

bucarest

ouverture du Musée national d'art contemporain

Palais du Parlement
29 octobre 2004

Fifteen years after the fall of Ceaucescu, Romania has opened a National Museum of Contemporary Art in a wing of the deceased dictator's palace, now known as Parliament Palace, with no less than five simultaneous exhibitions. A number of overlapping events made the inauguration all the more hectic—an earthquake (five on the Richter scale); a dramatic traffic accident that led to the hospitalization of the Chinese architect Yung Ho Chang and the museum's director, Mihai Oroveanu, whose life was hanging in the balance on opening night, his absence casting a shadow on an occasion toward which he had worked for more than a decade; and finally, to top it all off, a national debate, a month before the presidential elections, on whether or not a contemporary art museum was really needed and, beyond that, the wisdom of locating it in a building emblematic of Romania's darkest hours.

For some Romanian artists, one of the most annoying among the many things that bothered them about this opening was that as visitors entered this long-awaited museum, they were greeted by *Camera*, an exhibition of work by three artists from... China (Yung Ho Chang, Jian Wei Wang and Yang Fudong), as organized two years ago by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Vivian Rehberg for the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. As readers may recall, Yung made a number of metal structures meant to serve as projection surfaces for pieces by the two video artists, most notably Yang's always highly dreamlike films. The museum's second floor featured the *Stock Zero (Opera) Project*, in which curator Nicolas Bourriaud brought together works by six artists.⁽¹⁾ Among them was Mircea Cantor's much-hyped video *The Landscape Is Changing*, in which we see young people walking through the streets of Tirana carrying large mirrors. This action is very similar to *Le Blanc envahit la ville*, a 1973 intervention in São Paulo by Fred Forest, who had demonstrators brandish all-white picket signs—and was arrested for it. *Stock Zero* also included a remarkable video by Kendell Geers in which the South African artist reworked pictures of nuclear explosions, achieving images of glacial beauty. Romanian artists were not to be found until the third and fourth floors, starting with an excellent juxtaposition of work by Paul Neagu and Horia Bernea. This dialogue organized by Oroveanu assembled drawings, sculptures and paintings these two experimenters made in the 1960s. Bernea's most memorable pieces were his unfolded, painted umbrellas hung on the wall like paintings. Neagu's drawings of fragmented bodies anticipated the sculptures of his student Anthony Gormley.

The exhibition *Romanian artists (and not only) love the Ceaucescu Palace?!*, designed by the museum's art director Ruxandra Balaci was comprised solely of recent work by Romanian and other artists on the subject of "the Bigmonster Palace." The most noteworthy pieces in this section were Gorzo's very "1980s" paintings whose bright colors depicted scenes of sodomy in front of the Palace; the *Carpathian Castle* by the group Subreal (a photo of a scale model of the palace made of packs of Carpathian-brand cigarettes, topped by a chair whose legs end in sharpened stakes). Ceaucescu had demolished whole neighborhoods to erect this horrendously outsized building that looks more like Queen Amidala's citadel in *Star Wars* more than it does the White House. In other words, these pieces used humor to trump the venue's past and defuse the implications of setting up the museum within its walls, which is no laughing matter. As Pierre Desproges said about an analogous Paris situation, "The people didn't seize the Bastille to turn it into an opera house!" It is perfectly understandable that some people—both those nostalgic for the ancien régime and its victims—might be disturbed by this radical change in the site's function, but they need to get over it. It is, however, fair to question the wisdom of the decision to mark the museum's opening with this exhibition. The best way to set off a landmine you wanted to avoid at any price is to give it a kick and then say you're sorry, which is what the show's jokey title amounts to. The Ceaucescu Palace is not yet the Eiffel Tower, and the time for "I ♥ the Ceaucescu Palace" T-shirts has not yet come.

While many artists associated themselves with the rehabbing of the palace and its image, two Swiss troublemakers, Christoph Büchel and Gianni Motti, were working on their own project, *Under Destruction*. They went to meet the candidates in Romania's upcoming presidential election to ask them to explain their programs. Then they screened each of these video interviews using monitors set on a table with all sorts of information about the candidates and their parties. Nothing, it might seem, could be more democratic. The volume, though, was turned all the way up, producing a joyful cacophony, just like the various political discourses on the museum's site, which had become an electoral issue. For some reason, on opening night

practically no one even knew this installation existed and those who sought it out had more than a little trouble finding it. You had to descend deep into the building's dark and dirty bowels in a freight elevator run by an ill-tempered and unwilling operator who abandoned his passengers down below, leaving them alone with the ghosts of Nicolae and Elena C. The only way to reemerge from the depths was to climb up a shaky scaffolding, with the risk of breaking your neck at every step. Of course the presidential candidates who attended the reception (including the current prime minister) didn't see the terrific installation by these two Swiss artists.

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(1) Boris Achour, Mircea Cantor, Plamen Dejanoff, Kendell Geers, Bertrand Lavier and Frank Scurti.

