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A Celebration of the Art Medium as Channel of Cross-Cultural Communication: Alianta's Mediums Art Show (Washington, D.C. / Oct 7, 2015)

By Sonia Coman

The art show that Alianta organized on the occasion of the 2015 Annual Gala brought together Romanian and Romanian-American artists to highlight their relationships to techniques and mediums. While shaping the identity of the show, **Ramona Todoca** and I, as co-curators, found that Romanian art in the United States is overwhelmingly about the medium as a means of communication. That directed us to the simple title of the show – **Mediums** – and to a group of artists of diverse ages and backgrounds who work in a wide range of mediums, from historicist painting and modernist sculpture to animation and nano-art. Featured at the Organization of American States in Washington DC, the show explored the relation between artists and their mediums and emphasized the potential of the art medium for civic engagement in the context of enhancing bilateral relations.



The artists who participated are installation artist **Adela Andea**, photographer **Meyrem Bulucek**, book illustrator **Sonia Coman**, filmmaker and photographer **Rudolf Costin**, painter **Manuela Holban**, sculptor **Cristian Ianculescu**, ceramist and sculptor **Patrick Mateescu**, conceptual and installation artist **Sasha Meret**, animation artist and illustrator **Malina Omut**, nano-art initiator and scientist **Cris Orfescu**, lettering artist and graphic designer **Ionut Radulescu**, multimedia artist **Sabina Rak**, animation artist and graphic designer **Ramona Todoca**, and photographer and multimedia artist **Max Tzinman**. The show presented samples of their works and connected these artists to professionals in other fields, in the spirit of fostering dialogue between art and other spheres of activity that benefit from the presence and mechanisms of art.

The goal of this text is twofold. On the one hand, I hope to present a cross-section of the visions of the participating artists on three aspects of the concept of the show: firstly, the reasons for which they chose – or invented – the mediums in which they are working; secondly, the relation between art and communication; and thirdly, the relation, if any, between their art practice and Romania. On the other, I hope to make some observations on how their artistic practices translate their respective artistic visions.

Choosing the Medium

Whether a centuries-old medium or a newly created one, the medium has been essential for the artists of this show in shaping their artistic identities. For some of them, it took time and experimentation with other mediums and techniques before they found the ideal channel of expression.

For **Malina Omut**, the path to illustration entailed a lengthy journey that started with playing the cello and continued with sculpture, painting, photography, and video arts. She chose illustration because, in her words, "it's a very versatile art form, with many approaches that range from traditional painting to digital illustration and from fine art to commercial art." She privileges illustration because, through this medium, she can "communicate in the closed space of a gallery but also take [her] message beyond the gallery walls and bring it to people who are not likely to walk into an art space." This idea in particular resonates with the diplomatic context of the Mediums show, not because the Alianta public does not usually visit art spaces, but because there are too few opportunities to see contemporary Romanian art in the United States.

For **Cris Orfescu**, Nano-art was the result of a joint activity as artist and scientist and of numerous experiments with various materials and techniques in both fields. He explained: "I was an artist before becoming a scientist. I experimented for over 40 years with different media and art forms, including digital art, murals, acrylic and oil painting, mixed media, faux painting, trompe l'oeil, collage, animation, web design, video, and photography. [As a scientist,] (...) besides semiconductor materials and technology, I studied the unicellular algae known as diatoms. In 1984, I joined the Institute for Electronic Components in Bucharest, working in microtechnology research. (...) In the present, I develop nano-materials with applications in Lithium polymer batteries and ultracapacitors." Nanotechnology represented the link between these parallel careers because the artist is fascinated by its potential and believes that it is "capable of changing our lives." His digitally edited nano-images are informed by both art and science and represent, for the artist, a way of marrying art and life.

For many of the participating artists, the materials called for by their chosen mediums have become integral to the messages conveyed through their art.

For example, the medium of **Adela Andea** is light. However, as the artist stated, "such a medium does not exist by itself." She added: "I use all aspects of this technology as visual elements in the creation of my work."



Ionut Radulescu



(...) Each cable (...) is manipulated to create an interesting effect. All the electronic components are transformed into a story about the technology of the moment."

Malina Omut finds innovative ways to integrate various materials that are usually not associated with the field of illustration. She explained: "The tactile quality is very important to me and I like to use materials and techniques that enhance the message and add more dimension: wood, fur, canvas, screen-printing, acrylics, etc."

For **Sasha Meret**, the sensorial diversity and intensity of materials are key ingredients. He intentionally overwhelms the viewer either with a wide variety of materials that come together to create one piece or through a seemingly excessive number of items of one category. For example, in his playful *Ars Polystyrensis* series, he created whimsical egg-like and wing-like shapes out of disposable plastic spoons. In that world, dramatic creatures are born out of an excess of mass-produced single-use objects. Sasha Meret strives to find a balance between ideas and emotions through a whirlwind of sensations.

Unlike those who create heterogeneous objects, some of the Mediums artists dedicate their practices to a single medium. For example, the young artists **Meyrem Bulucek** and **Rudolf Costin** have already shown a commitment to photography. **Patrick Mateescu** has had a decades-long international career as sculptor and ceramist. For these artists, the medium becomes a spiritual practice or channels critical messages of social involvement.

According to an aphorism by **Patrick Mateescu**, the ceramic arts have a miraculous dimension. I take that to refer to the transformative power of the ceramist, who makes the clay into something that oftentimes has no resemblance to its material. Focusing upon ceramics and sculpture, Mateescu created a coherent oeuvre that ranges from small-scale porcelain to large-scale monuments.

Art and Communication

Art is a form of communication, isn't it? The history of art tells us that the relation between art and communication can take many forms, depending on the agency of the artist and the response of the audience across cultures. Art and communication have been confused and conflated. There has been tension between art and communication. And there has always been the question: How can we get the "correct" message that the work of art is there to convey? Also, as R. Wollheim and others posited, art does not have to be communication and artists do not have to have beholders as their categorical partners.

The artists who contributed to this show strongly believe in the notion of art as a form of communication. They define the art medium as a connector with a special power to bridge otherwise disparate ideas, individuals, and worlds.

For **Sabina Rak**, whose work combines a focus on materiality with digital technologies, art as visual communication is a ground for expressing "ideas, doubts, feelings, questions, and worries and hopes" that cannot otherwise reach others. As an artist, she asks herself what it is that she cannot articulate. What she finds becomes the subject of her art.

Digital and installation artist **Max Tzinman** conceives of his artistic practice as a refuge against groupthink and a safe haven for reclaiming individual consciousness. He wrote: "Humanity is sleepwalking through life." How can art wake us up? His "Mob Project" creates a virtual environment where the only way to escape the ever-growing presence of abstracted human figures and faces is to take shelter in the world of the self.

Commissioned for the Mediums show, the lettering of **Ionut Radulescu** explores the emotional impact of typesets and the role of the visual dimension of words in the effectiveness of a written message. With experience in the design of digital stock images, Radulescu played with color and scale to connect the notions of medium and message.

The Medium is the Message is a personal project of graphic designer **Ramona Todoca** that combines design and animation. Conceived as a visual response to M. McLuhan's *Medium is the Message*, Todoca's work playfully corrects the title to its original spelling, before McLuhan accepted the misspelling of his typesetter as evocative of his claims. In her words: "Fascinated by McLuhan's observations of our relationship with the media and the 'electrical information,' I visualized them as projections on the human body."

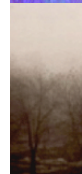
Relating to Romania

Deeply rooted in an investigation of what art is today in a global context, many of the works of the participating artists share an affinity for Romanian culture.

The sculptures of **Patrick Mateescu** and **Cristian Ianculescu** use the tradition of Brancusi to develop individual styles that respond to current trends in three-dimensional art. Their pieces, like Brancusi's, privilege archetypal representations of human, animal, and vegetal form, as well as abstracted expressions of various emotions and states of mind. Subtly site-specific and combining unusual textures, Mateescu's outdoor sculptures resonate with their surroundings by creating an environment where the transition from nature to art is as seamless or as violent as that from one natural form to another.

The paintings of **Manuela Holban** are reflective of a deep understanding of the history of European art. Her work playfully comments on artistic models (e.g. Velazquez, Van Eyck, the French school of painting) that influenced generations of Romanian painters and cemented the fine arts tradition in Romania. Her paintings, organized in series based on the historical pieces that they comment on, function as illustrations to the worlds of ideas generated by influential paintings of the Western past. The whimsical and dreamlike quality of her vision as an artist is not unlike Romanian surrealism. Her versions of paintings like *The Arnolfini Portrait* and *Las Meninas* become the pre- and post- histories of these imagined realms, in ways that resonate with how the "originals" spread their influence from the center to the periphery in the history of European art.

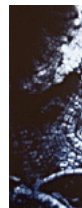
Although not autobiographic, some of the work of **Adela Andea** relates less to European cultural heritage and



Patrick Mateescu



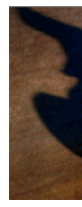
Sabina Rak



Max Tzinman



Ramona Todoca



Cristian Ianculescu

more to the artist's personal relation with the Romanian past. She explained: "For my first solo show (...) in Houston I used the title *Bioluminescence* as a metaphor for my past, growing up in a communist country." In that piece, Andea showed how through art she was able to "glow" as an individual despite the pre-1989 experience of living in a communist regime.

All participating artists recognized in one another not only shared points of reference, despite their different ages and backgrounds, but also a common interest in exploring how and to what effect the medium becomes part of the message itself. As part of a group show, their works illustrated how art that acknowledges the medium refers to the process through which it came into being and thereby becomes a meditation on what art is.

In conclusion, what I hope to draw attention to is the importance of community in art and the role of the medium in delivering and reinforcing a shared message. The message of this show, especially in the context of bilateral relations, is to emphasize the civic dimension of the philosophical and art historical debate, as articulated by M. Fried, S. Cavell, R. Krauss, and others, of whether or not a medium is invented and practiced by a single artist or is collaborative and heterogeneous by definition. A group show like Mediums is ambitious, crowded, and noisy, but it fosters a community of viewers who understand traditional mediums in new lights and interact with new mediums in ways that expand or alter the definitions and uses of those mediums. For example, in the context of this show, the abstract language of **Orfescu's** digitally edited nano-images served as a common ground for initiating and developing socially beneficial projects. The medium-centered group show also offers a platform for innovative artists to connect their mediums - old and new - and to shape the medium as media technology in ways that improve communication through the arts.

NOTE: *All quoted texts are from personal communication of the author with the artists.*

