individual agency is not possible because critical architecture is not possible—the thing cannot escape the shadow of its social consequence. What remains possible for Tafuri is the critique of ideology, or “critique of architecture”¹⁶³ as a critique of the sequence of consequences taking place in historical discourse. Perhaps the failure of the Bucharest 2000 contest to provide an architectural solution for the integration of the building into the cityscape comes as a result of a deficient critique of the ideology of the building. Could the Museum, in Tafurian terms, start this critique from the inside of the building?

The commissioned artworks celebrating dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his achievements are hiding within the air gap between the ironically named Palace of the People and the white cubes of the generously sized and well-lit galleries of the MNAC. The National Museum of Contemporary Art and The House of the Republic continues to replicate some of the old traumatic functions of the building by not being open to the public. This lack of transparency, therefore, continues to block the badly needed Tafurian analysis of the ideological function of the building.

¹⁶¹ 1st prize: Meinhard von Gerkan, Joachim Zeiss (Germany). The plan proposes a decentralization of the main axe formerly known as Victory of Socialism (the large boulevard in front of the palace, not visible here) by building a line of skyscrapers behind the place, among other residential apartment buildings on both sides of the palace.

¹⁶² “Architecture and the Critique of Ideology” *Architecture Theory Since 1968*. Ed. Michael K. Hays. (Cambridge and London: MIT, 2000), 441.

¹⁶³ “In assuming its historic, objective role as class critique, architectural criticism must become a critique of urban ideology [...]” Manfredo Tafuri, “Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology” *Architecture Theory Since 1968*. Ed. Michael K. Hays. (Cambridge and London: MIT, 2000), 32.

EPILOGUE

REENACTING SOCIALIST REALISM: ROMANIAN ART AFTER 1989

Post-communist Romanian artists seem, more often than not, to be drawn to Nicolae Ceausescu's portrait.¹⁶⁴ But why are so many of these contemporary artists choosing Socialist Realist subject matter and iconography as the sites for their interventions? After all, were not these topics and images only a short time ago imposed on artists by the Ceausescu regime for propagandistic purposes? Did not Socialist Realism try to contort artists into state operatives? Before 1989, from the façades of public buildings to the wall of every classroom, from the front pages of newspapers to the dedication pages of each textbook, Ceausescu's portraits deployed power unabated. Certainly, the draconian implementation of austerity measures toward the end of his regime complicated whatever comfort people may have been used to getting from seeing his face everywhere. That omnipresent and uniform headshot seemed to imply—while at the same time it sought also to create—a uniformity of attitudes on the part of the population.

Although commissioned by the hundreds of thousands, Ceausescu never posed and he usually criticized the portraits as failing to capture his likeness. He probably shared Stalin's belief that "a real Bolshevik never poses."¹⁶⁵ Jan Plamper explains in his book *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* that public figures and regular workers alike were reluctant to pose for portraits because they did not want to be thought of as having bourgeois dispositions toward leisure not suited for a diligent builder of socialism.

¹⁶⁴ Although some debate the term post-communism, I will use it advisedly for short hand.

¹⁶⁵ Jan Plamper *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*, Yale University Press; First Edition, January 17, 2012, p. 89.

In 2008, artists Ciprian Muresan and Adrian Ghenie started to paint Ceausescu as a conceptual response to this overwhelming production of portraits (see figure 67) “It was Ciprian’s idea,” Adrian describes in an interview with curator Magda Radu, “we wanted to find out if, given the imposed iconography [on communist artists back then and on ourselves now], it was still possible to make an aesthetically passable work.”¹⁶⁶ Their project brings up a daring question, which I argue still standardizes today’s studies of totalitarian art: could these portraits function as inspirational art/propaganda and as visual signs open to varied interpretations? Or in art critic Boris Groys’ words: “Can you have a good portrait of a bad dictator?”¹⁶⁷ Ghenie explains: “My generation, we were all losers historically, economically. There was no culture of winning. Winning under a dictatorship is to make a deal with the power, which is a moral dead end. A black

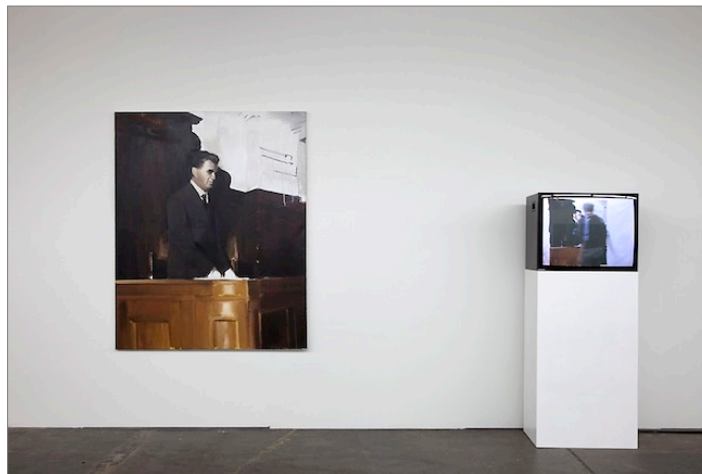


Figure 67
Ciprian Muresan and
Adrian Ghenie, *Untitled*
(*Ceausescu*), 2008,
Painting and video
installation, video,
12"/oil on canvas, 164 x
125 cm

¹⁶⁶ *Rise & Fall* Interview cu Magda Radu published in Flash Art n.269 November – December 2009, Web visited March 1st 2014

http://www.flashartonline.com/interno.php?pagina=articolo_det&id_art=447&det=ok&title=ADRIAN-GHENIE

¹⁶⁷ Boris Groys. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1992, p 24

hole.”¹⁶⁸

For Adrian Ghenie in *Understanding History* and Stefan Constantinescu in *Infinite Blue* learning about the communist ideology of the New Man, the heroine mother, the Socialist hero, and so on meant learning how to repaint archival photographic material. To contextualize the issue of access, I should mention that in 2008 *The National Archives of Romania* opened the *Online Photo-archive of Communism* and access to this archive stirred these and other artists' interest in appropriating these images.¹⁶⁹ Without access to these archived photographs, these creative interventions would hardly have been possible. The dictator's portrait then acts as an intersection between discourses of art and power, culture and politics, and space and memory. For these artists and for the Romanian public, these icons of power have been reenacted with a difference, the intent to understand and to overcome both the symbolic and the psychophysical traumas.

More than strategies for “memorializing the past,” Caterina Preda explains these re-actualizations of Ceausescu's portraits as reenacting the iconography of power.¹⁷⁰ Following this logic, for these artists, knowing history means doing history. This commitment to the material evidence of archives requires physically engaging with what happened in Romania.

For example, Ileana Faur's *Open for Inventory*, replaces the old labels from Socialist Realist sculptures with new ones (see Figure 68). Faur's meticulous process of transferring the information from the old labels onto new ones by hand as accurately as possible functions as

168 *Romanian Painter Adrian Ghenie's Sinister Mythology*, Interview with Rachel Wolff, October 2013, Web visited February 10th <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/874084/in-the-studio-romanian-painter-adrian-ghenies-sinister>

169 See Stefan Constantinescu, *Biology Laboratory*, oil on canvas, 2009, Dragos Burlacu, *Understanding History*, paintings after photographs, 2008

170 Caterina Preda. “The Digital Memory of Nicolae Ceausescu” (Part Three: Images of Memory), in *Memory, Conflict, and New Media. Web wars in post-socialist spaces*. Eds. Ellen Rutten, Julie and Vera Zvereva. London: Routledge, 2013 Pps 197-215

institutional critique. However it also works as a phenomenological intervention in the space of the viewer. The viewer must pass through a drape of old labels strategically placed at the entrance of the gallery and throughout the exhibition space, making it impossible to avoid direct contact with the labels, and therefore, with the past. Furthermore, *Open for Inventory* does exactly that: it opens—the otherwise closed to the public—depository to a new range of public interpretation and misinterpretation.

By dislocating historical facts from their official—and therefore inert—narrative and relocating them in the artist's current personal circumstances, artists deconstruct historical artifacts and their symbolic meaning and create what Alexander Etkind describes as “memory



Figure 68. Ileana Faur, *Open for Inventory*, 2012 Platform, part of Anexa The National Museum of Contemporary

events”: “a rediscovery of the past that creates a rupture with its accepted cultural meaning.”¹⁷¹ Faur creates such a rupture between past and present meanings by hanging the generic names of these state-commissioned artworks on individual nooses for our consideration and encumbrance. Strategically and poetically, these labels block our view of the walls with the wooden language of the official communist propaganda program, pointing a sharp and lyrical finger at the force of the past to influence what we see today.

By portraying these symbols of power from over two decades ago, artists also point to the former dictatorship’s lingering ideological specter over today’s society. More specifically, in a protest against the government’s austerity cuts in 2010, virulent protesters used banners with Ceausescu’s portrait side by side with the likeness of Traian Basescu, the country’s president at the time of the protest.

Both Ceausecu and Basescu enacted austerity measures. However, Basescu had a harder time of it since Romanians had the benefit of having had experienced such governmental ploys before. Romanians understood—and did not care for—the practical consequences of austerity because they experienced such strict limits on electrical power, food, hot water, and general cultural privations during the 1980s. The difference between the installment of Ceausescu and Basescu’s austerity programs is starkly evident in the photograph of 10,000 organized and publicly unafraid protesters with banners and clever posters engaging in the political discourse.

Also in 2010, the same year Basescu continued to implement his austerity plan in hopes of balancing the national budget on the backs of workers, the Ceausescu couple was exhumed to verify their identities with DNA testing. This event only somewhat tempered the nostalgic

171 Alexander Etkind. “Memory Events in the Transnational Space” 2010 Web visited January 18 2014 June 2010 <http://www.memoryatwar.org/pdf/Etkind%20memory%20events%20paper%20June%202010.pdf>

rumors making the circuit claiming that the infamous couple was either alive in Cuba or buried in a secret crypt. Such nostalgic trends in the national consciousness for an undead Ceausescu have even appeared on street corners and garage doors as graffiti tags such as “Lost” or “I will be back in 5 minutes” stenciled alongside the dictator’s portrait.¹⁷² (see figure 69)

Contemporary artist Ion Grigorescu, in his painting *Ceausescu Dead*, tries to certify to all concerned through his aesthetic witnessing once and for all the fact that Ceausescu—and all that he represented—is dead¹⁷³ Grigorescu is trying to convince himself that Ceausescu will not come back and although present on the odd and influence-twisted Bucharest streets as a figurehead with angel wings or as a lost person (and therefore, the terrifying logic goes, as a



Figure 69 Stencil found on the walls of Bucharest, attributed to Dumitru Gorzo. Bottom left reads: “I will be back in 5 minutes.”

¹⁷² Stencil found on the walls of Bucharest, attributed to Dumitru Gorzo. For more information please see Caterina Preda: “Looking at the Past Through an Artistic Lens: Art of Memorialization” http://www.academia.edu/540601/Looking_at_the_past_through_an_artistic_lens_art_of_memorialization visited March 2, 2014

¹⁷³ Ion Grigorescu. *Ceausescu*, 1980, Ion Grigorescu. *Ceausescu Mort*, 1992

person who could potentially be found at some point in the future) he is in fact dead and gone. Grigorescu is not participating in art therapy as luxury but art therapy as a personal and national practice that is imminently necessary to the *corpus politicus*. Although the position of Ceausescu's hands and the pale grey skin signify the death of the dictator, Grigorescu paints him with eyes wide open. Still here, stiff and powerless but still here, as any memory of him is at our disposal, powerless if we wish it to be, but unavoidably present.

Grigorescu is reenacting a practice; he is reenacting his livelihood as a Socialist Realist artist. In 1980, for instance, he was commissioned to paint Ceausescu's portrait. Although he did follow the Socialist Realist convention by showing Ceausescu in a position of power as "The Architect of Socialism" overseeing a scale model of Bucharest, the painting was rejected because Ceausescu had three faces. Not possible in a literal utopia, in a utopia of reality as it is. He was required to repaint Ceausescu and, when he presented the new version, his painting was again rejected. This time, the representation depicted Ceausescu too accurately. He looked old, tired, pale and with swollen veins in his gesticulating hand. And to recall here Adrian Ghenie's earlier thoughts on what it meant to fail under dictatorship, would this portrait, precisely by failing to follow official visual dogma, succeed then? Alternately, does it succeed now?¹⁷⁴

Clearly, communist artworks fail differently than post-communist artworks because of the differently constituted intentionalities and assumed viewerships. Given this stark demarcation between the communist and the post-communist aesthetic cosmoses, where do these two kinds of failures overlap—if they do at all? In other words, what kinds of political impact and aesthetic value can the critiques of communist iconography and subject matters by

¹⁷⁴ See Ion Grigorescu. *Ceausescu Mort*, 1992 and two versions of Ion Grigorescu *Ceausescu*, 1980



Figure 70 Ciprian Muresan, *Pioneer*, 2006, drawing on paper
 post-communists have in Romania's contemporary sociopolitical space? Also, how does the coercion of the communist central command relate to the coercion of the art market?

Ciprian Muresan's series of *Pioneers*, for example, also fails to embody the ideal Communist Youth and, although they do not directly involve the portrait of Nicolae Ceausescu, this series hails the dictator's presence through allusion. (see figure 70) Ceausescu's visual presence is activated in the national collective memory by these symbols of "the father of the nation" or "the future of Socialist Romania." (see figure 71) Therefore—to fall in line with



Figure 71.
 Author unknown. *Homage to Nicolae Ceausescu and Elena Ceausescu in a People Assembly*, oil on canvas, 1989
 Permanent collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art

communist party dogma—the pioneer offering homage to the Ceausescu couple should symbolize an abstraction rather than portray an actual child. But when the symbol is stripped of its function, what remains is a child, a self-destructive child, not saluting the “father of the nation” but inhaling substances such as turpentine and model airplane glue, effectively destroying the possibility of a Socialist future. Muresan’s paintings blur the boundary between the former national policies of child rearing—pro population expansion laws before 1989—and the present consequences of these policies. In 1990, Romania had the highest per capita number



Figure 72. (left) Ciprian Muresan, *Milka*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 200x170 cm.



Figure 73. (right) Page from the history textbook, 4th grade 1974.

of institutionalized minors among European countries totaling 125,000—many of them living on the streets and in the sewers, abusing substances and engaging in high risk behavior.

Demythologized, the pioneer steps out of line, under no ones’ supervision at the periphery of town. With no collective identity, the pioneers turn against each other, and any sign of camaraderie when one pioneer turns and tries to reach to help a friend who is being beaten becomes impossible (see figures 72 and 73).

With the *Minors planting flowers* Muresan continues to demystify the past, this time by reimagining the miner not as the “Worker Hero” as privileged by Ceausescu’s ideology, but as a peaceful builder of communities. (see figures 74 and 75) The artist hints here at the Mineriad, the namesake of a violent series of events in June 1990 when Ion Iliescu called upon miners to come to Bucharest to “restore and protect democracy.” Miners came not with flowers but with bats and violently repressed the anticommunist protesters who were mostly students and



Figure 74 (left) Vinitilă Mihăescu. *Rod Bogat visita de lucru (Visit to the Workplace)*, undated showing Ceausescu among miners.

Figure 75.(right) Ciprian Muresan, *Miners Planting Flowers*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 200 x150 cm.

intellectuals. In this context, Muresan’s painting overlaps symbols of former and current politics creating a kind of historically engaged irony, a portrait of a landscape peppered by monuments with henchmen as gardeners offering the viewer a “forget-me-not” flower.

On the one hand, some contemporary artists find themselves attracted to the visually of these paintings without any critical discourse. On the other hand, there are those more interested in critical aspects (such as what it meant to paint in a certain way or what it meant to build a certain building) and less in how the paintings or buildings look. Why is this relevant? To understand the recent past, it is crucial for contemporary artists, art historians, and critics to acknowledge the existence of these archives by engaging them critically and creatively.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the *House of the People* or *Ceausescu's Palace* also acts as a



Figure 76. Irina Botea, *Cow Session*, video, 2003



Figure 77 Irina Botea, *Batuta lui Oprica*, Video, 2003

portrait of Ceausescu himself since he insisted on having weekly input into its construction culminating as his, and his alone, autocratic vision. Whether to heal or to mock (or to join the global art market), contemporary Romanian artists have resurrected such effigies and used symbols of his ideology, rather than his physical likeness, to hail the former dictator through

allusion. Measure the power of Ceausescu's propaganda machine by the level that his presence is construed through the symbols of his ideology.

Haunted by the twenty percent of Bucharest torn down for its construction, Ceausescu's dream house continues to act as the subject of lively social, political, and artistic debates stirred to life by the inclusion of the first *National Museum of Contemporary Art* and the first Democratic Parliament (in 2004 and 2005 respectively) inside the former dictator's Palace, now quite un-ironically called the *Palace of the Parliament*. Perhaps a link may be made between the hollowing out of the old Bucharest center and Ceausescu's presence by absence as articulated through the blunt force of redundantly deploying the symbols of his ideology upon a captive audience.

Artist Irina Botea, as another example of historically engaged irony, rebuilt the Palace as a mockup expressing individual agency over a collective past identity. (see figures 76 and 77) By shrinking the second largest administrative building in the world to an object that can be held in one hand, the artist deflates the symbolic presence of the Palace to something manageable on a human scale. If what makes architecture oppressive is not inherent to the building *per se* but something belonging to the building's function, as Michel Foucault tell us in "Is Space Political?", then Botea's Palace intervenes to establish a new function: to entertain curious cows in *Cow Session* and to delight a birthday party of fictional characters in *The Dance of Oprica* (Batuta lui Oprica).

Continuing in this historically engaged ironic register, in 2006, Botea symbolically resurrected one of Ceausescu's bear trophies (see figures 78 and 79). "Out of the Bear" is both a "memory event" as defined by Alexander Etkind and a sociopolitical intervention. As Inke Arns states in her book *History Will Repeat Itself*, "reenactments transform the representation of

history through embodiment.”¹⁷⁵ By inhabiting Ceausescu’s hunting house and his trophies, Botea embodies individual agency and thereby claims authorship over past events precisely by creating an alternative narrative to the official discourse of “Ceausescu, the Great Hunter.” This way, the trophy bear undercuts the appearance of the dictator’s symbolic authority over nature by asserting the artist’s agency through the *reenactment* (overuse) of its original function as a symbol of power.

Much like the problem of refuting a stereotype without enforcing it, artistic strategies of recycling the canon meditate on the bygone presence of the communist symbols of power by isolating and reconsidering these symbols in contemporary society. It is the reenactment that makes the aesthetic political. It is the reenactment that gives new form to old function.

As an adolescent, I remember one of my first reactions to seeing Ceausescu’s hunting trophies adorning the villa walls was the sense of witnessing someone’s childish games of pretending to embody wild and dangerous animals, of being forced to feel big enough to play the bear, the buck, the wild boar. Play but play with something illicit and dangerous, something with which I should not be playing with as though someone will soon come to scold me back into history.

¹⁷⁵ Arns, Inke and Gabriele Horn Eds. *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance* Catalog for the exhibition at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, 2007



Figure 78.(left) Ieronim Boca.*Bear Hunting*, date unknown

Figure 79 (right) Irina Botea, *Out of the Bear*, Video stills, 2006

Botea's *Out of the Bear* gives the viewer this kind of spare room to dare to consider oneself a part of history, a maker of history. Daring to die, to take a bath, to hide, to crawl on the floor underneath, inside, and outside of a bearskin. Outside of the bear you float on a peaceful lake in the middle of an old orchard. Outside of the bear there is no sign of killing just gravity pulling upon the viewer's freedom to bob up and down in the lake, to move up and down the stairs. Going left and right and up again. As though the viewer were a soldier marching in no particular hurry to no particular place. As though the viewer were a widow into history. *Out of the bear* is a film about memories you never had.

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Center for Teaching Excellence, Columbia College Chicago, April 2010

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Poet-in-Residence

The Poetry Center of Chicago, Fall 2005

Curator's Choice: *Around the Coyote Art Festival*

Selected poetry chapbook: *The Last Superstition*, Chicago, Fall 2002

Visiting Writer: *International Writing Program*

The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Winter 1999

Fellowship: *ArtsLink Program*

Selected by CEC ArtsLink, which supports exchange of artists and cultural managers between the United States and Central Europe, Russia, and Eurasia, New York, Winter 1999-

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Columbia College Chicago, Visiting Lecturer**Art and Design Department**

3110: *Twentieth Century Art Theory and Criticism*, (1 section), Summer 2010

2120: *Art Since 1945*, (2 sections) Spring 2009, Spring 2010

2110: *History of Twentieth Century Art*, (3 sections), Summer 2008, Fall 2008, Spring 2009

1101: *History of Art I: Stone Age to Gothic*, (1 section), Spring 2008
 1102: *History of Art II: Renaissance to Modern*, (1 section), Fall 2007

Interdisciplinary Arts Department

6701: *Graduate Studies Seminar: "Art as Discourse"* (5 sections), Summer 2008, Fall 2008, Fall 2009, Fall 2011, Fall 2013

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Presented papers

Discourse, Politics, and the Arts

Chair of the Panel, Council for European Studies (CES), 21st International Conference of Europeanists, Washington, D.C., March 14-16, 2014

"I will be back in five minutes:" The Dictator's Portrait Reappearance in Romanian Contemporary Art After 1989

Council for European Studies (CES), 21st International Conference of Europeanists, Washington, D.C., March 14-16, 2014

Remains of Utopia: Communist Kitsch, Propaganda, and Sentimental Artifacts in Postcommunist Romania

Modern Language Association MLA, Chicago, 9-12 January 2014

Socialist Realism as Memory Site in Contemporary Romanian Art

Cultures of Memory, Memory of Culture, The 15th Annual Conference of the English Department, Literature and Cultural Studies Section, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania, 6-8 June, 2013

Recycling Ideology: Romania's Socialist Realism Canon

Cross-Cultural Encounters, Traumatic Affect and Paths of Remembrance, University of Bucharest, Center of American Studies, Lecture Series, Spring 2013, June 10, 2013

State Art or Sites of Resistance: Socialist Realism in Romania 1970-1989

Socialist Realist Art: Production, Consumption, and Aesthetics, Södertörn University and Modern Museet, Stockholm, October 19-20, 2012

One Woman is Every Woman: Socialist Realist Paintings of Elena Ceausescu

Romanian Studies Conference, Indiana University, Bloomington, March 25-26, 2011

Inhabiting the Spectacle: The People's House

Romanian Studies Conference, Indiana University, Bloomington, February 27-28, 2009

Portraits of Utopia: Inside Ceausescu's Palace

43rd Annual Midwest Graduate Student Seminar, The Art Institute of Chicago, Department of Museum Education, Chicago. April 11-12, 2008

“The Golden Age:” Socialist Realist Paintings of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu

Department of Art History Doctoral Symposium, The University of Illinois at Chicago, 2008

“Ceausescu's Former Palace and the Spatial Disruption It Creates”

Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, February 23 and 24, 2007

Utopia Likes Kitsch and Kitsch Likes Utopia

Department of Art History Doctoral Symposium, The University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago. March 13, 2006.

Artists Talk

It is now a matter of learning hope

Irina Botea in conversation with Mirela Tanta, May 2014, Threewalls Gallery, Chicago, IL

Discussant

Graduate Student Inquirer: ***SEE NEXT Seminar: East European and Northern Eurasian Crosstalk***, guest speaker: Theodora Dragostinova, Associate Professor of History, The Ohio State University. “Unlikely Cold War Encounters: The Bulgarian Cultural Opening of the 1970s from a Transnational Perspective,” UIC Institute for the Humanities, February 26, 2014

What Is and Isn't America? The Romanian Fulbright Alumni Association Conference, Bucharest, June 15, 2007

Interviews

Radio Interview on “Nascut in Romania” on Radio Romania Cultural, Elena Vladareanu, Bucharest, Romania, March 2013

Radio Interview on Northeastern Illinois University WZRD: Aloha Circus, Chicago, 2004

Radio Interview on Loyola University WLWU: WordSlingers, Chicago, 2003

Short documentary

Threshold, National Romanian Television, Bucharest, Part 1 and 2, 2001

PUBLICATIONS

Refereed Academic

The Viewer as the Performer at the Venice Biennale 2013

Article published in *Arta*, peer reviewed, Nr 10, Anul IV, Bucharest, 2013

Nothing to Interrupt: Dialogue on Irina Botea's Photocopy

Art review published in *The Epic Something*, catalogue of the art exhibition organized by Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, December 2012

Remembering Out of the Bear

Art reviews published in *The Epic Something*, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, December 2012

"Before a National Anthem" and "A place of Citizenship"

Art review published in *e. cites Bucharest* "Meeting Europe." Strasbourg: Apollonia European Art Exchange, November 2011

'First it was a rumor than it was too late:' From Ceausescu's Palace to the First National Museum of Contemporary Art

Collected presentations from Romanian Studies Conference selected papers, University of Indiana, Bloomington, 2010

The Industrial Identity

Outopos Magazine Iasi, Romania, 1999

The Limit of My Language is Not the Limit of My Art

Outopos Magazine Iasi, Romania, 1996

Selected Poetry and Translations***Court Green***

Annual journal of poetry and poetry on film. Poems: *With Yours Shoes On* (p. 26), *The Last Superstition* (p. 27), and *The 8th Remembrance* (p. 28). Columbia College, Chicago, IL. ISSN 1548-5242. First Issue, 2004

Another Chicago Magazine

Co-translations (with Carrie Messenger and Joe Like) of poetry by Romanian poet Ioana Ieronim: *Black-and-White* (p. 71), *Astigmatism* (p. 72), and *Nocturne I and II* (p. 73). Left Field Press, Chicago, IL, No. 42, 2003

Watchword Literary Magazine

Publication specializing in emerging American writing and Eastern European translations. Poem: *I can't wait for next fall* (p. 19), Issue Nr. 5, Autumn 2003 and *Plastic Angels* (p. 6), Issue 4, Winter 2002. Watchword Literary Press Magazine, San Francisco, CA

You'll Blow Away

Book of translated poems in collaboration with Gene Tanta. (pp. 38-54) Editura T, ISBN 973-99824-3-3, Iasi, Romania, December, 2001

Tight Fist Chapbook Poetry

Chapbook Poetry, International Writing Program. The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Winter 1999

PROFESIONAL SERVICE

Art History Search Committee,

Department of Art History, UIC, December 2013-March 2014

Guest Lecturer

Critique of Modernism: Body Art and Feminism, Center of American Studies, University of Bucharest, April 10, 2013

Postmodernism: Appropriation, and Ready-made Selves, Center of American Studies, University of Bucharest, March 14, 2013

Film and Simulacra. Graduate Film, Video, New Media and Animation Seminar, The Art Institute of Chicago, 2010

On Contemporary Romanian-English Poetry Translation. Graduate translation workshop, Columbia College Chicago, 2004

Peer Review Panel 2012 Community Arts Assistance Program

Chicago Office of Tourism and Culture, Cultural Grants Division, May 2012

Graduate Students Representative

Welcoming and advising incoming students, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2010-2012

Visiting Critic

Interdisciplinary Arts Department, Columbia College Chicago, Spring Critiques 2011

Department of Film, Video, New Media and Animation, The Art Institute of Chicago, Fall Critiques 2010

Lectures and Events Committee

Art History Department, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2009

Medical Interpreter

Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights, Cross-Cultural Interpreting Service, Chicago, IL, 2002-2009

Instructor of Education for Family Life

Investigation USAID Radu Cernatescu High School, Romania, 2000-2001

Professional Orientation Counselor

Radu Cernatescu High School, Romania, 1999-2001

Editor

Contrast, Annual Art and Philosophy Magazine, Iasi, Romania 1999-2001

Social Worker

Big Brothers Big Sisters program in Romania (the program is currently a member of Big Brothers Big Sisters International, Philadelphia). Iasi, Romania, 1999-2001

Romanian/English Interpreter for Play Therapy Program

The Body Shop Charity Foundation, Iasi, Romania, 1998-2005

MEMBERSHIP

Council for European Studies (CES) since 2013

Society of Historians of East European, Eurasian, and Russian Art and Architecture
(SHERA): Since 2013

Society for Romanian Studies (SRS): Since 2010

Midwest Art History Society (MAHS): Since 2007

College Art Association (CAA): Since 2006

Art History Student Association (AHGSA): Since 2006