

Ruxandra Trandafoiu interviews Marius Lehene

Marius Lehene is a Romanian-born visual artist active in the United States and internationally. His recent exhibitions include shows at Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art; Casa Matei Gallery at the University of Art and Design in Cluj, Romania; Manifest – Creative Research Gallery and Drawing Center in Cincinnati, Ohio; Pollock Gallery in Dallas, Texas; and the Ice Cube Gallery in Denver, Colorado. In 2013 he received one of the Dave Bown Projects Competition awards. Lehene is also the winner of the 2010 McNeese National Works on Paper Exhibition and of the 2007 edition of Positive/Negative 22 National Juried Exhibition. His collaborative book with poet Matthew Cooperman, *Imago for the Fallen World*, was published by Jaded Ibis Press - Seattle, in 2013. He holds an MFA degree in Drawing and Painting from Southern Methodist University, US and a BA in Economics from Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania. Lehene lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, and is a professor in the Department of Art at Colorado State University.

What's happening now in Romanian art?

A lot is happening and fast. It is like a mirror of the amount and speed of information we're living under globally. Writers, classical musicians, film-makers and theatre folk arguably preceded the success now enjoyed by Romanian visual artists. As a painter, I am more finely tuned-in to the visual arts and I will answer your question in that narrower sense. Artists like Dan Perjovschi, Mircea Cantor or Adrian Ghenie are already known to audiences abroad. But there is a much broader arts scene in the country. Supplied with interesting artists, many very young, from all over the country, the scene seems to have concentrated, in bipolar fashion, in Bucharest and Cluj. It is fueled by the competition, occasionally giving way to downright rivalry, between the two major art schools in the country - The University of Art and Design, Cluj, and the National University of Arts, Bucharest. Iasi and Timisoara contribute to it, too, but are rarely

recognized for it.

The professors at all these institutions tend to be fairly active as artists. And almost every Romanian artist that I know of is now active outside the country too. In fact, for the younger generations, activity abroad seems to be a pre-requisite to being taken seriously back home. This could have to do with the fact that though there is an arts scene, there is very little of an art market in Romania. It may also say something about the self-confidence of Romanian art institutions, wistfulness for Grand Tours... I am not sure.

So, I guess, a question is born within your question – “What makes a certain art Romanian? The location or the citizenship of the maker?” And “What do *location* and *citizenship* mean anymore, if anything at all?” Anyway... Entirely positive is the continual presence of these artists at home where they often show alongside lesser-known artists. This phenomenon also speaks tons of the sagaciousness of a relatively young generation of curators and cultural entrepreneurs.

A lot more of the generation of Romanian artists from the period of the Communist regime are becoming visible, retrospectively, through the influences they have on younger artists. Geta Bratescu (b.1926), Ion Grigorescu (b. 1945) and Ana Lupas (b. 1940, more of an installation artist), are artists of such an older, mostly conceptualist, generation. Even if not active they are nevertheless still shown and continue to influence subsequent generations. Calin Dan (b. 1955) and Matei Bejenaru (b.. 1963) follow, in their idiosyncratic ways, the conceptualist route. In the same generation as the latter two are the works of sharp socio-political commentary produced by Dan Perjovschi (b. 1961). Some younger artists are still at the confluence of conceptualism and social commentary yet transcending both: Andra Ursuta (b. 1979) predilectly via installation, and Alex Mirutziu (b. 1981) via performance and video focusing often on issues of gender and sexual identity. Issues of power and gender also feature in the work of photographer Alexandra Croitoru (b. 1975). Active mostly in the US is Rozalinda Borcila (b. 1971) who started out as a new media artist but is now navigating a line closer to social activism. Protean Mircea Cantor (b. 1977) does his best

to avoid any label – he is the winner of the 2011 Marcel Duchamp Prize.

The above mentioned artists are the ones I can think of that are *not* painters. I am saying this because I feel that painters still dominate the scene in Romania. Plan B Gallery (Cluj/Berlin) and its director, Mihai Pop (also one of the initiators of the independent cultural center Paintbrush Factory, Cluj), helped launch the careers of several interesting Romanian artists, mostly painters, among them Serban Savu (b. 1978), Ciprian Muresan (b. 1977, whose practice is a bit more diverse), and – notably – Victor Man (b. 1974) and Adrian Ghenie (b. 1977). Located at the Paintbrush Factory and run by Daria Dumitrescu is Sabot Gallery representing artists Aline Cautis (b. 1975), Vlad Nanca (b. 1979), Mihut Boscu Kafchin (b. 1986) and Radu Comsa (b. 1975), among others.

In Bucharest, cultural entrepreneurs, gallerists and curators like Cosmin Nasui, founder of Nasui Gallery and co-founder of the influential online art magazine Modernism.ro, do a lot of good work – as far as I can tell from a distance. In fact Bucharest has a good number of interesting galleries – a much more atomized scene than that of Cluj. Abroad, Mihai Nicodim of Nicodim Gallery (Los Angeles), champions the work of several Romanian artists, all of them painters – Razvan Boar (b. 1982) and Zsolt Bodoni (b. 1975) among them, but also Ghenie, Savu and Muresan. Mihai has also shown Mirutziu's work. A couple of years ago, Nicodim Gallery opened a branch in Bucharest and has broadened the range of artists it is working with. Ana Cristea Gallery (New York) has exhibited the works of some of the above-mentioned artists plus Bucharest-based painter Bogdan Vladuta (b. 1971). Irina Protopopescu, director of Slag Gallery (New York), adds to the list of Romanian artists represented abroad to include Dumitru Gorzo (b. 1975) and Dan Voinea (b. 1970), both painters and graduates of Bucharest's National University of Arts, one based in New York, the other in Berlin. Painter Marius Bercea (b. 1979) is also active both at home and abroad, in UK and US.

These are just examples; the enumeration can go on. I cannot help but notice the predominance of men, reflection of a too-slow-to-change patriarchal system. I am sure there are important names I did not mention and I am sure the labels I attached to

artists are relative – it is, anyhow, artist’s prerogative to deny any and all of them. Interesting to me remains the fact that, while initially Romanian contemporary art was almost exclusively noted abroad, this outside success has – in a roundabout way – fed back into the local scenes, adding to their robustness and effervescence. There is a sense of optimism in Romanian visual arts at the moment; I would have to dig hard to find anything of the sort in the American art scenes, for example, where cynicism dominates.

How did Romanian artists (at home or abroad) navigate the transition from communism to capitalism, from one system of control to another?

That’s a loaded question, but I do agree with your implied notion that the hard and centralized control exercised by the communist regime has given way to a new, if softer, form of control. In the Romanian transition this has not simply been the domination of economic determinations - control of the capitalist market with its injunction for profit - but still a state-control. Unlike other formerly communist states, in the early 90s Romania adopted a “slow” transition towards democracy and capitalism (I leave it to the reader to decide if the connection between the two is still a natural & necessary one). It wasn’t really a matter of strategy as much as the result of the fact that the Romanian “revolution” may not have been a revolution afterall, but a change of guard from one set of communist leaders to a new one (aspect that, for example, Le Figaro picked up on as quickly as a couple of weeks after the show trial and summary execution of the Ceausescus on Christmas Day 1989). The rather gloomy decades that followed were marred by corruption up to the highest levels of government and widespread feelings of social disenfranchisement, as well as widespread emigration primarily to Western Europe. A lot of that atmosphere persists to this day.

The mood spilled into some of the better art that was made in those years. The decade is possibly best symbolized by the “Mineriade”, those strange moments in 1990,

1991, and again in 1999, when large groups of miners were called (by the government leaders in the first two cases; by union leaders in the last) into the capital city to street-fight the political opposition formed primarily of students and intellectuals who were protesting peacefully. I think it is this lived-reality as well as the memory of communism that explains the propensity for dark subject matter and dark humor in both Romanian visual arts and cinema after 1989. It may also explain the recurrence of communist figures and themes – like the images of the Ceausescus in Ghenie’s work, the Communist-ghetto architecture in Bogdan Vladuta’s, people and situations that appear drab, broken, crushed-down, as in Serban Savu’s scenes, or displacement and ideology as in the work of Mircea Cantor. If I am allowed a speculation I would also add that the trauma of communism has not yet been dealt with by the Romanian society at large and, as such, it still looms large over the nation and that includes artists. There have been no trials of Communist leaders and the archives of the secret police (Securitate) have not been made public until recently and only partially and with the law protecting former communist upper-echelon. Our parents’ generation – those who spent their entire adult life under communism - is marked, I think, by an unacknowledged guilt-complex vis-à-vis the absence of any form of significant dissidence during communism.

The continual denial of this reality through arguments about the existence of sporadic moments of dissidence only perpetuates the effects this historical period (communism) continues to loom over Romanian society, including in its artistic production. Whatever some thinkers refer to as “resistance through culture” was actually not a form of dissidence but rather a strategy of individual (moral and ethical) survival, a retirement from the public/political scene. Proponents of this idea that there has been a “resistance through culture” advance an Adorno-like argument that simply reading/writing/painting constituted itself as a paradigm pointing to the possibility of a space other than the “official”, communist, one. The problem, in my view, is that these activities were rather invisible from the society-at-large thus they could constitute no paradigm of anything else at all. An interview conducted on September 27th, 2010, by Gabriel Liiceanu with writer Herta Muller (the Romanian-born Nobel Prize laureate) is

indicative of this conflict of ideas between intellectuals who left the country and are critical and those who stayed in Romania and revel in fetishistic disavowal, feeling the need to deny the practical absence of dissidence.

To return to the question-proper, a lot of what artists did in the years following 1989 was, first, to be perplexed contemplating the question “What do we do now?” and, second, try to recover the art made (often invisibly) under communism – very little of which was, as the stereotype goes, Socialist-Realist. Travelling abroad, which was now possible, and encountering the varied contemporary art scene especially in Western Europe Romanian artists took a while to (re)define themselves. But this was nevertheless a rather hopeful period... They did well in the long run against the fact that the first decade after 1989 was almost entirely a disappointment for them. Bizarre phenomena had flared in the early 90s on the arts scene; besides the historically compensatory persistence of right-wing ideas among the high-profile intellectuals permeating to some extent the art scene and peaking in the weirdest of all phenomena, the anachronistic neo-byzantinism which was active for a while, especially in painting and sculpture, not only as a niche-field serving the church but even as, how should I call it, “intellectual currency”. That trend seems to have fizzled-out. Artists now appear to have entirely accepted the late-capitalist, information society model – whatever you want to call it. Starting especially with the mid-2000s, the artists I mentioned, almost overnight, become prominent in the West – initially in Western Europe (Germany, UK, France), following very quickly in the United States. Several, mostly young, curators and gallerists started participating in art fairs, used the new communication technologies effectively and occasionally opened gallery-branches abroad - Plan-B Gallery (Cluj/Berlin) being an example of a successful such strategy. A rather un-critical embrace of market capitalism is currently at play. At least among phenomena visible from my limited perspective... I feel this observation applies not only to the art market itself (dealers, galleries, auction houses) - which would be natural; but I think it is safe to say that it applies to the overwhelming majority of artists. It will be interesting to see what the future holds in Romanian visual arts because I feel that it is imminent that more

artists than, say, Dan Perjovschi will begin dealing directly with (as your question announces) the reality of the global situation of narrowing civil and personal liberties, universalized surveillance, aggressive policing, racial and religious profiling, etc.

We have been working together on a project about visibility. Why is visibility important?

Well, for one, in an era of information success seems to equate more and more thoroughly with visibility. The global art scene starts looking more and more like Hollywood and the art market more and more like the fashion industry. At the center of all is visibility and, certainly, the media with its predictable propensities. This is the spectacle side of things, as in Guy Debord, and it is promoted actively by both galleries and by collectors. But it has an impact on the more serious aspect of visibility, namely the fact that a politics is always intrinsic to it. Jacques Ranciere talks about this eloquently. Seeing is an intentional activity. What is perceptible is not necessarily everything that is out there but only that for which we have a sensibility towards. And sensibility understood in this way changes historically; new items and phenomena (that are already there) can become visible. Ranciere calls it "the distribution of the sensible". It is a subtle thing but, I agree with him, arts do contribute to shifting sensibilities and as such every aesthetics is also a politics and vice versa. Perception of reality being the battlefield... Of course, in a certain materialistic sense everything is always there to be seen but the fact remains that aspects that were central can become marginal, and previously peripheral aspects can take center stage as a result of a subtle shift in the "distribution of the sensible". Its subtlety is itself problematic because these shifts in sensibility generated by new forms of visibility of the kind visual arts bring along often affect us without our being aware of it. What and who is visible speaks a lot about where our current "distribution of the sensible" is.

The current visibility of certain artists also makes visible a genealogy of their work and of themselves. This genealogy would not have become visible by itself; it requires an event (say the prominence of a contemporary artist's work) to render it

visible. It is only possible retroactively. I think that is happening and will continue to happen with Romanian art – the visibility of the current generation will render visible their predecessors (as much as they would love to have none). Thus the new generations create their own genealogies making visible, retroactively, art that was absolutely non-existent to a wide public (even within the country).

Vivid in my memory is the example of Harun Farocki. Together with Romanian film-maker Andrei Ujica, he made a film about the end of Ceausescu's communist regime in Romania, "Videograms of a Revolution". I think Farocki does particularly well (in all his works) this shift in visibility; he presents to the viewer images that were materially already there in full sight (like a found object which his footage is) but rearranges them so as to render visible what may have been hidden-in-full-sight. Visibility is for him, as a recent Art Forum article by R.N. Rodowick points out, a politics of perception. What is hidden in full-sight can be called ideology, a screen through which certain things become visible and others are eliminated from even the possibility of being perceived. The ideological screen is never experienced as an image; the minute one such screen is brought in focus it is replaced with another. It appears to be a condition "sine qua non" for consciousness – that its ultimate filtering screen is itself inscrutable. But the process itself, I think, can be made visible as Farocki exemplifies and as such artistic efforts still make sense, visibility at their core.

You return to Romania often (mentally, physically and artistically, via travels and memories). How do you manage to make sense of the multiple spaces you inhabit at any one time?

I don't think I manage it; it manages me. I certainly use the work to process this but it is not a totally conscious process. It may be that this multiple location manifests itself in my work as a simultaneity of perspectives. These perspectives come from different spaces and different times but become contemporaneous, like shards in the aftermath of an explosion. Not sure if this accurate... But I am not trying to control it. I am not

convinced I could even if I tried... It is something I observe about the work and about my own way of thinking; it is thoughts that come afterwards. In retrospect these things can be analyzed but they are directly experienced mostly as nebulous emotional charges whose magnetism is hard to pin-point. Part of this sense of dislocation is germane to my leaving the native country. That moment instantly multiplied the spaces I dwell in (in all senses of the word). Every return to Romania reminds me that I am dislocated from US, too, and that I have simultaneously become a stranger to my homecountry; that there is no “home” possible anymore. This is not said in any tragic sense, on the contrary; most of the time these dislocations are felt at the personal level as absurdities which, we know, are the source of every sense of humor.

I also think that a very strong sense of multiplicity of space was being experienced by us already under communism – right? The public sphere was the sphere of propaganda lies while the private sphere allowed some guarded authenticity; two distinct worlds. Furthermore, a multiplicity of meaning applied to each of these spheres – we were very aware that every statement in the public sphere had an internal split between what it said and what could/should be read between the lines (the classic example, reports on the communist “democratic” elections). Every explicit rule always had implicit (invisible) rules that dictated how it was applied. And these implicit rules were the ones that really mattered – we developed instincts to continually seek these hidden rules. I think we carry with us such die-hard perception habits – you see it in the way I relate even to your questions; my first impulse is to look not at what the question says but at where it came from, basically to seek its ideological foundation.

I shouldn't sound as if I am isolating this feeling of dislocation to communist societies. I think it is present everywhere. We play roles all the time – our professional lives and private lives are distinct space. Also the past, for example, can be conceived of as *“a country from which we have all emigrated”* (Rushdie), a space common to all of us across national boundaries and other identitarian determinations. Technological changes assault us with continual pressure for adaptation and, implicitly, with continual dislocation. This, again, happens to all regardless of physical location. So, if dislocation is

associated with the migrant, the migrant then is already a paradigmatic figure for contemporary global society. And the migrant comes with her own habits of perception dictated by the experience of inhabiting a kind of spatial multiverse. These habits kick in not as a matter of trust. They are reflexes. If you can gain any distance from them, you realize that they are part of interpretive acts, centered on subjectivity. These reflexes are art-like in a way, in that the migrant looks at something (an experience) and applies to it a number of different systems of categorization. “What exactly am I looking at? Am I sure? Is this for real? Can I also see it another way?” are questions instantly and involuntarily popping-up. But these are not the questions of mere recognition – that would happen unconsciously; they signal an aesthetic engagement. They put not only what is perceived under the microscope but perception (the subject) itself with all its illusions of identity. And, by the way, that concept – identity – is one the migrant comes to doubt profoundly. Because one realizes how easy to manufacture that is when its contents are always function of outside interpellation and validated only by self-speech.

What is the relationship between national art (culture) and diasporic art (culture)?

Well, I think there is an out-of-step kind of dance between the two. Not unlike the general relation of diaspora to the national community... In that dance the two get to compare the limitations and incongruencies of their respective views of the other. Each thinks it understands the other perfectly and yet each has an outdated image of the other. When they meet, there is opportunity to measure the disparities, to count the toe-stepping in the dance... I think the differences used to be more pregnant in times past and the two are becoming more and more similar but, in the Romanian case, not because of constant exchanges (which in cultural fields are not as frequent or dense as they could be) but because of external factors. European integration and globalization have minimized the differences between what cultural stimuli the national and, on the other hand, diasporic art scenes respond to. Even the alienation that is so closely associated only with diaspora is widespread nowadays inside national borders. One

needs not leave the country to feel like an outsider.

This is particularly true in Romania where decades of corruption after 1989 keep generation after generation in a constant state of disenfranchisement. And maybe this dislocation and disenfranchisement marks the cultural production of both Romanian and diasporic artists while at the same time reverberating with global noises of the same kind. The Hegelian argument that art (as a stage in the development of the Spirit) is dead, rendered art relevant only as a sort of production of cultural identity. If we look at it in this way, the national/diasporic art split may be worth probing at for insights into what is intrinsic to Romanian art (if anything) and what is extrinsic (reactive to environments). However, globalization deems this “art as production of cultural identity” comparisons more and more relevant when we all seem to grow up with more and more the same global culture. Cultural differences themselves are quickly becoming history and a reaction to this is natural. As such art as production of cultural identity takes necessarily the form of an archaeology – to get to anything culturally specific it needs to go back in time and space and turn, as it often does these days, painfully self-conscious. Diasporic art, I think, can contribute to making this explicit as its harkening back tends to be more obvious because it involves a spatial component easier to notice. This attempt at going back is, of course, taking the form of an impossibility – its actual results are never a recuperation.

The myth of the eternal return is I think unavoidable for any diaspora. But it is not a simple thing especially for artists because the spatial return overlaps broadly with a return to childhood, both as a place and as a state of mind; possibly a general art-tendency to attempt to return to a pre-linguistic infancy (in Agamben’s sense), where there are only perceptions – no meanings; where “green” can be experienced as such and not as “the greenest grass of home” et cetera.

Choose one of your works and talk us through the creative process, re-make it, re-paint it for us.

It is hard to answer this question directly because I have no distance from my work, I don't trust myself to have any perspective on it. When I work I do one thing and when I talk about it I do another. So, if you can accept this, I'll do my best to talk "around" the work... Most of the thoughts about it come after the work is done and you've already heard some of them here. These thoughts - I totally distrust them. I think they do more to fabricate, from scratch, scenarios in which the work makes sense rather than identify anything objectively true about it. They are just as speculative as the works were in the first place... I think... If I ever sound like I know what my work is about, remember that the truth is that I don't - I am simply following it; I am always behind chasing the "derapages". So, from here on we enact an Italo Calvino story: you are the Khan and I'll be Marco Polo painting for you an invisibility...

I can tell you first what I do physically, materially, in the most recent work (2015). In brief, I operate in layers; I do something, and then do something to it (I think I am paraphrasing Jasper Johns here). This process continues until simple recognition of visual entities in the work is not possible and it all becomes more of a feel. (Hearing myself say this I realize this is virtually identical with Shklovsky's idea of "estrangement".) My current series of works (2015) is based on layered images made to communicate with each other via the use of various hand-made combs employed to rake the thick body of paint and expose under-images. This physical procedure of painting is not new - African American artist Jack Whitten used it extensively in the 70s and applied it non-objectively. In my work, I add images as screens on top of other images; I tend to always put something in the way, visually. It pleases me when the top screen appears as something that is too close to be observed directly and is only discernible as an impediment. Or when no image of a number of competing ones seems to gain the upper hand... The result is itself form - it cannot escape that. Except a rather germinating one, like a humming or droning (as in Indian Classical music, or - who knows - like un-manned flying devices in recent military activity)... Bottom layers are themselves multiple, denying the possibility of visually discerning a final, rock-bottom, layer of meaning.

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Two years back I set up an installation of juxtaposed video clips recorded from a moving vehicle and projected them through a skeletal sculpture that was an impediment to any clear image actually forming. That's where this kind of visual thinking originates for me. In the often overlapping bottom layers of my recent works are drawings based on recent photos I took in my home town of Cluj (some literal views of my childhood apartment-block, views which in a sense I see for the first time), but combined with, in one instance, a US playground with a young boy in it, in another with an image from the 1989 "revolution" (Iliescu on the phone). I see them – either way – as function of a history (of some language possibly), access to what they really are being denied or interfered with as soon as they become "in focus", looked-at. I am interested in alluding to peripheral vision; images used are images of a spatial and historical periphery after all...

Lehene: Between blocks of flats, 2014



Lehene: Ashoka Pillar, 2015

