

ARTGUIDE EAST

Few Were Happy with their Condition: Photography, Video and Film in Romania

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Cristi Pogacean, *Untitled*, 2011, single channel video, 29".

***Few Were Happy with their Condition* explores life in post'89 Romania, a time of hope and enormous disappointment, where the desire for freedom materialized into economic uncertainty typical of the capitalist model, and profound corruption at all levels of society, from the interpersonal to the institutional, continues to this day. The weight of the communist past with its crimes and the oppression of the public sphere, and the poverty, precarity and instability of the post-communist era have resulted in a trauma that permeates most human activity and emotion, and is of course present in artistic production as well.**

Focusing on the inherently contemporary mediums of video, film, and photography, the exhibition addresses the topic of discontentment in a world that is still torn between the communist and post-communist periods, affected psychologically by its history while trying to break free from it to move into the future.

The participating artists, a new generation that started their careers in the late 90s or naughts, look outward with critiques of society, the political climate and social injustice, backward toward the country's dark past, but also inward, with personal narratives and reflections on the human condition.

In contrast to more traditional mediums like painting or sculpture which inevitably engage in examinations of their own materiality, video, film, and photography offer heightened immediacy, a sense of direct and instant connection between the viewer and the content of the image, eliminating the awareness of the medium from the experience, and fusing time and space into one. Through the work in this exhibition, that sometimes uses journalistic means and other times poetic and abstract language, the immersion of the viewer into the "reality" proposed by the image – which according to Barthes is "an emanation of the past into the present" - is seamless.

“Photography and the cinema...are discoveries that satisfy once and for all...our obsession with realism.” But it is not only the viewer that experiences the immediacy of these media. The artist feels compelled to document, reveal and interpret his/her reality through the means of those media that were invented precisely for that purpose.

Since the late 60s when experimental film and video, which critiqued the ever-growing hegemony of media itself on society's perception of a reality manufactured by Hollywood and TV, were integrated as art forms in museums and galleries, artists have increasingly relied on recorded images to continue that critique. As digital technologies became more and more accessible, artists turned to working with the ephemeral and immaterial images these technologies generated, raising questions about the nature of the art object and subverting attempts at commodification that other artistic mediums were likely to fall prey to, including analog film although on a much lesser scale due to the material's deteriorative nature. So the mediums in and of themselves were a form of opposition that was oftentimes also reflected in the topics addressed.

In the art space, film and video, which migrated out of cinemas, were no longer confined to a predetermined viewing timeframe with the seated spectators separated from the screen in an enclosed space as new modes of reception developed. Films entered into a relationship with the structure in which they were projected as well as with the surrounding works, allowing the viewers the possibility to move about freely and decide what to watch and for how long. This fragmented viewing has expanded the field of cinema into sculpture and installation, but also diminished viewers' attention spans, who are more likely to quickly consume images rather than devote the necessary concentration to longer sequences or narratives. Therefore, *Few Were Happy* with their Condition presents a variety of works, from analog to digital photography, short films and documentaries, encouraging various forms of reception and relation to the image.

The present and all its complexities is of course the most intriguing area of analysis, and we see the majority of the artists trying to make sense of it through various forms of study. As McLuhan observed, “the artist is always engaged in writing the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present.” But it is not only the future that is being written when analyzing the present – the past, in a country like Romania where the transition seems to be continuing endlessly, has a powerful, oppressive, and ubiquitous presence.

Found footage from Youtube is also utilized by Cristi Pogacean in his short video, *Untitled*. It is the famous sequence from Tiananmen Square, 1989 that has become iconic and instantly recognizable. A line of three tanks moves towards a sole protester who makes them falter and hesitate, man against machine, the power of individual resistance against the enforcers of absolute power. However, in Pogacean's video something is missing – it is that protester that challenges the tanks and the regime that they symbolize who has been digitally removed. We are left with the tanks that move uncertainly towards an empty space, then stop for a brief moment, and try to circumvent this invisible force in an almost balletic dance. Through extraordinarily simple means, Pogacean creates a powerful work that allows us to make several associations. It questions of course the truth of the image and reveals the process of manipulation, but it also refers to the construction of memory and the past, and comments on the nature of individual resistance in today's society where economic interests seem to dominate in the background and action against governments seems almost futile, despite appearances.