

NICODIM

The Influencing Machine

curated by Aaron Moulton

March 14 - April 27, 2019
Galeria Nicodim, Bucharest



Șerban Savu, *The Sower*, 2019

Luchezar Boyadjiev, Nina Czegledy, Ole Dammegård, Aleksandra Domanović, Constant Dullaart, Harun Farocki, Jakup Ferri, Andrea Fraser, Adrian Ghenie, Ferenc Gróf, Naomi Hennig, Mi Kafchin, Jon McNaughton, Yerbossyn Meldibekov, Suzanne Meszoly, Mike Z Morrell, Ciprian Mureșan, Lucia Nimcova, Oksana Pasaiko, REP Group, Joanne Richardson, Șerban Savu, Keiko Sei, Sean Snyder, SOSka Group, János Sugár, Andrei Ujică, Anetta Mona Chișă & Lucia Tkáčová, Gulnara Kasmalieva & Muratbek Djumaliev

Inspired by a True Story: What was the Network of Networks?

Thirty years ago as the Soviet Union collapsed, the Open Society Institute, an unprecedented civil society initiative created by philanthropic activist George Soros, stepped in to facilitate vulnerable transition in most major cities throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This non-governmental organization helped to implement a wide variety of neoliberal educational initiatives in areas such as public health and independent media that accelerated the path towards democracy and free-market thinking—ideals that were often incompatible with the previous system. One of the prolific ways this was done was by ushering in the most avant-garde program of contemporary art in human history in the form of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA), established in twenty major cities¹ across the former bloc.

¹ “Almaty, Belgrade, Bratislava, Bucharest, Budapest, Chisinau, Kiev, Ljubljana, Moscow, Odessa, Prague, Riga, Sarajevo, Skopje, Sofia, St. Petersburg, Tallinn, Warsaw, Vilnius, Zagreb.”

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Arriving with a pedagogical evangelism for Western-style cultural production, the SCCA networks had operating budgets that asymmetrically dwarfed the pre-existing Artist Unions or state budgets for art.² A new and superior art world appeared overnight. The centers set up a collaborative network within each major city and across the network as a whole: providing grant money, facilities, know-how, publishing, research databases of local artists for foreign curators and also infrastructure to cultivate off-shooting branches, events, education programs, etc. In places like Chisinau, Moldova the SCCA is credited with introducing the very idea of contemporary art as they would come to know it. The change has often been referred to as a “necessary upgrade” by former SCCA Chisinau director Octavian Esanu, who goes on to say it was “something happening across the newly independent states like what the IMF was doing for these same economies.”³ The result was in fact radically transformative.

In addition to pioneering the internet in the form of hands-on education and first-time access, the OSI also, in certain cases, laid the fibre optic cables and created the satellite networks for the fastest public internets in the world.⁴ An entire ecology of media resources from OSI-funded TV stations, radio, newspapers and magazines were at the SCCA’s disposal to communicate the message, experiment with the medium, and have an unprecedented and hopefully irreversible reach of communication in places where the democratic voice of the people had historically been easily suppressed. Their presence reinvented hierarchies of quality and schools of thought through the institutionalization of culture. They invented the notion of the “cultural manager” and influenced the rise in curatorial practice as a watchdog in the field.

Depending on the location, the SCCA program had a 5-10 year shelf-life. The latter years were referred to as the “Sunset Years” where as quickly and suddenly as they had come, they would exit. The network would downsize the budget annually with the notion that the centers would stand on their own through the knowledge and infrastructure they had acquired. And by then, a new generation of philanthropist would hopefully step in to take responsibility. The SCCA Zagreb or the SCCA Ljubljana, for example, successfully transitioned into independent operations and prospered to become the leading institutions of their art worlds. For others that was not the case. They shut down in slow motion, a shadow of their bombastic beginning. Art worlds would remain problematically divided in their wake. And now the SCCA’s histories are fast disappearing just like those they had stepped in to save.

What is The Influencing Machine?

The exhibition at Galeria Nicodim is as much about influence as it is an experiment in influencing. It is inspired by the SCCA network and reflects on the legacy anthropologically, turning the SCCA’s method in on itself. It employs a recursive format where form, function, meaning and interpretation are in a closed loop, a self-oiling machine, a meta-SCCA. It analyzes the SCCA’s practice of institutionalizing cultural networks and directionalizing cultural production—an invention of new patterns, practices and traditions that would fast become sacred. The exhibition includes iconic works, important themes, case studies, archival material and newly commissioned projects from international artists born out of this period or reflecting on it. The exhibition has five sections that lead the viewer through a spectrum of history, data, and aesthetics.

Section 1: Cultural Exorcism

The Influencing Machine is introduced through archetypal remnants and specters of the fallen regime, the Closed Society in the face of Disaster Capitalism. *Videograms of a Revolution* (1993) from Harun Farocki and Andrei

² From the information I found the range across the SCCA during the prime years is from three to ten times the state budget.

³ Octavian Esanu, “Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe - A Critical Anthology,” Ed. Janevski, MoMA Primary Documents (2018)

⁴ Jonathan Peizer, “The Dynamics of Technology for Social Change,” IUniverse, 2005. Peizer observes that the Institute had “the unique opportunity and responsibility to change the world using new concepts in philanthropy and technology that were tested and deployed thanks to Soros’ largess.”

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Ujica sets the stage with the mythologically televised “People’s Revolution” in Bucharest in late December of 1989. Kazahkstani artist Yerbossyn Meldibekov’s monumental sculpture *Gattamelata* (2007) shows the direct-action glory of dethronement. The ousted leader is remembered only with a heraldic pose of taxidermied horse feet, the animal and its rider violently cut at the knee and gone without a trace. Aleksandra Domanovic has produced a new work based on her portrait series of Yugoslavia’s beloved Tito as a cipher in states of transition. For the exhibition she has merged her classic image of Tito with the iconic Otpor! Movement of Serbia’s “Bulldozer Revolution.” A devil in the details becomes history’s ironic call-and-answer when we find First Lady Melania Trump’s visage uncannily blurred into Tito’s own features. The “Tulip Revolution” in Bishkek is captured on camera and operatically synched with the tempestuous soundtrack of “Hall of the Mountain King” in Gulnara Kasmalieva & Muratbek Djumaliev’s frenzied film *Revolution* (2005), a movie that leaves you hungry for change now at any cost.

Section 2: Conversion Therapy

Art therapy and shock therapy intertwine with works that address a spectrum of Ostalgia, theories on forgetting and transitory aesthetics. Slovakian Lucia Nimcova’s hilarious masterpiece *Exercise* (2008) shows villagers in a reenactment of bodily memory, cathartically remembering the mandated exercising that occurred every morning until everything abruptly changed at the Fall of Communism. Labor and capital have a clear conversion value in Anetta Mona Chişa & Lucia Tkáčová’s piece *All Periods in Capital* from 2007. The seminal book by Karl Marx has been filtered through the bean counter, each moment of punctuation converted into a small handmade black ball, more than 22,000 sentences of commodified ideology. The exchange rate for contemporary art and its importance to peasants is a dozen eggs or maybe a chicken. SOSka Group’s film *Barter* parodies the values of these cultural markets when they are displaced out of context.

Some of the earliest SCCA Annual Exhibitions had an unprecedented understanding of weaponizing context for holistic purposes in the name of art.⁵ These actions, unlike any prior in the history of art, were done as a means to not only confront the past but exorcise it. This pattern of exhibitions ritualized a use of sacred heritage sites or suddenly demilitarized spaces in a manner akin to cultural voodoo.

One such example is former SCCA Kiev curator Marta Kuzma’s controversial exhibition “Alchemic Surrender” from 1994 which took place on a naval base in the Crimean Sea aboard the live Battleship Slavutyich. Consecrating acts of emasculation, transgression, capitulation and desecration gave new meaning to the notion of conversion therapy. Such exhibitions were radical intersections of Cold War ritual, spirituality, protest and cultural metabolism.

Section 3: Pedagogical Evangelism

*When a scientific law is combined with the cause it provides predictions. When a scientific law is combined with the effect it provides explanations. In this sense, predictions and explanations are symmetrical and reversible through the logic of deduction. That leaves testing.*⁶

⁵ Related Exhibitions: “State” Curated by Ivan Runkovskis, SCCA Riga (1994), “Alchemic Surrender” Curated by Marta Kuzma, SCCA Kiev/Crimea (1994), “Carbon Art” Curated by Octavian Esanu, SCCA Chisinau (1995), “Monument” Curated by Helena Demakova, SCCA Riga (1995), “Island” Curated by Slaven Tolj, SCCA Zagreb/Dubrovnik (1996)

⁶ George Soros, “Fallibility, reflexivity, and the human uncertainty principle,” *Journal of Economic Methodology* (2013), 20:4, 309-329

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This portion of The Influencing Machine is inspired by a genre of exhibitions⁷ from the earliest years across the network, exhibitions that can be credited with bringing the world the clearest and most advanced form of socially engaged practice. In particular is the revolutionary exhibition “Polyphony” from 1993 curated by Suzanne Meszoly, the pioneering architect of the entire SCCA network. Prolifically engaging non-sites across Budapest, artworks appropriated and invented a range of Situationist tactics by hacking all forms of media and communication as well as teaching DIY methodology. An important achievement was that many of these interventions would hopefully slip past the common viewer and not even be seen as art but more as medium as message as disruption. The curatorial statement says it would “offer the artists information on available technological and material possibilities for the production of radically new forms of art.” This tactical media savvy could become useful tools in times of need.

The Ukrainian collective REP Group (Revolutionary Experimental Space) was born directly out of the Orange Revolution in Kiev. The energy and theater of change there on the Maidan Square became a stage for multiple performative actions that were political and artistic. Next to professional protestors, a ragtag group of artists came to the frontlines to imagine a new language for Ukrainian art and culture, one born from within and not superimposed. They used the SCCA Kiev like a pressure cooker to evolve a project that was being born in that very moment, transforming daily, an avant-garde of survival. For over a decade REP Group have continued to shape their revolutionary expression through performance, interventions, archiving and neologizing refracted through the problematics of cultural colonialism stemming from initiatives like the SCCA itself. A newly commissioned monumental mural in their Patriotism style as well as a survey of their performative interventions will be on view.

Section 4: Archival Rituals

*The complexity of the world in which we live exceeds our capacity to comprehend it. Confronted by a reality of extreme complexity, we are obliged to resort to various methods of simplification: generalizations, dichotomies, metaphors, decision rules, and moral precepts, just to mention a few. These mental constructs take on a (subjective) existence of their own, further complicating the situation.*⁸

The SCCA Archive was the most important and first ritual that consecrated each center: to collect data on the lost histories of the 60s, 70s, and 80s. This paved the way for writing the story as it was happening during that transitional period of the 90s. This selective resource became the exclusive avenue through which foreign curators would gain an understanding of contemporary art in these previously hard-to-access art worlds.

Half of these archives are currently inaccessible, disappeared or destroyed. As the harbinger of the internet with an obsessive archival impulse, today most of the SCCA websites no longer exist or are barely traceable in histories of the internet. In order to preserve these histories, The Influencing Machine uses the same approach the SCCA used to archive its networks of artists. A near complete archive is put forth here to allow a selective but broad view of the network’s Curriculum Vitae. It will have a collection of data pertaining to early programming histories including publications, open call announcements, documentation, films, reviews, and press releases that map the network. Focus is given to the anomalously advanced case study exhibitions referenced above that inspired the Conversion Therapy or Pedagogical Evangelism sections of The Influencing Machine.

⁷ Related Exhibitions: “Nonexistant Art” Curated by Urmás Muru, SCCA Tallinn (1993), “Polyphony” Curated by Suzy Meszoly, SCCA Budapest (1993), “Orbis Fictus” Curated by Ludvík Hlaváček and Marta Smolíková, SCCA Prague (1994), “010101” Curated by Calin Dan, SCCA Bucharest (1994), “Geo-Geo” Curated by Janis Borgs, SCCA Riga (1995), “Mundane Language” Curated by Algis Lankelis, SCCA Vilnius (1995), “Pune Ochiul” Curated by Bradley J. Adams, SCCA Chisinau (1997),

⁸ George Soros, “Fallibility, reflexivity, and the human uncertainty principle,” Journal of Economic Methodology (2013), 20:4, 309-329

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Section 5: Summoning Soros Realism

Socialist Realism was seen as the subservience of creative expression to aggrandize the dictator or the state's message—a lobbying to control the transcendental aspirations of the nation, of the artist. This was embodied in classical paintings of the Dear Leader or the proud worker in the field. It was the aesthetics and materiality of the Closed Society.

With Globalization and calls for an Open Society, a Good Samaritan came with the geostrategic zeal of a missionary, a mystic merchant offering an alternative form of aspiration to save the common man from subservience. Like a Big Brother, he directed them to the hopeful dreams of Magical Capitalism, a spiritualized alchemy of culture and finance. He worked across these lands to sow his seeds of enlightenment unconcerned with social consequences. He would take measures to assure that no one could have a greater philanthropic impact than him. In his native tongue of Esperanto his name meant “to soar”. This man was George Soros.

The final section of the exhibition will be a pantheon of portraits dedicated to this patron saint of the Open Society. These were each commissioned for the exhibition from some of the most important artists working today both in Romania and internationally such as Luceazar Boyadjiev, Adrian Ghenie, Naomi Hennig, Mi Kafchin, Jon McNaughton, and Șerban Savu.

Why Tell This Story Now in 2019?

Because it is extremely intriguing. Because it fits neatly in a history between Abstract-Expressionism for the CIA and the Russian trolling of 2016. Because politics and perspectives around this have evolved in unforeseen ways from then to now. Because this isn't about art nor was it ever. Because it's the great Rorschach of our times. Because it is not a simple matter about good or evil even though we're preconditioned to believe it is. Because perception management and consensus control is everything.

Many of these SCCA art worlds, their histories and their influence have faded completely. The narrative has been historicized and controlled predominantly by devotees who were advocating it from within the network. The Influencing Machine offers a chance to think critically about cultural avant-gardes and influence, especially on this scale.

The exhibition is a reflection of cultural practice in a mirror that has never seen itself. It is a celebration of the avant-garde in its most experimental form. It reveals contemporary art as a true battleground for beta-testing radical ideology, where the contemporary artist is an awakened activist, where institutional critique is a form of well-branded lobbying, and where avant-gardes can be scripted. It is a portrayal of perception, network and control.

This is The Influencing Machine.

Special thanks to Assistant Curator Nathalie Agostini who was essential to this project and establishing the archive.

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FOR PRESS INFORMATION

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EXHIBITION DETAILS

The Influencing Machine
Curated by Aaron Moulton
Assistant Curator: Nathalie Agostini
March 14 - April 27, 2019

ADDRESS

Galeria Nicodim
Strada Băiculești, nr. 29
013 193 Bucharest, Romania

OPENING AND PANEL

A conversation with important voices from the early period of the SCCA will precede the opening starting at 16:00.

Participants include:
Lucezar Boyadjiev, Calin Dan, Geert Lovink, and Aaron Moulton

Opening Reception: Thursday, March 14, 18:00–22:00pm.

For more information, contact: info@nicodimgallery.com.