

# The New York Times

## Romanian Artists Rethink Brancusi's Legacy

by Palko Karasz

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Photo credit: Andrei Pungovschi

SFANTU GHEORGHE, Romania — The legend of the sculptor Constantin Brancusi is more alive than ever in his native Romania almost 60 years after his death. But some artists want to dust off the ways in which he is presented today.

There are different narratives. One is of Brancusi (pronounced bran-COO- zee) abroad, the student of Rodin whose work is recognized as groundbreaking around the world. But in Romania, his name is pronounced bren-COOSH, and is part of the image of the nation, adorning streets and schools and even coming up in the lyrics of a recent pop song.

This year, the government of Romania, one of the poorest members of the European Union, collected over a million euros in a public fund-raising campaign for the 11 million euros, or \$12.3 million, needed to buy one of Brancusi's most iconic sculptures, "The Wisdom of the Earth," from a private collector.

The campaign fell short of collecting the necessary funds by the Sept. 30 deadline. But the government, which had already allocated €5 million for the cause, promised an "action plan" to ensure that the sculpture — a calm, seated nude carved from limestone — remained in Romania and accessible to the public.

Meanwhile, in the small Transylvanian town of Sfantu Gheorghe, just over 200 kilometers, or 125 miles, north of the capital, Bucharest, the artist Alexandra Croitoru was installing an exhibition that asked the provocative question, To whom does Brancusi belong, and most important, does he have to belong to anyone?



The artist Dan Acostioaei working on a fresco at Magma, a gallery in Sfântu Gheorghe, Romania, that is mounting the Brancusi exhibition. Credit Andrei Pungovschi for The New York Times.

More broadly, it is one of a growing number of small initiatives around the country that offer a new narrative on Romanian art, one that breaks with a tendency to celebrate figures of the past, deemed too conservative, at the expense of contemporary artists ready to assert themselves. “This myth of the genius artist, the modernist myth of the man genius, has faded,” said Ms. Croitoru, the author of “Brancusi, an Afterlife” and the curator of the exhibition.

She said the collection of works, previously shown at galleries in Cluj and Timisoara over the past year, was often misinterpreted as an affront to Brancusi. “It isn’t about Brancusi himself, but about the reception of his work,” and the use of his image in patriotic and even religious discourse, Ms. Croitoru said.

The artists invited by Ms. Croitoru placed Brancusi in the context of contemporary Romania, in works made since the country emerged from decades of brutal dictatorship in 1989. The country’s long transition to democracy also brought rapacious Western-style capitalism after years of isolation.

“Big Mac vs. Brancusi,” from 2001, by the artistic team Super US, is a play on the “Endless Column” Brancusi erected in iron and steel in 1938 in the town of Targu Jiu. The 100-foot-tall sculpture, which still stands, has inspired countless replicas over the years, both by Brancusi himself and others.

“Looking for Brancusi,” a film by Sergiu Sas, from 2015, shows people getting playful with Brancusi icons: kicking footballs at “The Gate of Kiss,” or playing backgammon, a popular game in the country, on the “Table of Silence.”

Dan Perjovschi drew “Bungee Jumping” in 2015, showing a figure leaping from atop the “Endless Column,” intended as a criticism of the ways Brancusi is interpreted in Romania. “This nation has a problem with the meaning of the infinite,” Mr. Perjovschi said. “Bungee jumping means to throw yourself into the void, but it pulls you back, you come back, it’s balance.”

“I grew up with a nationalist Brancusi,” Mr. Perjovschi added, recalling an official narrative that glorified the artist. “Then I rediscovered him in museums around the world.” He supported the campaign to keep “The Wisdom of the Earth” in Romania, citing what the work could mean for the country’s future.

“Our symbols are the Palace of Parliament and the Cathedral of the People’s Salvation,” he said, referring to the fortress-like building in Bucharest ordered by the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and

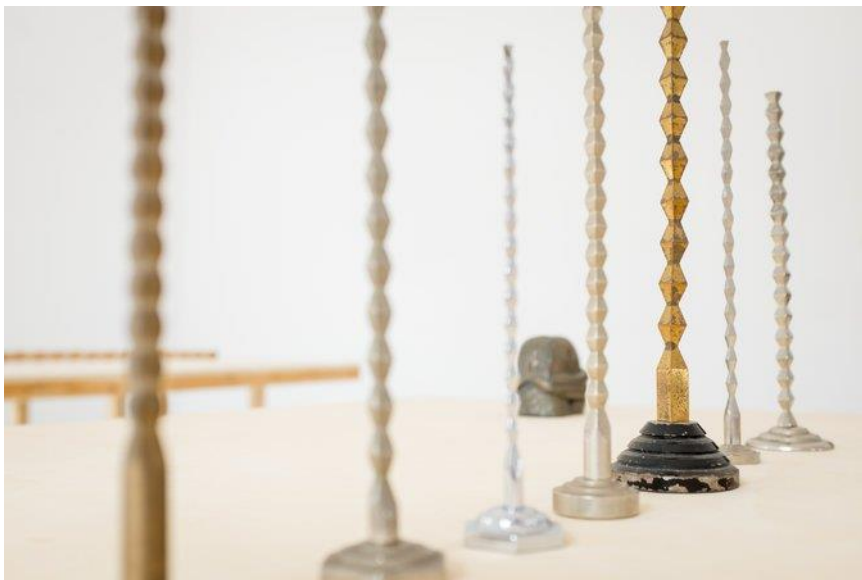
the equally huge cathedral being built directly behind it by the country's powerful church. "I prefer this, something small, with a calm name that invokes modesty."

In a country where art collecting is the privilege of a select few, even more so than in wealthier Western nations, contemporary art depends largely on state financing and foreign donors. A recurring complaint from artists and curators is that spaces exhibiting contemporary art have conservative agendas, are rigid and are scarce.

Both Ms. Croitoru and Mr. Perjovschi praised the energy and openness of Magma, the space hosting the Brancusi-themed exhibition. When it comes to nailing something to the wall or repainting surfaces, Mr. Perjovschi said, "the first thing you hear is 'no.'" At Magma it's different, you can do anything."

Seen from the highway, Sfantu Gheorghe, a town of 56,000, stands in stark contrast with the rolling hills that surround it. The picturesque town center, sprinkled with red-tile roofs on low-rise buildings reminiscent of the Austria-Hungary to which it once belonged, is encircled by tall, gray concrete housing blocks, a legacy of the Communist regime.

Magma occupies a corner of the spacious main square and park, between cafe terraces and the town's theater. Despite the serenity of its surroundings, the space, funded by the regional council, seeks to innovate, encourage creativity and even provoke at times, as imagined by Agnes Evelin Kispal and Attila Kispal, the artist couple who run the space.



Vlad Nancă, *Brancusi Souvenirs*. Credit Andrei Pungovschi for The New York Times.

"We've managed to create a platform where unspoken things are spoken," Mr. Kispal said. Like the Brancusi exhibition, Magma has been accused of going against the established art narrative. In reality, Mr. Kispal said, the aim was to fill a void to which nobody paid attention.

Whereas six years ago it was a struggle to put together a contemporary show locally, according to the creators of Magma, since that time they have hosted around 60 solo and group exhibitions. Sfantu Gheorghe is also one of few cultural centers for Romania's minority ethnic Hungarians, who live mostly in the center of the mountainous Transylvania region. To ensure the survival of their culture, the tendency has been to display works by local artists. "There is a sort of navel gazing, which is a dead end," Mr. Kispal said.

Magma has broken with that tradition and brought in art that people would once have had to travel hundreds of miles to see.

In an exhibition over the summer, “No Goddess of Memory,” Magma questioned the concept of building monuments. Works on display challenged the artistic value of busts of figures from Hungarian history and arts, springing up as signs of patriotic pride in communities in and around Hungary.

Opening up to the wider region, a video showed examples of “Turbo Sculpture” in the former Yugoslavia. In the absence of national heroes, many of them discredited in the Yugoslav wars, towns in the region have turned to figures from the west: pop culture with a Bruce Lee sculpture in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, or Bill Clinton’s larger-than-life depiction in Pristina, Kosovo.

“There is no nation in art,” Ms. Kispal said. “There is contemporary fine art and those who are good, no good or mediocre at it.”