CURATING AS ART: EXPERIMENTS IN COLLECTIVE CURATING IN LATE SOCIALIST ROMANIA

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Abstract

This text examines the activity of Romanian artists Wanda Mihuleac and Constantin Flondor as exhibition-makers in Romania during the 1980s. I frame their practice, on the one hand, as collective curatorial work and, on the other hand, as a curatorial process derived from conceptual art, system aesthetics and Herve Fisher's "contextual art". Most of the group exhibitions I examine, such as *The Study* (1981), *The Writing* (1980), *Space as a Mirror and Space as Objecthood* (1986), were organized by Mihuleac or Flondor in cooperation with fellow artists and art critics (such as Paul Gherasim, Mihai Drișcu, etc.). They questioned the principles of curatorial authorship associated today with visionary, albeit authoritarian male curators such as Harald Szeemann, and promoted experimental investigations of the exhibition as an artistic medium. The exhibition space was conceived either as a preparatory model, a collective art studio (*The Study*) or a multidisciplinary laboratory (*The Writing*), or as reflecting on its own condition (*Space as Objecthood*). A special case study I intend to examine is *House Party* (1988), an event co-organized by Wanda Mihuleac, Decebal Scriba and others, which may be analysed not only as "apartment art" (Tupytsin), blurring the boundaries between artistic intervention, the private sphere and everyday life, but also as redefining the art exhibition as a performative and processual event.

Keywords: Romanian contemporary art, socialist Romania, artist-curators, collective curating, exhibition as medium, conceptual art

Curated by Artists in the Cold War Era

The historiography of art in the latter half of the twentieth century has frequently been narrated through the ascent of the professional curator—a figure who, by the late 1960s, had assumed the role of an *auteur*, mediating between the artist, the institution, and the public. This narrative, often consolidated around the mythos of the *Ausstellungsmacher* and emblematic figures such as Harald Szeemann,[1] posits the curator as the primary agent of meaning-making through contextualization. However, parallel to this institutional professionalization runs a distinct, less explored trajectory: the history of the artist as curator.

1 Florence Derieux (ed.), *Harald Szeemann. Individual Mythologies* (JRP/Ringier, 2008).

This figure emerged not merely as a substitute for the institutional caretaker. It also became a producer of new social relations, alternative spatial configurations, and experimental modes of artistic distribution. The artist-curator did not simply organize exhibitions; rather, artists increasingly treated exhibition making as a medium in itself—one capable of generating heterotopic spaces and collective forms of cultural agency. It is precisely this trajectory that became particularly significant in the context of Socialist Eastern Europe, where curatorial practice was shaped not only by aesthetic concerns but also by ideological constraint, infrastructural scarcity, and the necessity of self-organization.

Precedents for the self- organized "exhibitions as medium" can be traced back to early instances of artist-led display, such as the first Impressionist exhibition held in Nadar's studio in Paris in 1874, and later to the historical avant-gardes. Marcel Duchamp stands up as the ur-figure of this genealogy. His *Boîte-en-valise* (1938–42)—a portable miniature museum of his own work—was an act of auto-curation that defied the immobility of the institution.[2] Similarly, his installation designs for the Surrealist exhibitions (such as the *1,200 Bags of Coal* for the 1938 show or the *Mile of String* created on the occasion of the 1942 exhibition) actively obstructed the viewer's ability to "consume" art, asserting the exhibition space as an experiential, often hostile, environment. In the Soviet context, El Lissitzky's *Abstract Cabinet* (1927–28), created for the Hannover Museum, stands as another monumental precursor. Lissitzky did not simply display artworks; he designed an interactive environment in which the viewer's movement altered visibility itself.[2] This Constructivist legacy of exhibition design as a form of "social engineering" would remain largely dormant during the Stalinist period, only to be reactivated—under conditions of limited resources and unofficial cultural production—by artists of the 1960s and 70s.

Elena Filipovic's scholarship has been instrumental in making the understudied history of the artist-curator visible. In her introduction to *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*, she asks: "Why have exhibitions by artists remained so relatively impervious to historicization?"[3] She suggests that while the history of the museum and the professional curator has grown into a "veritable cottage industry," the artist's role in shaping exhibition history has been marginalized. This marginalization is not accidental; it serves to maintain the boundary between "art making" and "art displaying," a boundary that institutions rely upon to maintain their authority. Filipovic argues that when artists curate, they often do so to

2 Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (MIT Press, 1998); Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (Yale University Press, 2009).

3 Elena Filipovic, *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology* (Mousse Publishing, 2017), 13-33.

challenge the "conventional forms of exhibition making."[4] The artist-curated exhibition is rarely a standard retrospective or a thematic survey. Instead, it is often an intervention, a proposition, or a critique. This approach aligns with Alison Green's claim that, "seen from the perspective of artists, showing is a part of making art."[5] From this viewpoint, the artwork is not completed when it leaves the studio but is realized through installation, juxtaposition, and public encounter. Exhibition space—whether the modernist "white cube" or an improvised site consecrated through performative and collective engagement—becomes not a neutral container but a raw material to be shaped. As Green observes, the artist-curator is thus a seemingly contradictory figure: one who bears the responsibility of critique while simultaneously engaging in the creative craft of exhibition making.[6]

The case studies examined in this article focus on moments in which artists collectively curated exhibitions in Socialist Romania between 1960 and 1989. They engage with Filipovic's proposition that the exhibition constitutes a critical medium in its own right, draw upon Green's insistence that "showing is a part of making," and integrate Beti Žerovc's critique of the curator-as-author.[7] At the same time, they require an explicitly comparative approach, attentive to the social, infrastructural, and economic specificities of exhibition making in Eastern Europe. Methodologically, this implies moving away from narratives of "derivative" Westernization toward one of autonomous, parallel modernity[8]—one that complicates the linear account of curatorial professionalization in the West.

In Western Europe and North America, the artist-curator often emerged through the imperatives of Institutional Critique, challenging the museum and the market from within. In the Socialist East, however, the artist-curator did not merely critique the institution; artists were frequently compelled to become institutions themselves. Confronted with state-sanctioned Socialist Realism and the censorship of the official public sphere, they constructed a "second public sphere" through self-organization, apartment exhibitions, and collective practices of display.

To understand the specificity of the artist-curator during the Cold War, it is also necessary to distinguish this role from that of the professional museum curator. The latter, institutionally embedded—whether

4 Filipovic, *Artist as Curator*, 15.

5 Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as a Medium* (Reaktion Books, 2016).

6 Green, *When Artists Curate*, 24.

7 Beti Žerovc, *When the Curator Is the Artwork: The Old Question of Curatorial Authorship* (Sternberg Press, 2018).

8 Dóra Hegyi et al. (eds.), *1971: Parallel Nonsynchronism* (tranzit.hu; PUNCH, 2022); Cristian Nae, "Plurimodern Constellations: Scales of Analysis in the Spatial History of Art," in *Plural and Multiple Geographies of Modern and Contemporary Art in East-Central Europe*, ed. Caterina Preda, Magdalena Radomska (Routledge, 2024), 79–96.

as custodian or as critic affiliated with the Union of Fine Artists—functioned as gatekeeper and validator. Their labor was defined by selection, preservation, and historicization. The artist-curator, by contrast, operated from a position of subjectivity and immediacy, challenging both the bureaucratic conservatism of museum structures in Eastern Europe and the emerging model of the "star curator" in the West.

In the Eastern Bloc, moreover, the true "super-curator" was the State itself: a centralized apparatus operating through ministries of culture, Salon juries, Artists' Union's commissioners, and ideologically aligned critics. The Communist Party acted as the ultimate authorial curator, deciding what could be shown, where, and how—effectively curating the "Socialist reality" itself. Against this monolithic and coercive authorial voice, the Eastern European artist-curator was engaged in a fundamentally different form of resistance. When artists in Moscow, Łódź, or Bucharest organized exhibitions in private apartments or marginal spaces, they were not simply critiquing curatorial style; they were negating the State's monopoly on contextualization and meaning.

Methodological Frameworks: Heterotopias of Labor

Analyzing the complex ecosystem of artist-curated exhibitions under state socialism requires adapting art historical methodologies to practices that were inherently ephemeral, informal, and infrastructurally improvised. Spatial theory and network theory therefore become essential for understanding how such exhibitions operated as social and political forms.

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* provides a framework for conceptualizing the "second public sphere" constructed by unofficial artistic communities. Lefebvre argues that space is not a neutral container but a social product, constituted through the interaction of spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational spaces (lived space).[9] In Eastern Europe, the state largely controlled the representations of space: official museums, galleries, and public squares designed to uphold Socialist ideology. These were spaces of power, surveillance, and ideological legibility. Artists, by contrast, operated within lived, representational spaces: apartments, studios, basements, and other semi-private environments.[10] These transformations were not merely physical but also collective and relational, converting private spheres into temporary sites of cultural visibility. Lefebvre's notion of "rhythmanalysis" is also relevant here, since such spaces often functioned according to irregular temporalities—sporadic, intense events in which the "opening" was simultaneously the "closing," distinct from the regulated rhythms of institutional display.[11]

These artist-organized exhibitions further functioned as Foucauldian heterotopias: counter-sites embedded within society yet operating according to different rules. In the Eastern Bloc, the artist-run apartment exhibition often functioned as a "crisis heterotopia," a space reserved for those positioned in tension with the dominant ideological order.[12] The private apartment—such as Nikita Alekseev's space for APTART—collapsed multiple functions at once: home, studio, gallery, archive.[13] This suspension of institutional distinctions enabled the juxtaposition of incompatible elements—artworks and domestic debris, aesthetic discourse and everyday intimacy—enacting the heterotopic principle of bringing disparate worlds into a single real place.

Central to these collective practices is also the question of shared authorship. Charles Green's concept of "The Third Hand," later contextualized within curatorial studies, offers a productive model: sustained collaboration generates a "third" artistic identity, a phantom authorship that exceeds the sum of individual participants.[14] In the Eastern European neo-avant-garde, such collective identity served both aesthetic and political functions. It provided a mode of fusion capable of withstanding pressures of surveillance and enabled the emergence of a collective consciousness that challenged the atomization of subjectivity encouraged by the Socialist state.

The transition from the singular artist-curator to the collective curator thus marks a fundamental shift in the ontology of exhibition making in the late twentieth century. Under Cold War conditions, collective curating functioned as a survival mechanism in the East and a political strategy in the West. Yet both emerged as responses to the alienation of cultural labor. By refusing specialization—by operating simultaneously as artists, curators, organizers, and critics—these collectives resisted both the capitalist division of labor and the bureaucratic division of socialist cultural production. The artist-curators of the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated that mediation itself could become a horizontal, collective practice, capable of short-circuiting the hierarchical models of both state and market.

9 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell, 1991).

10 Cristian Nae, "Basements, Attics, Streets and Courtyards: The Reinvention of Marginal Art Spaces in Romania During Socialism," in *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-based Art in Late Socialist Europe*, ed. Katalin Cseh-Varga, Adam Czirak (Routledge, 2018), 73–85.

11 Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (Continuum, 2004), 15.

12 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16/1 (1986): 24.

13 Margarita Tupytsin, Victor Tupytsin, David Morris, *Anti-Shows: APTART 1982-84* (Afterall, 2017).

14 Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Artist Collaborations from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001).



Viața fără artă? (Life without Art?), mail art exhibition, UAP Gallery, Lugoj. Courtesy of Iosif Király.

Ultimately, this condition of "totalitarian interdisciplinarity" generated a unique mode of cultural production in which boundaries between roles became fluid, collective, and non-hierarchical. It forced artists to short-circuit the division of cultural labor entirely. In a standard capitalist art economy, roles are clearly separated: the artist produces, the dealer distributes, the curator legitimizes, and the critic historicizes, thereby enhancing value within the market. In the "shortage economies" of the Socialist East, however, this division of labor was already structurally distorted. The market was absent, institutions were centralized and propagandistic, and criticism often operated as censorship. Artists were thus forced to become simultaneously producers, distributors, curators, and historians of their own work. Such a conflation of functions resonates, ironically, with Marx's vision of non-alienated labor, in which the individual is not trapped within a single professional identity. In the margins of a system that claimed to represent Marx, artists achieved forms of collective aesthetic labor and horizontal mediation that the state itself could neither accommodate nor provide.

In what follows, I propose and examine three modalities of exhibition making that emerged in Socialist Romania: the exhibition as studio, the exhibition as laboratory, and the exhibition as event—what might also be described as the "anti-show."[15] Although these categories are necessarily anachronistic, having been developed in relation to contemporary curatorial practices shaped by artistic research, they nonetheless help substantiate the claim that such Socialist-era exhibitions were likewise processual, experimental, and oriented toward expanded understandings of artmaking. At the same time, these categories often overlap in many ways, which makes them contextually usable. In these exhibitions, the boundaries between the art object, the exhibition space, and collective practice became increasingly blurred. These modalities of exhibiting will be explored through several case studies including *Studiul (1)* (*The Study (1)*), *I Lived 130 Days with a Sunflower*, *Life without Art?*, *The Writing*, and *House pARTy*.

15 M. Tupytsin, V. Tupytsin, Morris, *Anti-Shows*.

The Exhibition as Studio and Laboratory

In 1978, a group of artists including Ștefan Bertalan and Constantin Flondor took part in an exhibition at the Bastion Gallery, Timișoara. The event was organized by fellow artist Paul Gherasim in response to an invitation extended by art critic Coriolan Babeți.[16] Soon after, artist Ion Grigorescu joined the organizers to assist in the selection of exhibiting artists, while Coriolan Babeți took on a secondary, logistic role. According to Ileana Pintilie, "*The Study 1* exhibition inaugurated teamwork, in complete solidarity of ideas, and above all, suspended, through the choice of artists, the current norm of 'the levels of fame'."[17] This shift occurred because the exhibition was organized into seven thematic sections: "Utopia as an Investment of Research," "Analyses of Structure," "Configurations of Symbols," "Conceptualization of Visual Perception," "Memory Fund Signified by Image," and "Study of Nature and Modes of Interpretation."[18] The titles of sections clearly show that the organizers selected artists based on these pre-defined themes rather than their professional reputation.

The exhibition space was conceived as a visit to a collective studio, where various artists presented preparatory models and unfinished sketches for potential works. Some pieces were intended to serve as models for scalable sculptures and environments. Many of the exhibited works interpreted the "study" through the academic tradition of preparatory drawing; however, others remained purely conceptual drawings—ideas that may or may not be materialized, echoing Lawrence Weiner's famous definition of conceptual art.[19] Critics interpreted the study in various ways. Titus Mocanu decoded it as an "interior state of creation," while Mihai Drișcu viewed it as tension between the tradition of art (systematic knowledge) and its innovation (artistic knowledge). For Paul Gherasim, the term represented a "form of living itself or a way of understanding cultural phenomena."[20]

Ștefan Bertalan and Constantin Flondor were members of the first

16 Ileana Pintilie, "Far from the Center of Power: *Studiul* (*The Study*) Exhibitions in Timișoara," in *(In)Visible Frames. Rhetorics and Experimental Exhibition Practices in Romania 1965-1989* (Idea, 2019), 98–108.

17 Coriolan Babeți, *Atelierul de arte Timişoara* (Triade-Brumar, 2010), 319.

18 Pintilie, "Far from the Center of Power," 103.

19 Lawrence Weiner, "Statement of Intent," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson (MIT Press, 1999), 104–105.

20 Pintilie, "Far from the Center of Power," 103.

experimental group to emerge in the city: the 111 group (comprising Bertalan, Roman Cotoșman, and Flondor), which was selected to represent Romania at the Constructivist Biennial in Nuremberg in 1969. They were also active in the Sigma group, founded by Flondor, Bertalan, and Doru Tulcan, who were later joined by the mathematician Lucian Codreanu (active 1970–1974). By the late 1970s, Ștefan Bertalan exhibited photographic installations presenting knowledge derived from the observation of natural phenomena, such as the fractal development of a cauliflower—analyzing its inner composition based on a spiraling pattern—or the growth cycles of the sunflower. Within his work, the vegetal realm acquired environmental qualities laden with spiritual potential. This is evident in his sketch for an installation based on the internal pattern of a leaf, titled *Cathedral*, designed for the *Studiul 1* exhibition.

The "Utopia as an Investment of Research" section of the exhibition also included Ana Lupaș's project *Flying Carpet, Symbol of Peace* (Rom. *Covor zburător, simbol al păcii*). The artist presented the preparatory phases of a collective performance she organized in the village of Mărgău, near Cluj. Working with the local community, Lupaș trained residents to reenact the ritual of stretching white canvases, resulting in a large-scale art installation reminiscent of the landscape interventions of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The exhibited black-and-white photographs, accompanied by notes and sketches of the forthcoming action, offered a precious insight into her studio as a "creation laboratory."

Further overlapping with the concept of the laboratory, the *Studiul* exhibition featured what critic Mihai Pintilie considers to be "the most interesting work, innovative in concept and technique," as Ileana Pintilie recalls: the multimedia projection *Multivision*.[21] Created as a collaborative project by Flondor, Bertalan, and Tulcan, it consisted of semitransparent screens arranged in a tetrahedron. Both color and black-and-white films were projected onto these surfaces, intersecting in the center. The screening took place at the conclusion of the exhibition's inauguration in the gymnasium of the Art High School in Timișoara, which was transformed *ad hoc* into a performance hall.

The artwork that most effectively blends the characteristics of the exhibition-as-studio with those of the open laboratory is Bertalan's project *Kinogram of the Natural Process Seen through a Lens*. He presented a photomontage complemented by drawings and his own textual notes, which he described as a "plan of the seed developing."[22] In this project, the artist presented a long-term study of the beans, from seed to future growth, and eventually brought the plants themselves into the gallery.

Several of Sigma's activities, inspired by the structure of natural elements such as the plant *Datura stramonium* (jimsonweed), aimed to reintroduce nature-inspired artificial textures back into the environment.

21 Ibid., 105.
22 Ibid., 104.

The architectural environments and shapes employed by the Sigma group were also informed by bionics—the study of organic life promoted at the time by the Timișoara psychiatrist Eduard Pamfil—and by geometric compositions derived from observational research on systems and interactions. Their interventions in the urban tissue were further driven by a desire to regulate the planning of the modernist socialist city through an organicist understanding of life: the Bega River, for instance, was equated with a circulatory system in the action titled *Tense Lines over the Timiș River*.[23]

In this context, Bertalan exhibited photographic installations toward the end of the 1970s that presented knowledge drawn from the observation of the cauliflower's fractal development and spiraling inner composition, or the growth of the sunflower. The sunflower became not only a source of philosophical and artistic wonder but also a "companion" during Bertalan's best-known performance. In this work, he recorded the growth of the plant from seed to maturity and extinction, using a language that was simultaneously spiritual and scientific. Reading the texts aloud, he performed a sequence of movements that visualized the content through a ritual-like choreography.[24] Accompanied by music, the performance—titled *I Lived for 130 Days with a Sunflower*—took place at the Kalinderu Gallery in Bucharest in 1979, at the invitation of art historian and philosopher Andrei Pleșu. The environment was built around a large sunflower and included a series of drawings featuring notations and texts, replicating the artist's studio as a biological research laboratory. His own studio in Timișoara opened onto a garden that served as a site for ongoing experimentation with the growth of plants and insects.

In these projects, the exhibition as a laboratory expands the experimental character of the artistic actions themselves. It transforms the space from a container of aesthetic objects into a space for open-end investigation and artistic research.

Another example of collectively curated exhibition blurring the boundaries between the space of an artist's studio and that of a creative laboratory is the only international mail art exhibition that took place in Romania during Socialism. Titled *Life without Art?*, the exhibition was organized by Constantin Flondor, who was active in the mail art network of the 1980 through initial personal contacts established with East German mail artist Robert Rehfeldt since the late 1960s and maintained during the 1970s. Flondor sent invitations to a series of artists from the international mail art network, including Guillermo Deisler (Uruguay and Bulgaria), Tomasz Schulz (Poland), Aloys Ohlmann, Henning Mittendordf (GFR), Michael Groschopp, and Sigfried Otto (GDR). This was unusual in times of complete cultural and political isolation imposed by Nicolae

23 Ileana Pintilie, "Ștefan Bertalan. Un demers creator de la natură la estetica lui Leonardo," *Patrimonium Banaticum* 3 (2004) : 220.
24 Ibid., 221.

Ceaușescu after 1972 and intensified during the 1980s yet was partially made possible by the fact that the exhibition was organized first in Flondor's own artist studio, and then in a smaller art gallery in Lugoj, a town near Timișoara. The informal space of the first exhibition and its rather unusual character for that time, associated with experiments in graphic arts, highlight its relational character as a rhizomatic network rather than a narrative or discourse. The exhibition did not convey a single idea, did not illustrate moral or aesthetic values—instead, it presented a constellation of answers to the poetic question raised by Flondor (who played the role of the contemporary curator) in the exhibition title. The exhibition was thus organized dialogically, through a relay of responses from friends that were mailed to Flondor. The distinction between mail art and mailed art is important in this context: whereas mail art can be understood as a form of interpersonal communication, which uses mail as a medium and takes its rules and symbols as topics for subversion/creative (anarchic) transformation, mailed art references a form of artistic communication which uses mail to convey messages in the form of small handmade objects, graphic prints, photographs, collages, concrete poetry, or conceptual art pieces, which circulate within the mail art network. The two practices frequently overlapped, preserving mail as their common infrastructural element, a decentered structure that could be accessed from any point, as well as the horizontal, non-hierarchical structure of artistic communication that shaped mail art exhibitions. As various mail art scholars, such as Zanna Gilbert or Klara Kemp-Welch, pointed out, mail art was both infra-institutional (bypassing the existing art institutions and creating their own para-institutions) and translocal, connecting otherwise isolated localities and enabling the transnational circulation of ideas.[25]

However, the most important organizational aspect of mail art exhibitions was their reliance of multiple authorship, as the artists in the network responded by building upon each other's ideas (as Robert Rehfeld stated: "your ideas help other people's ideas"). According to the principles laid out by the Fluxus artist and mail art activist Robert Fillou, as well as to those expressed by the Polish conceptual artist Jarosław Kozłowski, mail art was horizontal, meaning there was no selection involved, and relied only on decentered and delegated institutional authority.[26] In the case of *Life without Art?*, everything that was sent was exhibited—either suspended or fixed on the wall. Therefore, we might state that mail art exhibitions were to a large degree uncurated, since the curator acted as an initiator of a new conversation and as an informational hub within the existing artistic

25 Zanna Gilbert, "'Something Unnamable in Common': Translocal Collaboration at the Beau Geste Press," *ARTMargins* 1/2–3 (June–October 2012): 45–72; Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* (MIT Press, 2019).

26 Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, 21–40.



Scrierea (The Writing), choreographed performance, Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture, Bucharest, 1980. Courtesy of Wanda Mihuleac.

network. *Life without Art?* also materialized in an artist's studio that not only belonged to an international neo-avant-garde artistic community but also relied upon some of the main post-structuralist principles, such as the idea of originality as derivative from multiple formative influences, as expressed by Roland Barthes.[27]

In the history of exhibitions in Romania during socialism, *The Writing* is a landmark experimental "exhibition as laboratory" organized in 1980 by artist Wanda Mihuleac, a central figure in the experimental art circles from Bucharest. Mihuleac's vision was multidisciplinary, going well beyond the borders of "fine arts". It expanded the field of visual arts towards literature, music, theater, film, choreography and architecture. *The Writing* was organized on the hallways of the Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture in Bucharest, starting from the premise that graphic arts are, literally, just one form of notation among other forms of writings (an idea that shares many affinities with the philosophy of Nelson Goodman, as well as with Jacques Derrida's expanded use of the notion of "writing" as a system of signs and marks that oppose "speech"). The exhibition comprised not only musical notations (including John Cage's own system), sketches, excerpts of film scripts (from film director Lucian Pintilie), and many conceptual art pieces, but also sessions of poetry, dance and even public lectures on topics like mathematical notation held by academician Solomon Marcus. Retrospectively, *The Writing* remains a unique moment in Romanian history of exhibitions, since it encompasses not only the premises of postmodernism and post-structuralism, but also the expanded understanding of contemporary art as a field of cultural action that will permeate the global art world after 1989.

27 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–148.



Scrierea (The Writing), poster-catalogue (front cover), 1980.

Anti-Shows: *House pARTy* or the Exhibition as Event

Although apartment exhibitions were less widespread in Eastern Europe than in the Soviet Union, the domestic sphere occasionally functioned as a site of artistic experimentation. In certain contexts, artists transformed their own living or working environments into informal, artist-run spaces, as was the case in several well-documented initiatives in Poland. In Romania, such practices remained relatively uncommon. Nonetheless, the increasing cultural isolation of the country, the deterioration of the living standard, and the intensification of official propaganda surrounding the personality cult of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu during the late 1980s gradually pushed many artists away from institutional exhibition

frameworks. Under these circumstances, artistic exchange and experimentation often retreated into small, informal circles of friends and collaborators who shared similar aesthetic concerns and critical attitudes. These micro-communities provided relatively protected environments in which alternative artistic practices could be explored outside official cultural structures.

It was within such a context that the series of artistic interventions known as *House pARTy* emerged in Bucharest during the late 1980s. It was a series of artistic interventions and performances organized in 1987 and 1988 in the Bucharest home of Decebal and Nadina Scriba, located on Petru Cercel Street. Both editions were documented on VHS video. The first gathering, held in the summer of 1987, emerged in a largely spontaneous manner from the need to find alternative venues for artistic experimentation, as the exhibition spaces controlled by the Artists' Union had become increasingly difficult to challenge or circumvent. In response, Decebal and Nadina Scriba proposed a playful artistic experiment staged within their own domestic environment, appropriating and subtly subverting the socially accepted format of a private one-evening party.

The 1987 event took shape as a loosely collaborative undertaking involving Călin Dan, Dan Mihălțianu, Wanda Mihuleac, Andrei Oișteanu, Nadina Scriba, Decebal Scriba, and Dan Stanciu. A year later, the group expanded to include Teodor Graur and Iosif Kiraly. At Wanda Mihuleac's suggestion, the performances were documented on video: they were filmed by Ovidiu Bujor using a VHS camera purchased in Kathmandu, and the resulting footage was subsequently edited only minimally. In its first edition, most of the actions appear as relatively spontaneous performative interventions, often linked to improvised spatial installations within the house. By contrast, the second edition—planned approximately a year in advance—introduced more structured scenarios, and the performances evolved into a sequence of individual video works authored by each participant. The initial premise of *House pARTy* had been to transform the domestic interior into a constellation of temporary artistic installations, with each participant selecting a specific area of the house and redefining it through material modifications and performative gestures. These spatial reconfigurations were further mediated by the act of video recording, which introduced an additional layer of representation of the transformed environment. Interestingly, only four participants in the 1987 event—Călin Dan, Dan Mihălțianu, Andrei Oișteanu, and Dan Stanciu—appear in the surviving footage. In the 1988 recordings, however, the performances of all participants are presented individually and separated by a clapperboard, giving the documentation a more explicitly cinematic structure, though at the same time diminishing some of the collective spontaneity that had characterized the earlier event.

From a curatorial perspective, *House pARTy* was a series of events rather than a mere spatial installation or (re)arrangement. It was a performative action that not only transformed the private sphere into an

artistic heterotopia, but also consecrated it as an exhibition space through collectively agreed performative procedures, if interpreted through Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space, as I mentioned elsewhere.[28] Like Flondor's studio used as an exhibition space for the exhibition *Life without Art?*, *House pARTy* became a cultural event consisting of a series of artistic actions and site-specific interventions that temporarily transformed the space, which was, in Arthur Danto's words, conceptually "transfigured" into an artistic environment.[29]

Such a temporal, performative structure of the exhibition—inherently ephemeral without proper documentation and unique in its site-specific and improvisational character—also impacted the curatorial process, as it was less oriented towards the production of discourse or knowledge and more towards the production of unruly and unsupervised social situations that favored aesthetic autonomy. Inherently, *House pARTy*, together with many other similar cases from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, can also be seen as a precursor of "relational aesthetics,"[30] whose main goal was the production of non-alienated social relations among artists involved in an experimental artistic project. Whereas Bourriaud, referring to the globalizing world of the 1990s, considered alienation as related to the capitalist post-industrial relations of production, I use the term in relation to a social tissue reified by ideological conformism and performative mimicry through mechanical integration in the political rituals organized by the state. In relation to the Soviet era Apartment Art Exhibitions, *House pARTy* reflects the curatorial "methodology of friendship," as suggested by Margarita and Victor Tupytsin. As Victor Skersis notes, "the purpose of a show in a Western gallery is to show the completed works of an artist to the public. Truly, it is a very archaic situation, where artworks broadcast conserved messages from a patriarchal figure behind the scenes to the congregation. On the other hand, in a closely knit community, as Aptart was, the purpose of a show was for a collective to assemble and discuss the common subject, which made Aptart work more like a lab than a museum."[31] Skersis's invocation of "a laboratory" is particularly revealing, as it underscores the open-ended, experimental character of artistic research—an inquiry whose aims, in this instance, were neither commercial nor ideologically representational, but rather directed toward the realization of aesthetic autonomy. Discussing the "evenimential" context of such exhibitions, understood as "anti-shows," Natalia Abakalova and Anatoly Zhigalov highlight that

28 Nae, "Basements, Attics, Streets and Courtyards," 83-84.
29 Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Harvard University Press, 1981).
30 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods (Les presses du réel, 2002).
31 David Morris, "Introduction: Anti-shows," in M. Tupytsin, V. Tupytsin, Morris, *Anti-Shows*, 21.

"the event is not an exhibition in the normal sense of the term. This is the continuation of explorative work, one of its phases, not in specifically artistic surroundings but in a real live apartment. And those who come here will find work and cooperation rather than the normal 'viewing of art objects." There are no 'art objects' here in the usual sense. These are not 'finished works," but rather art-in-making."[32]

Beyond the obvious contextual differences among artistic individualities and national political contexts, it becomes clear that the category of apartment art exhibitions, such as *House pARTy*, established a fully enclosed and immanent system of artistic production, exhibition, and reception, in which the artists themselves also functioned as the audience. This participatory and self-referential structure blurred the boundaries between creator and viewer, while simultaneously bypassing conventional art criticism—which, at the time, remained largely ideologically aligned and submissive.

However, for the performative events to become visible in conditions of limited cultural visibility, their documentation and archiving was of outmost importance. In the case of *House pARTy*, the video camera acted as a framing device, ensuring the survival and future circulation of performance art as well as of the site-specific installation pieces in the context of a globalized (and commercially oriented) artworld. Video recording did not play a secondary role, but a structural one: it replaced the framing devices of an institutionally recognized art space and ensured the circulation of the entire exhibition in a different format (the VHS tape) in a way which evoked Marcel Duchamp's *La Boîte-en-valise*.

Conclusions

Discussing the phenomenon of contemporary art exhibitions, Boris Groys noted that most of them appear not only as the realization of a (main) curator's view or plan, but rather as structures engaging multiple authorship: "Thus if the choice, the selection, the decision with respect to the exhibition of an object are to acknowledged as acts of artistic creation, then every individual exhibition is presented as the result of many such processes of decision, choice, and selection. From this circumstance result multiple, disparate, heterogeneous authorships that combine, overlap, and intersect, without it being possible to reduce them to an individual, sovereign authorship. This overlapping of multilayered, heterogeneous authorships is characteristic of any larger exhibition of recent years."[33]

Self-organized and self-curated group art exhibitions during Socialism, such as those in Socialist Romania discussed in this text,

32 Natalia Abakalova, Anatoly Zhigalov, "Analysis-Action. TOTART," in M. Tupytsin, V. Tupytsin, Morris, *Anti-Shows*, 93.
33 Boris Groys, "Multiple Authorship," in *Art Power* (MIT Press, 2008), 97.

demonstrate a radical rethinking of both artistic production and exhibition-making as representational strategies, displaying many of the features highlighted by Groys. They present aesthetic experimentation and art as an open-end process of artistic creation, which also shaped social relations based on a curatorial "methodology of friendship." Under conditions of ideological control, infrastructural scarcity, and cultural isolation, artists were compelled to assume multiple roles—creator, curator, organizer, and audience—effectively establishing self-contained systems of artistic production and reception. These practices challenged conventional hierarchies of authorship and disrupted the distinction between art making and art display, producing spaces that were simultaneously experimental, participatory, and socially embedded.

The exhibition itself became a medium of inquiry, a space for experimentation, collective creativity, and the negotiation of social relations, rather than a simple presentation of finished works.

Private and marginal spaces were transformed into heterotopias, where conventional rules of viewership and institutional authority were suspended. The ephemeral and improvisational nature of these exhibitions necessitated alternative strategies for documentation, such as video recording, which functioned not merely as archival tools but also as structural extensions of the exhibitions themselves, allowing them to persist and circulate beyond the immediate event. In this way, the act of showing became inseparable from the act of making, producing environments in which aesthetic and social processes unfolded simultaneously.

Ultimately, these practices highlight the model of the exhibition as a laboratory, which refuses the mere act of "showing" and is a site of open-end investigation and self-reflexive engagement, where collective authorship and relational exchange foster aesthetic autonomy. They challenge conventional historiographies of art by demonstrating that significant cultural production can occur outside institutional frameworks and that the roles of artist, curator, and audience need not be separate. By foregrounding fluidity, collaboration, and experimentation, artist-curated exhibitions offer enduring lessons for understanding the social, spatial, and temporal dimensions of contemporary artistic practice.

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