

Séance

Anca Benera attempts to communicate with spirits. Not the spirits of anonymous dead, but of departed symbols: major figures and events from the past, cast in iron or granite, worshiped for years, demolished in minutes, lost forever. The spirits of public monuments torn down throughout the inter-war, socialist and post-socialist years in Bucharest, according to seismic shifts of governments.

Some were stealthily removed from the public eye; some had the privilege of public executions. They relentlessly hunt us, asking why preserving the past never wins the war of symbols in Romania?

Benera addresses these very concerns: how do we know the past? What do we know of the past? Does memory have a history? What happens to Old World memories in a New World order? How does art extend and manipulate private and historic remembrance?

She guides us through the ruins of collective nostalgia that connect national identity and personal self-fashioning in the twenty-first century post-communist environment.

The past did exist but we only know its existence through texts, actual pictures and recordings or fictional representations. Yet, memory is attached to places where history took place. The artist maps these strata of memory in a quasi-archaeological procedure, making a fresh picture of the past for herself, appropriating it anew. She has started taking photos of and painting the derelict insignia of the old power alongside the cold atmosphere of disillusionment. The canvases hover somewhere between socialist realism and romantic art, imbued with a deep sense of nostalgia and melancholy. People seem to pay homage to ghostly-looking pedestals, statues and flags that drift aimlessly in a grey void – the memory that fades. The remains are fragments of political bodies that no longer exist or move in a clear direction, but this seems more obvious to outsiders than to those who inhabit Benera's works. Although nothing makes much sense, most of the figures in these images seem to carry on as if cold-war and revolution are standard practice. However, it is not the past that the artist idealizes; it is not the present on which she takes a critical view but on what is dying. Ultimately, the paintings questions whether nostalgia is hoping for a forgotten past, or longing for impossible futures; whether the artist can be the producer of history or only its archivist and subject.

The imagery clearly relates to socialist-style architecture and painterly realism, so that it is impossible to deny the artist's interest in the link between aesthetics and politics. Alongside the canvases, she produces imagined descriptions about the missing monuments via information drawn from photographs, politics, architecture and everyday life. These function as an audio guide for those curious enough to walk in someone else's shoes in order to learn history. In so doing, Benera is opening up a new space of experience: each protagonist activates the past as he or she plays the recordings; thus, they have the chance to explore hidden or overwritten narrations and their role in shaping our memory of the political and social landscape today; or various relations between past political movements and their subsequent contents such as revolution as

aesthetic performance (demonstrations, public art); activist / futuristic thinking; new forms and spaces of solidarity such as streets and public squares or networked and fluid metaphors such as Benera's soundscape.

Every political metaphor remaps and recodifies the world, causes one layer to disappear and places a new sign system over the known world. Still, empty pedestals are regularly defaced with garish paint or a pelting of eggs, suggesting that as long as the memory of thorny ideology remains, the ghosts will have to watch their iron and granite backs. Or engage in friendly séances with the living.

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