



Ирина Генова

# Tempus fugit / Времето лети

За съвременното изкуство и визуалния образ



## Tempus fugit / Time is Flying

On Contemporary Art and the Visual Image

Irina Genova

Book series  
for philosophy,  
the social sciences,  
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## A Contemporary Art Museum – MNAC Bucharest

What attracted me to go to Bucharest this time was to see the Contemporary Art Museum. I am very thankful to Mihai Oroveanu, the founder and director of the Museum, for his availability and for the time he generously shared with me as well as for his professional sincerity, which enabled me to get impressions of the different facets of the institution and to learn a lot about its functions.

### The Interest

Casa Poporului / People's House<sup>1</sup> is a place I visited 8 years ago on a guided tour. An unforgettable experience facing this amazing creation of a megalomaniac ambition. An ordeal in any way: it was unbelievably (your eyes refuse to believe it) out-of-scale; a frustrating notion of the eradicated (not only of the city areas the size of three Parisian quarters, but of human fates as well which are still associated with this building); and the unconceivable / impossible demolition of the "monster" (natural disasters and piles of construction scrap?). The fear for the body, the terror of falling down into a labyrinth of an insurmountable gigantic size (if it were stage properties, it could have been funny). Gulliver in the land of giants.

This memorable experience must have prompted me to revisit the building no less than my initial interest in the Contemporary Art Museum. Or, more likely, inseparably from it. The impatience to see whether / to what extent the museum (mind you, for contemporary art) has overcome / tamed the monster's spirit. Whether and how the gigantically intimidating palace has been transformed into humanly welcoming space, into a place for artistic resourcefulness, imagination, esthetic pleasures and festive togetherness.

And last but not least, the topicality of the Contemporary Art Museum project. Perceiving the Museum as an attempt at the contemporaneity notion, I'd like to make it part of my experience with multitudinous contemporaneities. It is the idea of the multitude that gives rise to my assiduous **interest** in the different "museums" – a conventional label for inherently various institutional projects, which have different ideas of the contemporary visual arts and audience.

Approaching the Museum in Bucharest, I was entering a specific, strongly felt as presence and paradoxical contemporaneity. "A dramatic situation", "an open wound", "a trauma", "grotesque", "a megalomaniac's child", "a figment of claustrophilia", "an extreme architectural event" and others are just some of the



similes referring to the location of the Museum in texts written by critics, curators and artists from the first published issue at the opening in October 2004. It is not a catalogue, although the chosen name for the institution is “museum”, there is neither a corresponding collection nor an intention of a permanent exposition. It is a collection of articles and images from the first exhibitions: texts from Mihai Oroveanu and Ruksandra Balach<sup>2</sup> present the project for the institution and the concept of the exhibition called “Rumanian artists (and not only they) love Ceausescu’s Palace”; critics, curators and artists are invited to tell their interest in the transformation of the building and the place, to discuss the intentions and chances of the art centre. Most of the texts are fascinating accounts of their authors’ personal experience with the physical and symbolic excessiveness and extraordinariness of the Palace. Some of them discuss the quality of “contemporaneity” of the artistic manifestations as well as the places connected with them. They outline some specific problems of this Museum and some general ones of the institution itself.

To invite a group of key figures in the world of arts – both Rumanian and foreign ones – to write the first issue is an idea that I find resourceful and effective. A couple of names – Ami Barak, Rene Block, Nikolas Bourriaud, Calin Dan, Anders Kreuger – amongst which I find with pleasure the name of our colleague Luchezar Boyadzhiev. Thus, all of them have a motive to concentrate

on the Museum in Bucharest – it's something like a brain attack on the large-scale enterprise and, as a result, a support too.

### **Before the Contemporary Art Museum**

On the first day, before I visit the Museum, I meet Mihai Oroveanu in the exhibition halls of the National Theatre. It turns out, that apart from the People's House (today the House of Parliament), the Museum has halls spread over 4 other places in the city. At the moment the Theatre holds the temporary exhibition of 3 Rumanian artists who fled the country at the end of the 1960's: Paulu Nearu – the most internationally renowned, George Apostu and Roman Kotoshman. The artists and their exhibitions deserve a separate account. What is important is the interest in the emigrant Rumanian artists over the last 15 years.

These exhibition halls in the building of the National Theatre, actively used for exhibitions in the 1990's, are an important appendix to the Museum today<sup>3</sup>. They appeal with their central location in the city structure, although they require additional maintenance and finances in order to improve the conditions for the exhibits. Apart from the exhibition halls, the Theatre also has offices and depots.

Compared to Sofia experience, the scales of the Bucharest museums have an astounding effect. Even on my first visit in 1995 the architectural disposition, the number of the museums, not to mention the collections themselves, seemed incomparable to those in our capital. The architectural spaces manifest the attitude to the importance of a specific activity. For the national institutions this is the attitude of the state. In this case, the national art museums (for Rumanian art, for European art, for rural art, etc.) add value to the collections by making them state treasure, and the availability of conditions for exhibiting visiting masterpieces is seen as a justification for national pride. They do not guarantee yet that the meeting between the works of art and the audience will take place – the exposition halls, renovated over the last years and equipped up to museum standard, can often be seen empty. However, their availability and maintenance demonstrate the state's concern and the public interest of certain educated milieus.

The communist experience with the private collections in Bucharest also deserves to be mentioned. After the change of the political regime their owners or inheritors, instead of hiding and dispersing the collections of the so called

“bourgeois” and foreign art, were compelled to donate them to the state. So those collections entered the state museums. That is how the famous Museum of Collections / Muzeul Colectirol de Arta was founded. Another example of how the state appropriated private art collections are the house-museums amongst which is the frequently visited house with Zambakchian’s collection in Bucharest. And there are many others... In contrast to that cultural and political practice of the Rumanian state, in Bulgaria the few important collection were lost (because of their owners fear of ideological persecution and confiscation after 1947).

In Sofia even the halls of the Bucharest Theatre would seem huge for presenting the contemporaneity in art. In Bucharest they are just an appendix to the Contemporary Art Museum.

It becomes clear – my expectations about the Museum have been great: I have had an idea of its location – the famous building, I have become familiar with the scale of other art museums in Rumania; and last but not least, I have had an idea of the influential figure of its director within the artistic milieus as well as of his ambitious and well prepared team. In our initial conversation in the office at the Theatre, Mihai Oroveanu with professional sincerity tries to prepare me for a peculiarity – the Museum does not have (yet) a separate entrance, there are negotiations for such an entrance, with a parking lot and, even better, with a park. I cannot grasp the problem at first – they have the premises, all the rest is of secondary importance, I wonder.

### **The Museum outside and inside**

It takes us 15 minutes to get from the Theatre to the House of Parliament with Mihai Oroveanu’s car. (It could have been faster but the traffic in Bucharest, though far from the hysteria in Sofia, has become more intense over the last two years). We approach the familiar, yet always surprisingly gigantic building, and pass through the security guards. Now I see the problem I have been told about – it is the Parliament that is being guarded, but the entrance is one and the same. Another 800-metre walk and we are in front of one of the faces of the Palace-monstrum.

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I checked how to get to the Museum on my own for the following day. I could go by taxi or on foot. The taxi gets you to the guarded entrance at the outer fence. If you walk, you have to cross the bridge above Dumbovitsa first,



then go along a park with recently planted trees and finally past the fence of the huge area surrounding the Palace until you get to the necessary guarded entrance.

The next day is bright and sunny. Getting nearer to the monstrum I feel like taking pictures (it was the same last time, eight years ago). However hard I try, the digital camera catches only fragments, with a photographically embellishing effect at that. It is possible to catch some entity only from a great distance, but in this case the size ceases to impress. It is really good luck if, while wandering around the Palace from a great distance, you happen to see a human figure in the desert area around the fence – just to imagine the scale. The creation exceeds the human sight. Just as the Giants' palace did for Gulliver.

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The **entrance** of the Museum - in the totalitarian colossal Neo Classicist style, with colonnades in an over-gigantic order - together with the whole building change the optics with their sheer scale. I look up and the facade threateningly hangs over my insignificant body. I look at it intently, hoping to see something “museum familiar” and welcoming, something like a friendly wink towards the museum entrance. At first glance the two outer lifts, of a similar size to the main building (they can transport a car), transform the notion of a closed and impenetrable fortress with their glass fragility, transparency and agility. The glass wall and terrace of the café bear the same idea of





reformulating the architecture as they also open space for sights, air and light. Mihai Oroveanu mentions that these as well as other changes in the building cost him two legal suits for altering the initial project, which he luckily won.

It's a non-working day for the Museum. We go through the central lounge, past the luggage control scanner. The halls are dark and empty. We head for the offices. They are very busy. A group of young (very young) men and women in good mood and with lots of self-confidence are doing their daily routine – at their computers or near some other office equipment in spacious, light and well-equipped premises. For our ongoing conversation they are printing lists of the exhibitions realized so far as well as for those negotiated for the following year. What I see and learn convinces me that the Museum has the capacity and aspiration to join **the routes of the significant international exhibitions** and that the curators' team acts energetically and competently in this direction. So far the Bucharest Museum mainly holds exhibitions, but its ambition is to participate in the international exchange with its own suggestions too.

I begin to see the outlines of the major **project** of the institution – in a nutshell, to present key names and artistic milieus from the international scene in Bucharest as well as to integrate an important, in the curators' view, part of the Rumanian art production in the international exchange. This museum, according to Oroveanu and Balach, is connected not so much with the notion of retrospection and storage of already acknowledged values as with the

desire for a laboratory, for a **museum in the process of creation** / museum in progress<sup>4</sup>. As I understand it – an attempt at an institution which is to create the quality of “contemporaneity”.

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While I go on asking questions, the installations in the halls are switched on. A ground floor as well as four more. On the last floor there is space well equipped for multimedia art, with a retrospection of interactive works “Kinema Ikon”; a hall for experimental films with ongoing film-shows; an auditorium; a cafeteria. There are also spaces for a documentation department and library, but for the time being there are not enough finances and staff.



On the other floors:

Valentin Stefanov and Nina Kovacheva – I was more than happy that my trip coincided with their exhibition. Their works are exhibited in the central ground floor spaces: four video installations in the interiors and one on the facade / on the windows under the common name “Beyond the Visible”. Not long ago in an interview in “The Kultura”<sup>5</sup> newspaper the artistic couple talked about their works. In Sofia we have seen “Wet Contact” (2002)<sup>6</sup>. Yet, the huge spaces and the facilities in the Bucharest Museum undoubtedly change the conditions for viewing them – they provide the opportunity for large-format quality images, for a play with the perception distances. It seems that the most successful in terms of total impact is the video diptych “The Stranger in Us”

(2005). The artists' faces are in a close-up, at times each of the faces doubles and fills in both the frames of the diptych. The way it's exhibited makes me go nearer and look down. The disposition of the images almost horizontally (from a small angle), the expressive close-ups, the staring eyes alternating with the closed eyes as well as the colours remind me of the Fayoum portraits. The idea of a gravestone. The face as an effigy, the same and yet different, as if in a mirror, reflected / caught in the ephemeral screen between this and the after life. The slow motions of the eyes and mouth catch the eye and have a magnetic effect. I can say for myself – I do not need the complementing, directing meanings of the uttered text. Except for the intonation patterns which enhance the effect. Nina Kovacheva and Valentin Stefanov should be satisfied with the opportunity to show their works in the best possible way, and the Museum's team – with the presence of their works there.

Mark Lewis<sup>7</sup> – 10 landscape large-format video installations. It is mainly because of his works that I came back to the Museum on the next day. I could talk about each of them separately. The landscapes, slowly and carefully, introduce us to stylistically defined representations of a natural or urban milieu, referring to the classical fine arts and cinema, entice us to patiently contemplate and concentrate on the details. These effective works could not happen without the scale of the spaces and their facilities – without them I could not comprehend the entity with a single glance, approach the detail, and catch the rhythm of the moving camera while walking within the physical dimensions of the hall. I wish I could contemplate these slow landscapes again. In Sofia this is impossible – there is not such a space.

**“Depot / this is not an exhibition”** is on two floors. While the other exhibitions entice you to contemplate (that's why they are exhibitions), the “depot” is a suggestion for considering the problem of the unwanted collections. This problem to some (different) extent is common for the museums for (most) contemporary art everywhere – it is extraordinary luck if the collections get started from the moment and by the team that has founded the museum.

The collection, which the Bucharest team does not want but has found to be property of the Museum, has been given to them by the Documentation and Exhibitions Service, which has bought the works<sup>8</sup>. The result of this activity is displayed with the help of ingenious staging of museum depot equipment – the fine art works are placed on grates – groups of vertical nets on rails, the sculptures are on shelves. Thus, most of the pictures are not seen well – the



grates, unlike their function in the depot, cannot be pulled here, but that is hardly necessary. Mihai Oroveanu's idea, as a curator, is to make us see the quantity of the objects (these here are just a small part) and their heterogeneity. The works that are fully exhibited in front of the viewer have not been chosen following some quality criteria, rather because of their expressiveness in terms of the situation (pictures by professors in the Academy, by the presidents of the Union of Artists, by key figures from different generations).

"What do we do with all that?" is the question raised by the staging of the "Depot". As an answer comes the discontent: "Are all these works, so different in character, to be thrown away?" Some of the fund units in the depot are the numerous portraits of Ceausescu, quickly drawn and of surprisingly poor quality (ingeniously hidden in a narrow corridor with installation pipes – that is the point of the staging) as well as quite a few art installations of different volume. The fact that the artistic milieus do not accept this exhibition action is easy to understand – a lot of active figures are involved / placed in the unwanted depot. And yet, even if everything remains where it is and these quantities of works are stored exactly by the Museum of Contemporary Art because of the long-living literal, not notional, contemporaneity, how long will this situation last and can it have an acceptable denouement? – the museum team still asks their colleagues.

A difficult situation without a "single" or "best" solution. If we project the problem of the collections into the future, into a hypothetical situation, in which the Museum of Contemporary Art has a budget not only for project works but for buying pieces of art too, wouldn't the next generation reformulate the no-

tion of contemporaneity and wouldn't it feel similar difficulties connected with the collections? Don't we view the attempts at conceptual art (seen as the only contemporary ones in Bulgaria during the 1990's) in a historical, even though close, perspective today? The inherent ambiguity and insoluble contradiction lie in the relationship creation – preservation / storage, as thought after the modernity.

To choose has always meant exercising power and this is inevitable – shares Oroveanu. In the best case, this power can be delegated by means of consultations with an international board (in MNAC Bucharest it is already founded) as well as the setting up of a committee of local independent specialists that will decide what to buy. I would add – this power can be divided and diversified if there are several institutions / museums of contemporary art existent (here, it is just an ideal, but elsewhere there is such a multitude functioning).

To sum up the arguments for and against. It seems that the main argument **”against”** in Bucharest is the building itself – its traumatic history, its monstrous presence in the heart of the city. Also, its existence in a common complex with an institution of power – the Parliament, which leads to the absurd for an artistic centre restrictive access measures. It is clear that unless the Museum acquires the complementing / introductory space of the planned park, it will not be really functional.

A bone of contention are the exhibition policies regarding the Rumanian artists and the formation of adequate collections (so far the desired works acquired have come mainly from donations, such as some of the works by Paulu Neagu, George Apostu and Roman Kotoshman exhibited in the National Theatre).

The **”for”** argument takes into consideration the exceptional importance of the building up of the institution itself. With its generous exhibition space and facilities, and with its team of professionals, it creates conditions for a new topos in the international routes, for its appearance on the map of the artistic world.

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The end of this story inevitably concerns the moral relevant for our situation. “Contemporary Art – Situation / Museum” is how I entitled an article in *Kultura* in 2003 in which I tried to thematicize the need for a contemporary art institution in Bulgaria and what it should be like. My conclusion was that the constant (re)formulation of the “contemporaneity” notion requires adequate dynamics of the art centre (even if it had a depot) rather than the inherent for

museums conservatism, and orientation to storage and retrospection. I see, however, and not only because of the Bucharest example, that “museum” is a conventional label in terms of contemporary art, that it points out not so much the basic functions as the desire of the institution to be associated with already existing authority and reliability in the eyes of the public. I can’t pledge my word today that a future contemporary art institution in Sofia should not be called a “museum”.

The topicality of the “Museum of Contemporary Art” project in Bulgaria is confirmed by the interest of the youngest generation – three colleagues from the New Bulgarian University and the Academy of Arts are already doing their Master’s and Doctor’s degree on the same topic. And there will be some more. The amount of literature also increases in the world (unfortunately, in Bulgaria it is not very common). Ivo Mudov’s project in 2005 within the framework of the Visual seminar renders topicality to the problem of the lacking Museum. What I find most resourceful in the action is the choice of a railway station – thus the quality of “contemporaneity” is connected with the nomadic and the lack of durability, with arrivals and departures, with the ephemeral space and time, rather than with the durability of the object. The manipulative parasitism on the public expectation though seemed a bit too easy and not much appealing to me.

Sofia badly needs artistic museums – contemporary in terms of design and different in terms of scope of activities. (Our participation in the European project requires at least the critical minimum of artistic institutions). It needs exposition spaces that are modernly equipped – in this respect we can only envy our Rumanian colleagues. Even the electricity installation in the halls of the Union of Artists (Shipka 6, Str.) is so old that it does not allow proper lighting. The modernly equipped exhibition halls are a prerequisite for our partnership in the world, and their lack – for our absence in it.

Such spaces are necessary to start our “museum in progress”. Such an institution of contemporary art, supported by the state with exposition resources, could enter the routes of important international art manifestations. It could raise funds for quality projects more easily, and as a result of such activities, it could gradually build up a prestigious collection and documentation, international at that.

It would be better if there were not just one but a couple of institutions / museums of art that is topical today<sup>9</sup>. It is of common interest for the mi-

lieu to realize not just one but several possibilities. As far as the preservation and retrospection are concerned, as a museum of contemporary art we could present the collection of a single collector or even the works of an artist – this has already happened in the field of private institutions (associations, foundations, etc.).

The idea of the museum in progress and the establishment of the desired state Museum in Bulgaria, just as in other cases elsewhere, need figures capable of lobbying. Establishing a state institution means a political will. The Museums of Contemporary Art in the world are different, among them is the Museum of Contemporary Art founded by Imelda Markos in 1975 in Manila or the Museum of Contemporary Art in Teheran opened in 1977 by the Shah of Iran<sup>10</sup>.

In Bulgaria, after the actions and the appeals, it is time we began a discussion about the project \ projects with the participation of their protagonists, state representatives and the so-called independent experts. The future National Museum / Institution of Contemporary Art is of public interest (in both of its meanings).

(2006)

Notes:

1 Also known as Palatul lui Ceausescu / Ceausescu's Palace

2 Ruksandra Balach is Programme Director of the Contemporary Art Museum

3 These halls are connected with the Documentation and Art Exhibitions Service at the Romanian Ministry of Culture, which, similar to the French funds for contemporary art (FRAC, DRAC), has bought works of contemporary (alive) artists in order to help them financially, to organize exhibitions abroad and to offer works of art for the decoration of public and official buildings.

4 M.Oroveanu. In: Muzeul national de arta contemporana / The National Museum of Contemporary Art. Bucuresti 2004, p. 20

5 Kultura newspaper, 2006, issue 8 from March 3<sup>rd</sup>, p. 6

6 In the exhibition called "Export – Import" with Maria Vasileva as its curator

7 Born in Hamilton, Canada, lives in London. A media artist and theoretician.

8 See note 3.

9 The ideas about a contemporary art museum are different in the different artistic milieus and generations. It would be useful to carry out a survey among the protagonists of the artistic events in Bulgaria with a view to outlining the differences in the projects for such an institution.

10 The Museum in the Philippines' capital is arranged for a couple of weeks so as to be opened for the International Monetary Fund Summit. Cf.: Carol Duncan. Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship. In: Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display. Ed by Ivan Carp and Steven D. Lavine. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1991, p. 89.