

Dan Mihălțianu

Canal Grande:
The Capital Pool
and the Associated
Public

Edited by Cristian Nae

**Unfinished Conversations
on the Weight of Absence**

The Romanian Participation at the
58th International Art Exhibition—
La Biennale di Venezia

Plan B Foundation

Idea Design & Print
Editură, Cluj
2019

Foreword

Unfinished Conversations on the Weight of Absence

Cristian Nae

The exhibition, installed in two complementary venues, presents contemporary versions of significant art projects realized by three uncompromising artists whose singular artistic trajectories, spanning more than forty years, expand the geography of contemporary art constructed according to national categories. Including the Romanian diaspora, it reveals the cultural mobility of these artworks across both space and time, rejecting the understanding of the artistic object as a fixed art historical entity. Central to the exhibition as a critical form is the ability to provide a space of encounter for post-conceptual artworks whose political potentiality derives from the interplay between their imaginary and material configurations.

The Romanian Pavilion displays reconfigured art installations, dating from the 1980s and 1990s, which were often subjected to material or conceptual transformations in their own exhibition histories: Belu-Simion Făinaru's *Belongs Nowhere and to Another Time*, this time expanded to include existing art pieces, as well as site-specific ones, either re-adapted or created specifically for this occasion, Dan Mihălțianu's *Canal Grande*, now with the subtitle *The Capital Pool and the Associated Public*, and Miklós Onucsán's *The Restoration of the White Camouflage*, accompanied by a *Camouflaging Guide*. On display in Venice, they either acquire a different meaning or change their formal structure, and thus, become new and topical art pieces. This time, these counter-monumental art installations are adapted to the scale of the Romanian Pavilion and extended in the space of the New Gallery of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Venice. Exhibited together, they raise another vital question: to what extent can the excavation of recent art historical past provide a response to the current troubled times, understanding the present as a coexistence of temporalities?

Reconsidering the history and the significance of these exhibition sites, these artworks are critically recalibrated as a poetic response to neoliberalism, nationalism and populism. They mobilize an aesthetic of the sublime against the abuse of symbols of power in contemporary visual culture, and prompt the viewer to reconsider the familiar notion of "imagined communities"¹.

It is, indeed, in our hectic political times, out of sync, "out of joint", that Benedict Anderson's catch-phrase gains a renewed actuality: for it may be read both as a plea for rethinking cosmopolitanism beyond given borders, territories and cultures, and as an invitation to invent a new political imaginary, new communitarian bounds (suggested, perhaps by Terry Smith's "planetary", inspired by the urgency of ecological awareness, or by other tentative terms such as the "translocal", borrowed from human geography²), that should critically dismantle the type of mythical, heroic and ethnocentric narratives consistently reconstructed today in many parts of the world. Often, such a resurrection comes as a response to the growing inequities in the global capitalist societies, to the perceived failure of representational democracy as an antidote of tyranny, and to the xenophobic impulses to preserve entrenched social privileges that lurk beneath the thin surface of post-colonial acknowledgment of multiculturalism in the form of uncritical nostalgia.

We live in times when the hyper-production of images and commodities, of signs and affects, generates myriads of interconnected responses from the "multitude". These relations between productive subjects and performative objectifications replicate, but also go beyond the capillary and rhizomatic approach to power once envisioned by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. We are witnessing a new era of political



uncertainty, where primitive accumulation is unfortunately ongoing, where values like tolerance and the affirmation of cultural difference as predicated by post-colonial discourse are no longer able to cope with the intensification of uneven economies and geographies, with the waves of war refugees, with the resurgence of fascism, including overt anti-Semitism and racism in many parts of the world, and with the intensification of necropolitics in times of war. Romania, with its fraught and palimpsestic history, where fascism was replaced by authoritarian communism and later, by neo-capitalism co-existing with residual socialism, is by no means immune to that. Acute is the resurgence of nationalism in its banal, and seemingly, benign forms—although these threats are still only potentially being present today in the structure of everyday life. Whereas art can never become a mere political instrument without affecting its own aesthetic autonomy that would guarantee its very efficacy, it can at least question its own limitations in the current social field by temporarily stepping aside the semiocapitalist political economy, using and reconfiguring its procedures.³ Thus, by this very movement between the space of action and that of representation, it may enable questions without a definite answer to be raised, perhaps by employing the century-old strategies of defamiliarizing and fictionalization, in order to facilitate the constituency of spontaneous and unpredictable communities of reception.

The special relationship between the art installation as a privileged contemporary art form and the constituency of empowered (or at least, enlightened) communities of viewers in the aesthetic experience was already underlined by Boris Groys, according to whom this particular art practice "builds a community of spectators precisely because of the holistic, unifying character

of the installation space. The true visitor to the art installation is not an isolated individual, but a collective of visitors⁴. The potential to delocalize and imagine new types of public interaction and responses from the public is highlighted by Groys in relation to mass culture, which, like installation art, "creates communities beyond any common past—unconditional communities of a new kind"⁵. The point of the installation art would be to provide "a de-localization and de-territorialization of mass-cultural transitory communities—in a way that assists them in reflecting upon their own condition, offering them an opportunity to exhibit themselves to themselves"⁶. However, according to Groys, installation art is acting in the name of artistic sovereignty, especially when it proposes a democratic order. "By taking aesthetic responsibility in a very explicit way for the design of the installation space, the artist reveals the hidden sovereign dimension of the contemporary democratic order that politics, for the most part, tries to conceal."⁷ That is how the reconfiguration of the Romanian Pavilion as a transnational and transitional space by means of these three installations encounters Jacques Rancière's idea of the "redistribution of the sensible"⁸, according to which the sensuous, aesthetic articulation of the artworks allows for political changes which are generated by the re-articulation of the viewer's subjectivity.

Acknowledging the sovereignty of installation art as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the curatorial project does not attempt to connect these autonomous heterotopic spaces into a coherent, unified ensemble, being content to trace punctual, evasive relations between artworks that sometimes only mirror, evoke or echo one another. Such a position also allows for the empty spaces between these artworks to gain visibility and to present themselves as the missing common

ground for those micro-communities of publics to be temporarily constituted. Each art project suspends, displaces or disperses the notion of locality. The selected pieces also disrupt the conceptual couple visual representation/national representativeness, by revealing multiple absences fissuring its core.

The art installations selected for this exhibition, although apparently sculptural in size and form, are also processual, performative and participative art pieces, all of them incorporating an important durational element in their material configuration. Thus, their juxtaposed presentation in the exhibition space attempts to take position against what Edit András refers to as the contemporary "chronopolitics"⁹: the mobilization of various temporal references, including past symbols of power and representations of possible futures, in order to reshape fluctuating identities in Eastern and Central Europe.

Temporality is another crucial element, both as a subject and as a critical agent of this exhibition. If the contemporary is to be understood as a constellation, rather than as a structure, even a decentered one, we might equally wonder if there is any possibility to envisage a "post-contemporary" condition. In particular, the long history of these art projects offers a rich terrain to investigate how contemporary art shapes its own history instead of being merely shaped by it. But, at the same time, the exhibition opens up a space of contemplation and interrogation, proposes new temporal orders which disrupt the present, and, being untimely, offers a crucial time for meditation and critical reflection, a slow pace in a time of accelerated capitalism. It is in the withdrawal of the representational function of the image, associated by Edit András with a counter-monumental form of the pervasive contemporary sublime, that these

installations are connected and situated in an open ended conversation not only with each other, but also with their potential public, past, present and future.

Canal Grande: The Capital Pool and the Associated Public is the title of the art project proposed by one of the three artists selected for this exhibition, Dan Mihălțianu, to tackle the above-mentioned questions. Dan Mihălțianu exercises an artistic discourse that includes historical, political, social and trans-cultural aspects, using a variety of media and representational forms, from photography, film, video, sound, to installation, object, drawing, graphics and text. *Canal Grande: The Capital Pool and the Associated Public* conceived by Dan Mihălțianu for the Romanian participation at the 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, is based on his *Canal Grande* series of art installations. Conceived in the 1980s in the shape of reflecting pools, *Canal Grande* series initially referred to the Danube-Black Sea Canal, a construction site initiated by the Communist regime in 1949 as a forced labour camp for political detainees, and inaugurated in 1984-1986 as the "Apotheosis of Socialism in Romania". According to the artist, "it is an encrypted title meant to avoid the censorship of the time, ironically combining the 'Death Canal' (Danube-Black Sea Canal) and Canal Grande as symbols for 'pain' and 'pleasure' (leisure)". The work was later installed in different exhibition contexts as a critical instrument meant to contextualize local social transformations, or to propose alternative economies revolving around the notion of liquidity.

The version on display in Venice consists in multiple elements installed in the two spaces, interconnected by the website www.capitalpool.net. *The Capital*

Pool is centrally located in the Romanian Pavilion in Giardini di Castello. It functions as a wishing well, inviting the visitors to throw coins in its water as a widespread cultural ritual. Functioning as a concrete social and economic process, the installation establishes an autonomous art fund and invites the visitors to self-organise and to decide on the utilisation of the capital raised during the exhibition for social or humanitarian initiatives. This way, the public is engaged in the continuous remodelling of the artwork. The free association of the public into an open micro-community, *Associated Public*, proposes an aesthetic and political formula for exercising direct democracy through artistic practice during and after the exhibition.

At the New Gallery of the Romanian Institute for Culture and Humanistic Research in Venice, Dan Mihălțianu sets up a temporary treasure room (in his terms, an "Art Capital Crypt"), which displays the transferred capital raised by the pool installed in the Romanian Pavilion in Giardini della Biennale, and records the process of its accumulation. The art installation metonymically replicates on the scale of artistic experience the myriad of capital flows that globally shape our current socio-political condition.

A series of performative events realized by Dan Mihălțianu, entitled *Discapital*, are scheduled during the biennale at the New Gallery. The public are invited to chew dollar-bills and spit the pulp into a glass container. The resulting blend will be distilled and bottled in front of the public, exemplifying the transformation of material wealth into artistic value through collective participation.

Through public engagement, the two part installation may survive its own exhibition, setting up a process that may be continued after the

exhibition has closed. Thus, the artwork generates discussions, allows for disagreement as a political principle, according to Rancière¹⁰, and constructs real-life interventions, albeit on a limited scale. One may even describe such an artwork as being "dialogical" according to the cooperative and socially transformative aesthetic principles advocated by Grant Kester.¹¹ Nevertheless, in the translocal context set up by the exhibition's curatorial framework, it also performs multiple operations: reflecting the surrounding space, it unveils its complicity with the so-called "culture of experience" deployed by the contemporary art biennale, incorporating cultural tourism and cultural industry, but also the production of subjectivity. Setting up an art fund, it questions philanthropy as disguised capitalist investment, and the financial exploitation of the Biennale's visual regime. Literally incorporating money in its structure, which is later deposited in the "art capital crypt" staged as a treasure room, it materializes and exposes the exchange value as a reified object, restored to its "aura". But, at the same time, the artwork also questions the implications and limitations of artistic labour at a larger scale. It scrutinizes the capacity of contemporary art's critical operations to live up to the avant-garde's expectations of transforming the world at large as long as it can still be financially translated or encoded. In order to succeed, it should "be able to engage not only with social contexts, but to challenge capitalist social relations"¹².

The texts commissioned to enrich and converse with these artistic projects address less obvious facets and unveil layers of meaning that only confirm these artworks' unique ability to shape their own time instead of being merely transformed by time, of constructing history, and not only being historical objects of study, and of



providing critical instruments for rethinking the context in which they are now exhibited.

Diana Marincu's opening text traces the micro-history of Canal Grande in Romania in the 1980s, specifying its exhibition contexts and its critical position under the socialist regime. Marincu conjures the familiar concept of artistic autonomy, contrasting it with the liquid materiality present in Mihălțianu's art installation and Zygmunt Bauman's theorizing of a liquid society, in order to describe the uncompromising position Mihălțianu took throughout his career. Marincu also hints at the idea of constituency being deployed by Mihălțianu's *Canal Grande: The Capital Pool and the Associated Public* as a term that allows us to envisage a new type of networked commonality without bounds or structural traits.

Referencing again Zygmunt Bauman's seminal sociological diagnosis of contemporary societies, predicated upon the precariousness and shifting nature of social bounds and the acceleration of social mobility, Ursula Frohne further investigates the meanings of liquidity in contemporary society in order to contextualize Dan Mihălțianu's *Canal Grande* installation. She notices that, during the 1990s, the artist often performed a sort of archival practice, and associates liquidity with liquidation, the erasure of memory. The seriality of *Canal Grande* may be considered a critical memorial practice which assumes and counters the precariousness of collective memory through its temporary installments. Frohne's text constructs a genealogy of liquidity in Mihălțianu's artistic practices, from its early uses as liquid memorials for the anonymous lives lost in the "Death Canal" to its more recent employment as an alternative currency. She recalls the use of alcohol as a form of black market economy during socialism, referenced by some of Mihălțianu's earlier works,

but also indicates its capacity to generate more spontaneous and uninhibited human relations in a contemporary alienating lifestyle.

Further tackling the relation between use and exchange value, Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher's contribution to the catalogue addresses again the imbrication between capital accumulation, liquidity (among other things also understood as mobility and circulation of people and products), and the critical potentiality of contemporary art. Their text relates *Canal Grande* with another longstanding series of Mihălțianu, the *Great Distillations* (ongoing since 1990)—an association present in the current version of *Canal Grande* exhibited in Venice, entitled *The Capital Pool and the Associated Public* and the *Discapital* series of collective performances. Focusing on a previous version of *Canal Grande*, *Vodka Pool*, installed in the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Toronto, in 2009 in relation to the 2008 financial crisis, they unravel the connections that tie that version with the current one, which also attempts to scrutinize the public indifference towards the financial system's "shaky dealings that dispossessed millions worldwide", and to position art as a strategic counter-model of social constituency. They conclude that, ironizing the philanthropic gestures that cover up capitalist investments in art, "in Venice, *Canal Grande* arrives full circle to co-exist with its namesake picturesque waterway. Here, though, it models a strategy of self-funding, micro-philanthropy, and charity that frames the generosity of the audience".

Geert Lovink's conversation with Max Haiven, published in the concluding section of the catalogue, functions as a framework for understanding the broader implications of Mihălțianu's artistic intervention and some of its key theoretical concerns. This thought-provoking

dialogue establishes a series of relations between art, capital and the reification of human relations, discussing the limitations and possibilities of contemporary art to reveal the "boundless, coercive potentiality" that today is encrypted by money. Max Haiven employs the psychoanalytical concept of the crypt—a benign phantasy that conceals a suppressed traumatic memory—in order to disclose the encrypted relation between art and money in the contemporary art system. He notices that "art is a crypt within capitalism for those treasured values (freedom, autonomy, imagination, connection) that are otherwise banished". According to Haiven, "art" and capitalism have grown up entangled together. How could art, therefore, challenge this very limitation? One possible answer would be to pay attention to the way human cooperation and the imagination of alternative futures are already transformed into commodities, transformed into assets and subsumed by monetarisation, and how art can transform these two fundamentally political human capacities. "Money hacks both: it shapes how we cooperate and how we imagine, creating a kind of infinite feedback loop (bad infinity). The endgame of financialization is the complete subsumption of society to money (...)". It is against this bitter diagnosis that Mihălțianu's art installation presented in Venice attempts to articulate its presence: "to imagine what art will look like *after* capitalism and start building that reality", by making "mutual aid, solidarity, struggle and grassroots resurgence possible".

Notes:

- 1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalisms*, London and New York, Verso, 1983.
- 2 Terry Smith, "Defining Contemporaneity: Imagining Planetary", *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, No. 49–50 49–50, 2015 pp. 156–174; Katherine Brickell, Ayona Datta, *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections*, Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2011.
- 3 In his influential book *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of Post-Alpha Generation*, London, Minor Compositions, 2009, Franco Berardi Bifo analyzes the conjunction between "cognitive labor" and "recombinant capital", explaining the overproduction of signs in contemporary capitalism as an endemic condition; Nevertheless, with the rise of neo-fascist politics, simulacra are again attached to appropriated mythical signifiers.
- 4 Boris Groys, "Politics of installation", *e-flux Journal* # 2, January 2009, accessible online at the address: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/> (Accessed on 14.04.2019).
- 5 *Ibidem*.
- 6 *Ibidem*.
- 7 *Ibidem*.
- 8 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill, London and New York, Continuum, 2004.
- 9 Edit András, "Shift from Geo-Politics of Space to Chronopolitics of Time", paper presented at the East-Central European Art Forum *Theorizing the Geography of East-Central European Art*, Poznań, 26–27.10.2018.
- 10 Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement. Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- 11 Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2013.
- 12 Marc James Léger, *Vanguardia. Socially Engaged Art and Theory*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2019, p. 1.



Liquid Economy, Solid Autonomy

Diana Marincu

Dan Mihălțianu has been creating a body of work since the end of the 1970s, the beginning of the 1980s which encircles the various ways of defining the artist's status in connection to art institutions and to the impact of political changes on the larger social context in which the artist engages. Mihălțianu has followed closely, as well as quite bluntly diagnosed, what he calls "the transition from *Socialism* to *Officialism*"¹—the period following the fall of the communist regime characterized by a general officialized state of confusion, corruption and hostility. "My interest in looking into the social changes, in close connection to the artistic realities from Romania and other areas where my activity takes place, is derived from the artistic process itself, the mediums and the techniques of expression I've used over time—photography, film, video, installation and other time-based-media—that contain in themselves an archivist side, in the sense that they accumulate and store data, information and concepts always available and reusable."² The constant work the artist does is often related to an attempt to understand how mainstream discourses in the art world are manipulated or undermined by artistic gestures towards a certain sense of autonomy, a need to overcome the "burden of representation" and the common clichés projected on artists coming out of a closed circuit art scene, isolated until 1989. In this context, one of Dan Mihălțianu's major recurrent observations, which are glimpsed from the vantage point of an artist-researcher, is the lack of a counter-current coming from an art scene which is increasingly diluting inside a creative industry, assimilating every critical gesture as a distorted image of a new product on the market. Placing a mirror in front of this self-absorbed apparatus is never comfortable. However, Dan Mihălțianu constantly stages scenarios and collaborations wherein the artist himself becomes a mediator

between the different instances, playing the roles of "producers", "viewers", and "consumers".

Canal Grande: The Capital Pool and the Associated Public, the new form that the long-term project *Canal Grande* now takes for the Venice Biennale, occupies the central floor of the Romanian Pavilion in the Giardini and adds the exercise of a spontaneous association structure onto its previous functions during and after the biennale. The audience is invited to use the pool as a wishing well, deciding later on how the money thrown in will be further used³. The visitors become instant handlers of this project's legacy, as well as the main decision-makers of how the symbolic chain of creation-production-consumption-capitalization-socialization is being defined and reinvented. In a time when the roles of art institutions and the structures of the art system are being reimagined, audiences become the center of a newly formed body of collaborative knowledge. During their five-year program "The Uses of Art"⁴, the confederation of museums *L'Internationale* examined the notion of "usership" in relation to the shifting operating systems of museums, more and more focused on becoming "sites for the co-production of new civic identities"⁵. Thus, the term *constituency* proves to be the essence of a generative change in what active engagement may look like in the future and how the Constituent Museum gradually becomes "a site in which meanings and identities are themselves coproduced and continually re-negotiated"⁶. By redistributing and rethinking the power structures defining the museums or the art field in general, the constituent forms of collaboration, co-labor "would no longer be to unite, bridge, or combine the seemingly irreconcilable antinomies of art and life—instead, it would be to operate as a form of collaborative, autonomous and constituent social possibility, or use-value"⁷.

The genealogy of *Canal Grande* goes back to the 1980s and progressively opens up to the audience, from first being a photographic experiment taking place in the intimate space of the artist's studio, to becoming an instrument of a self-organizational structure for the public attending the Venice biennial. The first embodiment of this project in 1984, *Canal Grande/Corridor*, enters into Dan Mihălțianu's main focuses and is dedicated to photographic experiments with light, water, reflection and movement, connected to a more extensive study he called at the time "the nature of light". The studio is both the place where his art installations, gestures and actions would be tested, and a symbolically protected area of artistic freedom. All the materials gathered since then—photos, videos and documents—continue to be active resources that the artist turns to in his ongoing projects documenting both the private life and the socio-political changes happening in the flow of history. The first visual outcome connected to the larger research project *Canal Grande* were long exposure, time-lapse, black and white photos of a mirroring surface of water leakage on the narrow corridor leading to the artist's loft studio. Different elements, such as images captured by a TV placed on the floor, lanterns and candles, "draw" light patterns and abstract shapes over extended periods of time, thus capturing into one photo the multiple layers of society: the official reality, shown by TV propaganda, which further fades into the overlapping images, and, on the other hand, the modest, "exhausted" space of everyday life, as represented in the details of the physical space. It almost seems as if two narratives are unfolding simultaneously—a visual research into the photographic process and a historical account on a particular moment of cultural, political and economic closure. This moment is pointed out even more by the private character of the photographic experiment and the symbolic title given by the artist.



Danube-Black Sea Canal, 1949-1984, press images.

Canal Grande hides a disjunctive reference in the well-known symbol of Venice, encrypting the hint to Canalul Dunăre-Marea Neagră⁸ (the Danube-Black Sea Canal, a navigable waterway from the Danube River to the sea), also known as the Death Canal, the site of a large forced labor camp in the 1950s. As Dan Mihălțianu explains the metaphor of the title *Canal Grande*, this is "meant to avoid the cultural censorship practiced at the time, and it refers to both the 'Death Channel' and the Canal Grande in Venice, as symbols for 'pain' and 'pleasure' (leisure)". In 1984, Dan Mihălțianu visited the construction site of the Danube-Black Sea Canal as part of a research trip organized by The Fine Artists' Union for its members with the precise ideological mission of connecting artists to the realities on the ground and the accomplishments of the regime. That trip and also the obsessive public talks about the Canal were triggers for the artist's interest in this particular existential context.

The photos that emerged from the first experiments were later re-used in another project materialized as an in situ installation, never publicly

shown, in 1985 at Atelier 35⁹ in Bucharest. This time, *Canal Grande/Blow-up* recreated the water leak inside the Orizont gallery space using a plasticine fencing in an irregular shape. The photos were then placed on the surface of the water, floating as in a developing tank for analogue photography, thus creating a dialogue with a recurrent situation—the underground exhibition space that would regularly flood at the time. The hint to the iconic film by Michelangelo Antonioni reveals another aspect of the photographic process of grasping reality—its power to both construct and deconstruct the moment seen through the lens of the camera, questioning "the reality of our experience". And if "the event is not what happens, but that which can be narrated" (Allen Feldman), the conversion of an image captured by the camera into a subsequent narrative structures *how* we look at things and the *ways* of seeing. The narrative turn, coupled with the unprecedented visual democratization, have come to define the photograph as "the sovereign analogue of identity, memory, and history, joining past and present, virtual and real, thus giving the photographic document the aura of an anthropological artifact and the authority of a social instrument"¹⁰.

One year later, *Canal Grande/Mirror Space* was the first public appearance of the project, in 1986, at the Institute of Architecture "Ion Mincu" in Bucharest, as part of the group exhibition *The Mirror Space*. Coordinated by Wanda Mihuleac and Mihai Drișcu, the exhibition has been assimilated in recent history as a landmark exhibition for that period because of its ambition and the controversy which followed. This exhibition was considered to be among Baia Mare 1988, *Alternative* 1987, and Sibiu 1986¹¹ as one of the most relevant and innovative manifestations of the young generation of artists, rising from clusters developed around Atelier 35 circles. *The Mirror Space* was censored

and closed shortly after the opening and its catalogue was never published, marking an increasingly restrictive political climate as well as the end of cultural openness.¹² The same year, an exhibition dedicated to performance and installation art in Sibiu, organized in conjunction with an art symposium of the young Romanian art critics of Atelier 35, was held in the basement of the old pharmacy in the center of the city. A few of the works presented there—installations, performances, etc.—triggered a scandal and limited their dissemination in the official press. But still, the oral narratives function even better as, over time, this manifestation has acquired an aura, especially among the younger generations of art critics. Here, in an underground space once again, *Canal Grande* becomes *Titanic Waltz* and links the Danube-Black Sea Canal with the tragic sinking of the Titanic in 1912. Visually suggesting a dramatic setting with elements representing twisted arms and struggling bodies in the waves painted on top of the blue foil, this installation is a testimony to the frictions between the artists' aspiration to the freedom of expression and the increasingly marginal spaces devoted to them.

In 1987, *Canal Grande* is further developed and exhibited in the *Alternative* exhibition, curated by Magda Cârnci, Călin Dan and Dan Mihălțianu at Atelier 35 Gallery Bucharest. This exhibition gathered the art production of the young people of the time while defining the spirit of a new generation of artists. Sadly, this exhibition was also closed after 10 days, and its catalog banned, coming out later in a Xerox photocopied format in the 1990s. This time, *Canal Grande* was functioning as a safe space where people would sit and project their dreams, fears, desires, and anxieties while gathering the collective memory of a whole community attending the exhibition inside that metaphorical territory of water.

The space created by this installation in its early stages has always "reflected" in some way the reality surrounding it, adding a new layer every time and mirroring the various contexts of display. The larger series that this work is part of, *Liquid Matter*, touches upon questions related to the systemic crisis of late Capitalism, new alternative economic models, and the fluidity of a social surface that the artist scratches, time and time again. Going from a solid to a liquid stage of modernity, as it has been coined by Zygmunt Bauman, this process has fascinated Dan Mihălțianu in different ways, from the actual terminology of liquid-liquidities (see the later filling of the Canal Grande with vodka and then with coins), to a parallel phenomenon of alternative and underground economies, outside the official circuit. It is within these parallel structures that autonomous, self-sustaining proposals are born, and the liquid economy takes the shape and form of the context generating it. According to Zygmunt Bauman, "'Society' is increasingly viewed and treated as a 'network' rather than a 'structure' (let alone a solid 'totality'): it is perceived and treated as a matrix of random connections and disconnections and of an essentially infinite volume of possible permutations"⁴³. In this network, Dan Mihălțianu adds a knot, in a permanent attempt to find "the root of the matter", and to pin down a micro-system of autonomous constituent forms of collaboration.

Notes:

- 1 "The transition from *Socialism* to *Officialism*—a state of grace, where *Meritocracy*, *Plutocracy*, *Profitocracy*, and *Kleptocracy* seem to be institutionalized and officialized as part of the generalized corruption—has been successfully implemented." Dan Mihălțianu, *Les enfants de Ceaușescu et de George Soros*, 2006-2015.
- 2 Diana Marincu in conversation with Dan Mihălțianu, *Poesis International VII* / vol. 17, 1, 2016, p. 187.
- 3 "The collected funds will be administrated by the public. The Associated Public is a free nonprofit association, established during the Biennale, including members of the public. It will continue to work together after the end of the show, as long

- as it will be necessary in order to implement the legacy of the project. The Associated Public will decide how the generated capital will be used. It could be reinvested in the same project to generate further income and redirect the surplus to other cultural, humanitarian, philanthropic projects, public institutions or initiatives, considered relevant by the members." (Dan Mihălțianu)
- 4 L'Internationale brings together seven major European art institutions: Moderna galerija (MG•MSUM, Ljubljana, Slovenia); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (MNCARS, Madrid, Spain); Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA, Barcelona, Spain); Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium); Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie (Warsaw, Poland), SALT (Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey) and Van Abbemuseum (VAM, Eindhoven, the Netherlands. The five-year programme *The Uses of Art—The Legacy of 1848 and 1989* started in 2013 and it was a dense programme of exhibitions, symposiums, publications, magazines, an online forum, an education platform and staff exchange. <https://www.internationaleonline.org/about>.
 - 5 "The Constituent Museum—Editor's Introduction" in *The Constituent Museum - Constellations Of Knowledge, Politics And Mediation. A Generator Of Social Change*, edited by John Byrne, Elinor Morgan, November Paynter, Aida Sánchez de Serdio, Adela Zeleznik, Amsterdam, Valiz/L'Internationale, 2018, p. 11.
 - 6 *Ibidem*, p. 12.
 - 7 John Byrne, "Becoming Constituent", in *The Constituent Museum...*, p. 27.
 - 8 The earliest plans for building this canal date back to the 19th Century, but it was only in 1949, after the establishment of the Romanian Communist regime, that the project started and this first phase came to a halt in 1953, but restarted 20 years later during the Ceaușescu regime, in 1973, and was finally accomplished in 1984 (the southern arm) and 1987 (the northern arm).
 - 9 Atelier 35 were satellites of The Fine Artists' Union organization focused on artists under 35, that became part of a national network of exhibition spaces in 1985, as a restructured form of The Youth Circle, founded in 1974, under the Union of Communist Youth, the Romanian Communist Party's youth organisation.
 - 10 Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument", in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, New York, Steidl/ICP, 2008, p. 13.
 - 11 In 1988 there was a large National Exhibition of the Atelier 35 branches that took place at the Art Museum of Baia Mare, coordinated by artist Ana Lupaș. *Alternative 1987* was a landmark exhibition organized by Magda Cârneci, Călin Dan and Dan Mihălțianu at Atelier 35 Gallery Bucharest. In Sibiu in 1986 there were taking place simultaneously the research trip of members of the Atelier 35 branches in the country, a symposium of the young art critics and a performance section of the young artists taking place in the basement of the old pharmacy in the center of the city of Sibiu.
 - 12 This harsh climate followed the July 1971 thesis—a name given to a speech delivered by Ceaușescu after his return from North Korea and China which focused on "improving political-ideological activity".
 - 13 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge and Malden, Polity Press, 2007, p. 3.

The Nature of Light, 1984, Bucharest, black and white silver gelatin print, variable dimensions.





Liquid Archives and the Incompleteness of the Past

Ursula Frohne

"The archive preserves items of our shared world, it preserves that which enables us to shape it differently, anew in common."

Ariella Azoulay¹

The shift of the global political and economic order that occurred at the end of the twentieth century and at the dawn of the twenty-first century in Eastern Europe and in the West has had a profound impact on the cultural constellations. Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the removal of the Iron Curtain, the formation of post-communist Eastern European identities is a process still in progress inasmuch as the discourse of remembrance and theoretical reflections of the historical experience continues. "The late modern subject is forced to face the demands of this new condition" as Elpida Karaba notes in view of the challenges linked to such processes of fundamental transitions within contemporary societies.² Moreover, financial crises intrinsic to the global capitalist economic order have intensified anxieties and inequalities "among subjects, who are faced with the implications of the expansion of an unfettered capitalism" while "neo-colonial relations among the powerful economic centres and (economically) dislocated peripheries" have been established within the European Union.³ The artistic field is particularly affected by such transformative shifts of political and economic power constellations. With the disintegration of communism the relatively static art milieu in Eastern Europe was replaced by a speculative art system. At the same time, artists were deeply involved in the research and reflection of those *détournements* and replacements of political and cultural élites, acting as chroniclers of the disappearing features of living conditions and their social traces while redefining their own role within a reality that was radically reshaped by the dynamics of the market.

Within this sphere of rigid change, that was experienced in Romania in the first place as a release from Ceaușescu's repressive totalitarian regime, while deregulation, liberalization and flexibilization reshaped the social fabric all over Europe, Dan Mihălțianu's extensive body of work emerged in permanent transition between his studios in Bucharest, Berlin and Bergen (Norway). Combining photographs and transparent picture tableaux displayed in public space, editions of bottled self-distilled alcohol, videos and printed publications, audio-visual jukeboxes with vinyl-records and installation concepts with diverse contextual references, the broad scope of his work bears witness to an explorative view that opens aesthetic leeway, keeping the notion of "difference within" the new hegemonic structures accessible. His growing archive of visual culture materials stunningly mirrors the entangled histories of the political, economic and aesthetic shifts so closely connected to the formation of post-communist identities in and beyond Eastern Europe. Neither preservation nor the desire to fetishize the once naturalized ideological images of the past inspire this archival impulse. The category of the archive is rather applied as a method to avoid overidentification and to reconfigure the "grid" that shapes one's perspective on the past. Within this discourse, the notion of the archive stands for "a shared place" as Ariella Azoulay maintains. It corresponds with the claim for the public right to archive what is otherwise "liquidated" by the narratives of the sovereign regimes "that serve the archive's sovereign"⁴. The here discussed archival practice challenges those "protocols by which official archives have functioned and continue to do so [...]", by documenting the material and visual culture and showing a panorama of a shared world from Ceaușescu's Bucharest to post-communist and high-capitalist Europe, compiled

The Nature of Light, 1984, Bucharest, black and white silver gelatin print, variable dimensions.

to an archive of ephemeral cultural moments, a historical index which operates as an antagonistic public sphere.⁵

The traditional modalities of the archive are, on the one part, deeply interwoven with the protagonists who occupy the positions of power and who administer the access to its content. On the other part, the archive functions as an articulatory practice for those whose histories have been excluded by the archive's own bureaucratic law. In the field of art these dimensions of the archive have been explored and applied as a reflexive instrument that registers and records the mutations inflicted on the human condition at times of crisis or during political and social conflicts from early Modernism to the postcolonial critique of the blind spots of its aesthetic and cultural legacy. Examples are manifold, including August Sander's early photo archive, compiled to create a portrait of his contemporaries from all social levels or Hannah Hoeh's *Album* [Scrapbook] containing collages of magazine cut-outs from the 1930s and Berthold Brecht's *Kriegslibel* [War Primer], a visual anti-war statement with picture-epigrams depicting atrocities from World War II, through Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs of *Anonymous Sculptures* that register a disappearing industrial architecture at the threshold of the post-industrial age to Gerhard Richter's monumental *Atlas*-project or Antoni Muntadas' digital archive documenting cases of censorship against art from all over the world in an open access project to Renée Green's biographical reconstructions and contextualizations of cultural producers whose oeuvre has fallen into oblivion and whose entry to the archive was thwarted for issues of gender and/or ethnicity. The different dynamic of such artistic approaches to the archive expands the frame of sharing its potentialities. It challenges the traditional notion of the archive and raises a

sense of civic responsibility by making accessible a material that references precarious events, biographies or processes that were otherwise kept unseen and withheld from collective memory. Dan Mihălțianu's point of departure can be located in this wider scope of art historical recurrences of archival methods as an aesthetic and also socio-political statement. His collections of observations and recordings of the conditions that characterized the living circumstances in 1980s Romania draw a surreal portray of a society in an apocalyptic state at the threshold of the demise of the communist era. Published under the suggestive title *Les enfants de Ceaușescu et de George Soros*, he unfolds a capturing survey of the downbeat atmosphere before and after the regime's collapse. Bucharest appears as a *terrain vague* where people struggled to survive in spite of scarce food supplies and irregular electricity, water and heating, if available at all, while "a closed-circuit art scene with no apparent spectacular events and no superstars apart from those designated by the state" managed to maintain a cultural sphere that was based on a "double discourse"⁶. In this context, Mihălțianu was associated with the group of artists that he defines as the "Outsiders" of the official art scene of the time: "To produce art and art events under such conditions was nothing more than an attitude related to the *creative instinct* and an interior need for expression, but nevertheless avoiding an external contribution towards creating accessories for a political regime that dictated rules and values in all its social spheres," as he explains.⁷ As "outsiders", they programatically worked at the margins of the socialist art, but were able to build and expand a network parallel to the official art institutions. It was this improvised sphere that survived and established connections to the international art world during and after the political shift of 1989: "Following people, events and places through the changes that occurred



Nineteen Fifty-Four, 1994, Kuenstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, copper still, water mellon, whale meat, cooling coil, sunflower seeds, DDT powder, variable dimensions.



Window—Maria Rosetti 53, 1999.
ZKM | Center for Art and Media,
Karlsruhe, video installation, variable
dimensions.



Windows Bucharest-Berlin, 2000,
Alexanderplatz, Berlin, City-Light-
Poster, 118,5 × 175 cm.

on the long journey from the closed society of the Ceaușescu regime, to the extended and still on-going period of transition towards the open society of the post-communist era", the traces of this dynamic process have entered the artist's archive, shaped by a collection of idiosyncratic observations that question the ways in which memory and personal experience are incorporated into larger histories.⁹ A work that condenses the experience of this historical process and reveals in parallel the methodological approach of an archival compilation is *Windows Bucharest-Berlin* (1998/2000), a picture collage designed as visual surface for a lightbox that was presented for the first time on Alexanderplatz Berlin in 1998 to highlight the significance of the square, where the demonstrations for a democratic society took place thirty years ago, eventually leading to the collapse of the GDR regime and eventually to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The conceptual layers of this multifaceted visual tableaux deserve a closer reading. On the one hand the idea of the public space is triggered by the format of advertising signs which are common on the streets of Berlin and enhances this seemingly commercial functionality when the transparent images were illuminated at night. At a closer look "the mosaic images" that were based on video stills, could be identified as "[...] spaces that were supposedly under surveillance before the fall of the wall. Images of private interiors, my flats and studios in Bucharest and Berlin, alternate with images of former times. [...] The poster shows similar situations from these two cities that play a major role in my life, with the intention of blurring time and place of the origin of the images, which once belonged to the most controlled spaces in the Eastern bloc"⁹.

At the center of the visual collage an image of the letters RFT can be recognized, a large neon

sign originally placed at one of the towers of the buildings at Karl-Marx-Allee in East Berlin. This acronym was the advertisement for the formerly well-known electronic equipment companies from the GDR that produced TV-sets and tape records, and also an expert company for surveillance equipment—as it is indicated in the line below the three letters: "measure-surveillance" [messen-überwachen]—that was used by the East German Secret Service ISTASII on a large scale and was ubiquitously installed in public spaces and at "international hotels, cafés, restaurants, airports, and others, especially on Alexanderplatz, the meeting point of East West [...]"¹⁰. Mihăltianu started this work while he was reading George Orwell's famous novel 1984 in the spring of the same year. While he was immersed in the fictional narrative, his sense for the real surveillance exercised in Bucharest on virtually every one, public and private spaces likewise, was stimulated. For obvious reasons censorship prohibited the reading of the book in Romania. The similarities between the fiction and reality seemed scary, but also amusing, as Mihăltianu recalls. It made him pay more attention to the methods applied by the Securitate, the notoriously invasive Romanian Secret Service, and eventually led him to engage in a kind of counter-surveillance, by shooting videos and "photographs of public spaces, buildings, state institutions, as well as special events: public meetings, exhibition openings, parties, and reunions in order to capture the atmosphere of the time"¹¹. To avoid that his recordings would be noticed by the authorities, Dan Mihăltianu used an undercover camera that enabled him to take pictures from unusual positions. In retrospect, he considers his "personal surveillance as a response to the official one," which made him reflect a decade later, when *Windows Bucharest-Berlin* was shown again at an exhibition dedicated to issues of surveillance against the backdrop of





Plaques tournantes, 2010, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, light-sound boxes, 70 × 50 × 15 cm.

digital culture at the ZKM Karlsruhe in 2000, on "the persistence of brutal methods of intimidation and annihilation, that do not even need modern surveillance techniques still present in large areas of the world"¹².

Inscribed in these images are the circumstances of their production. Key to their visual logic are the politics of systemic surveillance. Inasmuch as they evoke the historical constellations of a repressive regime that censored artistic practices of this kind, their hybrid setting between visual documentation and commercial display signifies the new control mechanism of an expanding contemporary media culture, which freely exposes all spheres of privacy and anonymity to the lens of the spectacle. In our post-capitalist era, not only the conditions of production and the imperatives of communication technologies have changed, but also social structures have assumed new forms of organization that Gilles Deleuze described as the transition from "disciplinary societies"¹³ to "societies of control", in which the principle of "enclosure", has been replaced by "open circuits" of "ultra rapid forms of free-floating control" during the past decades.¹⁴ In the wake of the social media, controlling authorities ceded their power position to global market mechanisms and corporate interests that no longer lie under central direction, but instead establish systems that are, in principle, open. Nevertheless, by employing codes, they give access to information, or reject it. In this process the meaning of surveillance and its technologies has radically changed. The general striving to be connected with the universal media machinery that springs from material profit intentions as well as from the narcissistic desire for self-display has released surveillance from the stigma of compromising the subject's freedom. These ambiguities and transitional meanings of visual regimes crystallize in Mihălțianu's artistic practice.

His archival gesture is never limited to preserve or display incidents or scenes from the past, instead his pieces function like prisms through which the conditions of the present become tangible as intrinsically connected to their historical conditions. The compilation of multiple images implies a multiple reading that also undermines the iconization processes of images that go beyond the sphere of totalitarian iconographies. In retrospect, Mihălțianu's hazardous act of counter-surveillance of 1984 sheds also light on the contemporary parodies of what he describes as the "Surveillance Syndrome", the excessive media usage we are facing today, combining "voyeurism with exhibitionism, obscenities with cynicism, advertisement with entertainment, intelligence with leisure, and aesthetics with fashion, omnipresent in the press, TV, the WWW and art"¹⁵.

This herein implied notion of an incompleteness of historical interpretation, so emblematic of Walter Benjamin's famously unfinished investigation of nineteenth-century Paris known as the *Arcades Project*, and the observation that "the past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption", can also be seen as a central motive for Dan Mihălțianu's engagement with the afterlife of a "spirit" characteristic for the social and cultural conditions in Bucharest, Berlin or Norway of the transitional decades at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century.¹⁶ His (archival) collection of materials and scenes conjures not only the economy of scarcity in Ceaușescu's Romania, but also point to a particular pathology that is characteristic of the political and the aesthetic systems of all stripes once they employ absolute control over the individual to further their ideological aims. This aspect also applies to the new regime of an all-encompassing culture of economic growth, which privileges the concept of fluidity, based on globalized labor conditions and

dependent as much on the mobility of goods as on instant capital flow. Mihălțianu's ongoing practice of distilling alcohol can be seen as a metaphorical reference to this shift towards an economy of flux. Although this project originates from his years spent in Bucharest in the early 1980s, his method of using all kinds of substances that he collected in cities where he presented his works or that he visited over the past decades has become identical with his own nomadic life, so typical for contemporary artists whose radius gradually expands with residencies, changing exhibition sites and the need to work at dislocated studios. Summarized as *Liquid Matter*, this ongoing project is documented in a book containing video stills and installation shots of simple distillation devices that Mihălțianu constructed on site and set to work at exhibition events.¹⁷ As records of his actions, they shape an "alcoholology encyclopedia" that is less concerned with the notion of intoxication than with places and tastes associated with the material substances that were used for distillation. The subtle arrangements of words and names suggest imaginary flavors by an almost Proustian elicitation of things past, as for example *Sweet Child in Time* liqueur produced from puffed rice, a popular candy in Romania or *Stalin Allee Wodka* that Mihălțianu claims to have distilled with Stalinist methods. Served to the visitors at his shows, then bottled and labelled, these editions of distilled liquids open a broad set of cross-references within the field of art and in retrospect of the (post-) communist living conditions. They link the format of the Multiple with the circulation logic of Fluxus objects and also to the underground economy of sharing developed during Ceaușescu's regime, when the supply of basic food deteriorated continuously in Romania. These features of scarcity, related to the homemade materiality of the product, metonymically converge with metaphorical terminologies associated with

financial resources, with liquidity or liquidation and the centrifugal powers of unlimited and rapid financial flows, and also with political connotations of transparency. The content-neutral appearance of the distillation fluids is only perturbed by the shapes of the bottle and their labels. These locally and self-produced "products" playfully mimic global distribution systems like cargo containers that represent today's logic of unlimited supply and the irrelevance of space vis-à-vis a monetized economy of time. Their shape appears as a pervasive modular unit with resonances of a minimalist aesthetic that functions like a universal currency. It symbolizes the passage to a world in which financing has become the preferred medium of influence, replacing politics, however with an abyssal legacy that is conjured by the alcoholic substance in Mihălțianu's *Liquid Matter*. While the standardized shape of the cargo container keeps the content invisible to resize the diversity of products and values to ubiquitously tradeable units—similar to the logic of encoding in digital culture—, the transparent liquid inside the individually signed and numbered bottles speaks of a different kind of economy, based on a home-brewed currency of essential goods whose suggestive names and titles are highly defined by the idea of provenance. An edition of 365 bottles labeled as "Pocket Revolution" and conceived on the occasion of an exhibition at MAGMA Contemporary Art Space in Romania, pushes this concept further to an explosive symbolism situated in underground cultures of protest and resistance. A cotton strip placed inside each bottle cites the functional pragmatism of Molotov cocktails with an aesthetic crudeness characteristic of homemade devices put into practice by the speculative energy of a revolutionary spirit. In Mihălțianu's words, "the hip flask", crated in a special box, "is not just a source of influence for the individual, but potentially for



Pocket Revolution, 2014, MAGMA, Sf. Gheorghe, cardboard, glass, cotton, self-distilled alcohol, 7,7 × 15 × 3,5 cm.



Das Kapital—Distillation, 2015, Salon Karl-Marx Buchhandlung, Berlin, performative installation, variable dimensions.

society as a whole on a historical level"¹⁸. Such objects speak about a capitalized reality, based on liquidity, a state as much imposed as embraced by a contemporary subjectivity that has broken free of history.

"All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real condition of life, and his relations with his kind."¹⁹ This famous prophecy formulated by Karl Marx in his *Communist Manifesto* predicted the end of the bourgeois world, once ideology was removed and overcome. The visionary faith of this metaphor was the idea that the masses would have access to the means of production and to knowledge. Instead of its realization, the "melting of solids" has become

the overall aggregate condition of modernity, "with all its geopolitical implications: money and information flows, liquidity, transparency, sustenance and the 'releasing the brakes' with increased fluidity, unbridling the financial, real estate and labor markets, easing the tax burden, etc."²⁰. Zygmunt Bauman in fact diagnoses the fluid state of things as a permanent feature of modernity that acquired a new meaning in contemporary times: today it constitutes the "techniques which allow the system and free agents to remain permanently and radically disengaged, to by-pass each other instead of meeting"²¹. Production on demand correlates with social isolation in this system, whereas under Ceaușescu's dictatorship the limited supply of basic food-stuffs forced people to queue for



Canal Grande/Titanic Waltz, 1986, Pharmacy Museum (basement), Sibiu, PVC foil, used canalization pipes, artist oil colour paint, variable dimensions.

everything needed in their daily lives, which “was practically the only manifestation of a civil society that existed,” as Mihălțianu recalls. An installation of a large pool of vodka poured on a black plastic foil displayed at the ground floor of a high-rise building, housing the CIBC Bank at the financial district of Toronto realized in 2009, can be seen as a reflection on the social dynamic that was paradoxically caused by shortages that people had to cope with in Romania. The viewers gathered at the artwork’s site in Toronto were instead attracted by the material abundance underscored by the fumes of the volatilizing alcohol and the mirroring effect of its liquid surface that stimulated people to throw in pennies and boats made from paper money until “by the end of the night the volume of the coins surpassed that of the vodka, oddly mimicking the public money surrendered to banks and corporations during the previous year’s bailout” of the global financial crisis in 2008.²² Curators Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher associated the pool with the liquidity of financial flows, with investment economies, black markets and “the transformation of use value into exchange value”²³. Displayed as an ephemeral “melting pot” of solids it was gradually transformed by the engagement of the collective.

A similar process was set in motion by a performative event at the Salon Karl-Marx-Buchhandlung [bookstore] at Karl-Marx-Allee 78 in Berlin in 2016. The work *Das Kapital - Distillation* conceptually referred to John Latham’s conceptual piece *Art and Culture* (1966-69) for which he used Clement Greenberg’s book with the same title as raw material for a performance of chewing and fermenting its pages with saliva assisted by with a group of students at the St. Martin’s School of Art in London.²⁴ In Mihălțianu’s setting, the public was invited to chew the pages from *Das Kapital*, after reading and memorizing them. The participants

were then encouraged to spit the pulp into a glass container and offered vodka to rinse their mouths. The resulting mixture was distilled in front of the audience and bottled. The act of internalization metaphorically intensifies the idea of intellectual engagement with the book’s content, invoking a multitude of motives and practices, including “initiation rituals, liturgical practices, transmission/ acquiring of knowledge, intelligence techniques, political activism and artistic labour,” as Mihălțianu notes.²⁵ “Symbolically, a book has to be first ingested and afterwards digested (distilled).”²⁶ This method also refers to the notion of cannibalism which has become a key concept of resistance and emancipation. Its practice of absorption, entanglement and transformation is directed against the superiority of the (neo-)colonial impact, counteracting xenophobic currents with a radical incorporation of diverse cultural strategies. The re-reading and chewing of *Das Kapital* appears as a form of anthropophagy, an exercise of blending and degustation, a devouring metamorphose that questions fundamental dichotomies of native/ foreign, center/periphery, nature/culture, past/ present. Performed as a creative practice of recycling, it also acquires relevance a political concept. The practice of fermentation and distillation of this book’s pages articulates a strong commitment to rethink its legacy.

Mihălțianu’s methods are exemplary for the transversal potentiality of art, working both ways on our perspective of the past and the present, overcoming the naturalized conditions of a framework that is politically maintained as unalterable. As an intervention in the ideological montages of contemporary reality, his modes of collecting and distilling offer material manifestations of immaterial processes of today’s value creation. In view of the contested concept of the archive as we experience it today between the

analogue and the digital, in a state of escalating movement and flux, it seems essential to make accessible the materials and narratives that document the possibility of change, by making the instability of the existing orders tangible and revealing the non-definite structure of ideologies that continue to rule the world.

By turning our attention to the marginal zones of everyday lives determined by political and economic ideologies, Mihălțianu avoids culture-critical denunciations in the vein of “wrong life cannot be lived rightly”²⁷. His work rather evokes an empathetic sense for the undercurrents within the contradictions of today’s and the past world order likewise, which he interrogates as a part of his own socialization—without nostalgic yearning for lost ideals, but with a clear sense for the networks that connect many different and distant localities under the conditions of the contemporary states of production, reception and consumption. The political is inevitably a part of this artistic practice that anchors its poetic momentum in the constellations of the social world; for as Jacques Rancière writes, the sense of community requires sensual representation.²⁸ It is here that the archival project becomes eminently political: as an emancipatory *alternative* with historical resonances, and as an expression of an eminently poetic praxis that irresistibly transcends political, cultural and aesthetic boundaries by new alliances.

Notes:

- 1 See Ariella Azoulay, „Archive”, in: *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, translated by Tal Haran, issue 1, 2017, <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/issue1/archive/> (April 18, 2019) unpaginated.
- 2 See Elpida Karaba, “Tactics of Resistance. The Archive of Crisis and the ‘Capacity to Do What One Cannot’”, *Third Text*, Vol. 27, No. 5, 2013, pp. 674-688, esp. p. 674.
- 3 *Ibidem*.
- 4 See Azoulay, *op.cit.*

- 5 *Ibidem*.
- 6 See Dan Mihălțianu, *Les enfants de Ceaușescu et de George Soros*, exhibition publication, Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici din România, Atelier 35/Suborizont, 2015, unpaginated.
- 7 See *ibidem*. On the Romanian art scene and the constructions of a post-communist Eastern European identity see also Cristian Nae, “Basements, attics, streets and courtyards. The reinvention of marginal art spaces in Romania during socialism” in *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere*, edited by Katalin Cseh-Varga and Adam Czirak, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, pp. 75-87.
- 8 Citation from Dan Mihălțianu, *Divided Files*, Kunsthogskolen i Bergen, Bergen, 2007, unpaginated.
- 9 See Dan Mihălțianu, “After 1984”, in *CRTL [SPACE] Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, edited by Thomas Y. Levin with Ursula Frohne and Peter Weibel, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 2000, pp. 362-365, esp. 362.
- 10 *Ibidem*.
- 11 *Ibidem*, p. 365.
- 12 *Ibidem*.
- 13 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York, Pantheon, 1977.
- 14 See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, *October*, no. 59, winter 1992, pp. 4-5. Also see the reprint of this text in this book, pp. xx-xx.
- 15 See Dan Mihălțianu, “After 1984”, p. 365.
- 16 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 2—1938 -1940*, Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 390.
- 17 The “Alcoholology Encyclopedia” was compiled by Inke Arns and published in *Liquid Matter*, edited by Dan Mihălțianu, Kunsthogskolen Bergen, Bergen, 2002, pp. 7-149.
- 18 See Dan Mihălțianu, “Pocket Revolution”, 2014, <http://www.magmacm.ro/pr/> (accessed April 22, 2019).
- 19 See Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, London and New York, W.W. Newton and Company, 1988, p. 58.
- 20 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Malden, Polity Press, 2000, p. 5.
- 21 *Ibidem*.
- 22 Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, quoted in Helena Reckitt, “Because the Night: Curating One-Off Nocturnal Events”, *Art Papers*, May/June 2013, pp. 42-45, esp. p. 44.
- 23 Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, “Vodka Pool”, *DisplayCult*, 2009, <http://www.displaycult.com/project.html?type=exhibitions&project=nightsense&exhibit=vodka-pool>.
- 24 See Paul Moorhouse, “And the word was made art”, Tate. Blogs & Channel, <https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/and-word-was-made-art> (accessed April 22, 2019).
- 25 See Dan Mihălțianu, *Das Kapital—Distillation*, exhibition brochure, Salon Karl-Marx-Buchhandlung, Berlin, 2016, unpaginated.
- 26 *Ibidem*.
- 27 Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, London, Verso, 1974, p. 39.
- 28 See Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement. Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.



Reflections on *Canal Grande*

Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher

Canals imply a range of meanings and affective flows. During the era of modernization, seaways and inland waterways created faster shipping options, progressive trading practices and the economic benefits of liberalization. For those seeking travel routes through areas hostile to roads, canals demonstrated the victory of human technology over the unruliness of the natural world. For Venice, the significance of canals cannot be overstated: they carved a cohesive city out of marshland and islands, founded an independent and wealthy republic, and stoked an impressive seafaring and trading empire that lasted for centuries. The significance of canals morph according to forms of utility—profit-making, city-building or marvel of engineering. Even when their original function is superseded by other forms of transportation, canals demonstrate a transformative resilience. Decommissioned canals often get repurposed as parks and sites of tourism, especially in urban areas where the appearance of water and outmoded technology carries nostalgia for a seemingly slower and simpler life.

The sequence of installations comprising Dan Mihălțianu's *Canal Grande* series chart the mutability of canals. These pools of liquid are situated incongruously indoors in galleries, museums and other exhibition sites, bounded by a sinuous, inch-high barrier of PVC and an underlying sheet of black vinyl. Where water on the floor usually portends the disruption of a leak or flood, these fluid expanses create an unusual screen for the play of light, images and reflections. The compound affect of precarity and contemplation is deliberate. The series began in 1984, the year that the artist's native country of Romania inaugurated a canal connecting the Danube River to the Black Sea. The construction had been decades in the making, first organized by Stalin during the Soviet occupation in the late

1940s and finished by the dictatorial president Nicolae Ceaușescu. While the project was hailed by propagandists as an emblem of Socialism's heroic modernization and a triumph of Romania's national spirit, the reality was far more appalling: the canal had been excavated by the forced labor of political dissidents and persecuted ethnic and religious minorities. An estimated 200,000 perished in the abysmal conditions of the camps and the tortuous work, thus earning the transportation corridor the title of *Canalul morții*—"Death Canal".

When Mihălțianu's installations first appeared, Ceaușescu's repressive surveillance state apparatus was in full force. Political critique at the time necessitated cryptic manoeuvres to avoid censorship or more dire retaliation by the regime. The artist's choice of the exaggerated title "Grande" is deployed ironically to divert the scrutiny of authorities by referencing Venice's scenic canal. To the Romanian art community, however, the work's indictment of the government was clear.² Where canals are conventionally designed to facilitate mobility, Mihălțianu's pools of water rest impassively on the floor, often blocking the centre of rooms and hallways and diverting normal perambulatory flow. Audiences must walk around them, confounding the promise of easy transit that such channels of water imply. Their black shimmering voids also hint at the secret depths (and horrors) that can lie below a shimmering surface of reflections. Despite the artist ostensible framing the works in terms of perceptual aesthetics, the pools were greeted with censorship by the authoritarian bureaucracy of Ceaușescu. The exhibitions in which the 1986 and 1987 versions of *Canal Grande* installations appeared were closed and the catalogue banned. To government officials likely unaware of installation art and post-medium practices, even

Canal Grande/Mirror Space, 1986. Institute of Architecture, Bucharest
PVC foil, plasticine, water, variable dimensions.



Firewater, 1996, Art in General, New York, copper still, self-distilled alcohol bottles, video projection, variable dimensions.



an artwork placidly reflecting the observer was perceived as a provocation to state mechanisms that required invisibility to exercise power.

In the years following the collapse of Ceaușescu's regime in 1989, aesthetic subterfuge became less necessary as Mihălțianu installed versions of the canal in Bucharest, Berlin, Bergen and elsewhere. In these post-communist years, however, a different problem emerged. After decades of intimidation, the Romanian populace—suffering from what historian Tony Judt called a “collective inattention to recent history”³—exhibited a general reluctance to investigate the cruelties and misdeeds of the Communist era. If the pools operated as covert dissent during Ceaușescu's time, their stilled blackness suggesting thresholds to the unspeakable abuses of the state, after the dictator's fall that same murkiness became a glistening surface for reflecting a traumatized country's unwillingness to revisit the past. Dip a finger or toe into the pool and ripples will disturb and fragment the image appearing on the surface. Any stable reflection upon which the sense of normalcy of everyday life depends is revealed to be a fragile illusion. To both victims and perpetrators of the momentous divide of 1989, the iterations of *Canal Grande* serve as liquid memorials against acts of forgetting the thousands of individuals punished and killed to fulfil the aims of an autocratic ideology.

Beyond the Romanian context, the series of *Canal Grande* installations maintains a variability that can assume a number of connotations—as each functions to mirror and adapt to social and political specificities. Reflecting pools commonly feature water elements in diverse cultural and religious landscaping traditions. The stillness of the liquid and the gentle reflections offer a respite from the bustle of everyday life to cultivate contemplation



or commemoration. Visually, Mihălțianu's pools deliver a similar meditative mood, yet contain the potential for multi-sensorial unpredictability when filled with other liquids, such as alcohol. *Vodka Pool* (2009), the Toronto version of *Canal Grande*, appeared in the public art extravaganza *Nuit Blanche*.⁴ The annual, all-night event is known for its striking artistic recontextualizations of civic space by site-specific installations and performances, open art institutions from dusk to dawn, and the oftentimes intoxicated revelry in the million or so attendees.⁵ Amidst the boisterous carnivalesque scene of the event, *Vodka Pool* promised an oasis of calm and respite in which visitors could recalibrate from the sensory overload typical of the event.

By using alcohol instead of water, Mihălțianu merged *Canal Grande* with another longstanding series, *Great Distillations* (1990 and ongoing), which investigates the personal, cultural and political meanings of alcohol deploying context-sensitive installations and actions. Iterations have been exhibited in cities such as Berlin, Bucharest, Budapest, Bergen, Canterbury, Munich, New York and Vienna. The projects typically feature a month-long process: the artist gathers fruits, seeds and herbs from the neighborhood surrounding the gallery, constructs a DIY copper apparatus to ferment and distill a distinctive brew, and then bottles the liquor in scavenged flasks refitted with labels referencing Mihălțianu's personal experience of the history and identity of the locale. A public tasting accompanies the conclusion of the distillation and offers gallery goers an opportunity to discuss and share stories about alcohol and the city.⁶ Alcohol thus serves as the means to distill, savor and imbibe a place's unique character.

While *Vodka Pool* presented a vast quantity of alcohol, no glasses were provided for

consumption. Viewers instead encountered a 75 square meter pool spread across the floor. Alcohol on the ground may be considered a minor loss (spilling one's drink), but here it took on the appearance of a monumental liquid to be looked at and walked around. Audiences were not invited to sip the spirits, yet a vodka-ish aroma filled the air that rendered the very act of breathing like the taking of a drink. The confusion of visual, gustatory and olfactory sensory registers was essential for the work's material and affective qualities. The inebriation aimed to be more implied so as to draw out alcohol's broader significance. “Alcoholology,” as Inke Arns defines in the glossary that comprises Mihălțianu's catalogue *Liquid Matter*, is an essential component of the artist's practice, for it “studies the relation between alcohol, culture, mass media, consumption and alienation in contemporary societies”⁷. The relation that played out in *Vodka Pool* focused on the financial crisis of the previous year.⁸ The contemplative, elegiac aspect of the pool was sustained, but was tempered by its location in the imposing lobby of one of Canada's largest bank's headquarters, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC) building on Bay Street.⁹ For this one night alcohol's volatility permeated audience behavior as it give a new significance to market dynamics. As liquor intoxicates, so does excess wealth; as liquor evaporates, so do savings during an economic crash; as liquor numbs, so does the indifference of the superrich. Liquor can also play a role in transforming economies of value, like the Marxian conversion of use value into exchange value. For the artist, vodka carried the additional relevance of its use as a home-distilled currency used to procure essential goods in underground economies, as well as a form of self-medication for traumatized individuals victimized within totalitarian regimes.¹⁰



During the night Mihălțianu's periodic emptying of bottles of vodka into the pool counteracted the gradual evaporation and set the conditions for the public to perform its own acts of uncorking. Despite the original idea of providing a respite from the bacchanalia occurring everywhere else in Nuit Blanche, the alcoholic fumes and the pool's black, mirrored sheen seemed to provoke the audience and ultimately caused that evening's most riotous conduct. Initially, at sunset, visitors encircled the pool and observed the reflections cast by the unlikely spectre of alcohol filling a bank's atrium. A few started to cast pennies into its smooth surface as if it were a wishing well. As the evening wore on and the crowd grew larger, a more diverse array of objects sailed into the pool of liquor. Keys, condoms and dollar bills folded into boats were thrown in. Then people began to launch themselves (and some dogs) into sliding belly-flops across the shallow depths. By the early hours of the morning, the frenzy to enter the space eventually tore the bank's revolving doors off its axis causing the piece to be shut down until security could restore order. At sunrise, the accumulation of coins submerged in vodka in the bank's atrium drew uncanny parallels to bailout funds given to insolvent banks from the public purse.¹¹ After a year of news about financial setbacks and bank meltdowns, Toronto's art-going mob had expressed acts of unanticipated charity amidst the festive chaos.

After the event, the unexpected bounty contributed by the audience posed a quandary for Mihălțianu. What to do with the vast number of coins? About 40kg of small change, amounting to approximately 500 dollars, had been accumulated. He considered producing an edition of multiples using the money to refill the vodka bottles emptied during the night.¹² Yet public's gesture of giving so spontaneously impressed the artist and added an

unforeseen twist to the meaning of *Vodka Pool*. The exchange of hard liquor for hard currency brought out the implicit politics of the installation and shifted its tenor from subtle and symbolic to overt and polemical. That an installation critiquing the neoliberal crisis in capitalism actually generated a financial gain, proved to be a significant aftereffect of the project: one that finds a resolution a decade later in Venice.

Money assumes an outsized presence at the Biennale: whether it be nations with grandiose pavilions contrasting to those with smaller, off-site or non-existing ones, collectors with personal museums and luxury superyachts parked alongside the Giardini boardwalk, or Venice itself with architectural and historical reminders of its glory years as the world's richest city, wealth saunters at the Biennale like few other exhibition venues. For the 2019 edition of the Biennale, Mihălțianu's installation accepts the play of wealth but seeks an alternative. For *Canal Grande: Capital Pool and the Associated Public* (2019), donations from the audience are openly solicited and the funds integrated into the concept of the work. The surface of the water reflects the surrounding environment, which includes not only the individuals gazing at the pool, but also the context of the pavilions, the exhibition, the art world, and the city of Venice. It is significant that the actual coins are on view, framed by the serpentine borders of the pool and its transparent water. Unlike the sublimated or commodified versions of conspicuous display that utilize materials (gold) or inferred markers of value (virtuosic craftsmanship) to indicate value but hide the true cost, the mass of coins admits to the materialization of wealth and its fundamental physicality. The pool's glistening reflections also endow the coins with an aura of sorts that fosters an incentive to give.

An additional significance of *Canal Grande: Capital Pool and the Associated Public*'s display of wealth is its scale and purpose. Despite the implied critique of the crisis in neoliberalism, the installation bears a sense of optimism through a humble and open-ended economics of exchange. It invites the generosity of the Biennale audience and their willingness to engage in acts of microphilanthropy—tossing in spare change that over time will accrue into a substantial amount. The atomistic reliance on small donations from numerous average visitors counters the art world's preference for megadonors from the elite class of one-percenters. Such populism parallels the project's intention to fund a variety of charitable endeavours (to be determined by the board set up to deal with the contributions). *Canal Grande* also candidly confronts the reality and costs of staging artwork at the international level: by contributing to its own funding itself, and not totally relying on the beneficence of the Romanian government and arts council, the installation performs an experiment concerning its own sustainability. Within the Giardini, Mihălțianu has created an artwork operating as both an aesthetic and financial entity that circumvents the spectacle of self-glorifying philanthropy practiced by artworld players eager to display their names. Instead, the artist promotes an ethos of anonymous giving without the payoff of recognition.

Silent, still and black, the versions of *Canal Grande* reflect their time and locale. First they resonated as memorials to the lives lost to fulfill an autocratic dream, and served as an irritant to governmental oppression. Post-Ceaușescu, the pools challenged Romanian's historical indifference and the financial system's shaky dealings that dispossessed millions worldwide. In Venice, *Canal Grande* arrives full circle to co-exist with its namesake picturesque waterway. Here, though, it models a strategy of self-funding, microphilanthropy, and charity that

frames the generosity of the audience. Over the years the pools of liquid have expanded, changed in composition and become more participatory, to the point that the watery mirror not only induces contemplation, it channels action.

Notes:

- 1 Ruxandra Cesereanu, "The Gulag in Romanian Prison Conscience," *Philobiblon: Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1997, pp. 129-151.
- 2 Dan Mihălțianu. 1984/2015. "Canal Grande Timeline." Text from a limited edition print.; Dan Mihălțianu. *Les enfants de Ceaușescu et de George Soros*. Brochure from the show of the same name at Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici din România, Atelier 35/Suborizont, 2015.
- 3 Tony Judt, "Romania: Bottom of the Heap," *New York Review of Books*, November 1, 2001. Available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2001/nov/01/romania-bottom-of-the-heap/> (Accessed July 15, 2015).
- 4 *Vodka Pool* was one of 15 projects in *NIGHTSENSE* (2009) curated by DisplayCult that intervened into Toronto's financial district for Nuit Blanche. See Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, "NIGHTSENSE," *PUBLIC* 45: Civic Spectacle, 2012, pp. 35-63.
- 5 Heather Diack, "Sleepless Nights: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Performance," *PUBLIC* no. 45, 2012, pp. 8-22.
- 6 *Great Distillations* projects also involve elements of video, audio and sculpture, and result in editioned books, photos, postcards, CDs and other multiples. See Jim Drobnick, "Inebriationism: Alcohol, Performance and Paradox," *Performance Research*, special issue: *Under the Influence*, vol. 22 no. 6, 2017, pp. 33-34; Inke Arns, "Alcoholology Encyclopedia," in Dan Mihălțianu, *Liquid Matter*, Bergen, Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen, 2002, pp. 71, 75.
- 7 Inke Arns, "Alcoholology Encyclopedia," in Dan Mihălțianu, *Liquid Matter*, Bergen, Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen, 2002, p. 7.
- 8 When searching for a sponsor to donate vodka for his installation, Mihălțianu first approached Absolut, who would agree to provide the alcohol only if the pool was shaped like an Absolut bottle. The artist declined, and found another sponsor in Polar Ice vodka, who respected the artwork's conceptual integrity. See Dan Mihălțianu, interview with the authors, Toronto, October, 2009.
- 9 Bay Street is the financial capital of Canada, the equivalent in symbolic and economic terms to Wall Street in New York or the square mile in London.
- 10 These points were expressed by Mihălțianu in an interview with the authors (Toronto, October, 2009) regarding vodka in Romania. On similar uses of vodka in Russia, see Dmitri Stakhov, "The Prose (and Cons) of Vodka," *Gastronomica*, Winter 2005, pp. 25-28 and Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2014.
- 11 The bailout of banks primarily occurred in the US. Canadian banks were less exposed to risk and so did not require government assistance. Nevertheless, *Vodka Pool* alluded to the broader international phenomenon of failed banks.
- 12 Mihălțianu also photographed the cache of coins pooled in the bathtub of his hotel room—a nod to both the dilemma of what to do with the money, and the origin of bootleg liquor such as "bathtub gin".



Interview with Max Haiven, author of *Art after Money, Money after the Art*

by Geert Lovink

Art is not supposed to be poisoned by money. Making money is considered dirty and the beauty of owning it all is perverted by the constant fear of losing it all. Multiply this strained relationship between money and art with digital technologies and you get a dazzling mix of speculation of flimsy concepts and unstable networks that everyone in other sectors would not even dare to touch. Not so in the world of "fintech" where the sky is the limit.

Do you dream of digital gold? Certainly, a lot of contemporary artists do. Over the past decades the number of artworks that explicitly deal with money and global finance has risen exponentially. The harder it gets for artists to sell their work, the more desperate they get, and the more inclined they will be to take the (failing) money as the topic of their work.

The Canadian theorist Max Haiven has written widely about the topic. Like Dan Mihălțianu he's affiliated with the MoneyLab network (www.networkcultures.org/moneylab) that is coordinated by our Amsterdam-based Institute of Network Cultures. Already at the time of the publication of his 2014 book *Cultures of Financialization* Haiven was exploring the work of artists who dealt with money, a topic he continues in his *Art after Money, Money after Art; Creative Strategies Against Financialization* (Pluto Press, London, 2018). The book is packed with examples and illustrations, from classics such as Beuys, Haacke, Lazano and Baldessari to MoneyLab contemporaries such as Fran Illich, Paolo Cirio and Femke Herregraven.

It is rare to find such a refined balance between case studies of artworks and the theorizing of the politics and aesthetics of finance. What is this elective affinity between money and art? To be frank, Haiven does not believe art needs to be protected against money's undue influence.

Neither does he believe that money needs to be reformed to be more functional. In this interview Max Haiven explains why money and art, as they exist under capitalism, must be abolished.

Dan Mihălțianu's 2019 Venice Biennale work can be seen as an ideal example of the issue discussed below. The massive and growing inequality in the world begs for a critical imagination that develops a visual language to address the "axiom of value". The more abstract, virtual and fluid money gets, the more necessary it gets to develop our own sense of mediation. Following Jameson, Haiven states that "capitalist totality is inherently unrepresentable, yet it demands representation". How would you imagine the quadrillions of dollars that are being pumped around the globe? Many have shown their discontent with the "crisis of representation". Why is this topic so hard to grasp? Encryption only makes matter worse. While necessary for security reasons, this technology also mystifies ideological agendas.

Haiven not only describes crypto through digital keys that produce endless rows of zeros and ones, but also features "palaces of encrypted culture", so-called art crypts where artworks are safely stored (such as Freeport in Singapore). This connects to a wider trend where new forms of digital money are no longer seen as a medium of exchange (read: to administer debt), but exclusively operate as a unique code, a string of zeros and ones that moves around the network with the sole purpose to store value. Time to turn to our email exchange.

GL: How do you look at Karl Marx's classic scheme of commodity, exchange value and profit? Many have tried to update it but it still remains a powerful analysis. This is perhaps also why Dan still refers to it. The transformation process from



Canal Grande/Alternatives, 1987, Galeria A35, Bucharest, PVC foil, used bed steel springs, artist oil colour paint, variable dimensions.

commodity to value to money is a mysterious one. A whole 'value' school of contemporary Marxism has been working on these issues.

MH: In digitalized capitalism, Marx's *conflict* labour theory of value, which focuses on exploitation, is more important than ever. I think it still gives us the tools to wage a struggle for the dignity of our lives and our creative powers against capitalism, and that struggle is more important than it has ever been, given that capitalism is ruining the earth's ecosystems.

It's crucial to remember that all value in society ultimately comes from labour, though we must expand our definition of "labour" beyond the fairly conservative 19th century Marxist definition of formal waged exploitation to include unwaged labour, and also all those made into "surplus populations" by capitalism. I analyse capitalism as a system that hijacks, co-opts, harnesses and organizes the way humans and non-humans cooperate to reproduce the world. Ultimately, capitalism is devastatingly effective at manipulating the crucial point where cooperation and imagination meet, and I think this is the heart of what we call "value". I recognize here that my notion of value in this sense is a bit unique, but I actually think it keeps faith with Marx's spirit, which as Harry Cleaver points out seeks to create conceptual weapons for class struggle. It is a theory grounded in a kind of optimism about the potential of the imagination and the creative force of cooperation.

For me, the question of the exploitation and circulation of economic value under capitalism is related to *who* and *what* we imagine is valuable and how we imagine what we, as a cooperative species, might be capable of. The transformation of human cooperative potential into commodities,

of commodities into assets denominated in money, and of money itself into capital, is also a process through which we collectively imagine our world and everything we create, including ourselves as subjects and producers of commodities. For instance, the computer I type this on is the cooperative product of tens of thousands of individual moments of human labour, and also of millions of earthly processes. But, like all commodities, this dazzling array of coordinated energies that produced a truly phenomenal tool is reduced to a very austere and banal fiscal calculus and we imagine the object itself is magical; we give it power, rather than recognizing it is our own power now in a new form.

This is a nefarious alchemy. The most poetic passages of Marx are dedicated to how profoundly *intimate* this process is. The young and the old Marx alike keep returning to the fundamental violence by which our boundless cooperative potential to remake the world together is constrained and harnessed by money. The capitalist form of money has this absolutely singular way of distilling this potential into a pure liquidity of power. In our age of financialization, where capitalism has eliminated almost all inhibitions, money attains a dark utopian liquidity: our own collective liquid potential offered back to us in self-destructive, profit-oriented form.

This is what I take from Dan Mihălțianu's fascination with these pools and bottles of toxic liquid. After all, alcohol murders its own producers: the yeast devours the sugar, but the waste it produces poisons it. I see his installations as a dramatization of how this toxic and also intoxicating form of commodity and consumerism-driven capitalism leaks into every social relation. It is a grim poetry, very fitting for an age of climate crisis: the wealth we produce poisons us.

But, you know, I teach English literature at the university, which is ultimately the literary history of the British Empire and its various satellites. I always ask my students to consider modern history—maybe all his-tory as the meta-story of slaves and servants who, for one reason or another, did not poison their masters. So I'm very interested in this question of latent or inactivated poisons...

GL: For Jean Baudrillard commodity, exchange value and symbolic value all got detached and became floating signifiers. The billions that float around in the networks have no external anchor anymore. This harsh and cynical analysis is still valid, in my humble opinion, however, today, we rarely see artists celebrating this virtual virtue of global capital. How come? Is this also because of the invisible, abstract nature of, let's say, derivatives, hedge funds and quantitative easing?

MH: I am of two minds on this question. On the one hand, there is a fundamental truth to the idea that speculative financial products like synthetic derivatives are "fourth order simulacra" as Baudrillard named it: simulations without any original, the eternal play of signs, the endless hall of mirrors. Here I would again reference Mihălteanu's work and the eerie charisma of these mysterious reflecting pools in, for instance, the lobbies of banks.

In my recent book I've borrowed Derrida's theories of the play of metaphor to describe this because I feel this terminology stresses the creativity and imagination required to reproduce these illusions, and also moves us away from what I think is a bad tendency towards nostalgia for a "pre-financialized" form of capitalism. As ever, my desire is to focus on where the imagination is at work, and how it might be organized differently.

On the other hand, it may be true that billions of dollars float around the earth with no underlying value. But those billions still have the power to *claim* value, to mobilize labour in the world, to command the imagination. I often wonder about the utility of claiming this money is somehow *more* imaginary than, say, physical forms of money. After all, even the value of gold is, to a large extent, imaginary. I am suspicious of the idea that, if only we could remove the "bad" speculative money from capitalism and "return" to a more stable and "realistic" quantity of money, we'd be in a better place. Again, I always come back to the very Marxian idea that we should question how labour, human cooperation, is being organized. When has capitalism been free of "imaginary" money, and even if we eliminated that money, what would change? I don't want to diminish the very real terrors unleashed by the global flows of speculative finance, but I think there is more here to discover.

Artists have a hard time dealing with this reality for a few reasons. First, we have failed to educate a young generation of artists to think rigorously and creatively about "the economy". Most of the time, artists dealing with economic issues do bad work because they reach for the appearance, not the substance. Many end up working with the physicality of money itself, or critiquing material economic conditions (precariousness, poverty, gentrification, individual greed), rather than the more abstract systems behind these appearances. We're at a point in time when almost everyone on the political spectrum, including fascists, have a critique of these conditions—it's more important than ever to have a firm analysis of why they exist. Many artists unwittingly contribute to some very problematic thinking with their flimsy approaches. More theoretically, artists are in a strange way envious of financialized money's power. After all, a derivative contract is ultimately a form of representation of the world that comes alive



Canal Grande/Liquid Matter, 2005. National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, PVC foil, water, variable dimensions.



Canal Grande/Liquid Cities, 2005, Bergen Kunsthall, vinyl pond liner, water, two channel video projection, variable dimensions.

and affects and shapes the world. This is in some ways the very dream of *art qua art*: to use representational strategies to shape the world one is representing. What is the most stunning work of art next to a derivative? There is something about money's ability to both represent and transform value that trumps art at its own game.

Ultimately, my question is: if we are indeed in the thrall of imaginary money, then let us also marvel at how powerful the imagination truly is, such that it can command the labour and passions of billions of us and literally transform our planet. To what other ends could that imagination be put, if we organized it, and ourselves, otherwise? For me, the best art strikes at this sublime question.

GL: Over the past three decades Saskia Sassen has explained the working of financial flows to us, time and again. She emphasizes that the "silly money" does materialize in very particular places, notably New York and London, both considered centres of the art market. We know by now, thanks to her, that this is no coincidence. Does this also mean that for you, a critical approach towards art & money will have a subversive plus when it comes from the edges of the network? Do we see the interplay between art and money more clearly we are in the centre? What's your experience in that respect?

Under financialization, the "art world" has been driven into an "event horizon" moment, a weird form of singularity. Like a black hole, the art market today is insatiably hungry, constantly drawing that which was once on the margin to the centre. Today we are seeing growing markets for forms of art that were once explicitly developed to evade, avoid or antagonize that market: net.art, feminist art, social practice art, outsider art... or at least the domesticated or derivative forms inspired by these tendencies. In this way, as Suhail Malik noted, the

art market isn't just a weird sideshow of capitalism, it is something that reveals the very logic of the system at large.

I am not so optimistic that art that is performed on the geographic, political or aesthetic margins has a better chance to "beat" the market. The "silly money" has created a new, very insecure caste of hyper-wealthy speculators who in some ways *need* art for at least two reasons: first as an "alternate asset class" to park their stolen money, second as a mechanism to define their spheres of social and cultural capital. As it has done throughout capitalist "modernity", art collecting, speculation and discourse is crucial to the social reproduction of the capitalist class.

Today, capitalists fancy themselves in terms we used to reserve for artists: creative, edgy, bold, iconoclastic, risk-taking, independent, passionate, maverick. Many of the new collectors no longer want boring old work that offers conservative prestige; they also want to collect new daring, provocative, even "political" art. The way financiers dream about a kind of intimacy with "the market" is more than similar to the way artists and arts professionals talk or fantasize about an intimacy with "the contemporary": a kind of hyper-present, to be on the bleeding edge, ahead of one's competitors, in the moment before the moment even occurs.

For this reason I am all the more interested, at least on an intellectual level, in artists whose work engages with money, finance, debt and economics from "within". Their experiments have something to tell us precisely *not* because they come from the margins of capitalist accumulation, but because they are so close to the proverbial centre. That said, I'm utterly bored by work that makes a simplistic critique or an ironic glamorization of money, which are both very common.



There's something about the methodologies and practices of smart and rigorous artists working with money that has a psychoanalytic character, a talking cure where the artist is able to express the unnameable contradictions at the heart of the system of which we are all part. Like psychoanalysis, to paraphrase Freud, art can only help to transform political-economic neurosis into normal everyday misery. But to actually transcend that misery takes radical anti-capitalist movements actively transforming the fabric of politics and everyday life.

I return to Dan Mihăltianu's work here, which delivers us into something that I have called benign pessimism. This is a theoretical inversion of Laren Berlant's "cruel optimism," a complex "public affect" we all share, whereby most of us sustain participation in a system that is slowly killing us, based on a belief that things will get better, even though we actually know they won't (much like the yeast producing the alcohol). There's something about the lachrymose minimalism of Dan's work that for me appeals to a potentially transformative melancholia.

And I think here we see another kind of art with or about money/finance/economics that is really just a kind of cunning sabotage, that uses the residual prestige of art, and its proximity to financial power, to get in under the skin of financialized capital and cause some real trouble.

GL: Is there a perspective on art and money from those who don't have much? One could say that the challenge these days is about the redistribution of wealth. This is why Trump and others get so upset about the word "socialism".

ML: Recently I've been working on the question of how to uncover the proletarian, hidden history

of money. In the face of so much (cruel) optimism about the potential to reinvent money, I'm interested in a history of money "hacking" and "innovation" from those of us for whom money has always felt not like a medium of liberation or exchange, but just as a weapon against common life and for enforcing exploitation. This is, in part, a response to the enthusiasm for new crypto-solutionism to "fix" the "problem" of money and payments. I cannot fathom why anyone would believe that they could outsmart or trick capitalism: it is a system that harnesses our intelligence, creativity and imagination like no other. My concern is that attempts to "fix" or "hack" the system from the top down will just renovate or reinforce that system.

My inquiries led me to examples of small yet fearsome ways that everyday people have rebelled and avenged themselves *against* money, what I call a "hidden ledger" of proletarian rebellion: destroying or defacing currency, creating new play or temporary currencies, using money as a representative vehicle for caricatures or subversive messages and the like. By proletarian here, I should say, I mean something much broader than what is taken for Marx's quite narrow definition of the working class (formally exploited industrial waged workers): I essentially include all those whose devalued labours are necessary to the reproduction of capital, including unpaid reproductive workers, unemployed or idled workers and those working under non-capitalist modes of exploitation within a broader capitalist paradigm.

Based on this hidden history I would push us to go one step further than the *redistribution of wealth*, though of course that is necessary. I think we also need to *reimagine value*. Imagine if tomorrow, by some miracle, the world's monetary wealth was



Canal Grande/Liquid Economy, 2015, Food Lab / NR Projects, Berlin

vinyl pond liner, plasticine, water, copper still, self-distilled alcohol, bottles, variable dimensions.

pooled and then equally divided between all seven billion of us. A good start indeed, but while this might have some potential to reshape the way we, as a species, labour and cooperate, it's likely that we would default back to old habits. Sweatshops would remain, with maybe different people in them. Children would slave away in mines, though maybe different children. This is a preposterous hypothesis, but I bring it up to reveal the stakes: I think we need to *reimagine value* as well, by which I mean have a revolution in the way we coordinate our cooperation on a planetary scale, such that we abolish sweatshops and mines and create a world of pleasure, generative cooperation and true creativity. I think that can only be done through networks of grassroots struggles which actively work to produce new methods for cooperating and reproducing social life in practice, within, against and beyond capitalism here and now.

To turn to Trump and his fellow gangsters. I agree with Naomi Klein that Trump is a morbid symptom of a system in crisis: capitalism produces authoritarian nightmares in the same way a body produces a fever to destroy an infection, or perhaps more accurately the way the intestines release water to flush out an infection, resulting in diarrhea that threatens to do terminal harm to the body... This somewhat grotesque metaphor does help describe the kind of phobic reaction of capitalism to the results of its own inevitable crises. One of the most important lessons from Marx is that capitalism can never actually solve the problems (political, economic, social, ecological) it inevitably creates, only transform these into new crises in other spheres.

What the system fears is indeed socialism. Trump and his brethren aren't even smart enough to have the correct nightmares: the "socialism" espoused

by his rivals, including Sanders or even Corbyn, is hardly even worthy of the name: at best it is Scandinavian social democracy, or slightly better managed capitalism. It would certainly be a lot better than the present order, but not enough.

The litmus test of meaningful "socialism" is (a) the reclamation of stolen wealth from the ruling class, (b) the transformation of daily life towards new methods of non-capitalist cooperation and (c) the complex valorisation of the human dialectic of autonomy and community, which is to say the infrastructures of meaningful freedom-in-relationships. This last point is key, because, obviously, no-one wants a grim collectivist state-run nightmare. But, equally, our notions of personal freedom need to be disentangled from the legal and cultural frameworks of pathological individualism, the residue of 500 years of colonialism. While in the most recent wave of social democracy there is some talk of greater taxation of the rich, of encouraging cooperatives and of the enforcing of basic human rights, which is good, I think socialism can and should dream much more dangerously.

GL: Many of your examples seem to come from either North-America or Western Europe. Can we think of subversive strategies that take into account the dark side of real existing communism as Europe has lived through it during the Cold War period?

MH: An artwork that is critical or subversive of the economics of the actually-existing communism of the Cold War period would likely not have expressed itself in the kinds of money-art we have seen in the so-called West. Artists in the "West" have gravitated towards money-art as a method of critical and creative expression precisely because money rules everything under capitalism, and



Liquid Capital, 2018, Post Capitalistic Auction, Landmark, Bergen Kunsthall, performative installation, variable dimensions.



Das Kapital—Distillation, 2014, King's Cross Continental Stores, London, performative installation, variable dimensions.

increasingly so. In non-capitalist nations (or state capitalist, depending on how you look at it), such as those of the so-called "East", my hypothesis would be that money didn't "sting" in the same way: it wasn't the example of authoritarian power to be resisted. I suspect that we would have more success comparing "Western" money art with the kinds of subversive performance art that mocked or challenged the hypocrisy of state-led "Communist" authoritarianism in the "East". But that is simply my largely uninformed hypothesis and I'd look forward to having it disproved.

GL: In your book you draw up a fascinating analogy between the secrecy of crypto and the psycho-analytic term of the crypt.

ML: I wrote *Art After Money, Money After Art* during the heyday of the cryptocurrencies, which thankfully has expired recently, largely thanks

to the entirely predictable way that big-time gambler/investors used and abandoned them to make a quick buck. But the naivete of crypto-enthusiasm was revealing in and of itself. People kept asking me what I thought, and I would always paraphrase you folks at Institute for Network Cultures: cryptocurrencies are often elegant solutions, but what, again, was the question?

I see money under capitalism as both a means and an end to hacking into the crucial intersection of forces at the heart of society: the place where our forms of *cooperation* meet the ways we *imagine* the world. Money hacks both: it shapes how we cooperate and how we imagine, creating a kind of infinite feedback loop (bad infinity).

The endgame of financialization is the complete subsumption of society to money. Such a situation would, of course, be a nightmare, where

Chapter Eight: Constant Capital and Variable Capital

The various factors of the labour-process play different parts in forming the value of the product.

The labourer adds fresh value to the subject of his labour by expending upon it a given amount of additional labour, no matter what the specific character and utility of that labour may be. On the other hand, the values of the means of production used up in the process are preserved, and present themselves afresh as constituent parts of the value of the product; the values of the cotton and the spindle, for instance, re-appear again in the value of the yarn. The value of the means of production is therefore preserved, by being transferred to the product. This transfer takes place during the conversion of those means into a product, or in other words, during the labour-process. It is brought about by labour; but how?

The labourer does not perform the work of the product, so, too, they do not. The cotton, the other in order of the workshops, &c., are always separate and distinct from the product. If we now consider the case of any instrument of labour, service, from the day of its entry into the workshop, till the day of its banishment into the lumber room, we find that during this period its use-value has been completely consumed, and therefore its exchange-value completely transferred to the product. For instance, if a spinning machine lasts for 10 years, it is plain that during that working period its total value is gradually transferred to the product of the 10 years. The lifetime of an instrument of labour, therefore, is spent in the repetition of a greater or less number of similar operations. Its life may be compared with that of a human being. Every day brings a man 24 hours nearer to his grave; but how many days he has still to travel on that road, no man can tell accurately by merely looking at him. This difficulty, however, does not prevent life insurance offices from drawing, by means of the theory of averages, very accurate, and at the same time very profitable conclusions. So it is with the instruments of labour. It is known by experience how long on the average a machine of a particular kind will last. Suppose its use-value in the labour-process to last only six days. Then, on the average, it loses each day one-sixth of its use-value, and therefore parts with one-sixth of its value to the daily product. The wear and tear of all instruments, their daily loss of use-value, and the corresponding quantity of value they part with to the product, are accordingly calculated upon this basis.

It is thus strikingly clear, that means of production never transfer more value to the product than they themselves lose during the labour-process by the destruction of their own use-value. If such an instrument has no value to lose, if, in other words, it is not the product of human labour, it transfers no value to the product. It helps to create use-value without contributing to the formation of exchange-value. In this class are included all means of production supplied by Nature without human assistance, wind, water, &c. These elements, however, in virgin form, makes them living factors of the labour-process, and combines with them to form the new products.

If the special productive labour of the workman were not spinning, he could not convert the cotton into yarn, and therefore could not transfer the values of the cotton and spindle to the yarn. Suppose the same workman were to change his occupation to that of a joiner, he would still by a day's labour add value to the material he works upon. Consequently, we see, first, that the addition of new value takes place not by virtue of his labour being spinning in particular, or joinery in particular, but because it is labour in the abstract, a portion of the total labour. We see next, that the value added is of a given amount, not by itself as an element.

On the other hand, a means of production may take part as a whole in the formation of value, while into the labour-process it enters only bit by bit. Suppose that in spinning cotton, the waste for every 115 lbs. used amounts to 15 lbs., which is converted, not into yarn, but into "devil's dust." Now, although this 15 lbs. of cotton never becomes a constituent element of the yarn, yet assuming this amount of waste to be normal and

inevitable under average conditions of spinning, its value is just as surely transferred to the value of the yarn, as is the value of the 100 lbs. that form the substance of the yarn. The use-value of 15 lbs. of cotton must vanish into dust, before 100 lbs. of yarn can be made. The destruction of this cotton is therefore a necessary condition in the production of the yarn. And because it is a necessary condition, and for no other reason, the value of that cotton is transferred to the product. The same holds good for every kind of refuse resulting from a labour-process, so far at least as such refuse cannot be further employed as a means in the production of new and independent use-values. Such an employment of refuse may be seen in the large machine works at Manchester, where mountains of iron turnings are carted away to the foundry in the evening, in order the next morning to re-appear in the workshops as solid masses of iron.

We have seen that the means of production transfer value to the new product, so far only as during the labour-process they lose value in the shape of their old use-value. The maximum loss of value that they can suffer in the process, is plainly limited by the amount of the original value with which they came into the process, or in other words, by the labour-time necessary for their production. Therefore, the means of production can never add more value to the product than they themselves possess independently of the process in which they assist. However useful a given kind of raw material, or a machine, or other means of production may be, though it may cost £150, or, say, 500 days' labour, yet it cannot, under any circumstances, add to the value of the product more than £150. Its value is determined not by the labour-process into which it enters as a means of production, but by that out of which it has issued as a product. In the labour-process it serves as a mere use-value, a "useful property," and could not, therefore,

[1] "The value to the production for one extinguished." (Analogously, "The value of Nations," Lohuon, 121, p. 13.)

[2] The subject of repairs of the implements of labour does not concern us here. A machine that is undergoing repair, no longer plays the part of an instrument, but that of a subject of labour. Work is no longer done with it, but upon it. It is quite permissible for our purpose to assume, that the labour expended on the repairs of instruments is included in the labour necessary for their original production. But in the text we deal with that wear and tear, which no doctor can cure, and which little by little brings about death, with "that kind of wear which cannot be repaired from time to time, and which, in the case of a knife, would ultimately reduce it to a state in which the cutler would say of it, it is not worth a new blade." We have shewn in the text, that a machine takes part in every labour-process as an integral machine, that into the simultaneous process of creating value it enters as an integral machine.

A violent interruption, the engineer in making [stocking] machines, aware of it.

As regards the means of production, what is consumed is their use-value, and the consumption of this use-value by labour results in the product. There is no consumption of their value, and it would therefore be inaccurate to say that it is reproduced. It is rather preserved; not by reason of any operation it undergoes itself in the process; but because the article in which it originally exists, vanishes, it is true, but vanishes into some other article. Hence, in the value of the product, there is a reappearance of the value of the means of production, but there is, strictly speaking, no reproduction of that value. That which is produced is a new use-value in which the old exchange-value reappears.

It is otherwise with the subjective factor of the labour-process, with labour-power in action. While the labourer, by virtue of his labour being of a specialised kind that has a special object, preserves and transfers to the product the value of the means of production, he at the same time, by the mere act of working, creates each instant an additional or new value. Suppose the process of production to be stopped just when the workman has produced an equivalent for the value of his own, labour-power, when, for example, by six hours' labour, he has added a value of three shillings. This value is the surplus, of the total value of the product, over the portion of its value that is due to the means of production. It is the only original bit of value formed during this process, the only portion of the value of the product created by this process. Of course, we do not forget that this new value only replaces the money advanced by the capitalist in the purchase of the labour-power, and spent by the labourer on the necessaries of life. With regard to the money spent, the new

everything of value in the world is sacrificed on the altar of the accumulation of capital. In other terms, all of society would become encrypted by money, translated into its code, so much so that the code becomes the law. One already-existing symptom of this is the way "imaginary" financial instruments which can never be decoded (shown to refer to real-world wealth) become the most powerful force on the planet, as we discussed earlier. Pure monetary code rules, the map becomes the territory. Oddly, this is also the dream of many crypto-currency evangelists, who seek to create coins or tokens to monetize any and every aspect of social life and believe that it is somehow "revolutionary," when in fact they are riding with the horsemen of the apocalypse.

Without going into too much detail, I reached here for Derrida's theory of the crypt, which he borrows from Abraham and Torok's re-reading of Freud. To vastly oversimplify, encryptedness describes the condition of a patient who can't be treated by regular psychoanalytic techniques because they essentially created a kind of sealed structure inside their psyche that protects a false, often idealized version of the world. The patient marshals all their psychic resources to hide this crypt from the analyst and from themselves and as a result both has this crypt within them but is also at the same time trapped inside this crypt. They marshal all their psychic resources to hide the crypt to prevent it from being "cured," for fear of a kind of subjective collapse without it, even though it is the source of their pain and suffering. The analyst needs to discover and the crypt through decrypting the patient's unconscious expressions in speech and dreams.

I drew on this concept of the crypt to describe the relationship between art and money: the two are encrypted by one another. This is easier to see

with art: this set of activities we identify as "art" under capitalist/colonial "modernity" (a distinct set of activities as distinct from craft, religious expression, ornamentation) has always-already been encrypted by money. I mean that the category of art *itself*, as well as actions undertaken within that category, have always been shaped by the class we used to call the bourgeoisie. "Art" and capitalism have grown up entangled together. Early on, capitalists manifested the demand for artistic objects *as such*; they created the market for the individual creative genius as the guarantor of the economic and cultural value of artworks.

As Peter Bürger among others has argued, the radical potential of art, its capacity to evoke and produce freedom, autonomy, imagination, connection, etc. has always been *encrypted* within the capitalist category of "art", living and dead at the same time. And these values or virtues appear phantasmagorical in a bourgeois hyperbole about the value of art. These values are allowed to exist within/around art precisely so they are not expected or demanded in wider society, or for other (non-art) workers for whom freedom, autonomy, imagination, connection is nothing but a dream under the economic authoritarianism of capitalism. Art is a crypt within capitalism for those treasured values (freedom, autonomy, imagination, connection) that are otherwise banished.

Likewise, money itself is a kind of encryption. As Marx put it, money is a mystified artefact of our own connection to society, the ultimate fetishized commodity. Money is, for Marx, access to the residue of other people's labour power. David Graeber connected this to Marcel Mauss' anthropological observation that money is the counterfeit coin of our collective dreams: our own social creative power transformed into an "object" (even if, today, that object is digitalized and

dematerialized) and offered back to us as natural. So encrypted within money is a kind of holographic image of "our" own potential, as a society to cooperate. And yet money, under capitalism, becomes both the means and the ends of all our cooperation. Money is boundless, coercive potentiality. This is what art draws on for its vitality, it is one of the few spheres of life under capitalism where this potentiality can appear, if only for a moment, and, of course, under its own encrypted conditions.

GL: My thesis is that more and more artists are drawn into the "art & money" vortex because of growing inequality worldwide. Money is becoming such a mysterious entity. Artists are told everywhere that they have to give up their professional expectations. They can withdraw in the niche of the crafts or become an amateur artist that has a normal day job. Our MoneyLab discussions have always included experiments with new revenue models so that artists can be paid for their work. In your creative "abolish" strategy against financialization you want to put the radical, fundamental problems on the table and reject short term reformist approaches such as Patreon or crowdfunding.

MH: True. Artists are motivated by growing inequality, and also because the thing they love to do, which is to do creative work in public, is almost completely worthless under this phase of capitalism. The majority of creative labour is made worthless, while a tiny fraction of artists are gaining wealth and stardom. So I see why so many artists chose to withdraw their labour in various ways, or to reserve "art" for their "spare time" and just choose regular forms of exploitation to "make a living".

Such a horrific choice: to be faced with the exploitation of either body or soul—if you're lucky:

a huge percentage of the global population now face the prospect of actually not even having the opportunity to be exploited at all...

Like all workers, artists need to find ways to withdraw their labour from the system that is killing them, some more slowly than others. Mutual aid and system-hacking are crucial here. All workers under capitalism, including artists, have historically and in the present had to develop material systems of mutual aid to meet their needs based on methods that don't rely on money, or at least not money as we conventionally imagine it. I am thinking here, for instance, of cooperatives, collectives and autonomous organizations. These vehicles help us organize our cooperation differently to meet our needs for food, housing, pleasure, care without needing to rely on commodities or lend our labour to producing commodities.

But, of course, these institutions-from-below are always partial and incomplete. Even those who try and live this way nowadays end up, at some point, needing to interact with the monetized capitalist economy, for instance to buy a computer (which cannot be produced by a neighbourhood cooperative), or to obtain advanced medical care (there is no anarchist CAT scan collective, yet), or to travel long distances.

Crowdfunding started out as a way to support creative people, who lacked independent wealth or institutional support, to do big projects, which is great—it rhymed with mutual aid, in a way. But now people are crowdfunding for basic necessities like medical care or university tuition.

As Pascal Gielen and Stevphen Shukaitis each note, there is a long history of the forms of organization and techniques of radical artists being



folded back into the capitalist system, perhaps because artists tend to calibrate their activities towards the values of freedom, autonomy, imagination, connection, which are also so sought-after under the alienating and exploitative sociological regime of capital accumulation.

This is where it is useful to learn from the abolitionist approach. Here, abolitionism emerges from the Black Radical Tradition (not exclusively in the territories we now call the United States). It takes inspiration from the radical anti-slavery abolitionists of the 19th century to develop an approach to abolishing today's prison system, which vastly disproportionately incarcerates the descendants of those who were once enslaved, which is to say those racialized as Black.

I end my book by calling for an abolitionist approach to art and money. To cut a long story short, I think we need to imagine what art will look like *after* capitalism and start building that reality. And we need to think about how we want to organize social co-operation after capitalism and start building the infrastructure now.

In general, I feel we must become much more courageous in imagining what we *want*. And then, based on that, we decide if and how to compromise in the interim, on our way to that future. If we fail to do that, our tactics of mutual aid and survival will not be strategic. And this system of capitalism is devastatingly chaotic, flexible and adaptive, and so will easily recuperate our best efforts.

GL: I agree, let's unlock the radical imagination and overcome both art and money. Stefan Heidenreich also got to this point. Can you take us there? At times I see this new world rising up at the horizon, and then it slips away again. It is hard to imagine

a world without money. With that I do not mean cash... Money and value are becoming more and more abstract. Is the next stage then, almost necessarily, its dissolution? Is the art we deal with in this context then a transformative device that assists us in that process of disappearance?

ML: I think Stefan's argument is important because he challenges us to realize that we now live in a world where most of the social functions of capitalist money can actually be done without money, with the help of advanced computing. There is the potential for a decentralized form of a planned economy that has a kind of democratic layer "baked in". From this perspective, capitalist money and technology, in a way, might have created their own gravedigger.

However, history does not change based on good plans or excellent code: it changes through struggle and struggles are messy because humans are messy. My litmus test for the importance of new schemes for the administration of value is not so much their theoretical elegance or abstract plausibility, but, rather, their utility in actual struggles.

I am not sure if I precisely trust art to show us a working miniature model of what money after "[capitalist] money" will look like. Here I would in a way agree with Marcuse that the goal of art is not to present a different method of engineering or economics, but to constantly antagonize the "reality principle". I don't want art to invent a new economy, simply show us the limits and cracks in the economy we have. And, if there is a role for art after "[capitalist] art" I oddly think it will be to continue this role. To paraphrase Cornelius Castoriadis, there will never be a form of democracy *democratic enough*: the democratic project, in the radical proletarian sense, is one of

constant disruption, even if (especially if) we do create a better, post-capitalist society. Well, I think art is in some way the avatar of such a project: its job is not to plan the future but constantly tease the limits of our order of thought, feeling and action. Good societies prize and value art for precisely this reason.

GL: As a counter-strategy, would it make sense to emphasize the gesture of the "gift"? One would expect many art works that deal with art and finance to do that. The gift seems such a perfect answer to the madness of speculation. The bitcoin and crypto-currency schemes are based on speculative expectations of the rise of the value. Do you feel sorry for these right-wing libertarian souls? What's the generous and sovereign artistic response to this organized silliness?

ML: I do feel a bit sorry for the right-wing libertarians, especially the younger ones. Many are attracted to the position out of an earnest commitment to the principle of human freedom. But it emerges precisely in the toxic conditions of insecurity, alienation, competition, atomization and fear that it, itself, creates in the world. Free market evangelism is the natural ideology of subjects damaged by its own policies and implications.

One of its crucial flaws is precisely the gift: the fact that, no matter what happens, the most meaningful and important human relationships cannot be commodified, tokenized, monetized or subjected to an "economic" logic without losing precisely what gives them value: the gift, love, real difference, real connection. I don't mean to get idealistic here: this is very material. Human infants, for instance, literally die without the gift of care. One can make a boring and stupid argument that care is an "investment" or simply a biological urge on the part of caregivers, but this is an ideologically violent approach to the

ontology of human connectedness. It's ironic that so many of these crypto-scenes are predicated on libertarian ideas about the need to measure, quantify, tokenize and exchange anything and everything, but if we were to look at them as if from space (or with an anthropological lens) we'd see a lot of lonely smart people—mostly men—creating technological alibis for having zones to be together, to form communities in online forums, start-up incubators, endless conferences and the like (successful communities always include methodologies of conflict, competition and hatred). And yet, as David Golumbia notes, the crypto discourse is actively hostile to any substantive notion of the public. There is a fantasy of a "trustless" economy, an almost completely unquestioned assumption of the possessive, self-centred individual as the basic economic unit, the jejune (and, frankly, oedipal) paranoia about a simplistic rendering of the "state".

I'm not sure artists should focus on engaging with this culture, unless they really want to. My sense is that those liberationist crypt-schemes that will survive are those that prove themselves *actually* useful to people. A lot of schemes and platforms have proven themselves useful as vehicles for financial speculation. I am interested in those that actually make mutual aid, solidarity, struggle and grassroots resurgence possible. I would prefer that artists interested in the economy also focus on making mutual aid, solidarity, struggle and grassroots resurgence irresistible.









Contributors:

Jim Drobnick is a curator and Associate Professor at OCAD University, Toronto. He has published on the visual arts, performance, the senses and post-media practices in recent anthologies such as *Food and Museums* (2017), *Olfactif Contemporain* (2015), *The Multisensory Museum* (2014), *Senses and the City* (2011), and *Art, History and the Senses* (2010). His books include the anthologies *Aural Cultures* (2004) and *The Smell Culture Reader* (2006). He is co-editor of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* and co-founder of the curatorial collaborative DisplayCult (www.displaycult.com).

Jennifer Fisher is a curator and Professor of Contemporary Art and Curatorial Studies at York University, Toronto. Her research focuses on exhibition practices, affect theory, and the aesthetics of the non-visual senses. Her writings have been featured in anthologies such as *Linda Montano* (2017), *Caught in the Act, Vol. 2* (2016), *are you experienced?* (2015), *The Artist as Curator* (2015), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Paranormal Culture* (2013), and *The Senses in Performance* (2006). She is the editor of *Technologies of Intuition* (2006). She is co-editor of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* and co-founder of the curatorial collaborative DisplayCult (www.displaycult.com).

Ursula Anna Frohne is a Professor for Art History at the University of Münster. Between 2006 and 2015 she was Professor for Art History of 20th and 21st Centuries Art at the University of Cologne; she also taught as Visiting Professor at the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University (USA) and was Professor of Art History at the International University Bremen (2002–2006). Anticipating her academic career, she worked as curator at the ZKM | Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe (1995–2001) and taught as lecturer at the State Academy of Fine Art in Karlsruhe. She chaired several research collaborations funded by the VolkswagenStiftung (2011–2020) and by the German Science Foundation. In 2014 she was awarded the Leo-Spitzer-Prize for Arts, Humanities, and Human Sciences by the University of Cologne for excellence in research. She has published on the sociology of the artist, contemporary art practice and technological media (photography, film, video), political dimensions and socio-economic conditions of art and visual culture.

Max Haiven is Canada Research Chair in Culture, Media and Social Justice at Lakehead University in Northwest Ontario and director of the ReImagining Value Action Lab (RiVAL). He writes articles for both academic and general audiences and is the author of the books *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power: Capitalism, Creativity and the Commons* (2014), *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (with Alex Khasnabish, 2014) and *Cultures of Financialization: Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (2014). His latest book, *Art after Money, Money after Art: Creative Strategies Against Financialization*, was published by Pluto in Fall 2018. More information can be found at <http://maxhaiven.com>.

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, internet critic and author of *Uncanny Networks* (2002), *Dark Fiber* (2002), *My First Recession* (2003), *Zero Comments* (2007), *Networks Without a Cause* (2012), *Social Media Abyss* (2016) and *Sad by Design* (2019). In 2004 he founded the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. His centre organizes conferences, publications and research networks such as Video Vortex (online video), Unlike Us (alternatives in social media), Critical Point of View (Wikipedia), Society of the Query (the culture of search), MoneyLab (internet-based revenue models in the arts). Recent projects deal with digital publishing and the future of art criticism.

Diana Marincu is curator and currently the Artistic Director of Art Encounters Foundation in Timișoara. She defended her doctoral thesis at The National University of Arts in Bucharest, conducting a research on the curatorial discourses about identity and periphery. Her recent exhibitions include: *Manufacturing Nature/Naturalizing the Synthetic*, Frac des Pays de la Loire (2018); *Sounds Make Worlds*, solo show of Marianne Mispelaere, Art Encounters Foundation, Timișoara; *Double Heads Matches* (with Zsuzsanna Szegedy-Maszák), New Budapest Gallery (2018); *Life—A User's Manual* (with Ami Barak), Art Encounters biennial Timișoara (2017); *Message in a Bottle*, Walk & Talk Festival, Ponta Delgada Azores (2017); *The White Dot and The Black Cube* (with Anca Verona Mihuleț), The National Museum of Contemporary Art – MNAC Bucharest (2015–2017); *Inventing the Truth. On Fiction and Reality*, The 56th edition of La Biennale di Venezia, the New Gallery of the Romanian Cultural Institute (2015). She edited art catalogues or books, such as: *Dig the Inbetween—* Lea Rasovszky, Vellant, Bucharest, 2016; *Fabrica de Pensule/The Paintbrush Factory* (with Corina Bucea), Cluj, 2016.

Dan Mihălțianu was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1954. He is currently living in Bucharest, Berlin and Bergen. He is the co-founder of the artists group subREAL. He has been teaching at Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2001-2007, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2008-2009 and Oslo National Academy of the Arts, 2018-2019. He exhibited in numerous international contexts and manifestations, such as the International Drawing Competition "Joan Miró" Barcelona, 1980, 1985; Impact Art Festival, Kyoto, 1986, 1997, 1988; European Print Triennial, Grado, 1987; Istanbul Biennial, 1992; Aperto, The 45th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, 1993; Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1994; Art in General, New York, 1996; The 48th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, 1999; ZKM / Museum for Contemporary Arts, Karlsruhe, 1999, 2001; Bergen Kunsthall, 2005; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 2005, 2012; Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2005; The Kitchen, New York, 2006; NGBK, Berlin, 2007; Prague Biennale, 2007; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2010; Tallinn Print Triennial, 2014; Vienna Biennale, 2015; Vargas Museum, Manila, 2016; National Portrait Gallery, London, 2018; Grand Palais, Paris, 2019; Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, 2019; Espoo Museum of Modern Art, 2019.

Dan Mihălțianu's art project for the Romanian Participation at the 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia 2019 is illustrated in this publication as follows:
pp. 6; 10-11: 62-63; 66-67; 79: *Canal Grande: The Capital Pool and the Associated Public (part I)* 2019, vinyl pool liner, water coins, approximately 19 x 3,5 x 0,5 cm, Romanian Pavilion in Giardini di Castello (Background: Miklós Onucsán, *The Restoration of the White Camouflage*, 2019)
pp. 68-75: *Canal Grande: The Capital Pool and the Associated Public (part II)*, 2019, various media, variable dimensions, The New Gallery of the Romanian Institute for Culture and Humanistic Research, Venice.



Unfinished Conversations on the Weight of Absence /
The Romanian Participation at the 58th International Art
Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia / May 11th—November 24th
2019

Artists: Belu-Simion Făinaru, Dan Mihălțianu, Miklós Onucsán

Comissioner: Attila Kim
Curator: Cristian Nae
Assistant curator: Mădălina Brașoveanu

The Romanian Participation at the 58th International Art
Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia is organised by the
Romanian Ministry of Culture and National Identity, the
Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Romanian
Cultural Institute.

Unfinished Conversations on the Weight of Absence

is produced by the Plan B Foundation and Gallery.

Project manager: Elvira Lușța

Production manager: Alexandru Damian

Production of *Canal Grande: The Capital Pool and the
Associated Public*

Assistant producers: Matei Cioată

Production team: Flaviu Cacoveanu, Norbert Filep

Webdesign: Liam M. Alzafari

Communication: Daniel Kozak

Custodians coordinator: Oana Hodade

Italian translations: Roberto Merlo

Proofreading: Giles Eldridge

Photo: Pavel Curagău / Yap Studio (pp. 6; 70-75),

Dan Mihălțianu

Design: Eugen Coșorean

Supported by: Art Encounters Foundation, Timișoara

Partners: George Enescu National University of Arts Iași,
National University of Arts Bucharest, University of Art and
Design Cluj, New Europe College, Bucharest, Cluj Cultural
Centre, Art Encounters Foundation, The Paintbrush Factory,
Cluj, Domeniile Sâmburești, Aqua Carpatica.

Plan B Foundation
Idea Design & Print, Editură
2019

Printing: Idea Design & Print
Cluj

Unfinished Conversations on the Weight of Absence
ISBN 978-606-8265-62-9

Dan Mihălțianu
ISBN 978-606-8265-64-3



FUNDATIA PLAN B

