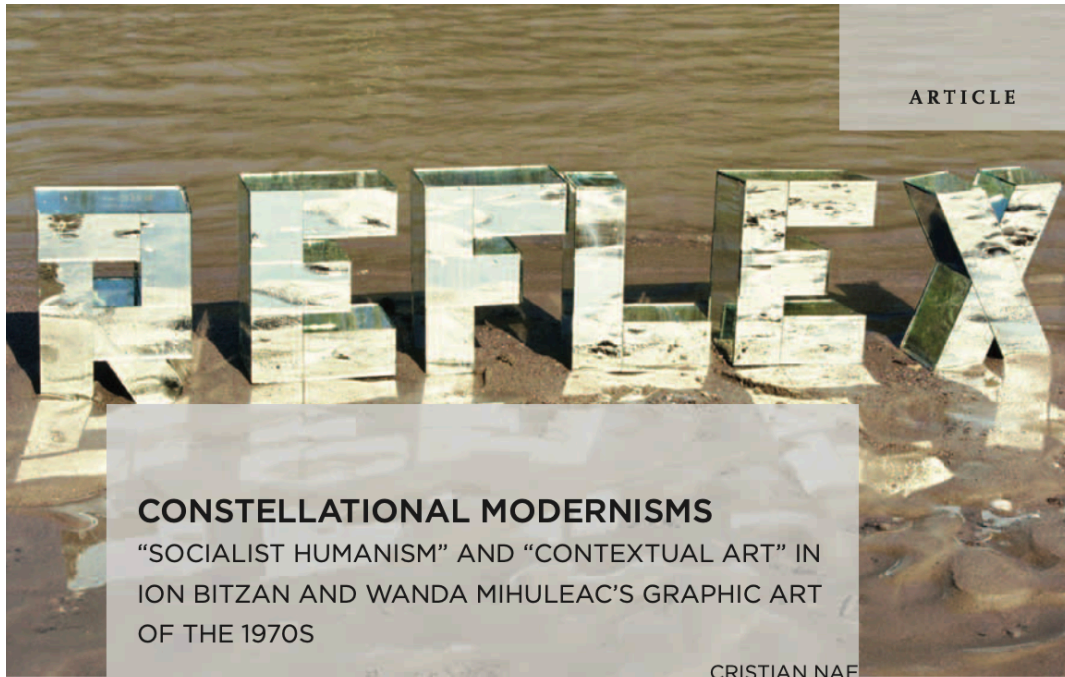# ARTMARGINS

Constellational Modernisms
"Socialist humanism" and "contextual art" in Ion Bitzan and Wanda Mihuleac's graphic art of the 1970s

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By Cristian Nae

ARTICLE

CONSTELLATIONAL MODERNISMS

"SOCIALIST HUMANISM" AND "CONTEXTUAL ART" IN
ION BITZAN AND WANDA MIHULEAC'S GRAPHIC ART
OF THE 1970S

CRISTIAN NAE

Notable efforts have been made to undo the idea that cultural interactions in Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War were limited to self-enclosed national ecosystems. Instead, scholars have emphasized networks of personal contact[1] and other hubs of translocal communication[2] as well as, more recently, institutions that facilitated the circulation of culture between nations.[3] In the visual arts, biennial exhibitions are privileged examples of such "unstable institutions," as Carlos Basualdo has

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1   Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).
2   Zanna Gilbert, " 'Something Unnameable in Common': Translocal Collaboration at the Beau Geste Press," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2–3 (2012): 45–72; Beata Hock, "Doing Culture under State-Socialism: Actors, Events and Interconnections," special issue of *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 4 (2014).
3   Ivana Bago, "A Window and a Basement: Negotiating Hospitality at La Galerie des Locataires and Podroom—The Working Community of Artists," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2–3 (2012): 116–46, and "Dematerialization and Politicization of the Exhibition: Curation as Institutional Critique in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s," *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 7–37; Bojana Videkanic, *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2019); Octavian Esanu, *The Postsocialist Contemporary: The Institutionalization of Artistic Practice in Eastern Europe after 1989* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021); Jelena Vesić, "SKC (Student Cultural Centre) as a Site of Performative (Self-)Production, *October* 75—Institution, Self-Organization, First-Person Speech, Collectivization," *Život umjetnosti* 91, no. 2 (2012): 30–53; Bożena Czubak and Jarosław Kozłowski, *Beyond Corrupted Eye: Akumulatory 2 Gallery, 1972–1990* (Warsaw: Zachęta National Gallery of Art, 2012).

called them.[4] In this article, I propose to analyze biennial art exhibitions, especially in relation to Romania, as a form of material infrastructure that facilitated cultural transfer, setting in motion people, objects, and theories, as well as descriptive concepts. In the 1970s, few biennials were transnational, with most of them still relying on the format of national participation.[5] In Romania, the restrictions placed on travel and the exchange of information transformed these returning exhibitions into privileged opportunities to establish interpersonal connections and conversations between artists from different parts of Eastern Europe.

To throw light on such encounters and their material traces, I draw on the concept of "constellation" developed by Walter Benjamin, and on Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of assemblage as the selection, organization, and stratification of "traits" and "singularities" extracted from a flow.[6] Recently, the idea of constellational analysis was taken up by the art historian Alex Dika Seggerman in relation to Egyptian art.[7] For Seggerman, who builds on Okwui Enwezor's definition of the postcolonial matrix as a set of cultural relations embedded in discourses of power,[8] a constellation describes "a discrete set of travels, exhibitions, degrees, and circulated textual and visual materials"[9] across national boundaries. Instead of defining a stable structure, a constellation in Seggerman's reading allows for multiple associations of heterogeneous elements, including artistic techniques, ready-made visual materials from local sources, and reproductive technologies, as well as traces of transnational encounters and artworks produced in various geographic spaces connected with Western European and North American modernism.

In this article, I propose to examine examples of local contact between socialist modernism and Western modernism that go beyond

personal friendship.[10] Focusing on the national participation of Romanian artists in state-supported large-scale art exhibitions, I hope to throw light on the artistic transfer of ideas and techniques both within and beyond the aesthetic context of Central and Eastern Europe. The medium of the exhibition as an international and transnational network that enabled direct as well as indirect communication between artists may help us reveal continuities as well as discontinuities in the artistic practices of Eastern European artists.

I analyze two instances of Romania's participation in biennials: the Venice Biennale and the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts. In the case of the Ljubljana Biennial, I will lay special emphasis on the imbrication between national and international exhibitions as parts of the same state-supported ecosystem, as an instance of what Tomasz Załuski has aptly described as "official unofficial" art.[11]

DOUBLE EXPOSURES: ION BITZAN'S GRAPHIC EXPERIMENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIALIST HUMANISM

Ion Bitzan's figurative art of the late 1960s and early 1970s is a prime example of the expansion of realist representation that took place in socialist Europe in the wake of the Thaw. In Romanian art history, Magda Cârneci has used the term "experimental realism"[12] to describe a selection of artworks from Ion Bitzan in the early 1970s, such as the *Portrait of Engineer Timar* (1968), *1st of May* (1970), or *Pages from History* (created with Vladimir Șetran in 1970), which translate official language glorifying work and celebrating socialist achievements into mixed-media collages. Bitzan presented these collages at national biennial exhibitions of fine arts, such as the Biennial of Painting and Sculpture, Dalles Hall, Bucharest, in 1968 and 1970, and at the Exhibition of Militant Graphics, Bucharest (1970). These use silk screen, colored pen-

4   Carlos Basualdo, "The Unstable Institution," in *The Biennial Reader*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Ovstebo (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 124–35.

5   Juliane Debeusscher, "From Cultural Diplomacy to Artistic and Curatorial Experimentation: The Paris Youth Biennale between 1965 and 1973," *Institute of the Present*, 2020, https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2020/09/10/from-cultural-diplomacy-to-artistic-and-curatorial-experimentation-the-paris-youth-biennale-between-1965-and-1973/ (Accessed January 26, 2024).

6   See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 406.

7   Alex Dika Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt between the Islamic and the Contemporary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

8   Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 58.

9   Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile*, 6.

10 Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*.

11 Tomasz Załuski, "The Alternative Official? KwieKulik's Studio of Activities, Documentation and Propagation as a State-Financed Performative Archive under Real Socialism," in *What Will Be Already Exists: Temporalities of Cold War Archives in East-Central Europe and Beyond*, ed. Emese Kürti and Zsuzsa László (Bielfeld: Transcript, 2021). For the Romanian context, see Magda Cârneci, *Artele plastice în România 1945–1989: Cu o addenda 1990–2010* (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2013), 113–22.

12 Cârneci, *Artele plastice în România*, 77. Cârneci places Bițan's works in the aftermath of an enlargement of the figurative that was taking place in the second part of the 1960s in Romania, among which she notices tendencies toward oneiric figuration (Sabin Bălașa), lyrical figuration (Constantin Piluță), inspirations from folklore (Dimitrie Gavrilean, Brăduț Covaliu) or Byzantine history (Octav Grigorescu), and expressionist and geometric features (comprising artists such as Marin Gherasim or Traian Brădean).

Ion Bitzan. *Portrait of Engineer Timar*, 1968. 140.5 × 155.5 cm. © Ion Bitzan Foundation. Art Museum Galați, Romania. Image courtesy of the Ion Bitzan Foundation.

Ion Bitzan. *Pages from History III*, 1970. Color serigraphy, colored pencil, acrylic on paper, 70 × 70 cm. © Ion Bitzan Foundation. Institute of Eco-Museal Research "Gavrilă Simion" Tulcea, Romania. Image courtesy of the Ion Bitzan Foundation.

cil, and acrylic on paper in a baffling example of artistic virtuosity, malleability, and flirtation with Pop Art, new figuration, and Socialist Realism. Bitzan worked in series spread over long periods of time. The unsettling character of this cycle of works, which includes others presented to much acclaim in national biennials, such as the *Portrait of Engineer Timar* or the cycle *Pages of History*, lies in their imbrication of formal compositional elements such as loose brushstrokes, serial silkscreened photography, and colored-pencil drawing, with a flattened composition which depicted socialist topics. Such compositions were reminiscent not only of collage but of cinematic crops and *bande dessinée*. This situation was not unique to Eastern Europe. In Hungary in 1965–66, for instance, László Lakner or Gyula Konkoly adapted Pop Art techniques such as silk-screen photographs of socialist everyday life to Socialist Realist topics such as labor and anti-imperial struggle, incorporated into fragmented, serial compositions that were often manually retouched with paint.[13]

As in the case of Lakner, the explanation for Bitzan's uncharacteristic takes on Socialist Realism lies mainly in his encounter with Robert Rauschenberg's work at the 1964 Venice Biennale, an explanation promoted by Bitzan himself. His experience with works by Rauschenberg such as *Express* (1963) or *Buffalo II* (1925–2008), displayed within the

American Pavilion where Rauschenberg won the Golden Lion for painting, was no doubt facilitated by Bitzan's presence in Venice as a representative of Romania in the same year. Later, at the 1967 Bienal de São Paulo where Bitzan participated alongside Virgil Almășanu and Aurel Cojan, he and Vladimir Șetran (the creator of related artworks such as *Speeds*, 1971) saw not only Rauschenberg's but also works by Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Jasper Johns. The traveling exhibition, The Disappearance and Reappearance of the Image: American Painting since 1945, organized by the International Art Program of the Smithsonian Museum and presented at Dallas Hall in Bucharest in 1969, provided yet another opportunity for encountering the works of Western artists.

Rauschenberg's silk-screen images became highly influential in contemporary painting for the way in which they assembled iconic popular images and private snapshots in compositions with no recognizable center, based on chance procedures rather than logic. However, in Bitzan's case, their belated referencing six years later in the artist's graphic works was the result not only of the powerful reach of American art across the Iron Curtain but also of what may be called a cultural détente in Romanian art that took place roughly between 1967 and 1972 and went

13   Maja and Reuben Fowkes, *Central and Eastern European Art since 1950*, 49–50.

by the term "humanist realism."[14] Bitzan was additionally well aware of the French artists associated with what was called "figuration narrative"[15] and their political leanings. The Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski used the term "new figuration" in relation to a broader spectrum of figurative art in Central and Eastern Europe, which he distinguished from the Pop-oriented artworks of Hungarian painters such as László Lakner, Sandor Altorjai, or Gyula Konkoly in the second half of the 1960s.[16] The phrase "new configuration" was first used in Europe by French art critic Michel Ragon as a blanket term for the return to figuration at the beginning of the 1960s in conjunction with two exhibitions organized at the Gallery Mathias Fels in Paris.[17] In the Latin American context, the term has also been used in conjunction with Otra Figuración, a movement active in Argentina since 1961, and the Nueva Presencia group in Mexico.[18]

In the French context, new figuration was often understood, alongside American Pop Art, not as a rejection of realism but rather as a form of "submission to reality."[19] This interpretation can help explain why Bitzan's images, sometimes created with his friend Şetran, could have passed for mere extensions of realism rather than being considered examples of Pop Art by local art critics, since these works incorporated ready-made propaganda images and facsimiles of political writings. With this in mind, and instead of regarding Bitzan's visual referencing of Rauschenberg's compositions as a process of unidirectional Western influence—a stylistic inflection closely related to pastiche—we may be better off describing them as adaptations of the aesthetics of the image that interested Bitzan throughout his career. From this perspective, the artist's encounter with Rauschenberg as well as *nouvelle figuration* become opportunities for the artist to broaden his horizon rather than instances of "influence."

My use of the term "horizon" in this context is inspired by Hans Georg-Gadamer's description of understanding as a "fusion of horizons." According to Jeff Malpas, in Gadamerian phenomenology,

> The "horizon" is, in general terms, that larger context of meaning in which any particular meaningful presentation is situated. Inasmuch as understanding is taken to involve a "fusion of horizons," then so it always involves the formation of a new context of meaning that enables integration of what is otherwise unfamiliar, strange, or anomalous. In this respect, all understanding involves a process of mediation and dialogue between what is familiar and what is alien in which neither remains unaffected.[20]

Therefore, Bitzan's apparent decoupling of figurative representation from its associations with a personal, subjective point of view expands realism toward the territory of the kind of images that circulated in the socialist press at the time, including in journals such as *Scânteia*. David Joselit's reading of Robert Rauschenberg's mid-1960s compositions sees them as a turning point in the history of painting due to their capacity to extract images from popular media that, once

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14 Humanism was introduced into socialist discourse by the French Marxist revisionist Roger Garaudy, and it quickly gained traction, signaling the moral superiority of socialism over capitalism. Roger Garaudy, *Le marxisme et la personne humaine* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1949); Roger Garaudy, *Humanisme marxiste: Cinq essais polémiques* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1957). The term was used to define international socialism in opposition to "cosmopolitan modernism"—represented by cold, inhumane abstraction—in the competing cultural discourses of the late 1950s. As Susan Reid has noted, during the debates occasioned by the 6th World Festival of Youth and Students, held in Moscow in 1957, the terms *socialist humanism* and *(humanist) realism* started to be used almost interchangeably. Susan Reid, "(Socialist) Realism Unbound: The Effects of International Encounters on Soviet Art Practice and Discourse in the Khruschev Thaw," in *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)*, ed. Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 287. In Romania, under Nicolae Ceaușescu's political regime, socialist humanism became a state doctrine that functioned as an umbrella to cover all forms of figurative representation with a socialist content, which, by 1970, were diversified enough to depart from the academic doctrine of Socialist Realism that had dominated Romanian art in the 1950s.

15 See the exhibition Mythologies Quotidiennes (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, July–October 1964). Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, *La Figuration narrative dans l'art contemporain* (Galerie Creuze: Paris, 1965).

16 Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 158–68. It is notable that in 1970, Romania also presented a selection of artworks under the title *La nouvelle figuration roumaine* at Cagnes-sur-Mer.

17 Michel Ragon, "La Nouvelle figuration," *Arts* (March 1961); Raymond Charmet and Michel Ragon, " 'La Nouvelle Figuration' va-t-elle trancher le débat abstraits-figuratifs?," *Arts*, no. 865 (April 1962), 10. The two exhibitions are Une Nouvelle Figuration: Appel, Bacon, Corneille, Dubuffet, Giacometti, Jorn, Lapoujade, Maryan, Matta, Saura, Staël (Galerie Mathias Fels, Paris, November 8–December 8, 1961), cat. pref. by Jean-Louis Ferrier, and Une Nouvelle Figuration II (Galerie Mathias Fels, Paris, 1962), cat. pref. by Michel Ragon.

18 Otra Figuración was the title of an exhibition installed in Galeria Peuser, Buenos Aires, in 1961. It included the artists Ernesto Deira, Rómulo Macció, Luis Felipe Noé, and Jorge de la Vega. For a critical overview of Argentinian new figuration, see Andrea Giunta, *Vanguardia, internacionalismo y política: Arte argentino en los años sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2004). For the Mexican group, see Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth Century Art of Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

19 Pierre Schneider, "Le Pop Art à Paris: Quand la peinture subit la réalité," *L'Express*, October 10, 1963. For a longer account of the reception of American Pop Art in France, see Richard Leeman, "Before the Catastrophe: Pop Art in France in 1963," *Critique d'Art 46* (Spring–Summer 2016), http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/21200.

20 Jeff Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/gadamer/.

inserted within a different mediascape, are enriched by a strong, desta-bilizing local political overtone.[21] Similar techniques were employed by Bitzan in order to subvert the Socialist Realist infatuation with the typi-cal—that is, with an ideologically constructed "objectivity." For instance, in the painting entitled *1st of May* (1970), Bitzan juxtaposes black-and-white images of happy children and a sepia photograph of marching workers that was most probably extracted from propaganda photography in the journal *Scânteia*. Other, silk-screened images of demonstrating youth veer toward monochrome representations in red and yellow. He also picks up a photographic detail—a girl's face that appears in one of the photographs—and multiplies it as a sketched drawing, over which he discretely uses frottage. This composition is punctuated by rectangles of solid red and green that sometimes seem to stand in for other photographic images. The middle section is framed by a stripe of identical silk-screened images depicting a worker's demonstration that covers the lower part of the image, while on top Bitzan draws the con-tours of an ethereal cloud reminiscent of watercolor. The resulting com-position amplifies the constructed character of the narrative, an amplification that only intensifies the unease with which the viewer per-ceives this reality.

By highlighting the deeply ambivalent attitude of these images toward socialist culture, this interpretation goes against the grain of the interpretation proposed by Erwin Kessler, for whom they may be regarded as instances of "propagarde," a term Kessler used to describe the former avant-garde Romanian artist M. H. Maxy who after 1945 turned into a promoter of Socialist Realism. "Propagarde" refers to a politically servile formal artistic novelty whereby "an imported and depleted (uncritical) experiment is decoratively cohabiting with official propaganda in order to support a harmless, visual modernity, with a Western form and an Eastern core."[22] Kessler's argument is noteworthy, since such artworks seem to reinsert allegory into the essentially anti-allegorical procedures of Pop Art.[23] And, to some extent, Bitzan's above-

Ion Bitzan. *1st of May*, 1970. Acrylic, oil, serigraphy on canvas, 136 × 155.5 cm. © Ion Bitzan Foundation. Art Museum Galați, Romania. Image courtesy of the Ion Bitzan Foundation.

mentioned paintings fit this description, However, they also depart from the infatuation with the typical that is characteristic of academic Socialist Realism. Furthermore, through their mechanical reiteration and quotation of ready-made propaganda images these works destabi-lize the reality those images were meant to convey in the first place.

Bitzan's artistic practice occupies a somewhat unique position through its complex mix of artworks that are associated variously with Conceptual art, abstraction, Pop, postminimalism, and Socialist Realism, and that fuse formal experimentation with what looks like a cunning obedience to political demands. Therefore, the artist is often described as a "dual" artist, caught between official and unofficial art, living "parallel lives." Echoing this view, some critics have wondered, "how many Ion Bitzans are there?"[24]

I want to suggest that Bitzan's often ambiguous work does not repre-sent merely a local variation of globalized trends such as Pop Art or pho-torealism, and that he does not conceal formal innovation behind political

21   David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 89–90.
22   Erwin Kessler, "On *Propagarde*: The Late Period of the Romanian Artist M. H. Maxy," *in Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)*, ed. Jerome Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 177.
23   Kessler, "On *Propagarde*," 176.
24   Anca Arghir, "Ion Bițan: Câți Ion Bițan există?," *România Literară*, 1969, 28.

harmlessness.[25] Instead of reading Bitzan's paintings of that period as contradictory instances of a "double life,"[26] I find continuity in these works, facilitated by his exhibitions and cultural encounters. What they have in common is not only the technique of collage but also a critical analysis of images as imaginative representations, a construction that goes through different stages of dematerialization—reduction to formless traces, painting from memory, and transmedial transference—and that includes the juxtaposition of ready-made images extracted from popular media. Between the artist's 1964 participation in the Venice Biennial and the series of experimental, "socialist humanist" graphic art compositions from 1968 to 1970, for example, Bitzan experimented with graphic techniques such as etching and woodcut, using a vocabulary that fused informal representation with gestural and geometric abstraction.[27]

The fusion of abstraction and informal representation is paramount in the series of *Compositions I–XXI*, which Bitzan presented at the Ljubljana Graphic Arts Biennial in 1969 and at the São Paulo Biennial during the same year. In Ljubljana, *Composition I*, a color woodcut fusing color field, flat abstract forms, and gestural, free-flowing scribblings that anticipate 1971 works entitled *Cordonnet non-tendu* and *Cordonnet bien-tendu*, won the purchase jury prize. These qualities are also obvious in his contributions to the exhibition *4 Romanian Artists*, which occurred in 1969 at the Bauzentrum Hamburg and then traveled to the Richard Demarco Gallery in the same year. The 1969 *Compositions* contrast sharply with other graphic works such as the above-mentioned *Pages from History*, which Bitzan produced together with Vladimir Șetran for the exhibition Militant Graphics in 1970. Many other works such as *The Presence of the Letter "G"* (1969), a collage on Japanese paper juxtaposed with watercolor on manual paper, or the compositions presented in Hamburg and Edinburgh in 1968—including *The Pleasure of Making Collage, The Poetry of an Abstract Painting, A Few Strokes of Bright Color*, and *Composition with White Protruding about the Page* display the same

interest in collage, a form that attracted the artist because of the allegorical quality various ready-made materials used. Collage also allowed Bitzan to juxtapose solid rectangular blocs of color and experiment with traces of it in various shades and transparencies. As he noted, "collage brings together materials that we normally use, ordinary materials, but which, in the original syntax that the artist creates, gain emotional values."[28] In his figurative works of the period, the serial juxtaposition of ready-made photographic materials transferred on canvas enacts the separation between the concrete existence of facts; the same reality as filtered through the imagination; and reality mediated by images. This proves that Bitzan was in fact tailoring his interests to different audiences while preserving his main focus on expanding the limits of visual representation and pondering the semiotics of the image.

Similar ideas are offered in an article by the respected art critic and exhibition organizer Anca Arghir published in *Romania Literară* in 1970,[29] in which she describes *Portrait of Engineer Timar* as "new figuration," a label that is politically unproblematic in comparison with either Pop Art or Socialist Realism. However, according to Arghir, Bitzan's work "attests to the belief that art does not reflect the outer world, but our images of the world, deposited in consciousness. Neofigurative language uses these images as documents of knowledge and reconstructs from them a version of reality mediated by concepts."[30] Arghir concludes that, apart from knowledge of outer reality, Bitzan's figurative works also create knowledge about the potentiality and limits of representation. Indeed, splitting the representation of an ordinary socialist event into a series of similar photographic images that are each treated differently through repeated silk-screening and other graphic interventions suggests that the overall image constructed by the artist can be seen as the subjective aftereffect of media practices that all participate in the construction of a collective memory.

Bitzan's adoption of a new artistic vocabulary not only helps him reflect on the potential separation between documents and propaganda, achieved through his treatment of the imaginary mediated by press

25   Erwin Kessler, "Picture It Painted . . . Reality Real and Realisms in Romanian Art and Theory, 1960–1976," in *East of Eden*, ed. Nikolett Eröss (Budapest: Ludwig Museum, 2012), 104.

26   Kessler, "Picture It Painted . . . ," 104.

27   Geometric abstraction was revived in Romania after the 1965–67 rehabilitation of Brâncuși's work. From October 13 to 15, 1967, the Romanian Committee for Culture and Art, together with the Union of Fine Artists and the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), organized in Bucharest a major congress dedicated to the work of Constantin Brâncuși. This is considered a turning point in the reception of Brâncuși's work, after a long period of outright art-critical opposition to abstraction.

28   Ion Bițan, "Interview by Radu Varia at Arte Frumoase, December 4 1968, ed. Ruxandra Garofeanu, audio 4:55 (fragment)," in *24 Arguments: Early Encounters in Romanian Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. Alina Șerban and Ștefania Ferchedău (Bucharest: Institutul Prezentului, 2020), 20.

29   Arghir, "Ion Bițan," 28.

30   Ibid.

Ion Bitzan. *A Few Strokes of Bright Color*, 1968. Watercolor, gouache, Japan-paper collage on paper, 45 × 60 cm. © Ion Bitzan Foundation. Jennifer Gough Cooper. Image courtesy of the Ion Bitzan Foundation.

photography, but also continues his exploration of what may be considered artistic knowledge.[31] Bitzan's work often preserves compositional clues from the artist's more abstract graphic works, thus testifying to a broader formal interest in experimenting with representational techniques and forms. The sharp, dichotomic separation between a "politically servile" and an "experimental" Bitzan should also be revisited. If neo-avant-garde art was among other things a product for export, circulated mainly through official channels until the progressive reinforcement of a nationalized form of Socialist Realism after 1971–74, then we are here being offered another argument to revise the distinction between "official" and "unofficial" culture as nothing more but a historically conditioned prejudice, derived from the retrospective glorification of aesthetic autonomy in the visual arts of the 1970s, in neoliberal discourse after 1989.

FROM CONCEPTUAL TO CONTEXTUAL ART:
WANDA MIHULEAC'S GRAPHIC EXPERIMENTS
Another example for the local adaptation of a concept developed in Eastern Europe is the experimental artistic practice pursued by Wanda Mihuleac in Romania toward the end of the 1970s. In her case, the circulation between Eastern European countries of the concept of "contex-

tual art" was facilitated through its translation within a third space, France.

At first glance, Wanda Mihuleac's and Ion Bitzan's practices seem not to have anything in common. However, both artists frequently interacted with international art through large-scale biennial exhibitions, and both chose graphic art as an expanded experimental artistic medium. Like Bitzan, Mihuleac was by no means an underground artist. In fact she occupied a rather privileged position, free-floating between informal local artistic networks and the international scene. The artist also benefited from state-supported networks, participating for example, in 1972, in one of the most remarkable Romanian Pavilions at the Venice Biennale, as well as in the fifth edition of the Cracow Graphic Arts Biennale; the 10th Ljubljana Graphic Arts Biennial in 1973, and later, as a representative of Romania, in the 1982 Biennale de Paris. Between 1972 and 1982, Mihuleac participated in no less than 13 international art exhibitions dedicated to the graphic arts and drawing, organized in Italy, Slovenia, Germany, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, and Japan.

To apply the term "contextual art" to Mihuleac's practice is to engage in a creative misinterpretation. The artist did characterize her work in relation to this concept, which was coined by Jan Świdziński in 1976, and used it for her retrospective exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest in 2018. However, her encounter with this term was retrospective, facilitated by close connections with France, where she eventually emigrated after 1989. Indeed Świdziński's concept arrived in Romania through Hervé Fisher, who was known from his publications in the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, and much later, through Paul Ardenne's book, from which Mihuleac also adopted the notion of an "artistic situation."[32]

Świdziński had coined the term "contextual art" as a reaction to North American conceptualism, which he considered to be different from Polish conceptualism. Instead of repeating artistic ideas and creative investigations developed elsewhere, Świdziński called for a contextual approach stemming from the context of real socialism. According to Łukasz Ronduda, contextual art therefore "was meant to be an alternative to the existing relations between what then constituted the art world's

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31 For a definition of artistic knowledge that surpasses the capitalist disciplinary confinements of artistic research through academization, see Tom Holert, *Knowledge Besides Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020).

32 Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextuel: Création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2009). This was also confessed by the artist in an interview with me in Paris in 2016.

center and peripheries."[33] Ronduda views Świdziński's turn toward nonessentialist, post-conceptual art as an acknowledgment of the institutional conditions of artistic interpretation that define art as an "empty signifier" and an engagement with the institutional infrastructure through open forms and collective, non-hierarchical and participative processes of producing meaning. Świdziński rejected linguistic conceptualism as promoted by Joseph Kossuth, aiming instead to bring art back to the actual, existential contexts of communication. According to Ronduda, "whereas conceptualism is based on ontological questions, Świdziński's contextualism is interested exclusively in the relations between the context of art and other contexts of professional culture and everyday life."[34] For Świdziński, the meaning of a fragment of reality is an event that can only be established contextually, in a specific time and place, by a specific member of the public, artist, or other agent of the artworld, and in an open process of semiosis.[35] Therefore, it should not be objectified. In the second manifesto developed for Remont Gallery in Warsaw, Świdziński wrote: "6. Contextual art opposes the exclusion of art from reality as a separate, independent object of artistic contemplation. . . ." Under number 15, he clarified the social intervention of contextual art as follows: "Contextual art is a form of acting in reality through the following transformation of meanings: 'REALITY – INFORMATION _ ART – NEW OPEN MEANINGS – REALITY'."[36]

As Juliane Debeusscher has documented, Hervé Fisher brought Świdziński's concept to France after participating in the above-mentioned exhibition at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw in 1977,[37] associating Świdziński's idea with his own "sociological art," which he defined as an interrogative practice meant to intervene in the fabric of social reality. Presented as a series of printed ephemera distributed to audiences in a way that mimicked a sociological questionnaire, Fisher's conceptual art was meant to reflect not only on the way society constrains art, but also on the possibility for art to operate outside of its institutions. Fisher and Świdziński shared a common critique of the tautological version of lin-

guistic conceptualism, turning instead toward a politicized version of the concept.[38] Both critics shared an interest in participatory engagement with the audience in specific social and institutional contexts and in the liberation of the artwork from its autonomy within the gallery space. And both artists conceived the artwork, in an interventionist manner, as a social tool. In his project *Hygiene de l'art*, which took place between 1971 and 1974, Fisher conceived sociological art as a therapeutic means to cleanse art of its heavy historical baggage, and its confinement in a museum as an autonomous object of contemplation. Motivated by a form of "sociological realism," such art attempted to circumvent existing institutions, going against the art establishment.[39]

In Romania, one can hardly speak of art as a socially engaged activity that surpassed figurative representation, and going against the art establishment could only be realized by means of marginal, less-than-visible artistic interventions. Mihuleac for her part was not a political dissident. She was motivated by a desire to ameliorate Marxism rather than overcome it, employing conceptual tautologies in an aesthetically depoliticized way to describe the special position of her works as self-erasing signifiers.

Between 1975 and 1986, Mihuleac created works that reflected the surrounding space by means of mirrors, water, and other elements. These artworks were often inserted in natural environments instead of being presented in white-cube galleries, and later they circulated as photographic reproductions. Some of the best-known examples from these series are *Reflex* (1980), in which mirror-made letters are inserted into a natural landscape, multiplying the perspectives while integrating the approaching viewer. These series of artworks are more than belated echoes of Robert Smithson's land art in the "expanded field" of sculpture.[40] They can be read in relation to other tautological conceptual art pieces, such as "Ombre" (Shadow, 1974), which was written with the shadows cast by three-dimensional cutout letters photographed in the sun, or "Terre: Poème tautologique" (Earth: Tautological Poem, 1974), which was written with a stencil applied to the soil, photographed, and then reprinted. Both works address not only pressing environmental issues but also pinpoint the connections between written and visual language that have the effect of doubling the written word within the mate-

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33   Łukasz Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 1970s* (Jelenia Góra: Polski Western; Warsaw: Center for Contemporary Art–Ujazdowski Castle, 2009), 204.
34   Ibid., 205.
35   Ibid., 203–5.
36   Jan Świdziński, "Sztuka jako sztuka kontekstualna," in Łukasz Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 1970s*, 209.
37   Juliane Debeusscher, "Sociological and Contextual Art," https://hervefischer.art/blog/2018/01/juliane-debeusscher-sociological-and-contextual-art/.

38   Ibid.
39   Lily Woodroof, *Disordering the Establishment: Participatory Art and Institutional Critique in France, 1958–1981* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 195–207.
40   Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979): 30–44.

riality of the signifier. Such artworks, which question the dichotomy of nature and culture, could be classified as "analytical conceptual art" along the lines of Joseph Kossuth's art if it weren't for the institutional channels and the graphic medium in which they circulated as concealed conceptualist experiments. To take into account their medium, however, means to expand the definition of graphic art to encompass installations and sculptural objects that are presented as printed photographic works. Prints allowed for text and image to overlap within the same representational frame. Manipulated photographic prints also functioned as indexical signs of artistic interventions taking place outside of the art institution. More importantly, for Mihuleac, they echoed the concept of "trace" proposed by Jacques Derrida, for whom the meaning of a sign bears with it traces of other related concepts from which it also differs.[41] Similarly to Świdziński's contextualism, Mihuleac's tautological graphic works acquire additional meanings depending on the institutional context in which they circulated within the Socialist bloc.

Mihuleac created *Terre: Poème tautologique*, which she presented in the exhibition Grupa Junij at Mestna Galerija, Ljubljana in 1977, as a stencil-like natural imprint that the artist photographed and manipulated to resemble a mountain and then reconstructed as an offset print. This work was also presented as a graphic work within the 12th Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana in 1975. Other biennials, such as the International Print Biennial in Kraków, sought to facilitate similar transfers. As Gregor Dražil points out, Romanian artists, among others, used print as an opportunity to circulate experimental art within broader international circles.[42] The reason for this is that prints were cheap to make and easy to multiply and transport. In this way, Romanian artists for example were able to make use of the networks that existed within their socialist state to leverage the materiality of the graphic medium as a vehicle for the communication and testing of ideas.

41 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 62–63; *Positions*, trans. and annotated by Alan Bass (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 26. In this case, prints bear traces of performance art, installation art, as well as conceptualism, related within the system of artistic media. They also evoke oppositions between nature and culture, image and text, presence and absence.

42 Gregor Dražil, "Romanian Art at the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts," *Institutul Prezentului*, 2020, https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2020/08/20/romanian-art-on-the-ljubljana-biennial-of-graphic-arts/; Gregor Dražil, ed., *Shifts in the Canon: The Nature and Significance of the Prizes Awarded by the International Juries of the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts* (Ljubljana: MGLC, 2020).

Wanda Mihuleac. *Reflex*, 1980. Textual installation. Letters R, E, F, L, E, X written in mirror glass, 50 x 50 x 18 cm. Argentic photography, 40 x 60 cm. © Wanda Mihuleac. Image courtesy of Wanda Mihuleac.

Wanda Mihuleac. *Ombre*, 1974. Black-and-white print, 40 x 60 cm. © Wanda Mihuleac. Image courtesy of Wanda Mihuleac.

Wanda Mihuleac. *Terre: Poème tautologique*, 1974. Colored offset print, 155 × 140 cm. © Wanda Mihuleac. Image courtesy of Wanda Mihuleac.

Mihuleac's replacement of the globally established term *conceptual* with the more limited term *contextual art* was not mere artistic caprice. It allowed her to account for the progressive demise of artistic subjectivity in her works, which culminated in a fascination with the Derridean theory of deconstruction.[43] This elastic concept also accounts for the artist's environmental concerns at the end of the 1970s that are reflected in such works as *Moebius Band* (1978), a long stripe of layered earth and grass on a thin metallic framelike cutout, echoing the lithographic technique that the artist would later present, in a different version, at the 1982 Biennale de Paris. Deconstruction can also help explain Mihuleac's activity as an exhibition organizer in the 1980s, when together with the critic Mihai Drișcu she created temporary curatorial collectives for shows such as The Writing (1980) and The Space-Mirror (1986), or when with artists such as Cristian Paraschiv or Decebal Scriba she worked on an international environmental action initiated by Paolo Barilo, entitled *Messagio Terra* (1983). In this way, the artist was both within and outside the art establishment that she cleverly instrumentalized.

The Writing is a good example for the conceptualist expansion of the medium of graphic art advanced by Mihuleac. Conceived as an interdisciplinary exhibition and installed in the hallway of the Institute of Architecture in Bucharest, it brought together scientists, poets, choreographers, stage directors, musicians, and visual artists whose common ground was their reliance on various systems of notation. The Writing expanded the Derridean notion of *l'écriture* into a kaleidoscope of micro-situations in which the public was invited to interpret text-based art. Mihuleac also acted as a co-organizer for the performative artistic event *House Party*—a series of performances and site-specific art installations that took place in the house of Decebal and Nadina Scriba in Bucharest in 1987 and 1988.

However, the most emblematic event for the aforementioned expansion of the graphic medium in the direction of conceptualist experimentation and collective labor can be found in Mihuleac's participation in the Romanian Pavilion at the 1972 Venice Biennale, together with 19 other graphic artists. Although the commissioner of the Romanian pavilion was an art critic (Ion Frunzetti), the idea of tearing apart and then recombining the graphic works of all the participating Romanian artists in unpredictable assemblages came not from Frunzetti but from the artist Marcel Chirnoagă[44] who thought of it as a reenactment of the behavior of medieval craftsmen within their guild—this time, in the service of society.[45]

The result was the dismissal of artistic in favor of collective agency, a stylistically hybrid collage of fragments extracted from each artist's works and assembled in heterogeneus configurations that generated loose, sometimes surrealist associations. This practice, together with a favorable international art-critical reception, made a lasting impression on Mihuleac. While international critics saw in the work a continuation of *décollage*, and others interpreted it as a symptom of collective rebellion, in Romania, Frunzetti presented Mihuleac's work as a plea for humanism motivated by "humanist socialism."[46] Frunzetti further interpreted the work as a neurotic symptom of industrial modernity that sig-

43   Daria Ghiu, "Interview with Wanda Mihuleac," in *Grafica românească contemporană*, ed. Ruxandra Garofeanu (Galați: Muzeul de Arte Vizuale Galați; Bucharest: Galeria Dialog, 2017), 7.

44   Daria Ghiu, "Interview with Wanda Mihuleac," 6–7.
45   Ion Frunzetti, "Bienala Internațională de Artă Plastică Veneția 1972," in *Grafica românească contemporană*, ed. Ruxandra Garofeanu (Galați: Muzeul de Arte Vizuale Galați; Bucharest: Galeria Dialog, 2017), 13–16.
46   Ion Frunzetti, "The 36th Venice Biennial," in Garofeanu, *Grafica românească contemporană*, 22.

nals the chaos of a depersonalized, alienated humanity replete with "anthropophagus machines."[47]

MODERNISM AT THE MARGINS: TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENTS

Cultural transfer may be interpreted as the active selection, incorporation, and reuse of an existing artistic or conceptual vocabulary. Some elements of this vocabulary, created in conjunction with local conditions for art production, attempt, and often fail, to accommodate the frictions that result from distant inter- or transnational cultural interactions. Circulating across borders, other elements may arrive late on the scene, motivating and legitimizing on an international scale what may already have been happening locally. What becomes clear, at any rate, is that state organizations that during the Cold War had facilitated the international circulation of art and artists—for example, through their participation in international art exhibitions—were not only exercising coercion, but also often unwittingly facilitating cross-cultural communication. Paying close attention to and analyzing such cultural exchanges might allow us to reconceive what we like to think of, in the context of Eastern Europe, as the heroic fight of individual, autonomous artists against the external constraints imposed by the state. Instead, as I hope to have shown, artists often cleverly used existing state facilities for the production and circulation of art to advance their own aesthetic experiments and integrate these within the international community—for example, through exhibitions like the ones mentioned above. In this way, these artists not only facilitated the circulation of ideas and representational techniques outside of the social and political contexts in which they were initially produced, they also extended the medium of graphic art to accommodate experiments in an expanded form of realism and post-conceptualist performative attitudes. This facilitated the emergence of forms of modernism that can be referred to as "alter-modern"—not in the sense advocated by Nicolas Bourriaud,[48] as critical reflections on the capitalist conditions of global cultural exchanges, but in the more restrained sense of hybrid artistic languages employed in conversations about art in various socialist localities.

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47   Ibid., 23.
48   Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).