

FREEDOM IN THE GRAY ZONE

Experimental films and photographs produced by Romanian artists under Communism continue to resonate in the free-market era.

by **Olga Stefan**

Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood. To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.

—Susan Sontag

IT'S POSSIBLE TO come away from many art fairs and international biennials with the impression that Romanian contemporary art is defined largely by the work of painters from the city of Cluj, who found critical and commercial success in the years following the 1989 revolution. The Romanian pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, organized by the ministry of culture and the Romanian Cultural Institute, features the work of young Cluj painter Adrian Ghenie, whose richly colored canvases, blending figuration and abstraction, are highly prized by collectors. However, the story of Romanian art since the 1960s can be told from another perspective, one that foregrounds experimental—if visually understated—work in film

and photography. Often produced illicitly, the films and photographs of vanguard Romanian artists are being reexamined today because they offer some of the most incisive reflections on the country's tumultuous political history—and because they may provide a guide for addressing contemporary social realities in Romania and throughout Eastern Europe.

It is well known that in the 1960s and '70s, film and photography began to figure prominently in the work of Conceptual, performance and Land artists active around the world. But while in the West the films and photographs of such artists as Yoko Ono, Robert Smithson and Carolee Schneemann were written about, exhibited in important art institutions and integrated slowly but surely into the contemporary art world, in Romania such practices remained underground, undertaken by a very limited group. The official art system was controlled by the official artist's union, *Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici* (UAP), which distributed funds for commissions and maintained a monopoly on the country's network of exhibition spaces. In turn, the UAP answered to the state,

Ion Grigorescu:
Trăisteni (The Pole), detail, 1976,
gelatin silver print,
19¼ inches square
overall. Courtesy
Galerija Gregor
Podnar, Berlin.

OLGA STEFAN is
a writer and curator
based in Zurich. See
Contributors page.



Kinema Ikon:
Vorspann,
1970-98, 16mm
film transferred
to VHS,
26 minutes.



which encouraged Socialist Realism in painting and a positive image of the socialist society in other mediums.

The indexical quality of film and photography was perceived by the authorities as a potential threat, a way for the common person to denigrate socialism by recording and showing the dismal reality that actually existed. Artists such as Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu and members of the SIGMA group sometimes used film and photography in ways that authorities sometimes found unacceptable. These artists deviated from the official aesthetic policy by evoking individual experiences of pain and disenchantment. If caught producing work that contradicted the official aesthetic, they were subject to various forms of censure, from the forced closure of exhibitions to the confiscation of equipment to questioning by officials.

However, the mere existence of such experiments points to porous zones—the gray areas—from which some artists were able to circumvent censorship while reflecting on their social condition. These spaces of relative freedom allowed for alternative forms of artistic production, and these practices influenced subsequent generations of artists.

The decade following Nicolae Ceaușescu's ascent to power in 1965 is often seen as a golden age of Romanian culture, society and life under Communism. Viewed as a reformer during the early years of his rule, Ceaușescu instituted a version of socialism with a nationalistic flavor; he moved the country away from the dominance of the

Soviet Union and established more contacts with the West. This process of liberalization reached its apex in 1968, when Ceaușescu denounced the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia. The West, and especially the United States, immediately embraced Ceaușescu as a bulwark against Soviet hegemony in the Eastern Bloc and started bestowing financial credits and other economic advantages on Romania. Trade with the West increased, international cultural exchanges were encouraged and, in 1969, an exhibition of American Abstract Expressionist paintings traveled to Romania. Sorin Preda, a Romanian journalist and writer, describes that moment eloquently:

Tired out, history left people alone for a few years, forgetting about denunciations and workers' wrath, about suspicions and ugly memories. It was the artists' time—including those just released from prison. It was the time of the thaw.¹

During this lull, the artists who would become the representatives of the Romanian neo-avant-garde finished their educations and started taking artistic risks. Yet even as they benefited from the thaw, Romanian experimentalists maintained their official duties as academics or members of the UAP, producing art sanctioned by the state. This oscillation between private and public practices—the effective splitting of the artistic self in two—also informed



Ștefan Bertalan:
Dragonfly Wings
Study, ca. 1972-74,
black-and-white
photograph, 8¼
by 11½ inches.
Courtesy Johnen
Galerie, Berlin.

the content and form of the work. Unlike their peers in the writers' union, visual artists in Romania made few overt criticisms of the government. Instead, private or masked expressions of resistance and discontent became the *modus operandi*.

Ion Grigorescu (b. 1945) is perhaps the best-known member of his generation. The subject of intense analysis and research in post-1989 Romania, his work has been included in Documenta and other major international exhibitions. The artist completed about 30 films in the late '60s and '70s. His private artistic practice—in contrast to his public one as a painter of Orthodox church murals, which he continues to this day—is characterized by performances that he filmed or photographed. While traditional performances are understood to have audiences, Grigorescu's actions took place in the complete isolation of his studio and home, or while he was alone in nature. Grigorescu sometimes documented himself engaged in rituals of daily life: he filmed himself eating or simply walking (*Walk*, 1974). In *Around My Apartment (Mozart Street)*, 1974, we are taken through the rooms of the artist's home in a series of photographs shot with a fish-eye lens. Though Grigorescu deliberately invites a visual inspection of his domestic space, the work still projects an eerie feeling of voyeuristic transgression, perhaps revealing the artist's anxiety about the pervasive atmosphere of constant scrutiny in which he lived. Indeed, by the '80s

thousands of Romanians were registered informants with the Securitate secret police, establishing a general atmosphere of fear and paranoia.

The technology that Grigorescu used during this period was simple: a Soviet Quartz film camera and a 35mm still camera. Despite the liberalization under Ceaușescu, such devices, as well as film itself, were rare commodities. The photographs and films that Grigorescu developed and printed at the time tend to be of low production value, exemplifying the modest circumstances in which he was often forced to work: in a makeshift darkroom in his apartment using improvised materials. For this reason, he printed many of his works from this period only after 1989.

In the face of these difficulties, Grigorescu remained fascinated by the forms of serialization and sequencing that the camera allowed. For him, photographs and films could offer a "representation of the real."² The artist was particularly intrigued by human anatomy, and he often used his own body as the subject of his work. In the photo diptych *Our Home* (1974), we see him in the nude, urinating and defecating almost on the lens of the camera. With this rebellious act, Grigorescu highlighted his own corporeality, one element of his "reality" that he could still control.

Despite the private nature of such works, Grigorescu also sought exhibition opportunities outside the UAP's channels. He discovered the Friedrich Schiller house, a cultural center in Bucharest that was managed by art historian Alexandra



Titu and had a reputation for being left alone by authorities. In 1976, Grigorescu organized the first in an annual series of photography exhibitions that would continue relatively undisturbed until 1979.

One artist who exhibited at the Schiller house was Geta Brătescu (b. 1926). Like Grigorescu, she also used her body as a subject while exploiting the provisional freedom that the domestic confines of her studio and home allowed. Almost a generation older than Grigorescu, Brătescu often collaborated with her husband, Mihai Brătescu, to create works like *Towards White—Self-Portrait in Seven Sequences* (1975), photographs showing the artist's face progressively obscured by a film that appears more opaque in each image. *The Smile* (1978) documents discreet changes of the artist's expressions through a serial arrangement of nine closely cropped self-portraits. The piece has an almost clinical feel; the expression signifying happiness is broken down through repetition, and the work appears like a study of muscle contractions and facial features as much as a reflection of the artist's emotional state. The retreat from oppression offered by the studio itself is a continuous subtext of Brătescu's work, and her most well-known project, a film simply called *The Studio* (1978) records the artist's highly performative process of creating large, improvised drawings.

If Grigorescu and Brătescu expressed themselves through the solitary, personal nature of their work, other artists found pockets of freedom and opportunities for public engagement by working in collectives. In 1970, the group SIGMA formed in Timișoara, the city where the Romanian revolution would start in 1989. Using high-tech equipment, SIGMA artists created photographs, films and multimedia installations that bridged the fields of design, science and art. Started by artists Ștefan Bertalan (1930–2014) and Constantin Flondor (b. 1936), SIGMA, whose name comes

from the summation function in mathematics, soon brought in visionary painter Doru Tulcan (b. 1943) as well. Other collaborators joined for short periods of time, as SIGMA offered a way for artists to work together in a voluntary collective rather than a state-enforced one.³

Bertalan was attracted to the plant, animal and insect kingdoms, and he created detailed photographs of organic matter using microscopes. The 1973 series of photomicrographs "Insect Studies" comprises magnified shots of translucent wings and compound eyes. It was realized through the artist's collaboration with the Institute of Medicine in Timișoara, which gave him access to advanced optical equipment. In addition, Bertalan experimented with modes of exhibition. For "Inflatable Structures" (1974), produced at Bastion Gallery, a UAP space in Timișoara, the artist worked with other SIGMA members to create dreamlike environments by superimposing several layers of slide projections, either on walls or on objects, including balloons.

Also founded in 1970, Kinema Ikon is considered to be the longest running art group in Romania. Launched in Arad, a city near the Hungarian border, Kinema Ikon was originally led by the film professor George Sabau. Its members came from various educational backgrounds, including philosophy, architecture, film, mathematics and computer science. The group's interdisciplinary composition is reflected in the work they produced. Demian Sandru's *Open-Flash* (1975) is a typical example from the early years of Kinema Ikon. The black-and-white nonnarrative film combines symbol-laden drama (a woman ties a slipknot around a man's neck) with self-referential imagery (shots of camera lenses and viewfinders). Kinema Ikon traversed the decades of political and technological change, with the group's focus moving from film in the 1970s to video in the '80s to computer-based art in the '90s, thus paralleling developments in the West.

IN THE LAST YEARS of the '70s conditions in Romania became increasingly restrictive. Ceaușescu announced a "mini-cultural revolution" modeled on similarly draconian programs instituted by Chinese and North Korean rulers. The low-key and semiprivate experimental photography and film exhibitions at the Schiller house were no longer tolerated, and the ministry of culture shut down Grigorescu's 1979 exhibition. Even during the height of Ceaușescu's clamp-down, a few privileged artists with connections opened up another gray zone of possibility. These lucky few traveled and exhibited abroad in the '70s and '80s, returning with information about contemporary art from the West that circulated within elite intellectual circles. The UAP also had subscriptions to most international art magazines, permitting some artists to connect their own work to global trends.

In 1983, Ana Lupas, a textile artist with an international reputation, became director of Atelier 35, a national network of exhibition spaces for artists under the age of 35. The Atelier system was established by the UAP with the aim of encouraging experimentation within a controlled environment. The youth-oriented galleries, opened in all major Romanian cities, became essential for many artists because of the increased supervision of cultural activity in Bucharest. It was in cities such as Oradea, Cluj and Arad that much of the artistic experimentation happened through the 1980s. In Oradea, members of the local branch of Atelier 35 developed the Fotomobil biennial, which surveyed new photography and film from around the country in three editions from 1984 to 1988. Many of the artists in these shows followed the path opened by Grigorescu and Brătescu and documented simple performances. The work of artist László Újvárossy, who also comanaged Atelier 35 Oradea, exemplifies this tendency.

The young artist filmed himself painting a structure in the aptly titled *Painting House Wall* (1985). The list of participants in the Fotomobil biennials reads like a who's who of the '80s generation: Dan and Lia Perjovschi, Dan Mihălțianu, Iosif Király, Teodor Graur, Marilena Preda Sanc and Rudolf Bone, among others.

FOLLOWING THE 1989 ouster of Ceaușescu, artists began working in new, more overtly political ways. They were free from the ideological constraints imposed by the UAP but also lacked the financial support that the state agency provided for official work. In the void created by the revolution, the Soros Center for Contemporary Art, founded in 1992 by the Hungarian-born American financier George Soros, became a key resource, especially for artists working with video and other new mediums. The Soros Center also promoted moving image work through national exhibitions such as "Ex Oriente Lux" (1993) and "01010101" (1994). One of the most important groups to come out of this milieu is subREAL, cofounded in 1991 by art historian Călin Dan (who was also artistic director of the Soros Center and is now director of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest) and artists Király and Mihălțianu. The collective engaged critically with the country's turbulent cultural history through projects such as Art History Archive (AHA), 1995–98. This ambitious effort primarily involved researching and exhibiting material from the archive of *ARTA* magazine, the official publication of the UAP, which Dan had once edited. This material included photographic documentation of art objects produced under the Ceaușescu regime. One version of AHA, presented at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 1995, featured thousands of these photographs affixed to gallery walls with a light adhesive. Over

Geta Brătescu: *Towards White—Self-Portrait in Seven Sequences*, 1975, black-and-white photographs, 7½ by 29 inches. Courtesy Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin.



View of subREAL's installation *Dataroom*, 1995, part of the "Art History Archive," at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin. Courtesy subREAL.

the course of the exhibition, the images slowly peeled off and fell to the floor in a symbolic reenactment of the regime's downfall. The display also evoked the systematic censorship that occurred under Communist rule. Images of artworks had been cropped or altered for publication in *ARTA*, a process made apparent by subREAL's installation of the original, prepublication images sent to the magazine.

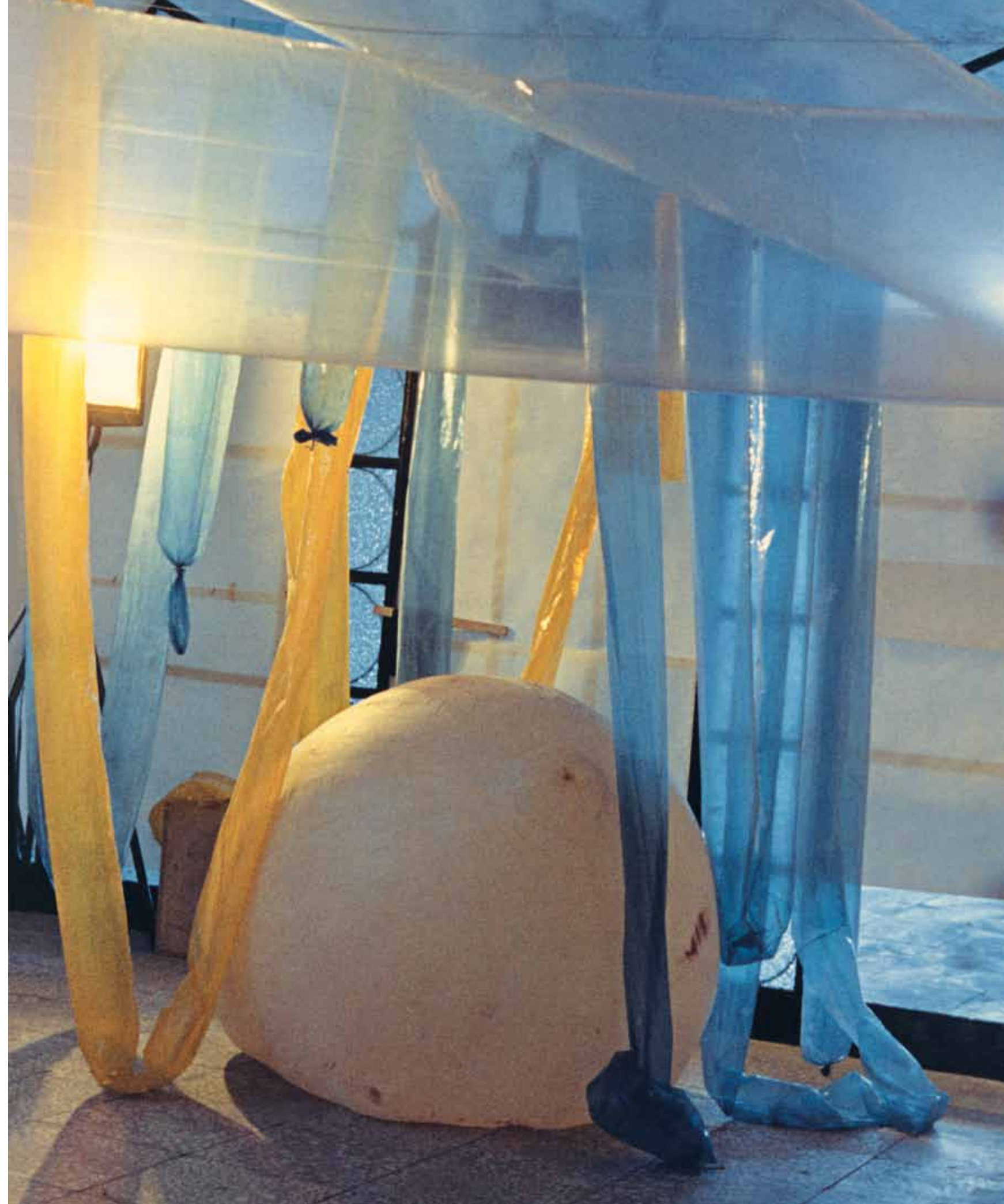
SubREAL's attempts to excavate decades of work, bringing to light both the veiled social commentary that took place during Communism and the mechanisms through which state institutions controlled artistic expression, has helped foster new inquiries into Romania's past by younger artists. Some contemporary figures, such as Matei Bejenaru, employ journalistic modes of filmmaking. *Battling Inertia* (2010), one of his many short documentaries, is about a literary group at the Heavy Equipment Plant in Iași that was active during the '70s and '80s. Other Romanian filmmakers take a narrative approach to history. Stefan Constantinescu's *Troleibuzul 92* (2009) is a fictionalized account, based on an actual event, of a man on a bus speaking on a cell phone and becoming increasingly threatening to his interlocutor while those around him remain indifferent.

The legacy of the Communist state lingers over the work of those who were very young in 1989. Irina Botea's

We, in the Year 2000 (2011) combines video and Super 8 footage. The title alludes to Alain Tanner's film about the fallout from the May 1968 uprisings in France, *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000*, and to an eponymous Romanian children's song from the '70s that describes a utopian socialist future. The work juxtaposes footage of third-grade children deciphering the lyrics of the song and nostalgic Super 8 footage of the adults who grew up singing it.

Official censure on speech and creation no longer exists in Romania. But the post-1989 economy has created its own set of unwritten codes and rules. As in many places, artists whose work takes the form of films, videos and conceptually oriented photographs are still relegated to the margins of a market system that values painting far more highly. Where are today's gray zones of freedom? They are being formulated, but exponential developments in digital technology have decreased production costs and widened access to these media, which may allow for freer expression. ○

1. Sorin Preda, "With Love, About Bucharest," *Formula-as.ro*, accessed July 2015.
2. Magda Radu, "Mărturii XXI—Ion Grigorescu," video interview, Youtube.com, accessed July 2015.
3. Ileana Pintilie, "Photography in the Context of Romanian Contemporary Art," *ARTA*, nos. 6-7, 2012, p. 43.



Opposite, view of Ștefan Bertalan's installation *Inflatable Structures*, 1974, at Bastion Gallery, Timișoara.