

The Poetics of Politics – The Bucharest School of Photography

June 10 - July 15, 2023

Artists:Michele Bressan
Dani Ghercã
Nicu Ilfoveanu**Curator:**

Sam Steverlynck



Exhibition view at Harlan Levey Projects, June 2023.

Harlan Levey Projects65 Rue Isidoor Teirlinckstraat,
1080 Brussels, Belgium**Opening: Saturday, June 10, 2023**

Exhibition: June 10 - July 15, 2023

Wednesday - Saturday: 12:00 - 18:00

The Poetics of Politics – The Bucharest School of Photography, curated by the Belgian art critic/curator Sam Steverlynck, is a two-part exhibition that takes place at Harlan Levey Projects in Brussels, Belgium and Art Encounters in Timișoara, Romania within the framework of Timișoara 2023, European Capital of Culture.

The exhibition unites the work of three Romanian photographers (Michele Bressan, b 1980; Dani Ghercã, b 1988; and Nicu Ilfoveanu, b 1975) who all graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest, where two of them are currently teachers. Having grown up in the aftermath of the 1989 revolution, their practices are united by a certain cautiousness towards a narrative oriented use of images, and a meta-reflexive way of dealing with the medium of photography. Adhering to a conceptual approach rather than a documentary one, each reflects on a period of economic, social, and technological transition, experimenting with different presentation modes in hopes of overcoming the limitations of the still image and stretching its potentiality. Though their shared position is not politically outspoken, their gaze bears a political dimension which is reflected in visual languages that are at times experimental, aesthetic, and poetic.

Generation Loss

Generation Loss (2009) by Michele Bressan and Larissa Sitar can already be considered as a contemporary classic. The video consists of a static, frontal image of the Casa Poporului, the most detested building in Bucharest, which was commissioned by the megalomaniac dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918-1989). With a height of 84 meters - nine floors above ground level and nine underneath - more than 1000 rooms, and a total surface of 330 000 m², it is the second largest administrative building in the world and one of the most expensive building projects of the 20th century. In order to construct this behemoth – of which the construction works started in 1978 and were never fully completed – a significant part of Bucharest's historic district was destroyed; 40 000 houses were evicted and a country, which was already dealing with high debts, was only pushed further into extreme poverty. Filmed in 2009, exactly twenty years after the revolution which led to the execution of Ceaușescu and his wife Elena, Bressan and Sitar made this video and copied it twenty times on a VCR, hence exhausting the image and reducing the building to a blurry façade. *Generation Loss* evokes the historical amnesia in Romania and the other parts of the former Eastern Bloc. The deliberately destructive technique is a reference to the repeatedly copied, illegal video tapes of Western movies that circulated during the dictatorship.

4 Houses

Dani Ghercã often uses photography to examine the notion of architecture, scale, and power. That is also the case in the series *4 Houses* (2015-2016) which presents four monumental Soviet-style buildings – including the Casa Poporului – that were once the pride of the regime. Ghercã's way of portraying these buildings – such as the frontal perspective on the Casa Scanteii (House of Free Press), for example – stresses the power structures they embody and the way they dominated both official discourse and urban space.

Found & Lost

Exploring different modes of distribution and presentation, publishing photo books is an important part of Nicu Ilfoveanu's practice. The series 'Found & Lost' (2011), presented here for the first time as a full-sized digital projection, was initially



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conceived as a publication. For this series, Ilfoveanu strolled around a flea market for an entire year, observing the ritual of buying and selling and capturing it in a visual analysis of recurrent gestures and a play of performativity. This thriving informal economy and exchange of commodities is revealing of the way one's discarded past is the other's bargain.

Waiting for the Drama

Many of Bucharest's eclectic buildings – some more run-down than others – were destroyed or repurposed in the wave of liberalization that followed the revolution. In his series 'Waiting for the Drama' (2010), Michele Bressan captures various cinemas throughout the country prior to their demolition or transformation into bingo halls, (strip)clubs, parking spaces or shopping centers. Bressan does not take pictures of the projection screen, but instead turns his camera to the deserted room. The empty seats, outlined in the semi-darkness, and the eeriness of the scene, evokes a memento mori or last tribute to cinema. When Bressan started this series in 2010, out of the 290 state cinemas in Romania only 29 were left. By 2020, none of them were used as a cinema anymore.

Steampunk Autochrome

When Nicu Ilfoveanu received an old box-camera from a friend of his mother's, he realized that it hadn't been used in almost 50 years, but there was a roll of film left inside containing two pictures. He decided to develop them and bring these 'latent images' back to life a half century later. This experience inspired the series 'Steampunk Autochrome' (2004 - 2008). The title is a reference to both the autochrome procedure that enabled the first color pictures and the concept of Steampunk, a form of neo-romanticism linked to industrial ruins. Ilfoveanu started taking pictures of the present with a device from the past, while embracing the camera's limitations due to its single enclosed aperture and long exposure time. He did not use the camera's signature aesthetics, its dreamlike haze and color effects, to portray nostalgic scenes, but instead captured (post-industrial) landscapes, dreary wastelands, and bleak housing blocks. Because of this anachronistic device, some of the images of the present directly bear witness of their past and the ruins of communism, hence reinforcing the notion of photography as a way to freeze and fossilize time.

RABLA

In its striving to modernize the country, the Romanian government launched the so-called RABLA programme in 2005. Owners of cars that were older than ten years could exchange their vehicle for a voucher with which they could purchase a new one. Especially owners of Dacia's from the 70s and 80s – a Romanian brand that was the only available option for those who could afford it – were eager to get rid of their old car. Michele Bressan visited one of these scrapyards where the Dacia's – once the pride of the nation – were reduced to an abstract heap of scrap metal.

Portrait of the Unknown

Over the years, Nicu Ilfoveanu befriended Valerică and later Gigi, two unusual characters living outdoors, in the margins of society. Without falling into the trap of exoticizing the other, Ilfoveanu portrays them with humanity and tacit understanding. The different series dedicated to both men are a tribute to those who live life by their own rules and do not fit the capitalist diktat of non-stop productivity and unbridled consumerism.

A Glimpse of Disconnection

Leaving Bucharest for the rest of the world, the communist past for the neo-liberal present, and a frontal view for an aerial one, Dani Ghercă's series 'A Glimpse of Disconnection' (2021-ongoing) consists of pictures of various metropolises taken from a helicopter; aerial portraits of the simultaneous connectivity and loneliness that characterize contemporary urban space. Each skyline becomes interchangeable, reduced to abstractions, composed of form, color, and light. The pictures are not taken at night – as the almost pitch-black compositions would suggest – but during the daytime, in contre-jour, which explains why they all look underexposed. The odd shiny details are reflections of metal and copper elements embedded in the buildings' roofs and facades. This dense network of lines and surfaces does not evoke the shape of a gigantic motherboard by accident. 'A Glimpse of Disconnection' is a visual embodiment of the ideal of the interconnected metropolis and its constant flow of data, which is omnipresent but remains invisible. By revealing these hidden circuits in his digital pictures, Ghercă draws on something akin to the magic of analogue photography; the golden moment when pictures are developed in the dark room and reveal what is there, but is not always visible to the naked eye.

Sam Steverlynck

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