

MODERN PAINTERS

**The New Roman(ian) Order**

by Jane Neal

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FROM TOP: Mihai Pop, left, and Mihaela Lukac of Plan B's Berlin location; Victor Man, Untitled (Old Blue), 2007. Oil on canvas mounted on wood, cane. Painting, 304 x 124 in., installed dimensions variable. OPPOSITE: The site of Plan B's new space in Cluj.

## While no one was looking, Romania's thirtysomething artists seized control of their country's feeble gallery scene. Now, they're infiltrating the art world en masse.

by Jane Neal

ACCORDING TO LEGEND, THE ROMANIAN SCULPTOR CONSTANTIN BRANCUȘI refused Auguste Rodin's invitation to come to work in his studio because "nothing grows well in the shadow of a big tree." The prospect of being overwhelmed by an already successful and established artist is one thing, but the reality of living under a dictatorship and through its aftermath is quite another. Strangely, though, these problematic circumstances may have helped contribute to the generation of thirtysomething Romanian artists recently gaining recognition on the international art scene. Growing up during communism and witnessing its disintegration, followed by the rapid onslaught and effects of consumer culture on their society, has given them a unique perspective.

It could be, as Romanian critic Mihaela Mircea proposes, that the artists have developed a kind of "allergy to Utopia" that has imbued them with a watchful detachment, a desire to deconstruct and uncover things for themselves and to develop and sustain a strongly independent voice in their work. It would be wrong, though, to suggest that a common theme threads through the work of all up-and-coming Romanian artists. What they do share—and this extends across their various practices—is a highly

individualized sense of perception often mingled with a dark, sometimes ironic, approach to their chosen subject matter.

A number of factors have contributed to the ascendancy of Romanian artists, not least the success of Plan B, an artist-run gallery in Cluj, a city that is itself something of a rising star. The capital of the northwestern province of Transylvania, it is a quickly growing academic, commercial, cultural, and technological center. Plan B began quite modestly in 2005 as a collaboration between the multimedia artist Mihai Pop and the painter Adrian Ghenie, who were entering their thirties and were frustrated by the local art scene—what there was of one. With a tiny loan from a family friend, they established a commercial gallery that could function as an exhibition space, a vehicle for promoting artists internationally, and a laboratory where artists could initiate research and develop projects. The name of the gallery was a wry acknowledgment of the fact that, up to that point, all of their plan As had come to nothing.



Dipier Muresan, *Choice*, 2005. DVD PAL, 41 sec.

Laika and Sabot, the newest editions to the gallery scene.

Meanwhile, Plan B shares a number of artists with Romanian-focused galleries outside the country in order to increase their international exposure. Among them is Mihai Nicodim's eponymous gallery in Culver City, California, where the recently opened group show "I Wanted a Horseshoe as If It Were a Flower" features a mix of Romanian, American, and British artists. Like Pop, the Romanian-born Nicodim has worked hard to create a forum for Romanian art on the world stage.

But Plan B is not the only gallery in Romania to gain wider recognition. The Bucharest-based Andreiana Mihail Gallery will also premiere in Frieze's "Frame," a new component of the fair dedicated to young galleries that exhibit solo-artist shows, presenting the conceptual artist duo Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor. And in both Bucharest and Cluj is the aforementioned Laika, run by artists Marius Bercea, Vlad Olariu, Serban Savu, and Mircea Suciu. The idea behind Laika was to link two art scenes previously distinct from each other and thereby double the exposure for participating artists. The gallery showcases exciting emerging Romanian artists and those more established practitioners who might wish to have the opportunity to experiment on projects not typical of their usual practice. "We want to provide visibility in [these two cities], and we think it's very important that artists from Laika are seen by both audiences," says Bercea. Laika is one good example of a drive to not only provide a showcase for interesting new work but also to promote dialogue within Romania outside of the state-run institutions, which have a problematic image, due in large part to the country's political history.

Lia and Dan Perjowschi's model, the Contemporary Art Archive, is opposed to unruly government spending on cultural institutions. The CAA is run by the Perjowschis from their Bucharest studio, and the modest—and 100 percent privately funded—building that houses their organization is particularly poignant when held up against the controversial National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC). The latter occupies, along with Parliament, the gargantuan "People's Palace" masterminded by Nicolae Ceausescu, and the maintenance costs alone are exorbitant. Also in Bucharest, the nongovernmental, apolitical, and nonprofit International Centre for Contemporary Art (IOCA) targets the young in particular and seeks to provide a resource center, a creative laboratory, and a platform for art to reach the wider community.

Concurrently, outside the capital, the Periferic Biennial in Iasi, the principal city of the province of Moldavia, has deliberately maximized its

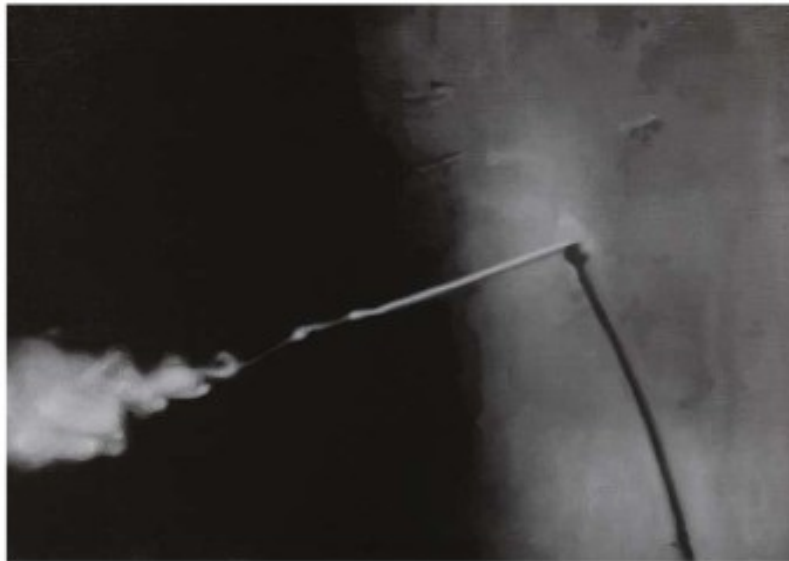
position, though geographically peripheral, in northeast Romania. Operated by a dedicated group working under the name Vector Association, Periferic was initiated by artist Manei Bejenaru in 1997 and has grown into an international biennial. Always intended to operate outside the market, Periferic has nonetheless managed to create a sustainable operational structure. The involvement of experienced foreign curators in the biennial, the creation of the Studio for Art Practices and Debates—an educational platform for critical research and art production—in partnership with the local university, and the establishment of Vector Gallery (an independent art space with an international and educational program) have resulted in the city experiencing a greatly increased level of visibility and the development of a thriving local art scene.

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Interestingly, virtually all of the artists who have begun to enjoy international success spent time away from Romania during the formative years of their artistic careers: Cantor in France, Man in Israel, Ghenie in Austria, Muresan in the Czech Republic, and Savu in Italy. Cantor, whose first solo exhibition in Switzerland, "Tracking Happiness," runs through October at the Kunsthaus Zürich, summarizes the impact of leaving Romania on his life and work: "Living between two countries gave me the opportunity to see the good and bad side of the contexts without being too touched by it, though [at the same time] not indifferent."

That so many young Romanian artists are becoming successful internationally is a phenomenon that intrigues and puzzles many, not least the artists themselves. Savu says, "No one knows why," but, after pausing for thought, he offers a possible explanation. "For so long, while we were growing up, there was this sense of frustration, a longing to get outside and taste freedom and to emulate the West. Once we had the opportunity to make something happen, we took it; we traveled. We learned what we could from established art scenes: how the gallery systems worked, how artists' careers developed. It wasn't as if we didn't have strong and interesting artists in Romania; the problem was how to become visible on a global scale. We realized we needed to apply what we had learned outside, inside. We had an opportunity that had been denied [to] the older generation, and we didn't want to waste this."

It is clear when talking to younger artists that they feel a certain obligation to their older counterparts. Certainly preceding generations of Romanian artists have played a part in the development of the highly conceptualized thinking that distinguishes much of Romanian art. Young artists such as Cantor are keen to support and promote figures such as painter Ion Grigorescu, sculptor Bone Rudolf, and the conceptual, multidisciplinary artist Miklos Otuscan, who taught and inspired them. Cantor says, "Due to our history, these artists didn't get the chance to benefit from international exposure. They grew like marvelous flowers and gave their fruits in a space where, often, they weren't taken for what they [were]. Now it's time that these flowers show their colors



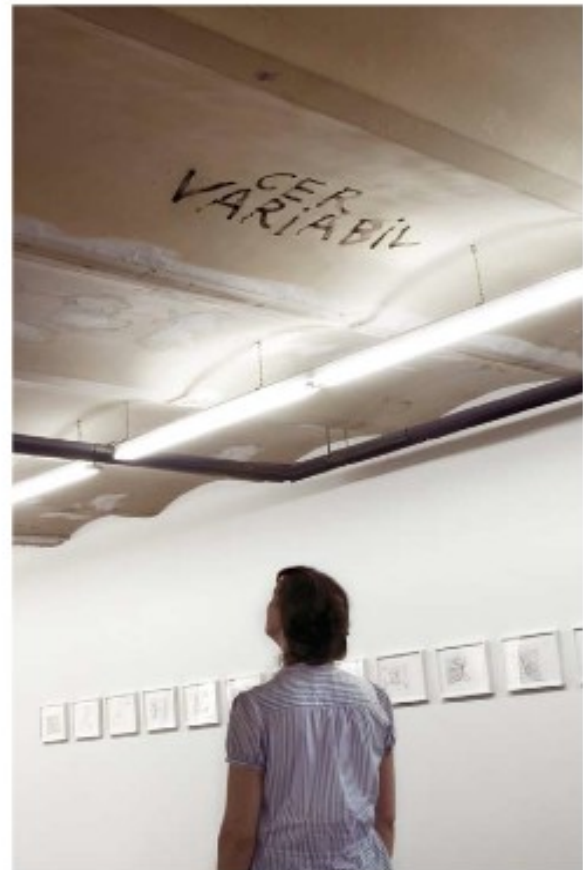
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Victor Manu, *Untitled (detail)*, 2007. Oil on canvas mounted on wood and print on acetate. Painting: 10 1/2 x 14 1/2 in., acetate: 15 1/2 x 10 1/4 in., installed dimensions variable. IDEA art + society cover, issue no. 30-31, 2008. installation view of "Berlin Show #1," Plan B, Berlin; Victor Manu, *Untitled*, 2007. Oil on canvas mounted on board and print on acetate. Painting: 22 1/4 x 14 1/4 in., acetate: 15 x 22 1/4 in., installed dimensions variable.



and [fragrances] in the global garden, I believe that these artists are still very up to date and should be recognized."

Many art academies in Romania still refuse to acknowledge the role of cultural theory and critical thinking in contemporary-art education. Instead, it is such entities as the Cluj-based *IDEA art + society*, a magazine devoted to the dialogue between artists and thinkers in the field of social analysis, that have stepped into the intellectual vacuum. There are a number of other publications, among them the Bucharest-based quarterly *Omagia*, that operate as vehicles for creative industries through themed issues, as well as the artist-run *Venișor* magazine, a collaboration between Paris-based artists Cantor and Gabriela Varga and Cluj-based Cipean Muresan. Though differently positioned, these magazines have made a significant contribution toward the building interest in Eastern European contemporary art and culture.

Curators, naturally, are vital to the artists' validation process, whether locally, nationally, or internationally, and a cadre of young Romanians has recently emerged and quickly become influential. Among them are the art historian Alina Serban, responsible for the Romanian Pavilion at this year's





Serban Savu, *Minister Bridge 2*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 119 x 159 in.

The venture exceeded expectations. Plan B's artists are now included in the stables of some of the world's leading galleries and are regularly invited to participate in major international art events. (In fact, so successful has the gallery been in launching native artists that Ghenie has gone back to concentrating on his painting, although he is still linked to Plan B as an artist.) These international connections—and the non-Romanian collectors they attract—have been essential to the development of the country's contemporary art arena, as relatively few Romanians are willing to personally support emerging art.

Most of Plan B's artists are of the same generation as Pop and Ghenie, and, indeed, many of them—such as Mircea Cantor, Victor Man, Ciprian Muresan, Serban Savu, and Cantemir Hausi—trained alongside them at the University of Art and Design in Cluj. They could all be described as being conceptually strong, as the work of each is concerned with exploring and deconstructing specific ideas and phenomena. Cantor and Muresan work across disciplines; Man, in painting and installation; and Ghenie, Savu, and Hausi (along with a number of promising young talents from Cluj) maintain a steady commitment to painting. Historically, Romanian artists have a

reputation for avant-garde thinking, most notably derived from their involvement with the Dada movement. (Their contribution to Dada and so Dada's continued influence on contemporary Romanian art was recently acknowledged in a 2006 book by Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East: The Romanians of Cahiers Vitaires*.)

Plan B has earned a reputation for the collaborative way with which it engages with artists. Last year, in keeping with his original intentions for Plan B to facilitate projects, Pop invited Cantor to use the gallery as a workshop in preparation for his solo show, "The Need for Uncertainty," which toured three U.K. museums. Pop also served as commissioner of the Romanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007, and in October, Plan B will participate in the Frieze Art Fair. The gallery's good reputation—coupled with the fact that its artists' works have become extremely desirable to international collectors—enabled Pop to open a second space in Berlin last year with cofounder Mihaela Lutea. And next month, their Cluj gallery will move into a larger space, a former paintbrush factory that has recently been renovated to house artists' studios and gallery spaces. Their neighbors will include



Achille Obergé, *Pie Fight Study 4*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 27 1/4 x 22 1/2 in.



ABOVE: Victor Mir, August, 2005. Oil on canvas, 27½ x 37½ in. OPPOSITE: Șerban Savu, 05-0944-2, 2003. Oil on canvas, 19½ x 11½ in.

Venice Biennale; Mihnea Mircea, who is becoming increasingly well-known for his series dealing with monuments and monumental art (Venice Biennale 2007 and the Stroom Den Haag 2008); and Atila Tordai, former editor of *IDEA art+architecture* and the coordinator of the studio/laboratory-style space Studio Protokoll, Cluj, which, together with *IDEA*, was active in shaping Cluj's art community.

One of the few locally based Romanians committed to cultivating this contemporary-art community as a collector is businessman Mircea Pintu. Next year he will loan his private collection for five years to the National Art Museum in Cluj, which in return will build a permanent section dedicated to the art of the past 40 years, with Pintu's collection at its core.

Although there is optimism within the Romanian art scene, it is cautious, especially at a time when the global economy is putting so many art businesses into difficulty. Nevertheless, the very number of ambitious, informed people working to establish a place in the international art world is encouraging, and so too is the host of individuals who are instigating this advance through small, collaborative initiatives. ♦

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PHOTO: MARIAN GAVRUTA FOR THE ARTIST AND PAVEL G. COPPOLA FOR SHIRAZ DAVAR COLLECTION BY GREGG FAYE/ARTS

