

Solidarity: Making it Happen

Xandra Popescu

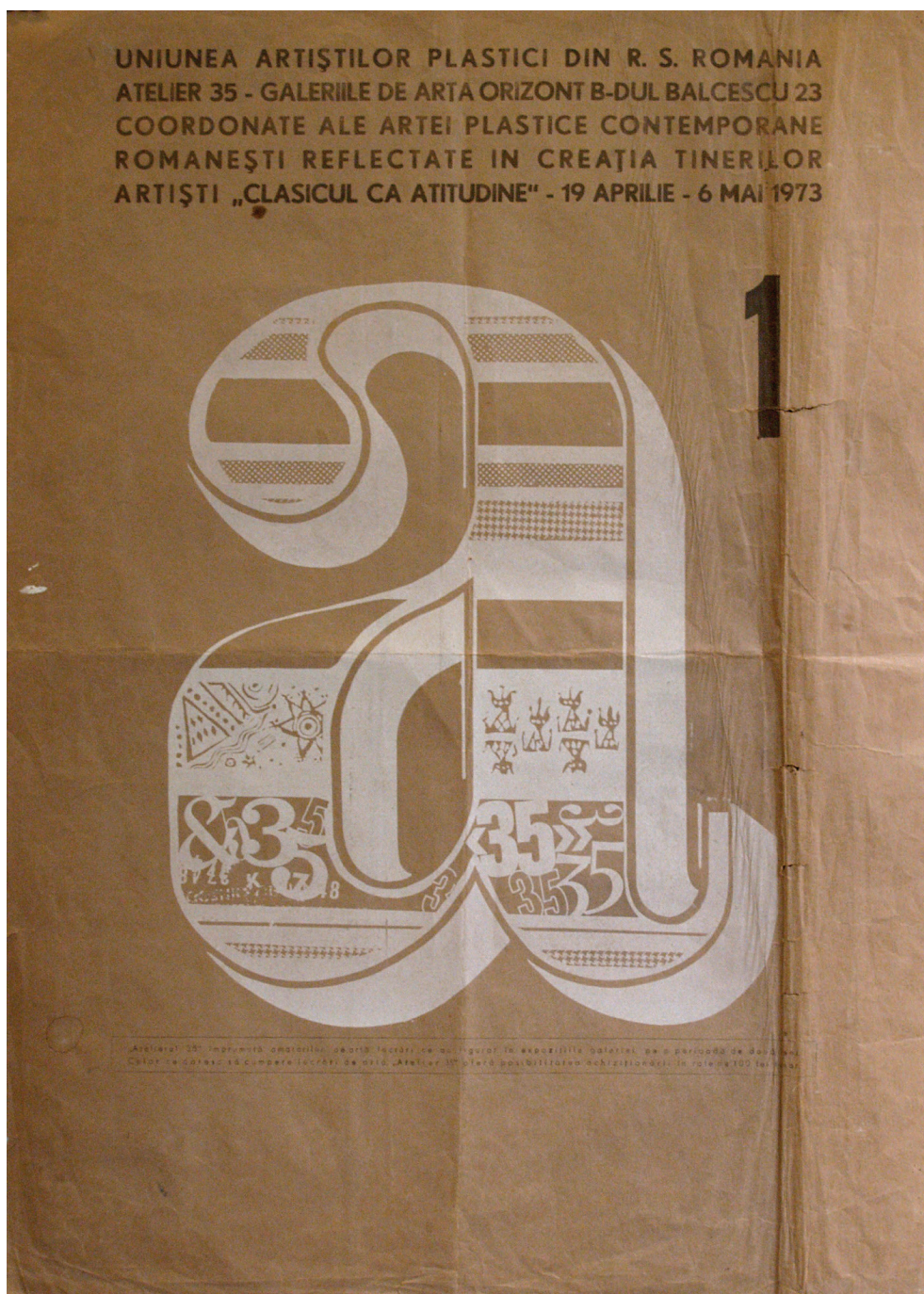
Imagine a world without an art market. A world in which the state is the sole art commissioner. A world in which the artists are unionized. Union Memberships come with a set of concrete advantages: having an atelier, discounts for art supplies and artist residencies in picturesque spots at the seaside or in the mountains. One could say that this is what the Artist's Union provided in Socialist Romania. That would be one version of the story. Others would remind us that all of these things came at a high price: the price of isolation. Artists could seldom go abroad. Career wise virtually none of them had access to the international art scene. Every exhibition was subject to censorship and artists were often denounced with or without grounds. What sort of political role could artists assume in such circumstances? The best case scenario they could aim for was creating a space of resistance.

Paradoxically enough, in Socialist times entering the Artists Union was prestigious. Many were knocking at the door; few entered. In order to keep younger artists at bay, enlightened members of the Union came up with the concept of Atelier 35 a network of project spaces in the big cities of Romania dedicated to artists up to the age of 35 – which would have been considered back in the days the conventional upper limit of youth. Atelier 35 functioned as a laboratory for experimentation and at the same time a waiting room for the Artists Union. But soon the waiting room became more interesting than the room. After the fall of Ceaușescu regime, the role of the Artists Union changed and young artists no longer rushed to join the Union. Loosing this point of reference the role of Atelier 35 also remained unclear, but remained inscribed somewhere along the vague lines of youth, experimentation, and enthusiasm.



The Logo of Atelier 35 designed by artist Ion Grigorescu

In the beginning of 2015, following the controversy around the possible evacuation of Atelier 35 in favor of the organizers of Bucharest Biennale, the Romanian Artists Union has renewed its request towards young artists to form a new department within its structures titled Atelier 35. Their reason: the Union needs enthusiastic and active young people capable of moving things forward and “absorbing Euro-pean funding.” But perhaps by increasing the number of memberships, the



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unions could continue to ensure social benefits for its members. Currently the Artists Un-ion is funded through the memberships but also through the so-called stamp - a two percent tax on every work of art galleries sell. Part of the quota of memberships goes to the Union and part of it stays with the departments and is used for the or-ganization of exhibitions and events. The Union is structured into departments ac-cording to the criteria of medium: textiles, graphics, metal, ceram-

ics, art critique, restoration, etc.). But what would be the medium of the department titled Atelier 35? Well, youth itself, apparently. Artists entering Atelier 35 would become mem-bers of the Union in their full right and obligation. But why wouldn't young artists join the medium-specific departments of the Union directly? For one thing, because they may find such divisions outdated and secondly perhaps because through its activity, Atelier 35 has become representative for contemporary artistic practices. Indeed, over the last few years, Larisa Crunțeanu, Alice Gancevici and I have un-wittingly contributed to the “rebranding” of Atelier 35 as the administration of the Artists Union puts it.



A stamp of Atelier 35 dating back to Communist Times



An 80's logo of Atelier 35

Along with several collaborators and friends, Larisa and I who currently power At-elier 35, have albeit reluctantly, responded to the Union's call to form such a new department within the organization. The reasons varied from pragmatic ones such as: pensions and social protection for artists (and the Artists Union has already got such mechanisms in place) to the old adage: "we can bring the change from inside" or the optimistic idea of artistic solidarity. For some, there was also the hope and claim to the Union's resources, as it still disposes of many studios and exhibition spaces.

A group of around 10 to 20 people started gathering regularly and discussing what should be the principles of such a structure. Collective making is not easy. Many decisions are still to be taken: should this group be a small circuit of like minded people who would lobby for the rights of artists by key institutions or rather a "catch all" kind of structure based on the lowest common denominator? Should decisions be taken by voting or rather by constructing consensus? Should this structure inside the Union have a patrimony of its own for organizing exhibitions and events? Should there exist aesthetic criteria for entering this structure or not?

For me the most important question is what should be the relationship between art workers? What is the element that binds us together? Is it our shared aspirations, our precarity or our youth?

I have asked three women artists with a great deal of experience in self-organization to answer the following question. What would a union you would like to be part of look like? I hoped that such exercises of wishful thinking could create a climate for political friendship.



An 90's logo of Atelier 35

Veda Popovici

Imagining communitarian solutions is one of my favorite pastimes. But, unlike many such dreams that are faraway utopias of communal organizing, a Union of the Cultural Workers could be a very tangible and realistic imagining. Routed in the historical tradition of unionizing and workers organizing, such a union should be a response to the current siege upon the social rights of the workers by late capitalism. However, I must state that I am not really a big fan of unions – as they look nowadays, mostly sell-outs – my impression is that it's mostly an outdated strategy of struggle. With this tension in mind, I can still think of two major arguments in support for a union. Firstly, it could be a strategic solution, for the contemporary Bucharest and Romania. Given the specific conditions of where, with whom and in what conditions my labor is conducted, this could really work. The Romanian context is characterized by a continuous and assiduous dismantling of all social rights of cultural workers gained through decades of struggles. Mostly, this is due to the violent intrusion of capitalism in the 90s. A Union of today could protect the little that remains and begin the retrieval of what has been lost. Which brings me to the second argument: such a union would also be a stable platform for organizing and creating political discourses in the realm of contemporary art. It would be informed and connected to international networks and organizations for cultural workers rights such as: similar unions in Eastern Europe, collectives such as W.A.G.E., Carrots Workers Brigade or ArtLeaks. With such international openness, this Union could constitute the formal social frame for creating new discourses and tactics of struggle, that would be more radical and more adapted to current global conditions of empire and capital.

Veda Popovici works as an artist, theoretician and activist mostly in a dilettante manner. Currently, she is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Arts in Bucharest with a research on nationalism and national identity in Romanian art of the 70s and 80s.

Delia Popa

My father was a designer-architect, a lecturer at the “Nicolae Grigorescu” Art Institute, Bucharest and a member of the Artists Union until 1990 when he died. I grew up spending summer holidays at the Casa de creație [House for Creating] in Constanța, at the Black Sea, one of the residency spaces for members of the Artists Union. (The Union was considered an NGO of public utility; it obtained a complementary pension of 50% for members who already had a pension, and had the potential for obtaining other benefits for artists. On the other hand, art exhibited in the Union spaces has not gained international exposure and recognition and hasn't generated any visible artistic group before 1989.) My sister and I loved that house (and still do) and I assume that spending all this time with artists and their children, since I was 4 and into my adolescence, played a part in choosing to become an artist and study painting at the National University of Arts Bucharest.

There I learned a bit about art, philosophy and anthropology, how to draw and paint, but I also learned that almost all professors had a beard, no female painter has taught in the Painting Department, and that the U.A.P. was run by the same people (men) as the school. Beyond the lack of feeling that I belonged to this group, I also felt a sense of stagnation, in the department and in the art scene of Bucharest. As I was leaving for London, to find movement and more knowledge, the art scene was starting to move here as well.

But was the Union moving? Was it still a place which artists aspired to enter, to gain artistic status and group representation as it has been during the Ceaușescu regime? According to my uncle, Vlad Calboreanu, also a designer-architect and active member of the Union, in the last 25 years this organization has been a mixture of a union and a promoter of art, without really succeeding in any of the two endeavors.

Since I returned from my journey abroad in 2008, I have been interested in triggering a group of like-minded individuals around feminist ideas in Bucharest, and now I feel this group is possible with the purpose of strengthening the work of the Union, with feminist ideas. In my opinion the main thing is to separate the promotion of art from the work for the union.

Delia Popa is a visual artist and art educator from Bucharest. Her practice makes use of feminist theory and practice re-contextualized in the Romanian environment by means of performance, video, drawing, and painting. She studied fine art in Bucharest, London, and Chicago. In 2014 she defended her thesis on Arts Management in Contemporary Art in Romania at ULBS Sibiu. In 2013 she co-founded ArtCrowd-artists in education, an arts education organization which aims to develop life skills such as critical thinking, creative thinking and collaborative skills in children and youth.

Ioana Cojocaru

Considering the present socio-economic situation in Europe and the repercussions that debt, austerity regulations, and precarious working conditions have on workers' life at large, I would say that the artists' union to whose platform I would choose to subscribe should be one that works actively with formulating and sustaining different modes of organization than the top down structures ruled by a neoliberal capitalist logic. It should be generated by people who acknowledge the necessity of counteracting the alienation that occurs with a low, insecure or non existing wage, and the acceleration in demand for rapid production. It should enable its members to slow down and question the means of production, the hierarchies of knowledge, and the divisions of labor embedded in the production of an artwork, as all these processes and actions are integral to the meaning of the piece. It should offer legal advice and professional support to the ones who raise uncomfortable questions and demand transparency in decision making when entering or being hired by an art institution. It should have policies that help regulating the working conditions

that art institutions offer its employees, and it should work actively with a gender agenda in order to level the existing inequalities and eliminate the discrimination faced by women artists. It should encourage its members to become political subjects rather than entrepreneurs answering to the market demand. It should work close to the art academies and lobby for collective organization in which cooperation, solidarity, open source, non market economies, and the commons are replacing the words that have entered the arts from the lean production vocabulary, and are now forming the subjectivity of young artists, leaving them with very little space to imagine otherwise. This syndicate could engage in larger political debates that could be beneficial for artists, one being lobbying for a guaranteed basic income. Parallel with this, it could build alliances with all the other existing progressive trade unions being active at the time in order to influence the political climate.

Ioana Cojocariu is a visual artist who currently lives in Malmö, Sweden. She is presently engaged with the formation of a self-organized group that uses video documentation and auto-ethnography as a re-search practice. The intention of initiating this platform of communication and knowledge production that is not tied to a specific cultural institution, but which can be seen as an autonomous formation with an agency, came out of necessity. This type of collective re-search focuses of intersubjectivity and interrogates the modes of organization and productions of an artwork. It engages into a constant process of re-evaluation and positions itself critically in relation to the notion of ownership.