

Contemporary Art and Discourse in Romania: Three Interviews with Artists Larisa Crunțeanu, Marta Jakobovits and Cătălin Petrișor

The following interviews were conducted with three artists based in Romania: Larisa Crunțeanu, Marta Jakobovits and Cătălin Petrișor. With different approaches and media, their work show the compelling range of art practices thriving in the country.

Especially over the last year, Romanian artists have been the subjects of international attention. The first edition of the Vienna Biennale – which ended in October 2015 – included an ambitious exhibition at the MAK (the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts / Contemporary Art) entitled *Mapping Bucharest: Art, Memory and Revolution 1916-2016*. The intent of the show was to reveal how Romanian artists shaped all-important artistic movements in Europe, while portraying Bucharest as the city that can offer an insight into Europe's future.

Another recent event taking place in the Romanian city of Timișoara aspired to create a field study of the Romanian art scene: Art Encounters is a programme of exhibitions that wants to seek out cultural difference and place the secret chapter of Romanian art within the global discourse.

However, artists and cultural professionals from Romania seem to have conflicting opinions on the relation between the country and Western Europe. On the one hand, the contemporary art scene is growing, being interpreted by bright conceptual artists and curators orchestrating thought-provoking activities in many centres of the country, which generate interest from the rest of the world; on the other hand, as showed by some penetrating articles published on the main Romanian art magazine [Revista Arta](#), this is still a highly heated debate. Alongside prominent international voices – such as the philosopher Marina Gržinić – signalling the current repetition of the divide East-West, some Romanian figures are expressing the need for an authentic art that can subvert Western codes and its validation.

Leaving aside the socioeconomic implications, the art scene in Romania is enlivened by four main hubs: Bucharest, Cluj, Timișoara and Sibiu, together with the artists living abroad. Although traditionally renowned for its painters – two famous contemporary examples are Adrian Ghenie and Victor Man –, the Eastern European country is in the vanguard of multidisciplinary art. Ioana Nemeș' practice was one that exquisitely alluded to the potential of cross-disciplinary projects: her remarkable experiment *Monthly Evaluations* was an almost scientific ritual, for which she exhibited items archiving her everyday life; emotions conveyed by mathematical and economic diagrams.

Spaces such as [Atelier 35](#) and [Salonul de Proiecte](#) in Bucharest offer platforms for emerging artists to produce and present socially and politically engaged work. Xandra Popescu and Larisa Crunțeanu, an artist duo who combine collaboration and support to other artists, run Atelier 35. Owned by the Romanian Artists' Union, this project space has been the site of stimulating interventions coordinated by the two; the most recent one is *Revolutionary Gear*.

The History of Art Retold Through the Black Square by Veda Popovici. Her instructional video project reconsiders moments of art history to urge a new revolutionary vision. Her revolution works as an accomplished theoretical declaration, but also as a terrorist threat.

In our interview Larisa Crunțeanu emphasized how collaborating with other artists is what allows her to not specialise on one medium; the artist can be the all-knowing amateur. Her work as performer, video and sound artist moves from reality to fiction in an endless conversation with the viewer. She is a PhD candidate at the National Arts University of Bucharest and she has exhibited work at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest (MNAC). Her latest project *Femina Subtatrix* was a collaboration with the Berlin-based artist Sonja Hornung and was presented at the [Ivan Gallery](#) in September 2015. The exhibition collected objects, images, videos and sounds produced in response to their visits to a wasteland near the APACA textile factory in the Politehnica area in Bucharest. *Femina Subtatrix*, meaning 'weaving woman', is about mothers working in light industries, invisible games and revealing understandings.

A thorough engagement with materials and a sensuous approach is what characterises Marta Jakobovits' practice. Her ceramic pieces dialogue with the natural world as well as our human spiritual essence. Working with a sheer variety of shapes and arrangements, her art is positively magical. In the series *Pilgrimage* she combines geometries with intimacy. She has exhibited internationally and received awards from countries such as Hungary, Japan and Romania. Her next exhibition opens this coming November at the Romanian Academy in Rome.

Cătălin Petrișor's paintings are carriers for his interventions. His conversation is primarily with the potential of his medium. The surfaces of his paintings don't unveil reality; they deconstruct it to uncover the action of image making. *The Illusion of Depth* is the title of his exhibition at the Mind Set Art Centre in Taipei in May 2015. For this solo show the artist explored ways to unsettle the Renaissance principle of perspective. In the space lines on the walls led to rectangular shapes leading to black and white images. Each object was part of a narrative intriguing the viewer. In the following interview the artist discusses the notion of space and imagination as the most suited way to orient us in the world.

Cătălin Petrișor

GD: Your practice seems to be combining art and science, while also showing the inherent mechanisms of the process of creation. Can you tell about your artistic demands and current research?

CP: Even if I studied painting a lot during school (both technically and the history of painting), I've also experimented with other media to express my practice. I am now trying to combine these techniques and I am using painting in other fields too. I read about "painting in expanded field", which I liked as concept and I am referring to it in my work. One example is my video *reasons for stained* (you can access it here <http://www.catalinpetrisor.com/blog/reasons-for-stained-september-2015>). I painted the studio walls in order to obtain a Chroma key, which could help me for this short video.

GD: One of your shows to have drawn my attention is The Illusion of Depth. The exhibitions presented a wide variety of works referring to the Renaissance concept of perspective; to this illusion of space was counterbalanced the alternative meaning given by your work. Can you tell me about the idea behind this exhibition and the artworks you selected for it?

CP: *The Illusion of Depth* was my first solo exhibition at Mind Set Art Center in Taipei, Taiwan. With this project I didn't want to illustrate a concept, but rather an alternative for re-sensing painting by starting with its most rigid form: the renaissance canon based on the laws of Euclidian geometry. Painting is no longer a form of seduction which delivers a story under the illusion of reality (...). It actually hides the essence of an internal construction, which requires honesty and an effort to know to be able to be realised. This self-revelation is the release of appearances of the visual space created through light, shadows but mostly through tutelary geometry, without the help of which the illusory dimension of depth cannot be held. This show is about overrating painting as a way of expression, especially here in Romania. Painting is no way superior to other means of expression, as calligraphy isn't likewise.

GD: How to Mend Unbroken Things is the title of another recent project in collaboration with Ana Maria Micu. During this work-in-progress activity a relation was created between the interactive mobile workshop Abstract Circle you had run in Craiova and the different context of 'my art' in Vienna. How did you respond to the challenge of adapting your apparently finalised work to a different environment?

CP: Under the title *How to Mend Unbroken Things* I presented a short fragment from the photo-video documentation of the *Abstract Circle* performance (the documentation of this performance was made by Ana Maria Micu). This performance – a mobile workshop – lasted for 7 days and it consisted in re-echoing the almost abandoned practice of en plein air painting. Every day I created a painting inspired by the association of constructivism and the anonymous and spontaneous geometrical manifestations – spread through serial productions – which can be found in the design of urban windows' gratings. The purpose of the *Abstract Circle* project – which took place in a suburb of Craiova with the support of Craiova European Capital of Culture 2021 Association, and which was coordinated by art critic and historian Catalin Davidescu – was to convey the following message through the arts: living in a world without borders, imagination is the most suited way to orient ourselves. (...) The concept of real is one of the most debated ones in art because nowadays exact definitions of this term always prove to be

erroneous statements. (...) The project's intention was to provoke a new kind of interest towards abstract art, through its production as an activity which can be done by anyone without acquiring any special knowledge. (...) We will reach a time when the separation between the artist and the world will no longer happen, and this will emphasize a positive individualism that will succeed in overcoming rigid fortuities. Alongside this fragment from the *Abstract Circle*, Ana produced a collage-drawing made of white self-adhesive vinyl cuts that were imprinted in sections of the floor and wall. Her drawing stood as an evidence of daily activities (...). In Vienna I continued working on various sketches that I had done outdoors in Craiova by covering them with new layers of paint, protecting some parts with black-out tape, which become an integral element of the painting process. These works are somehow related to the act of showing some static objects made in black ice, which draw specific patterns on the paper underneath as they melt. Currently I am working on a project on static natural forms constructed from ice.

GD: Another subject within your practice appears to be the concept of distance between realities that are both factual and imaginary. How the medium of painting can contribute to this discourse? Can you describe the process you were interested in the 2013 video The Distance Itself?

CP: The Distance Itself was my third collaboration with C-Space in China. Here I exhibited nine black and white paintings – in fact a recurring element of my current painting practice is the use of all types of black that can be found on the market, which I then combine with titanium white. This series of paintings entails a process of reflection that moves back and forth between the space and the explorer; in this space two circular relationships are implied, one between the image and the artist and another one between the work of art and the perceiver. Some of these paintings were used as support for small objects found outside, objects which inspired me to create them. Beside these nine paintings I presented a video that gave the title to the exhibition: *The Distance Itself*, 2013, 38m19s HD video. This video should function as a statement (presentation-explanation-declaration) for each painting. In my practice together with the photo documentation I include the video documentation. I document the stages of a painting starting with the idea-stage, to finally realise a video which I edit in order to avoid the simplistic documentary information and obtain instead something closer to the artistic field.

More examples of Cătălin's videos can be found here:

<http://www.catalinpetrisor.com/blog>

Marta Jakobovits

GD: Marta you started your journey in the arts at the Academy for Visual Arts in Cluj (Romania), and then developed an increasingly international profile. Tell me about your early influences and the beginning of your career as a ceramic artist.

MJ: Thinking about my beginnings, I consider myself a very privileged person, as I was born in a little village and I lived there until I was thirteen years old. I could enjoy the great freedom of country children, and the sensuous but magical nearness to nature, which I discovered gradually. That little place was the big World for me. Everything, each little thing, each impression had a great importance for me. I still remember the feeling and amazement at walking barefoot on the wet clay roads after the rain. This is maybe why when I touch the clay I feel like going back, not only to my childhood, but also to ancient times; and I feel amazingly contemporary with those times – several thousands years don't matter. (...) At university I was lucky to have professors and colleagues who challenged me. They inspired me; we were united by the same passion. Then I became more and more conscious of what a wonderful human activity I was gifted by destiny. (...) Working in my studio and teaching at the same time at different levels, including university, for more than forty years has allowed me to develop a comprehensive knowledge in the field of Ceramics and Paper Art. Over the years my interest and passion for expressing myself through the language of materials – understanding the secrets of the materials and their possibilities – has increasingly grown.

GD: Your practice seems to retain a beautiful connection between the artworks you create and space, the environment surrounding them. I am thinking of your action of placing your works on soil on the floor in your series Travelling in Time and natural setting for Action - Interaction. How do you see the relation between ceramics and space?

MJ: My ceramic pieces easily dialogue with natural materials and together they create places for meditation, spiritual islands, circles, roads and pilgrims' ways. (...) I try to look around with fresh eyes and to be open-minded, as if I were seeing everything for the first time, and feeling that behind and beyond the most common things there are marvels and miracles to discover, which can be hardly expressed by words; they are beyond our human understanding. Feeling very close to nature, I keep collecting little things, pebbles, stones, bark, shells and all sorts of little pieces from nature, believing that they are telling me something I have to decipher. But my collection is a very subjective selection, and this is how the collected pieces create an interesting dialogue with my ceramic pieces. To work with clay and with other ceramic materials is for me an ongoing process, a never-ending pursuit. I try to translate myself into those materials and be as genuine and as instinctive as I can. It is a very personal dialogue, which results in small primary shapes having their own features, their own character; then forms appear, related forms, groups of forms, segments of my spiritual diary. Starting from a totally instinctive approach, a special state of mind, I let myself be guided through by the messages of clay, I respond to the impulses coming from it. Afterwards I wonder, was that even in me?

GD: Pilgrimage is in my opinion one of your most compelling works. What was the inspiration for this project and what were you hoping to convey with the objects you created?

MJ: In a period of time I work on different segment of ceramics, and one of these I called 'pilgrimage', which is in fact a spiritual diary translated into material. (...) Ceramics is such a special language. I am convinced that even the most primitive methods, the most rudimentary techniques have still so many things to discover, to give shape to, which cannot be formulated by any other media. (...) This is why I cannot understand when they say that in ceramics everything has been told, that there is nothing more to be discovered, so we have to be up-to-date and use virtual form-generating techniques and 3D printing, because there is no need to get our hands dirty with clay. (...) Since the beginning of my professional activity I have always felt that there is something more important in ceramics than simply making beautiful shapes out of clay. Clay and the other materials we are working with are methods of a special language, which enables us to express essence that cannot be expressed in other ways. These methods are able to take us into other dimensions, rich in secrets of our existence, beyond the limits of the logical and conceptual thinking. (...) As artists we strive to understand these hidden relationships, but we have to admit that before the great wonders we are often confused, vulnerable and fragile.

Marta's website: <http://www.jakobovits-marta.ro/>

Larisa Crunțeanu

GD: Larisa, you are a performer, a video and sound artist and you are also doing a PhD in Bucharest. Can you tell me more about your studies; your background is in photography...?

LC: Actually my BA was in Journalism and this was, let's say, the springboard and beginning of my friendship with the arts. In my first year of studies I won a position as a junior reporter in the politics department of a TV, and that's where I realised how difficult it was to do it, both emotionally and ethically. The reality and the image of the reality we were constructing felt so disconnected that I soon wanted to quit. But before I did it, an editor suggested that I tried covering some culture & arts events. And that's how it started. Time passed by and I was trying to keep up with this illusion of objectivity, reporting on arts and keeping, as much as possible, my opinions for myself. A couple of years later, when I attended some informal gatherings that were held at the Dance National Centre in Bucharest, I started to experiment with another type of objectivity, or self-positioning in relationship to a specific event or situation. I started making performance, specifically conceptual performance and happenings. This is when I decided I wanted to study art. Afterwards, I did a Master in Still and Moving Image at the National University of Arts in Bucharest. And after that I took a break and then applied for a PhD. In this one-year break, together with Xandra Popescu and Alice Gancevici, I started to coordinate the project space Atelier 35. Nowadays, I'm still doing that together with Xandra, whom I'm also partnering in art projects.

GD: What kind of activities does Atelier 35 support?

LC: Most of the things we have produced in Atelier 35 are projects where the artists have still not completed their works, where they are usually in the stage of elaborating a concept or finding the medium or aesthetics of an idea. It's funny to see now the effect of this constant conversation, I think it made me drift away from the idea of specialising in one medium and becoming more of a universal amateur.

GD: These notions seem to have been prompted by your collaboration with Xandra Popescu and your past projects together. How did you develop the work entitled Things for Money?

LC: *Things for Money* focused on people's relations with money, the idea of having or losing something that is abstract but that can fulfil any wish - money, or the prospect of money. At some point Xandra had the idea of putting together some of the stories involving money and things people do for money. Her background is in dramatic writing, and she has a huge talent for creating narratives. So we did this and the first form of the work we produced was two sets of postcards, one with portraits of people and one with these stories. The two sets were next to each other, but it wasn't clear how or if they are connected in any way. The work was presented in an art fair, where visitors could have as giveaways these cards, but only in pairs. So by choosing a face for a story they were actually setting the characters. This work was called *Things for Money*, and it was presented as part of an exhibition put together by Salonul de Proiecte, entitled *Dear Money*. It was very interesting to see how much we think in stereotypes, how a certain face would do certain things for money. I guess this also touches on the interest into the distance between the self and the image of the self. This work was presented in 2013, but we kept thinking about developing it further. In the beginning of 2014, Xandra and I went

on a one-month residency offered by the tranzit network in Vienna at Museumsquartier which we used as a production time to transform the collection into a performance, which moved more towards the subject of regret concerning broader issues. It is a performance for one or two characters, depending on the situation, and it's a modular performance, in which the audience can choose which stories are about to be enacted. In the performance there is a guru who claims that she can heal people from one of the hardest diseases of our time, which is regret. This appetite for regret appeared as a response to something that is much more valued these days, which is nostalgia; so we chose to talk about the uglier sister of nostalgia.

GD: Your work seems to start from history, some specific ideas, and then to test them through different objects, which are turned into words, performance and much more. Each subject you are choosing seems to have the potential to become a world in itself..

LC: I think this is determined by the nature of the conversation, where every new line of thought relies on a previous one, and so on, until you don't remember where it started and can barely wait to see what's next...(laughs) ...or this is how I flatter myself maybe. Memory grows in hoards of thoughts. In my collaboration with Xandra there is this constant action of push me-pulling you strategy. (...) I work with objects but it is the idea behind it that is more important. The idea of a gesture becoming a work without explanations, without being included in a larger discourse is for me very unappealing. Exactly like you were saying, for me art starts very real and it keeps being played in reality.

GD: Earlier on you mentioned how Western art needs Balkan artists to fill a void. How do you think your practice as artist and curator is influenced by your own context, your living in Bucharest?

LC: I like Bucharest because of the way it makes me work. There is a fantasy of the artist as someone locked away in a tower, independent and isolated from the rest. I'm not buying into that. I try to live and work in the public sphere, in a constant mental connection to the now and here. I just feel this way I don't lose contact with what is possible and what the contemporary discourse is. And this is very important in a city that is so unsettled like Bucharest. This city is a like a pop song- you know all the elements, but still the way they are put together creates personality and style. But this also means you have to be aware and keep up to date. I love this feeling of very different elements and styles crammed together, one into another, I think this is what makes this place to be Bucharest. It feels like capitalism has just bumped into it; that's something that I miss when I'm away, the fact that it's so alive.

GD: Talking of different elements combining together and ambiguous histories, I cannot help but think of your new show Femina Subtetrax, which is exhibited in the space at Ivan Gallery in Bucharest. How was working with such a dense story?

LC: *Femina Subtetrax* is a collaboration with Sonja Hornung, an Australian artist based in Berlin, and Xandra Popescu as curator of the show. Sonja is a very good artist whom I knew about, through Xandra, before meeting. Her work approaches objects to erase their identity, while still maintaining a feeling of approachability, of interaction. (...) Long before we met I wanted to work with a specific topography, the former site of a factory, which is misleadingly called Apaca. But I kept postponing working on it. So when I met her I and saw that we shared this interest I was very excited; we started talking about a possible common endeavour in Bucharest and things evolved from there and starting from let's say a mistake, the fact that this

land was called Apaca when in fact it wasn't, we started addressing the history of the real Apaca factory as well. The factory was built in 1948, erasing the small manufacturing workshops that were there. All the construction was made with voluntary work and in the enthusiastic spirit of communist propaganda in a record time - 40 days! During the communist time Apaca was known as the Chanel of Romania; they had a specific section for high rank party members, catalogues, catwalks and diplomatic visits. And it was very large, at some point employing up to 6.000 women. After the communist state collapsed, the factory still belonged to the state, but they started firing employees. In 1992 privatisation started, but thank to a cell structure it was hard to be sold in one piece and so it has multiple owners, which is actually the reason why most of the building is still standing. Nowadays Apaca is a complex of buildings; some of them still have the same technical equipment and business profile, and others have turned into something else. And so, on the other side of the road, there is a huge wasteland, which is also called Apaca, but was actually a munitions factory. So on one side of the road the heavy industry and on the other the light industry. A gender separation required by industrial lightness. As Xandra mentions in the curatorial text, it was interesting to work combining such different perspectives: myself from the inside, and Sonja from the outside. My parents are the generation of the sacrifice for the privatisation of the industry, and my grandparents are the generation of the sacrifice for the industrialisation of this nation. These are political, economical and social decisions that are inscribed in the actual lives of several generations of people. I might also be a generation of sacrifice, but we'll only be able to tell what the sacrifice was made for in 20 years or so.

GD: How did you elaborate this bundle of information into art objects?

LC: We wanted to work with objects to make them approachable, in a way that one can address them and have a physical response. The works don't have names, but they have instructions. This was Xandra's idea and it was a crazily good one as it contributes to a feeling of technical museum. The first work piece is a cube, which contains a cast of my and Sonja's right hands. Visitors can slide their hands in it and experience a hidden gesture, which cannot be seen but can be felt.

GD: How did you come to work with concrete?

LC: It was important to underline how concrete is a material that is not intended for women to work with, but it is also a material that signifies something heavy and stable. (...) I read somewhere that 50% of the cement in the world disappears or it is in the air. So something that we believe is very stable and creates a steady living and/or working environment mostly vanishes. (...)

GD: How come you didn't include much of the APACA women's original stories in the show?

LC: Well, we had interviews with these women and a huge media archive created during the research time, but in the end we decided not to include any of this visual material; for me and for Sonja it was more important to see the mechanism behind it and allow ourselves to be like a strain which only keeps some of the elements. For me it was important to resist the impulse of showing documents that were already available, but which wouldn't have involved our subjectivities so much. (...) I think in the end this is such a multilayered story that we could have only told it in an honest, first person voice.

More information on *Femina Subtetric* can be found here:

<http://www.ivangallery.com/en/exhibition/21/femina-subtetric>