Aerial map of downtown Budapest showing the location of the artists’ projects in Polyphony: Social Commentary in Contemporary Hungarian Art (1993). Photo: courtesy of C3 Center for Culture & Communication Foundation, Budapest, Hungary.
IZABEL GALLIERA
University of Pittsburgh

Socially Engaged Art, Emerging Forms of Civil Society: Early 1990s Exhibitions in Budapest and Bucharest

Abstract
Through a contextual reading and critical analysis of two post-1989 art exhibitions in Hungary and Romania, Polyphony (1993) and Exhibition 01010101… (1994), this article explores the distinct role played by curatorial discourses and socially engaged contemporary art in catalyzing locally emerging forms of democracy in the early 1990s. These exhibitions reveal the paradox of civil society in the wake of communism. Embracing a neoliberal approach, they juxtapose a desire for collective change against a longing to participate in the contemporary international art scene.

The first years of the post-communist period across most of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) were characterized by an aversion to anything communist or socialist and an embrace of capitalist neoliberal economy, western forms of democracy, and a pluralistic political system. Romanian cultural theorist Ovidiu Tichindeleanu trenchantly summarized the post-communist condition as one defined by ‘the dominant axes of anti-communism, Eurocentrism and capitalocentrism’ (2010: 118-19). These societies manifested a jumbled mix of collapsing communist institutions, the desire for internationalization and reunification with Western Europe, the presumption of a rapid membership in NATO and the European Union (EU), as well as the hope for a number of other reforms to the political, social, cultural and economic structures and infrastructures. The enthusiasm embodied in the early 1990s revolutionary spirit, however,
was difficult to maintain because of a lack of realistic proposals and concrete implementations. Such unresolved ideals resulted in weak local institutions in all areas of society, especially within contemporary art.

During these transformational years, the presence of foreign and independent institutions played a significant, yet not unproblematic, role in the emergence of democracy and the nascent contemporary art scene. The Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts (SCCAs) funded locally developed artistic and exhibition projects, and sponsored several notable exhibitions as part of their mission to support the development of contemporary art in the CEE. Initiated by the Hungarian-born, US-based financier and philanthropist George Soros, the foundation facilitated the first independent and most influential regional institutions supporting local art in CEE countries throughout the 1990s. The first Soros Center for Contemporary Art was founded in Budapest in 1985, and from 1991 to 1999 eighteen additional centres in seventeen countries were opened. As branches connected to the Soros Foundation in New York, the SCCAs were guided by concepts of a civil and ‘open’ society as theorized by the philosopher and initiator of neoliberal thought Karl Popper (1971). Through their aims to promote and develop experimental forms of contemporary art, these local centres actively participated in building western neoliberal democratic values in formerly communist societies.

Two exhibitions funded by the Soros Centers were critically important within the curatorial discourse of socially engaged art practice emerging at that time in Eastern Europe: *Polyphony: Social Commentary in Contemporary Hungarian Art* (Budapest, 1993) and *Exhibition 01010101…* (Bucharest, 1994). Both operated at the juncture of a defunct communist regime and the desire to participate in the contemporary international art scene. At the same time, these exhibitions sought to enhance the potential for democratically inclusive public spheres. Considering *Polyphony* and *Exhibition 01010101…*, along with their respective artists’ projects, as spaces of negotiation, I will argue that they became active producers of incipient forms of civil society in Hungary and Romania in the early 1990s.

The transitional period in Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic has been typified by political scientists such as Milada Vachudova (2005) as liberal states because the collapse of their totalitarian regimes was immediately followed by the creation of a competitive democratic political system strongly opposed to the presence of the socialist state. Calls for reform and negotiations for political pluralism had already begun in 1986–1987, followed in 1989 by immediate personnel changes within the ranks of the Communist Party. On the one hand, Hungary entered the post-1989 transition period with the experience of ‘goulash’ communism (a communist type of consumerism fueled by western loans and credits), and Jozef Antall, a former intellectual dissident, became the leader of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, the right-wing party that led the coalition government after the first free election in 1990. On the other hand, countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia are considered ‘illiberal states’ because of the lack of a strong opposition party to take power immediately following the collapse of communism, and because of a generally non-competitive political system. Romania, for example,
under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu, had no organized opposition to communism as it was entirely silenced by the regime’s oppressive measures (Vachudova 2005: 11–34). Even though the first elections in 1990 were mostly free and fair, former communists won most seats, and Ion Iliescu, a high-ranking and active member of the former Communist Party, became the president and leader in the Frontul Salvării Nationale (FSN) (National Salvation Front).

While the different socialist legacies shaped the nature of the transitional period of the two countries in distinct ways, Hungary and Romania shared similar cultural and political understandings of the emerging function of civil society. Former intellectual dissidents conceptualized it as a sphere of activity entirely divorced from the state or government. During the communist period, civil society did not mean participation in public life, but rather a retreat from the totalitarian state into private forms of self-organized enclaves grouped around dissident intellectuals such as George Konrád in Hungary, Vaclev Havel in the Czech Republic and Mircea Dinescu in Romania (Tismaneanu 1998: 145–48). For example, Konrád described the democratic opposition as ‘antipolitics’:

Antipolitics is the emergence of independent forums that can be appealed to against political power; it is a counter-power that cannot take power and does not wish to. Power it has already, here and now, by reason of its moral and cultural weight.

(1984: 230)

This call for the depoliticization of lives and a conception of civil society based on openness and morality emerged as reactions to the socialist regimes whose politics controlled every aspect of society. For example, in Hungary, an organized opposition emerged in 1984 when intellectual dissidents and environmental activists formed the Danube Circle, protesting the construction of a dam across the Danube that would displace Hungarians from villages and towns. The emergence of opposition parties led by intellectuals and students contributed to the collapse of the Communist Party.

Despite such enclaves of opposition, the suppressive communist regimes’ legacies have nonetheless contributed to shaping contemporary civil society in the CEE region. In the early 1990s, citizens generally maintained mistrust towards any voluntary associations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and refused to participate in public activities, mainly because of recent past experiences and memories of mandatory participation in May Day parades and other such propaganda-related activities (Howard 2003: 148–52). At the same time, as Timothy Garton Ash observed, the concept of civil society concerned the general population, a concept that was understood to include forms of association not controlled by the state, an open and inclusive idea of citizenship, and the notion that ‘people should be “civil”: that is polite, tolerant, and above all nonviolent’ (Ash 1990: 20).

Emphasizing freedom of association and expression, these basic principles also further underline the conceptualization of civil society as separate from the state. Paradoxically, such a popular approach was both
in unison and in opposition to the agendas of the newly elected post-
1989 governments, which were committed to adopting western forms
of civil society as part of the transition from totalitarian and centrally
governed systems to democratic and self-governed forms of state institu-
tions. Referring to the American context, social scientist Michael Waltzer
pointed to the paradox of civil society where the state both frames civil
society and occupies space within it. Arguing for a pluralist approach to
associational life exemplified through political, cultural and social organi-
sations, he considered a democratic civil society as ‘a project of projects’
and one controlled by its members through different and uncoordinated

The public spheres emerging in the post-1989 CEE, in which the
spaces of civil society continue to be negotiated and defined, arose from
the complex and uneasy juxtaposition of the political against the anti-
political, of individual entrepreneurship against solidarity and collective
unity. Thus, the early phases of post-communist democratization corre-
sponded to the existence of mutually exclusive relationships between
civil society, economic forces and political activities. It was within such
an ambivalent socio-political setting, shaped by competing concepts of
civil society, that Polyphony: Social Commentary in Contemporary Hungarian
Art and Exhibition 01010101… can be, in retrospect, most productively
understood. With their explicit focus on interventionist forms of contem-
porary art in public spheres that directly engaged the social (and only
obliquely the political) context as an artistic medium, each of these exhibi-
tions revealed the paradox of civil society in the early 1990s. They nego-
tiated different understandings of the role of art in society, and of the
mediating role of the curator as an institutional representative seeking to
internationalize the local art scene.

Reclaiming Public Life through Interventionist Public Art
The first series of socially engaged art projects in public spaces to be de-
veloped in the Hungarian capital after the fall of the Iron Curtain were real-
ized as part of Polyphony: Social Commentary in Contemporary Hungarian
Art (1993). Organized in Budapest and curated by Suzanne Mézsöly, the
exhibition aimed to encourage socially conscious artworks, harking back
to the leftist tradition of the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde
and its goal of closing the gap between art and life. Polyphony, however,
intended to provide Hungarian artists with ‘a forum to express their
broadest social commentaries’ and so distanced itself from contemporary
political ideologies by inviting works that did not engage with ‘current
political issues, specific persons, institutions, lobbies, ideological trends
or interests of the state’ (Mézsöly and Bencsik 1993: 14–18). Initially
planned to take place in Múcsarnok, a state-funded art space, the exhibi-
tion was rejected by its then–director Katalin Keserü based on the premise
that it featured political art too closely connected to the ideology of the
recent communist past. She objected most directly to the definition of the
word ‘art’ that opened the call for proposals, which was taken from A
Dictionary of the Hungarian Language: ‘ART = 1. One of the forms of social
consciousness: a creative activity, the aim of which is to present reality
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according to certain aesthetic principles […] generalizing and typifying unique phenomena’. Keserű remarked that ‘I was outraged by the text of the advertisement that began with a crazy epigraph; a text, which I later found out had been written in New York, by […] András Szántó […] a proto-Marxist’ (quoted in Mészöly and Bencsík 1993: 18, 301). Keserű thus assumed that the exhibition’s concept promoted Marxist ideals, which were considered contrary to the locally emerging forms of western democracy promoted by the nation’s newly elected right-wing government. Even though Mészöly called the incident a ‘bleak echo of censorship from the not so distant past’ (Mészöly and Bencsík 1993: 14), I would argue that both the stated goals of Polyphony’s curator and Keserű’s reaction actually manifested a similar understanding of the locally emerging civil society as divorced from politics, suggesting a strong continuation of Konrád’s anti-politics into the early 1990s. It also reflected one of the founding goals of the Soros Foundation – to stand in opposition to, and help bring about the dismantling of, the totalitarian state (Soros 1991: 131).

Polyphony comprised 29 site-specific artists’ projects realized in various public spaces in Budapest, along with a one-day, small-scale exhibition documenting the artists’ interventions at the French Institute in Budapest on 4 December 1993, which was also the location for the closing symposium. The exhibition’s curatorial framework was ambivalent in terms of its plural allegiances. It juxtaposed an anti-political temporality shaped by the communist legacy with a simultaneous desire to participate in the contemporary international (socio-politically charged) art scene. An important goal of the SCCAs was the promotion of local visual arts nationally and internationally via exhibitions, catalogue publications and international conferences. Towards this end, each local centre was contractually required to conduct several types of activities: organize annual exhibitions on an artistic ‘medium rarely explored within the country’; introduce new ideas and artists; and publish a bilingual catalogue in both English and the local language. Participation was open to competition and publicized nationally. An international jury invited and financed by the SCCA awarded prizes (Mészöly and Szekeres 1995: 11). Polyphony identified and adopted one of the early 1990s international trends of issue-based, site-specific art practice as its theme to provoke and motivate Hungarian artists to formulate their own distinctive approach.

Well-known western curatorial projects were taken as inspirational models for the exhibition. At the symposium marking the exhibition’s closing, Mészöly directly acknowledged Polyphony’s precedents: ‘I was greatly influenced by the 42nd Street Art Project [and] a lot of issue-based work happening in the US and Great Britain especially’ (Mészöly and Bencsík 1993: 291). Such a statement appears somewhat contradictory when noting that Polyphony became an exhibition of site-specific works only as a result of Mücsarnok’s refusal to house it within its galleries, and the two calls for proposals illustrate the change in the curatorial premise. The final version invited art projects for ‘any public or private space’, which were minimally advertised to intentionally confront viewers unexpectedly in a variety of places in Budapest, thus further blurring the lines between art and everyday life.
It is worth noting that the English translation changed the original meaning of the exhibition title, which in Hungarian read ‘social context as a medium’, reflecting what most artists actually realized, while the English title read ‘social commentary in contemporary Hungarian art’.

The works were referred to as ‘site-specific’, yet there was no explanation of what was actually meant by the term in the exhibition or local context. Nonetheless, the curator had in mind contemporary site-oriented artworks, as practiced in the United States where site was conceptualized in both physical and discursive terms, the art addressed socio-political issues, and the artists often engaged the participation of audience in the production of the work (Kwon 2004: 60). Similar to Creative Time’s 42nd Street Art Project (1993–1994), which included temporary art installations in the storefronts, windows and public areas between New York City’s Broadway and 8th Avenue, Polyphony featured art on streets, telephone booths, bridges, buses, grocery stores, electronic billboards, local newspapers, an artist’s flat, and a private gallery. Instead of the highly charged, socio-political themes of racism, AIDS, violence and feminism that had been directly addressed by artists in New York, Hungarian artists used the city of Budapest’s social and physical context as an artistic medium.

Critics reviewing Polyphony for the local press, such as Sherri Hay (1993), and participants in symposium, such as András Szántó (1993) and László Beke (1993), objected to the lack of politically and socially charged projects in the Hungarian context when compared with the activist interventions in New York. Hungarian-born, US-based critic Szántó argued that in contrast to the calculated silence towards the communist regime, after 1989 the same ‘politics of silence’ carried no meaning as there was no longer a Big Brother to fight against. According to Hungarian curator and art critic Beke, the early 1990s vacuum of dissident contemporary art was due to the fact that ‘we’ve used up all our gunpowder’ following the 1960s and 1970s neo-avant-garde activities, which prepared the way for political changes (Mészöly and Bencsik 1993: 31–36, 317). In 1997, Hungarian art historian Edit András remarked that in the Hungarian context, politics were equated with governmental politics, and the social consciousness that drove international art currents in the 1990s failed to trigger any local response because such initiatives still carried the memory of state control and manipulation (1999: 126).

I would argue, however, that rather than positioning themselves in relation to the contemporary American socio-politically engaged art practices (that emerged in reaction to the conservative climate of a three-term Republican government), several artists in Polyphony developed projects that were anchored in and contingent upon their locality, thereby reactivating public space as a forum for open dialogue that formerly had been dominated by the visible ideology of a totalitarian regime. Instead of passive social commentary, Hungarian artists attempted to formulate different strategies to directly interact with and establish participatory platforms for communication among local publics. For instance, among the 29 projects, Zsolt Koroknai’s Telephone Booth Gallery (1993) consisted of public telephones in seven locations across Budapest, each connected to the artist’s Audio Studio. Upon dialing the indicated number, the caller could enter into a dialogue with the artist on various topics, including the role of art in contemporary society (Mészöly and Bencsik 1993). The street-level, open-ended artwork extended agency to passersby who actively participated in the creation of the work.
Agitator (1993), a two-and-a-half-hour acoustic installation by Gyula Varnai, also involved audience participation. Consisting of a tape recorder positioned next to a tree with two microphones placed at a busy Budapest intersection, the artwork recorded street noises and ambient sounds. The artist looped the tape so that it encircled the tree trunk, covering the delete button of the recorder with aluminum foil (Mészöly and Bencsik 1993: 272). In its capture of transient yet incoherent moments, in the presence of a tree rooted as a silent witness to 1950s Stalinist socialism, Agitator coalesced the perpetually shifting relations between the palimpsest of present, past and future temporalities. István Szili’s proposal A Few More New Telephone Booths (1993) illustrated a similar desire to challenge the legacy of a politically motivated private/public divide. Although unrealized, the work would have consisted of two or three telephone booths placed around the capital city, each equipped with an amplifier and loudspeaker so that, if used, the conversation would be heard outside by passersby. It encouraged the exercise of newly gained democratic rights of free speech as a way to confront and dismantle the legacy of the socialist regime, which highly controlled citizens’ lives.

These artists’ projects could be seen as tools for unrestrained expression, bringing to public light the horizontal social networks of communication and exchange that functioned parallel to the totalitarian regime as embryonic forms of civil society before 1989. This became particularly
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important during the initial process of democratization. According to American sociologist Robert D. Putnam, the sustained presence of social capital, based on interpersonal trust and norms of reciprocity that facilitate problem solving through collective actions, would gradually offer a model for democratically functioning political institutions (1993: 171–72). Thus, artists subtly disrupted and intervened in the city’s familiar urban sites in order to break down prior associations with obsessive control and surveillance. They articulated a form of socially engaged site-specificity where social interactions and the participation of passersby became the site and content of the artworks.

Despite its overarching ambivalent aim, *Polyphony* acted as both curatorial provocation and public platform for the individual artists’ interventions. Taken together, such manifestations, however small and temporary, contributed to the opening up of public life, which as American historian Gail Kligman rightfully stated is a ‘prerequisite to constituting a civil society and a democratic public sphere’ (1990: 426). The historical importance of exhibitions such as *Polyphony* in shaping newly emerging forms of democracy lie in exactly these artistic and participatory attempts to engage the public and, even if symbolically, to exercise newly gained freedoms of expression and rights of free assembly in public spaces. These early endeavours began a slow process of changing decades-long understandings of public art as propaganda tools for spreading party-state’s communist ideology, often in the form of monumental sculptures and

**Gyula Varnai, Agitator (1993), acoustic installation at the corner of Rottenbiller and Damjanich Streets, Budapest. Photo: courtesy of C3 Center for Culture & Communication Foundation, Budapest, Hungary.**
overpowering pictorial representations. Moreover, within the broader history of such emancipatory curatorial initiatives, *Polyphony* became an important point of reference for subsequent exhibitions of participatory and socially engaged public art, such as *Moszkva Ter Gravitation* (Moszkva Square Gravitation) (2003) in Hungary as well as other exhibitions in the CEE region that have included diverse modes of interventionist art as strategies for public participation and political agency.

**Curatorial Visions: Framing Community-Oriented Art Projects**

The contemporaneously functioning Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Romania funded the organization of *Exhibition 01010101…* (1994) that similarly encouraged forms of socially engaged art practice, yet from a quite different socio-political context. Unlike Hungary’s relatively clear rupture with the political past, Romania’s political changes had not been nearly as substantial. The country’s leading post-Communist Party, FSN, represented by Ion Iliescu, ‘a communist with liberal views’, had the backing of the National Army and former Communist Secret Police or *Securitate* forces in 1990 to silence any critics. The local opposition was represented, on one hand, by a small group of intellectual dissidents with no organized political agenda, who formed under the regime and contested its legacy. On the other hand, there were the members of parties that had survived the Gulag and maintained the pre-1938 conservative and traditional view of Romania as a monarchy. Such weak and fractionalized opposition made it possible for Iliescu’s party to occupy the majority of seats in the 1990 Parliament (Mungiu-Pippidi 2002: 34–41). In the first few years after the 1989 revolution, the FSN, or the so-called *nomenklatura*, built upon the continuing strength of personal networks of the communist regime’s administrators and actively worked to maintain the former ideological and institutional structures. The party appointed previous political elites to key national positions, thus delaying the replacement of a centrally governed infrastructure with democratically oriented forms of leadership.

As a response to the stagnant socio-political situation, Romanian curator Calin Dan organized *Exhibition 01010101…* in part to ‘force the artistic discourse’ towards a new direction by provoking Romanian artists to engage with their immediate social context (1994: 10). Anchored by the theme ‘The Artistic Discourse as a Reflection of the Community’, *Exhibition 01010101…* was a two-tiered project featuring site-specific artworks and actions with particular communities around the country, as well as an elaborate installation on the opening day. The first component was represented by nineteen artists’ projects chosen by an international jury. Over the summer of 1994, artists were asked to engage with a marginalized community and develop their projects in the localities where they lived and worked. At its core, the curatorial goal was to articulate a local understanding of the internationally emerging practice of ‘new genre public art’. Coined by artist and critic Suzanne Lacy, new genre public art addressed major social issues, engaged marginalized groups, and mostly took place outside of the art establishment. It emphasized the
process of production and communication, where collaborative strategies of engagement were integral to the works’ aesthetics (Lacy 1995: 171–88). Exhibitions based on this practice, such as *Culture in Action* (1992–1993) curated by Mary Jane Jacob (Jacob et al. 1995), aimed to promote organically emerging, fluid and open projects between artists and specific communities guided by mutual interests. However, in the case of *Culture in Action*, the curator and institution actively mediated between artists (who for the most part did not reside in Chicago) and local groups, and so predetermined the nature of several of the projects. As Miwon Kwon observed, ‘The contribution of the community partners was limited to the realization of projects that fully prescribed the nature of their participation in advance’ (2004: 123). Thus, rather than fully collaborative partners, community members were excluded from many of the projects’ initial conceptualization and only functioned as assistants constructing the works.

A comparable curatorial premise was also evident in *Exhibition 01010101…*, which provoked artists to engage with real people and real situations as a way to get beyond the modernist notion of creative isolation. For example, Alexandru Chira’s *Reminding, for Suggesting the Rain and the Rainbow* (1994) most successfully achieved the exhibition’s goals, winning the jury’s first prize. Strategically, the curator refused to fully fund Chira’s proposal in order to ensure that he would engage with the local community. The artist received the enthusiastic approval of the village of Tauseni to build an elaborate, large-scale work that took the form of a hexagon, the shape of a living cell. Meant to connect the realms of the sacred with the profane, the structure, situated on top of a hill, connected the village’s school, cultural centre and church (Dan 1994: 13, 66–68). The site of the installation was even consecrated during an official religious ceremony. However, instead of open collaboration, the community only performed physical labour, executing a public artwork that was entirely conceived a priori by the artist in his studio. As such, Chira’s project was not based on sustained forms of engagement and dialogue with members of the community.

At the same time, the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘site-specificity’ were not explicitly defined by the exhibition. Several projects considered ‘site’ in terms of the location of a particular social group or community in a specific time and place. Marcel Bunea’s *Exodus Traces* (1994) resulted from a two-week collaboration with a 200-member Roma community of brickmakers. This group had settled in the Death Valley region near Lapus City, in the northwestern part of the country, after their houses were destroyed by Romanian villagers after a Roma man was convicted of rape (Dan 1994: 53–64). In contrast to Chira’s unilateral mode of engagement, Bunea’s project was collectively conceptualized. The work involved the Roma themselves to confront the subsequent stigmatization of the entire community as criminals and thieves. It was precisely such negative stereotyping that prevented the social integration of Roma into Romanian society, and which Bunea aimed to revise through working with the group. Everyday communal interactions and the process of collaboration became the content of the art. Ultimately, their combined efforts resulted in the building of a decorative throne used for ritual traditions. The artist’s
Marcel Bunea, Exodus Traces (1994), detail of the collaboratively built decorative throne by the artist and a Roma community near the city of Lapusi, Romania. Photo: Jannine Huzinga, courtesy of the International Center for Contemporary Art, Bucharest, Romania.
sustained engagement with this Roma collective offered an effective counter-perspective by asserting a positive image of a self-sustaining and hard-working community.

A set of site-specific projects in *Exhibition 01010101…* proposed communicative social interfaces by provoking temporary participatory interactions with various groups of people. Adrian Timar’s *Transylvanian Gazette* (1994), which won the jury’s third prize, consisted in printing four large images – a cat, an abstract mask, a local church and a portrait of an aboriginal individual – on consecutive days in the pages of the local newspaper. The artist worked with the press and silkscreened the images directly onto a number of pre-printed newspapers. The action culminated in inviting (via an ad posted in the paper) all of the newspaper’s owners to the *Gazette’s* headquarters to engage in conversation and win prizes. By making it difficult to read the newspaper, the artist challenged readers in Brasov, his hometown, to question the reception of mediated information. Moreover, the artist’s gesture allowed readers to see the inner workings of the printing of a newspaper, one of the most significant ideological tools of the recent and oppressive Ceausescu regime. Timar’s interventionist work dared readers to exercise personal freedom in a still fragile state of civil society, when, as noted above, Romania’s newly elected government aimed to essentially preserve the pre-1989 ideological and institutional structures. Similar to projects in *Polyphony*, Timar’s subtly disruptive public intervention functioned as a temporary platform for dialogic interactions and voluntary participation.

Like *Polyphony*, *Exhibition 01010101…* chose to document and represent all of the projects as part of a carefully choreographed, large-scale curatorial event. Since the local Soros Center for Contemporary Art did not have a permanent exhibition space, the exhibition was strategically installed in the Romanian Peasant Museum to present the conflict between modern and traditional values. The title of *Exhibition 01010101…* referred to the computer binary code of data processing to underscore the important role of new technologies – such as e-mail, computers and video devices – in establishing and maintaining free and alternative networks of communication. As the exhibition’s curator Dan expressed, ‘We cannot afford to maintain the fifty or so years’ distance from what is still supposed to be the Western model’ (1994: 18). The design of the exhibition sought to demonstrate the applicability of new technology. Artists participated virtually via the Internet, thereby linking the museum audience to artists located in various cities across the country. Yet this new mode of communication failed to engage the public, who was unprepared to use computer technology. As well, the socially transformative curatorial goal to not only propel the nation towards a digital and democratic future but to also internationalize the local art scene fell short by not being able to connect the exhibition audience with the individual artists’ projects aimed to activate inclusive public spheres within their own localities.

Dan worked closely with architect Marius Marcu to construct an elaborate exhibition installation that featured sound, slide projections, flickering screens and even a disco ball. Movies shot and edited by the curator during his summer travels across the country to each of the artists’ sites were screened. Images and texts documenting the artworks were
also presented in a series of slide projections, lined up one after the other along a gallery wall. At the centre of the exhibition, on an elevated platform, seven computers displayed the documentation of all the projects. Although the public was meant to openly browse the computer files and spontaneously communicate with each other and the artists via e-mail, the installation remained structurally bound to perform a self-contained virtual monologue. In this way, the dominance of the curator’s voice over those of the artists in effect sabotaged the intention to introduce and promote an engaged form of art practice within a politically static national context.

Articles and reviews in the local press emphasized the discrepancy between the exhibition’s stated democratic goals and its highly mediated installation. For instance, Alexandra Titu critiqued the museum display as a ‘form without a content’, where the sustained modes of engagement and complex forms of communication at the core of the artists’ projects were reduced to the special effects of high-tech visual arrangements (1994: 14). Erwin Kessler called it a mega-installation that swallowed all of the individual projects into the distraction of a ‘noisy and glittering organism that drew viewers into an aesthetic coma’ (1994: 15). The disjunction between premise and outcome was determined by
the exhibition’s ambitious yet opposing goals. While it aimed to be an interactive event featuring the latest communication technology, it also sought to reinvent the transformative potential of locally anchored, socially engaged art as separate from its former communist connotation as rhetorically unifying propaganda. For example, under Ceausescu, Romanians were obliged to participate in community events to perform patriotic song and dance recitals in conjunction with the national cultural festival Cantarea Romaniei (The Singing of Romania) (Boia 2002: 123).

Despite these problems, *Exhibition 01010101…* in its broader aim to recover from the tainted memory of the recent collectivist past, contributed to an emerging civil society as a space for articulating and pursuing agency and reflexive thought. Like *Polyphony* in Budapest, the exhibition provoked and acted as a trigger for artists and audiences alike to actively engage with the multi-layered changes occurring in the country. However small and temporary the artists’ projects were, they could be seen to be working collectively towards re-activating a democratically inclusive public sphere in which a civil society bypasses hegemonic silencing principles and instead becomes a space for diverse and conflicting interests to be expressed and negotiated. Moreover, in the history of Romanian exhibitions, *Exhibition 01010101…* evidenced the first notion of a socially engaged curatorial initiative that would be furthered in exhibitions a decade later, such as *Va Urma (To Be Continued): Urban and Cultural Regeneration Movement* (2007) and *Spatiul Public Bucuresti/Public Art Bucharest* (2007).

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2. It is interesting to note that because of the anti-socialist program of the Soros Centers, there was a general failure to acknowledge artistic precedents of intervention and social critique that had developed prior to 1989. For instance, in Budapest’s public spaces, Miklós Erdély’s *Unguarded Money* (1956) and Gábor Tóth’s *Food Vending Machines* (early 1980s) represent important historical examples for the role of the artist as a catalyst of collective actions, yet were only vaguely referenced by *Polyphony*’s curator (see Mészöly and Bencsik 1993: 293).

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Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts: Constraint and Self-Determination

Under the auspices of the Soros Centers, *Polyphony* and *Exhibition 01010101…* were shaped by a mandate to promote emerging democratic forms of civil society according to western neoliberal values of individualism and entrepreneurship within a free-market economy and culture industry. Yet some contradictions exist within its openly stated rhetoric of inclusive democracy. As curator Dan (1997) has asserted, the philanthropy of these SCCAs in fact operated similarly to the market forces of supply and demand: ‘the rich […] provide jobs, goods, control, and the poor […] provide work, profit, recognition’. Rather than attempting to negotiate at the state level to establish a legal framework that would support, for instance, the local contemporary art scene, SCCAs implemented and funded their centres for a period of five to seven years. They therefore lacked politically and socially transformative long-term local impact. After this initial period, funds were terminated and the local centres were expected to become self-sustainable as individual competitors within the neoliberal market, employing the expertise and training that the SCCA had provided the staff.

At the same time, the important role that the Soros Centers had within the local art scenes during the 1990s must be emphasized. Their financial support and institutional programs represented vital resources for contemporary curators, artists and art critics in a context where artists’ unions had continued to monopolize the local scene with
pre-1989 conservative forms of art, even immediately after the collapse of the communist regimes when state funds were almost non-existent. The SCCAs, through their annual exhibitions and grants to individual artists and curators, were an important alternative to the unions by providing infrastructure, training and assistance to implement exhibitions and programs to benefit the local experimental contemporary art scene.

The curatorial frameworks of *Polyphony* and *Exhibition 01010101...*, while aiming to broadly open up communication and participation, remained within the confines of the Soros Centers as sponsoring institutions. Both exhibitions revealed the paradox of civil society in their sustained tension between the concern for regenerating local ground-level relationships unmediated by the state and the interest in building democratic institutional structures at the state level based on western models. While it was former art critics and artists active during the 1970s and 1980s who assumed curatorial and directorial roles at these centres, they were expected to implement directives issued and approved by the Soros Foundation in New York. In this way, the Soros Centers were both enabling and constraining structures, yet *Polyphony* and *Exhibition 01010101...* set crucial precedents for institutionally sponsored and socially engaged artistic practices in the crucial transitional period of post-communism that would more fully materialize in the subsequent decade.

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Contributor Details

Izabel Galliera is an independent curator and a Ph.D. candidate in the History of Art and Architecture Department at the University of Pittsburgh. Her dissertation, *Reclaiming Public Life, Building Public Spheres: Contemporary Art and Exhibitions in Post-1989 Europe*, will address socio-politically engaged contemporary art practices that contributed to the shaping and emergence of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. Her other research interests include participatory forms of public art, public sphere and civil society theories, and contemporary curatorial practices. For 2011–2012, she was awarded a Fulbright Grant to conduct research in Bulgaria and Romania.

E-mail: izabelpitt@gmail.com

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