

MOVING DIALOGUE EXCHANGE—ROMANIA

In the Making of a New Revolution

by cristiane bouger

While observing Bucharest from the window of a flat on the 14th floor, I learned attentively about the history of earthquakes that afflicted Romania. On account of the country being located in a seismically active region, many of the populated buildings in the capital's downtown area would not be able to withstand a high intensity tremor. The building I was in was among the ones at risk. When I asked about how to proceed in the case of an earthquake evacuation, I was told that the odds of a tremor hitting the city in that period were low. I knew I should not take the elevator. I was then informed that, in these buildings, I should take neither the elevator nor the stairs, since the latter would be the first part of the building to collapse. The information kept resonating, not so much because of the fear it caused, but of its implicit Kafkaesque threat.

Walking down the streets, the opulence of the institutional buildings dramatically contrasted with the gloomy blocks of residential flats constructed during the Communist regime, while innumerable money exchange houses and giant billboards covering the façades of old buildings reminded me of the free market politics adopted by Romania in the 1990s.

For people who lived under Communism from 1947 to 1989, and were deprived of the right to choose what to eat, what to learn or how to live, embodiment of capitalist clichés is not a matter of superficiality. As I heard in the city, for those who grew up seeing the grocery store shelves always empty, entering a McDonalds felt like being in paradise. In a synthetic way, such statements uncover the roughness contained in the opposing political systems that shaped the recent history of the country, with more evident traces in Bucharest.

Because of its geographical position, Romania faced a history of constant migrations, invasions and several back-and-forth divisions and unifications of its territory. Invasion by the Roman Empire led to the conquest of Dacia, giving rise to Dacia Romana. In the centuries that followed, battles with and invasions by Austro-Hungarian, German, Slav, Turkish and Russian tribes made of Romania, from its territory to its myths, a hybrid of distinct influences.

The country was shaped into the unified territory that we currently know through several political negotiations, including the failed attempt to remain neutral during the World Wars and, eventually, the acceptance of controversial alliances under Nazi and Soviet pressure during World War II. During this period Romania played a major role in the persecution of Jewish and Gypsy minorities. Switching leaders and sides during WWII, in 1944 the country joined the Allies. The Soviet occupation, which lasted until 1958, facilitated the rise of Communism as the country's main political force.

In the Communist decades that followed, under the censorship of the feared Romanian secret police agency known as Securitate, artists, writers, journalists and intellectuals were required to be loyal to

the socialist ideals espoused by the state or they were condemned by the regime. The regime was marked by several human rights abuses as well as deportations and assassinations, mainly under the rule of President Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965-1989).

Under those circumstances, dance taught in the ballet schools followed the conservative Soviet model. Modern dance was politically intolerable since it was a cultural influence coming, at least more recently than ballet, from the West. Clandestinely, however, some dancers learned techniques of modern dance in secret classes with teachers who studied abroad. The "after-hour" classes and improvisations, as choreographer Vava Ștefănescu recalls, gave dancers access to the training techniques developed by choreographers such as

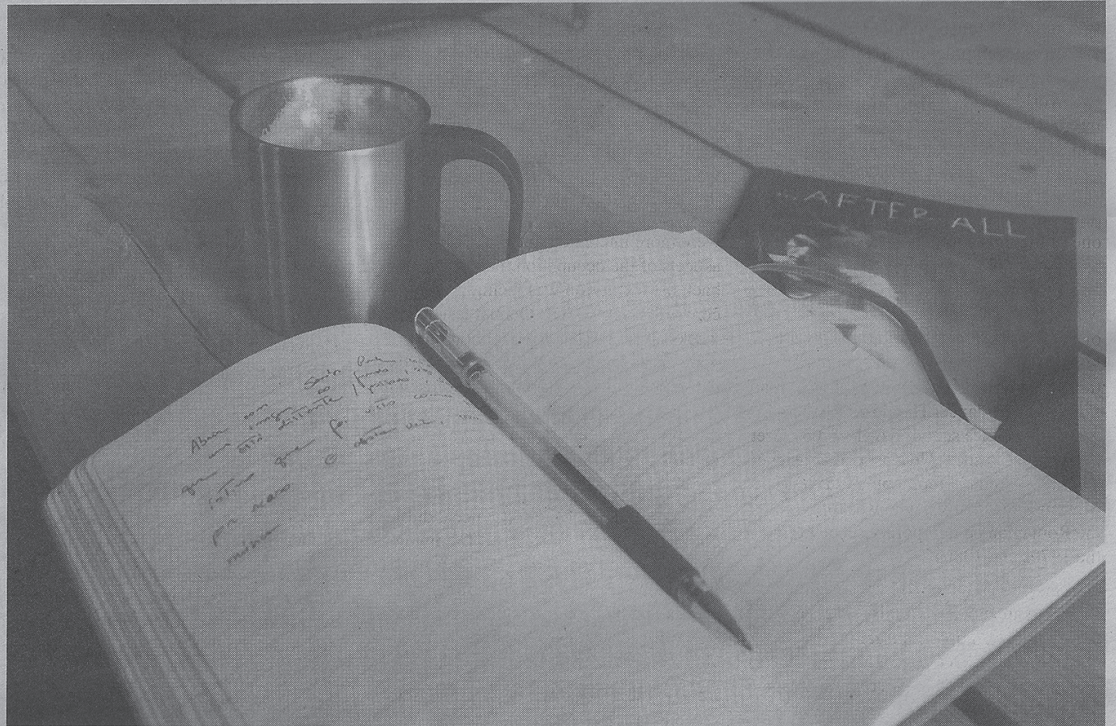
Salvation Front party.

In the post-Communist years, contemporary dance in Romania was largely influenced by the contact with the conceptual dance scene in Western Europe. Political themes marked many of the dance works created in the decade that followed the Revolution. In the more recent period of Romanian choreography, dance journalist Gina Șerbănescu affirms that a shift from political content towards the investigation of a more personal discourse occurred on the scene. A challenge to be faced, however, is that the Romanian audience is still not comfortable with the experiments and ideas of contemporary choreographers.

According to choreographer Mădălina Dan, the educational system in Romania plays a major role in the lack of audience apprecia-

Fairuz/Mihai Mihalcea as an extrasensory trance and fairy play, prompted created identities and political criticism; Mihaela Dancs presented *Art and Life: Day 91 and Day 98*, an adaptation of Deborah Hay's solo *Art and Life*; while *Stage Psychosis* by Carmen Cotofană was a dense physical research on the use of masks. Although the leitmotif of the works varied significantly, the influence of theater aesthetics was clear in most of the work, made evident through the construction of scenes and the use of make up, costumes, and props.

Although "conceptual dance" is a term that has been used by critics to define the works that started to emerge in Europe in the mid-1990s, some artists reject the term¹ for its lack of clarity, and because they understand that contemporary dance encompasses a



Martha Graham. Searching for knowledge was a violation and a risk, but wanting to know what was happening beyond the Iron Curtain, Ștefănescu reminisced that she stole dance reviews about Twyla Tharp and Lucinda Childs from the American Library.

During the last two decades of the totalitarian Ceaușescu regime, the country's international debt grew extraordinarily and paying the debt, to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, impoverished Romania considerably.

In 1989, the Romanian Revolution brought the regime down, culminating with the execution of its dictator and his wife, Elena Ceaușescu. The country was proclaimed a democratic and social Republic in 1991, but, inconsistently, the government that followed the Revolution was constituted primarily of former Communist officials under the newly established National

tion for contemporary dance works. She points out that the academic environment is very conservative and does not offer enough knowledge about contemporary art. In the choreography department where she studied, conceptual dance was a sort of blasphemy.

The Romanian works seen in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca during the Moving Dialogue Exchange revealed a variety of interests and investigations: personal experiences of love and loss informed *SuperGabriela* by Cosmin Manolescu (presented at PS 122 in New York in 2010); the dancer's embodiment of the memories shared by the choreographer could be seen in *After All*, by Vava Ștefănescu; Transylvanian myths and queer interests served as the base for Paul Dunca's *I.C. [progressive work]; Good-bye! (or the limbic system's discreet outlets)*, which was defined by Farid

diversity of interests, strategies and forms that cannot be described by a single term. Concerning this issue, a group of artists that included Jérôme Bel, La Ribot and Xavier Le Roy, among others, gathered together in Vienna in 2001 to write the *Manifesto for an European Performance Policy*², stating that contemporary practice "can be described by a range of terminology, depending on the different cultural contexts in which we operate." The artists listed about twenty terms that could be used to describe their practice in order to demonstrate the heterogeneous and evolving nature of their work.

Nevertheless, the understanding that contemporary curators and critics in Europe have a preference for "conceptual dance" remains a common perception among artists from different backgrounds and contexts. For instance, the choreographer

Cosmin Manolescu attributes the tendency of young Romanian choreographers to create conceptual dance works to the fact that this aesthetic is seen as way to meet the curatorial demands of many festivals in Western Europe.

Paradoxically, if we trace influences back, we will see that Romania has been looking for inspiration in France, considering it a model in politics and culture, since the 19th century. Furthermore, German modern dance and Expressionism also influenced Romanian dance in the 1950s. In that sense, it is not unexpected that current cultural influences coming from Western countries would be enthusiastically adopted after the fall of the Ceaușescu regime. The academy, in contrast, remained focused on the traditional art content, since its masters were formed in the Communist period.

Diverging from the opinion that Romanian choreographers simply “pressed enter” to conceptual dance without having any previous development in dance aesthetics, Gina Șerbănescu affirms that during the two World Wars, and even during the Communist years, alternatives to ballet were conceived “not necessarily in the form of modern dance, but as specific tendencies of elaborating new choreographic languages.” She considers Trixy Checais (1914-1990) one of the most eminent choreographers of this period. As stated by Șerbănescu, “Checais started to study dance when he was in his 20s. He attended the classes of Paule Sybille, where he could develop his natural tendency towards improvisation... He was also inspired by the German Expressionist dancer Harald Kreutzberg³, and by the dance school developed by Gret Palucca in Dresden. He was a great teacher and discovered choreographers such as Miriam Raducanuiv⁴, who was to influence the Romanian contemporary scene during the 1970s and 1980s”.

Checais was condemned by the regime for being an anti-Communist, and sentenced to hard labor in the camps on the Danube-Black Sea Canal. Released in the mid-1950s, Trixy Checais continued dancing, though his work had never received significant visibility.

Beyond Evictions and Displacements after the EU Integration

Interest in joining the European Union has played a major role in the recent politics of Eastern European countries. Multilateral fund programs were created for education, culture and transnational mobility to meet EU standards. As part of this process, Romania had its constitution amended in 2003 as a step towards its eventual acceptance into the EU in 2007.

In 2004, during this transitional period, the National Center of Dance-Bucharest (Centrul Național al Dansului București-CNDB) was founded and officially established as a publicly subsidized institution by the former Minister of Culture, Razvan Theodorescu.

Originally located in the north side of the

National Theater of Bucharest, CNDB, which is the only contemporary dance institution supported by public funds in Romania, started playing a significant role for the new generation of Romanian choreographers and interdisciplinary artists. The Center, as choreographers in Bucharest call the institution, offered workshops, artist grants, exhibitions, and lectures, giving visibility to contemporary dance and by extension, forming an audience.

Despite the fact that CNDB holds the status of a national public institution, in 2010 its team was officially informed that the Center facilities would be dismantled because of a renovation in the National Theater. The 51 million euro renovation project, approved by the current Minister of Culture and National Heritage, Kelemen Hunor, was based on the announcement that the building could collapse if a severe earthquake hit Bucharest. After the renovation, as CNDB was informed, the building would no longer be available to accommodate the institution’s activities.

In response to the lack of clarity about the future of the institution, a group of artists, including Mădălina Dan, articulated the CNDB Ocupat in March 2011. The artists in the occupation faced differing opinions amongst themselves, since some of them were more interested in the anarchistic aspects of the occupation than in the setback the institution was facing. In spite of contradictions, CNDB Ocupat lasted three weeks and brought together choreographers, performers, architects, visual artists, theoreticians, activists and musicians who occupied the institution with workshops, discussions and performances while its facilities were dismantled by the construction workers.

CNDB’s director, Mihai Mihalcea, did not want to be a candidate for following a mandate, and the dance programs of the institution are currently on standby. Its offices operate from one building, and a studio for rehearsals is temporarily available in another institution.

Beyond the occupation, other protests and demonstrations took place in public spaces and in front of the Ministry of Culture. The protests gained media attention, but the outcome so far does not meet expectations. The contemporary dance community is still waiting for a pragmatic solution from Mr. Hunor.

Among the activist actions is the non-curated and non-invited Romanian Dance History. Florin Flueraș, Ion Dumitrescu and Manuel Pelmus are behind the self-nominated cultural terrorism action, which is held in theaters and festivals to show, in four minutes, “our short and not so great history.” Not necessarily successfully received in its incursions at the National Theater of Bucharest or in festivals like Impulstanz, the action consists of dancers who step on the stage just after another artist’s work has been presented or the artists have bowed. The performers state they are Romanian Dance History and inform the audience that what they are seeing is a

post-spectacle or “a bonus track” and not a protest. They start performing “the melting ice-cream” from *The Hammer Without a Master*, created by Stere Popescu in 1965. They advise the audience to read meaning in between the lines of the poetic movement since the choreography was created under Communist censorship.

Activism and art also merged at the Community Art Center laBOMBA studios, originally located in an old disco club in Rahova-Uranus. The neighborhood, along with other parts of the historic district of Bucharest, has a turbulent history of mass evictions, with thousands of residences demolished in the 1980s to make space for the construction of Ceaușescu’s Palace of the Parliament, also (ironically) known as The House of the People. Nowadays, Rahova-Uranus is facing a gentrification process, and, once more, evictions shadow the community.

Originated by the Offensive of Generosity’s Initiative, by Maria Draghici and Irina Gadiuta, laBOMBA is a good example of communitarian and activist art to empower the children and women of the Gypsy community living in the neighborhood. Among the collaborators of its troupe de force are the performer Paul Dunca, the fashion collective Rozalb de Mura and the musicians of Biluna Jam Session.

Educational and cultural activities, such as workshops and laboratories, resulted in events like Biluna Jam Session/Street Delivery 2010, which gathered together experienced musicians and children, and The Evicted Women Fashion Parade⁵, which consisted of a fashion show with discarded clothes from the community. The models on the catwalk were the mothers from Rahova-Uranus, who joined fashion designers to take part in the design process of their styles.

Despite the work developed in Rahova-Uranus, laBOMBA studios was also evicted from their community base in 2011.

Shaded by uncertainty and continued struggles, the contemporary dance and art activist community in Bucharest is pessimistic about their future in Romania. The different actions led by CNDB Ocupat, Romanian Dance History and laBOMBA can be seen as statements against the void to which their work has been relegated by the Romanian cultural arena.

Within this situation, dance artists started to face the necessity of more organized efforts to deal with their bureaucratic system and law. Beyond evictions and displacements, the impact of their actions may trigger a debate about cultural policies in Romania.

The resistance that has been delineated by these artists is formed by an intriguing combination of defeated discourse and dawning political awareness. These individuals, who over the past two decades have been facing the political and cultural challenges of their recent history, seek to nurture the survival and legitimization of their work.

CRISTIANE BOUGER develops work in the fields of performance, installation, experimental theater, video and critical writing to engage in a discourse intertwining body, biography, culture and politics. [www.cristianeboger.com]

NOTES TO THIS ARTICLE:

Moving Dialogue Exchange happened in three parts. This article refers to the phases 1 and 3, which took place respectively, in New York (October 15-31, 2010) and in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca (May 15-30, 2011).

Ana Drosdowski, Levi Gonzalez, Jillian Peña, Cosmin Manolescu, HeJin Yang, Gina Șerbănescu, Madalina Dan, Mihaela Danc, Paul Dunca and I spent two weeks together presenting our performances, sharing our work process, engaging in discussions, visiting theater venues and art spaces and talking about the different contexts from which we came.

With the displacement of CNDB facilities in March, the exchange took place at Atelierul de Productie, an art and party space located in an former factory in Bucharest, and at Fabrica de Pensule (in partnership with Collective A and Ground Floor Group), in Cluj-Napoca, in the Transylvania region.

Given the context found in Romania, instead of writing about the works presented during the residency, in this article I opted to reflect on the actual challenges and threats contemporary dance artists are facing in Bucharest.

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ENDNOTES:

1. In the notes of the book *Exhausting Dance*, dramaturge Andre Lepecki quotes Xavier Le Roy and his perspective about the term conceptual dance: “I don’t consider myself as a conceptual artist and I don’t know of one choreographer who works in dance without a concept.” (Notes of the chapter: *Choreography’s slower ontology: Jérôme Bel’s critique of representation*”, page 135)

2. During October 13-18, 2011 Jérôme Bel, Maria La Ribot, Xavier Le Roy and Christophe Wavelet led a self-organized artists meeting at The Tanzquartier Wien, in Vienna, to articulate an artistic policy for the European Union.

3. Kreutzberg also studied with Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban.

4. To learn more about the choreographer’s work, search for “Miriam Raducanu - Pasari in noapte” on Youtube.

5. To learn more about the events at laBOMBA, search for *Our Way.mov* and for *Biluna Jam Session* on Youtube.