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ANNE-SARAH BÉNICHOU

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# DECEBAL SCRIBA

# TEXTES SUR LE TRAVAIL DE L'ARTISTE

( Sélection )

**Présentation du travail de Decebal Scriba dans le cadre de l'exposition personnelle  
*Memory Clouds* (galerie Anca Poterasu, Roumanie, 2018)  
Par Ami Barak, commissaire de l'exposition**

Au début des années 1970 à Bucarest, Decebal Scriba (né en 1944), était l'une des personnalités artistiques les plus marquantes et innovantes. Ses expérimentations artistiques sont aujourd'hui considérées comme partie intégrante de la tradition avant-gardiste de ce moment clé de l'histoire de l'art, en période d'après-guerre. Au cours des années '70 et '80, Decebal Scriba est l'auteur d'un corpus cohérent d'œuvres substantielles, dans une approche conceptuelle et performative, qui traitent des problématiques liées au langage formel et textuel, à l'analyse de la représentation spatiale, des gestes et des formes symboliques. A travers la performance, une forme d'expression qui répondait au contexte artistique alternatif de l'Europe de l'Est, l'essence des gestes et des actions a été exaltée et dissoute dans les *Memory clouds* (nuages de la mémoire).

Malheureusement, le régime a resserré son étau autour de la société roumaine, sa rigidité et contraintes idéologiques étouffant l'indépendance et la liberté d'expression de même que tout accomplissement artistique. Ce n'est que récemment que Decebal Scriba a de nouveau raccordé sa création au présent, la présente exposition proposant une sélection de projets des années '70-'80, revus par l'artiste ; elle leur confère une seconde jeunesse dans une approche actuelle, en préservant leur force et leur fraîcheur d'origine.

Le titre de l'exposition ne renvoie pas à ce projet que l'artiste a conçu, il y a une dizaine d'années, pour la Trafalgar Square de Londres, où des textos envoyés par le public étaient projetés sur des écrans de fumée. Il ne fait pas, non plus, allusion au stockage des données sur les clouds électroniques, une pratique tellement anodine de nos jours. Cette exposition est une tentative poétique de rassembler et de raviver des souvenirs, des fragments de mémoire dispersés ici et là, qui se retrouvent enfin réunis en un tout.

Extract from the exhibition catalog *Decebal Scriba, 70s – 80s works*  
Written by Cristian Nae, 2017

## Situations and Transformations: Notes on Decebal Scriba's Conceptual Art

Cristian Nae

Decebal Scriba's activity in the 70s, overshadowed after 1989, when the artist emigrated to France, has recently seen an exhibitional revival in Romania, paralleled by an inherent and long-expected historicization.<sup>1</sup> A nowadays review of these projects and experiments reveals a pregnant and singular conceptual interest in the Romanian art of the decade, due to the concern granted to this artistic field. In Romania, conceptualism manifested in "hybrid" ways, either from the perspective of a relationship between the artistic idea and the traditional means of expression (painting, sculpture, drawing), or in close connexion with performativity. Certain projects signed by Horia Bernea, Andrei Cădere, Paul Neagu or Pavel Ilie could be associated with a kind of conceptualism, seen, on the whole, as a critical interrogation of visibility and objectuality, the way Magda Radu, Olivia Nițș or Ileana Pintilie suggest.<sup>2</sup> Due to the systemic character privileging the idea to the detriment of the final product, the modular and modifiable neo-constructivist works based on cybernetics, achieved by Șerban Epure in late 60s and in early 70s, could also be associated to conceptualism.<sup>3</sup> In the context, Decebal Scriba's works converge to the Western aspects of the conceptual art, catalogued by Peter Osborne as "strong or exclusive conceptualism", understood as a critical investigation made upon the nature, function and social effects of the (graphic) sign and of the (artistic) language, or, at large, on the conditions and non-mimetic relationship between representation and reality.<sup>4</sup> Achieved with philosophical and semiotic theoretical instruments, the investigation develops within the visual representation and via the artistic language.

Decebal Scriba's works open several planes of approach, among which the one analyzing the systems of space representation, production and reproduction, accompanied by that dealing with the conceptualization of (visual, mathematical and textual) signification systems and of the action upon the significant and its transformations. The private, inner, almost existential assumption of the artistic act is also significant. The artistic act develops on the unstable boundary between inside and outside, which it transgresses and suspends, installing the temporal separation between the self's autonomous space, understood as a filtered introspection of the existent symbolic regime, and the public space, specific to a conventional, impersonal and normative codification. The intimate process of reflection upon the language and artistic demarche becomes the catalyst of the visual notations which, codified according to a personal algorithm – sometimes linguistic, at other times mathematical –, often enigmatic or abbreviate, are publicly displayed (accompanied or not by legends). In the first case, one notices a predilection for examining the hiatus between a process and an imaginary object – still unacknowledged, as an unshared secret – and the systems of representation trying to reconstruct it.

Reconstruction becomes the pretext of a fragmentary or of a serial proper artistic construction. The artistic act is often deconstructed, its constitutive elements and their interrelationships are displayed, a fact which shows the primacy of the signifying conventions upon the re-codifying attempts defining it. For example, the drawings in the series "Studies on the Veil" (1979), apparently abstract, showing controlled gesturalism, evoke the processes of language agglutination specific to Cy Twombly. For the American painter, the frottage, quick writing, the "scrawl", exploit sign's incapacity to choose a visual or a textual regime of signification, still remaining at the intersection. In this voluntary oscillation, the graphic sign becomes a potential signifier able to canalize the communicational impulse and



**Kartographierte Leere | Mapping the Void | Cartografiind vidul, 1976**  
Installation, Dokumentarfoto | installation, photo document | instalație, document foto

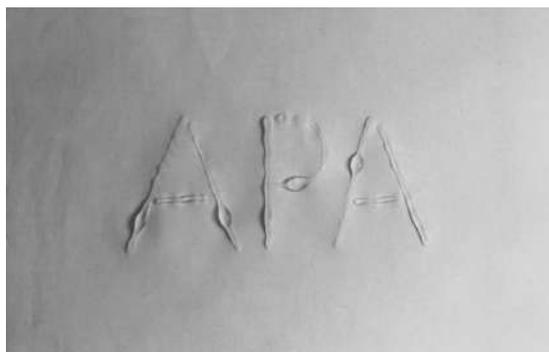
present it in a nascent, pulsional stage. In Decebal Scriba's case, the representation process is ampler, because it integrates an imaginary dimension. The graphic signs are the visual stamps of a poem developed exclusively in artist's mind, a poem unknown or not transmitted to the audience, showing the incapacity of the visual representation system to become a transparent relay between author's intention and the significance decoded by the public. I'm referring to drawing, seen, the way it was looked at during Renaissance, as project – *designo* –, an essential visual formula and a possible condition for the other media. Artist's option for drawing as a medium able to explore the process and limits of interpersonal communication is not accidental and should not be seen as a simple refusal of traditional media in favour of the "pure" idea. The recourse to the "concept" is part and parcel of the investigation of visuality (in its active sense, which combines the visualization process with the imaginative one, specific to vision), shared by other experimental artists of the period, like Geta Brătescu or Horia Bernea<sup>5</sup>, and expresses Decebal Scriba's interest for the elementary conditions of the artistic shape – the act of concomitant drawing and signification –, more precisely, for the preservation of the constitutive ambivalence of both terms (sign and drawing): designation. Generated on paper, the structures resulted through the (frictionless) transfer between two signification systems become possible representations of matter organization and of the interactions occurring at the level of the re-mapped and oversized elementary particles. The project first examined the disaggregation of one particle in an experimental device (Wilson chamber), recording the traces left by the matter elements in a dense medium. On the one hand, the veil refers to the fundamental illusion of materiality (Maya's veil) – a possible condensed state of the energy; on the other hand, it alludes to the idea of the "absolute", non-mimetic painting, a painting aware of the image status (inspired by artist's conversations with Horia Bernea), able to describe its own condition. Neither the propensity toward a certain transcendental state of the cultural existence, nor the genuine interest for the relationship between matter and energy should be neglected. On the contrary, approached qua productive singularity, this metaphysical concern offers a counterbalance to both the oppressive social and political reality which determined art's interpretation in the period, and the almost dogmatic quartering within the rationalism the canonical exegeses of the Anglo-American conceptualism used to propagate.<sup>6</sup>

In early 70s, Decebal Scriba's activity, concentrated on examining the notion of artistic situation, could be cautiously placed in the larger sphere of system aesthetics and of art qua information – in late 60s, the systems were already acknowledged almost all over the world, but their local concrete "shapes" were significantly different.<sup>7</sup> This association is today the more important the more it gradates the mythicizing narratives defining the stereotyped portrait of a dissident artist, isolated behind the Iron Curtain, retired in his/her own fictional world – commonplaces in the art history of the last two decades. Though the sentiment of inadequacy with the social reality in the way it used to materialize then and there, as well as the predilection for introspection and for the recovery of some autonomous processes of subjectification, specific to strong individualities, could be considered subjacent motivations of the creative ways Decebal Scriba expressed, they ignore the connexions and the exchange of ideas both inside the ex-socialist countries and between them and the Western world. The fact that conceptual art was concentrated on the relationship between word and image, the relationship between gesture, trace and graphic sign (the analysis of visual language's performative dimension included), as well as the demarche of abstractization practised in the West were not new for him. According to the artist, the incursions into the conceptual art have been catalyzed by the encounter, in the years of the so-called "cultural opening"<sup>8</sup> and in the short following period, with the exhibitional activity of the alternative galleries from Poland (for example, Foksal in Warsaw), as well as with some British and American art reviews which presented the works of some conceptual artists – Art-and-Language Group or Joseph Kosuth.<sup>9</sup> It is preferably to speak about the assumption and creative transformation of these references in the traditional terms of influence. No less important seem to be the semiotic theories originating from structuralism (and structural semiotics) and post-structuralism, according to which the significance of a sign is relationally determined by the position it occupies in a certain representation system and by the process differentiating it from the other signifiers, as well as the idea of the open character of an art work, which includes the receptor in the constituted artistic situation.<sup>10</sup> The works Decebal Scriba achieved in the 60s illustrate certain conceptual strategies, like exploitation of tautology, the incursions in the invisible (yet utterable) area, the paradox of creation as obliteration or dematerialization (detectable through the filiation Duchamps–Rauschenberg–Art-and-Language Group), the insistency of the inquisitive regard in the open space, through enunciation between beholder's imagination and the signifying potentialities of the graphic system codifying the statement. In artist's case, these ways of investigating the limits of representation parallel his predilection for questioning the logical, mathematical or combinatorial regularities and for exploring the indexing and the iconic exploration of the sign, together with the symbolic, codified ones, whom Rosalind Krauss considers as fundamental mutations occurring at the level of artistic representation in the (American) art of the 70s.<sup>11</sup>

For example, an analysis of the system of representation and signification is achieved in *The Wall* (1972), a photographic diptych where the artist numbers spontaneously, in ascending and descending order, the bricks of a Bucharest wall, thus emphasizing the arbitrary character of the chosen signification system, but also the subsidiary idea (bearing obvious political connotations) according to which any built wall can be demolished. Though the chosen numbering system is objective, impersonal, in concord with elementary arithmetic (a symbol of scientific, positivist reliability), the existence of the notational system becomes as arbitrary as the significance of each inner codified element. The outer reality is assumed as a cultural construct, and the (apparently ineluctable) material existence is counterbalanced by the existence of the action and its significance, more exactly, it represents the result of the interaction between locutor's subjectivity and the pre-existent independent language system.

Denaturalization of the representation such a spontaneous algorithm calls forth is accompanied by a decentred effect generated by the Lacanian deconstruction and semiotics, if considering system's pedestal paradoxically made up of an absence (of the centre, of the final significance, etc.). In this respect, exploration of the systemic condition of representation acquires political connotations, noticing the vacuity and the arbitrary specific to all signification systems related to culture immanence (therefore, the authority language included). Such works can also acquire indirect political connotations due to an interest in preserving the autonomy of thought and of the artistic language. Because, in the way the north-American artists are concerned with the impersonal aspects of the specific language – in Benjamin Buchloh's terms, of the "aesthetic of administration" –, though the affiliation to a certain system of codification is unavoidable, the used codes can be recombined.<sup>12</sup>

The relationship between the idea, sign and referee is approached in the works *Water* (1972), *The Word as a Sign* and *A-Z* (1973), *Process A* (1974) or in the series "Separating Systems" (1973), where the conceptual dimension reconstructs and completes signifier's transformation. This transformation can sometimes take place through sign addition (and by blooming the base on which the sign is stamped), without changing the structure of the visual signifier, like in *Situation M* (1973), a work within the series "Signs", showing an aspect of the separating systems – the



**Das Wasser | The Water |  
Apa, 1972**

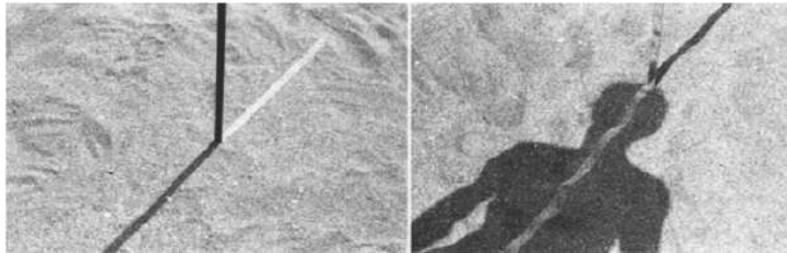
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suspended and questioned relationship between the inner and the outer space of the studio. At other times, it can include transformations at signifier's physical level, suggested via an additional process of symbolic denotation.

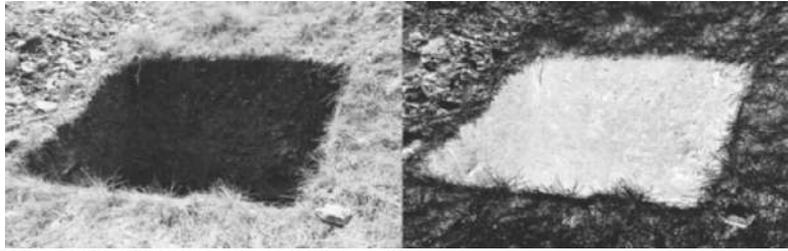
The performative dimension of Decebal Scriba's works, sometimes implicit (resumed to a simple conceptual intervention, seen as an act meant to re-signify an extant situation, a ready-made in Duchamp's pure tradition), at other times explicit (*The Gift*, 1974), is not negligible. For example, entitled "Actions" (1973), the series of conceptual interventions describe a matrix of the possible interventions operated upon an imaginary object starting from verbs initialled in a. They display a possible alphabet able to map the creative process, which describes art as a field of transformations and operations taking place within a (significant and power) system defined by permutations, combinations and positioning. Abandon, abbreviation, abolition, abrogation, absolutization, absorption, abuse, acclamation, accreditation and accuse designate conceptual operations materializable in a social space where they can modify or introduce power relationships in a given (artistic) situation, accompanying the more neuter accelerations, actualizations or additions. Signifier's

obliteration, specific to the transition from an entropic stage to a disordered one which conveys the information and recovers it at the level of interpretation, is analyzed in the works *A-Z* and *Process A*. In *A-Z*, each capital letter is made of its opposite letter, multiplied and printed as a small letter: A from a series of zs, and Z from multiple as. Between these graphic signs the artist put a bag of clay. Though, apparently, it's an enigmatic calligram, the work stands for a meditation upon the language and its limits, as well as a possible meditation upon the materiality and the finite character of any human action (the beginning being in the end, and the end, in the beginning). The concept condenses the subsequently materialized creative process, the work standing for a representation of this very process. In *Process A*, the artist experiments the regenerating capacity of a natural system taken as model, exploring the transition from order to disorder and back to order through the progressive erosion of a sign: the English vocable *word*. Both in its complete physical shape and in the dematerialized situation of its imaginary existence, the artistic sign generates information. If the work *Water* documents a similar process of (de)materialization, which analyzes – through the tautology Joseph Kosuth explored just a couple of years before – the relationship between signifier's properties and its conventional significance, the more complex intervention operated in *The Word as a Sign* becomes a pretext for expanding the statement resulted after each word was deconstructed into an alternative system of mathematical codes further recombined following the elementary principles of the string-and-set theory. Though possible, text re-composition is subsequent to the process through which, due to the transition to an adjacent signification system, the capacities to generate and convey information are modified.

By accentuating the processual dimension of signification to the detriment of the visual signifier diminishes objectuality and, implicitly, the formal fetishization of an art work, the material resultant of the creative process. Yet it offers the condition in which the creative implementation of the tautology and of the idea of a self-referential signifying system takes place in Decebal Scriba's oeuvre. Contrary to the way some artists (Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Huebler) use these concepts, they are not meant here to suppress referentiality according to a fetishized epistemological positivism confident in the self-sufficiency of the signifying systems or, at other times, criticizing them by mimetically exacerbating this approach.<sup>13</sup> He rather appeals to photographic images, which act as visual stimuli meant to materialize the mental activity the sign achieved during the elementary process in which the reference is substituted by a signifier, and to the eminently arbitrary character of the, albeit incomplete, codifying systems proper to this materialization.<sup>14</sup>



**Achse #01 (die Serie „Spiegel“)** |  
**Axis #01 (Series “Mirror“)** | **Axă #01**  
**(Seria „Oglindă“), 1984–1985**  
 Installation, Dokumentarfoto |  
 installation, photo document |  
 instalație, document foto



**Ohne Titel (Studie über die Leere) |**

**Untitled (Study on the Void) |**

**Fără titlu, (Studiu despre vid), 1973**

Abschnitte in Echt, Dokumentarfoto |

section into the real, photo document |

secțiune în real, document foto

poetics of interhuman relationships, as well as a potential reconfiguration of the social tissue. For that matter, during the 60s, the relationships show the failure of the therapeutic dimension of the socially-engaged art in Romania, a dimension which, existentially assumed, resembles the themes of personal failure approached, with comparable poetic candour, by Bas Jan Ader. This sentiment of isolation generated the series "Separating Systems", in which the windows of the studio were noted according to a combinatorial matrix, reversing the relationship between the inside and the outside, between artist's studio (a space of solitary meditation) and the world. In the photo-performance *The Gift* (1974), the artist walks in Bucharest holding an imaginary object in his hand. A series of four photos record the walk, which takes place almost unnoticed. The implication in a private mental experience and the lack of interest showed by the rude observers, an ad-hoc public in front of camera's objective, becomes an implicit declaration of the nonconformism facing an ideologically pre-defined social space. The artistic act can be approached as a social experiment. Nobody takes over artist's gesture, and he hopes that this symbolic gesture, which is essential for a basic asymmetric economy founded on generosity (and on the excess specific to donation vs. negotiation and exchange), become a catalyst of further transformations occurring in the adjacent constitution, in the infra-epithelium of the public sphere within the Romanian society of the moment. The images recording this poetic activity can be associated with the photographic documentation of the subversive, almost imperceptible gestures Jiří Kovanda achieved in an oppressive context, when, in 1968, the Soviet troops occupied Prague. In *Contact* (September 3, 1979), Kovanda slightly touches the passers-by, and this performative process is captured from the distance in the way an observer who, hidden in a paradoxical immanent exteriority, surveys the public space. If, in case of Decebal Scriba, one can speak about "resistance", it remains at the level of reclusion within an autonomous mental space which contests the interference of political ideologies in the process of artistic conception, as well as the dominant conventions occurring in daily life, by re-codifying the visual language and examining its capacities of signification and aggregation of information. An escape from the quotidian by assuming observer's condition is a fundamental gesture in a conceptual artistic activity, allowing one to reconquer his/her position of a subject agent.

In all processes implying the transformation and re-codification of the visual signifier, the tautological character of the relationship between the signifier and its significance is used programmatically, in order to limit the inevitable deformations produced in a communicational process in which the image is imaginarily recomposed by the beholder who participates in the constructed artistic situation.



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Refusing art's vulgarized mimetic approach – according to which art creates the reality it expresses in its own process of re-codification and re-presentation –, one could conclude that, generally speaking, the conceptual art Decebal Scriba produced in the 70s re-codifies the notion of realism, offering it a more authentic dimension than that present, in the period, in the socially-engaged art. Approached retrospectively, this art can be considered inconvenient in the conditions of the aesthetic ideology in effect in the Romanian art of the 70s, which insisted to render most faithfully the social reality, in spite of the fact that the works were deprived of any deliberate and explicit political interests or concerns. Through a lucid questioning of the existential (social, political, cultural and linguistic) conditions of the subject and of the artistic process, specific artistic strategies in conceptual art<sup>15</sup>, these works preserve a destabilizing potential even today.

## REVUE DE PRESSE

(Sélection)

ARTAN°20-21

*A Field of Possibilities – Decebal Scriba and The Semiotics of Appearance*, 2016, Par Cristian Nae

## A Field of Possibilities – Decebal Scriba and The Semiotics of Appearance

Text CRISTIAN NAE

Decebal Scriba's activity in the 70ies, which was overlooked following his emigration to France in 1989, has been recently subjected to a vast process of revisiting (and implicitly, of being placed in a historical context), curated by Olivia Nițiu, through the agency of two exhibitions arranged at the Victoria Art Center in Bucharest and the Călina Gallery in Timișoara. The extensive recapitulation of these projects and experiments highlights today a strong conceptual interest which is, I dare say, even singular in the Romanian art of that decade. The coordinates of those works open up many levels, including, on the one hand, that of the analysis of the systems of representation and production and reproduction of space, alongside that of the conceptualization of the (visual, mathematical and textual) signification systems and, on the other hand, at the level of a private, interiorized and nearly existential assumption of the artistic act. The latter always takes place at the unstable border between the inside and the outside, which it transgresses and at the same time suspends, installing the temporary separation between the autonomous space of the self, understood as a filtered interiorizing of the existing symbolic regime, and the public one, specific of the conventional, impersonal and normative codification. This intimate process of reflection on the language and artistic process becomes the catalyst for the visual notes, codified according to a personal, sometimes linguistic, other times mathematical algorithm, which are more often than not enigmatic or abbreviated, and exposed to the public (in some cases, accompanied by captions).

In the first case, we can notice a predilection to examining the hiatus between an imaginary process or object, which remains ultimately unknown to the public, like an unshared secret, and the systems of representation which try to reconstruct it. This reconstruction also becomes the pretext for a fragmentary and sometimes serial artistic construction. The artistic act is often deconstructed, exposing its constitutive parts and the relationships between them, which attests to the primacy of the signification conventions over the attempts at re-codifying which define the artistic act itself. For instance, the series of apparently abstract drawings *Studies of veil* (1979), which betrays a controlled gestualism, evokes Cy Twombly's specific language agglutination processes. To the American painter, the frottage, the hurried writing, the „dawdling”, exploit the incapacity of the sign to choose a certain regime of signification, either visual or textual in nature, remaining at the intersection between the two. In this voluntary oscillation, the graphic sign becomes a potential signifier which channels the communicational impulse, as well as presents at this nascent, pulsional, stage.

For Decebal Scriba, the representation process is wider, as it integrates a major imaginary dimension. The graphic signs are the visual

Decebal Scriba, *The Wall / Zidul*, 1972, argentic print. Courtesy of the artist

marks of a poem which unravels only in the artist's thinking, but is not known or transmitted to the audience, witnessing to the system's incapacity of visual representation (in this case, the drawing, an essential visual formula, a condition of possibility for all the other media) to become a transparent relay between the author's intention and the signification decoded by the audience. The structures generated on paper, resulted through the transfer (not lacking frictions) between two signifying systems, become possible representations of the organization of matter and of the interactions at the level of the elementary particles, re-charted and oversized. The project had its starting point in the observation of the dissolution of a particle in an experimental device (the Wilson chamber), registering the traces left by the constituent elements of the matter in a dense medium. The veil is referring, on the one hand, to the fundamental illusion that materiality represents (Maya's veil) – a possible condensed state of energy – and, on the other hand, to the idea of an “absolute,” non-mimetic painting, conscious of its status as an image (stemming from the frequent discussions between Decebal Scriba and Horia Bernea), apt to describe its own condition. An analysis of the systems of representation and signification is achieved in the photographic diptych *The Wall*, dating from 1972, where the bricks of a wall found in Bucharest during a walk are spontaneously numbered by the artist, in a rising and descending order, thus underscoring the arbitrary character of the chosen signification system, as well as the subsidiary idea (with obvious political connotations) according to which any wall that has been erected can be brought down. These analyses are deepened in works like *Water* (“Apă”) (1972), *The Word as A Sign* (“Cuvântul ca semn”) (1973), A-Z (din 1973), *Process A* (1974), or in the series of works titled *Separating Systems* (“Sisteme separatoare”) (1973), where the conceptual dimension is sometimes used to reconstruct of to complete a process of transforming a signifier. Sometimes, this transformation can take place only through the addition of a sign (and by rendering opaque the support which marks this sign), without

changing the structure of the visual signifier, such as in the work *Situation M* (“Situatie M”) of 1973 from the series *Signs* (“Semne”), which presents an aspect of the separating systems – the relationship between the interior, the space of the study, and its exterior, suspended and questioned. Other times, it can include physical transformations of the signifier, which are suggested by an additional process of symbolic denotation.

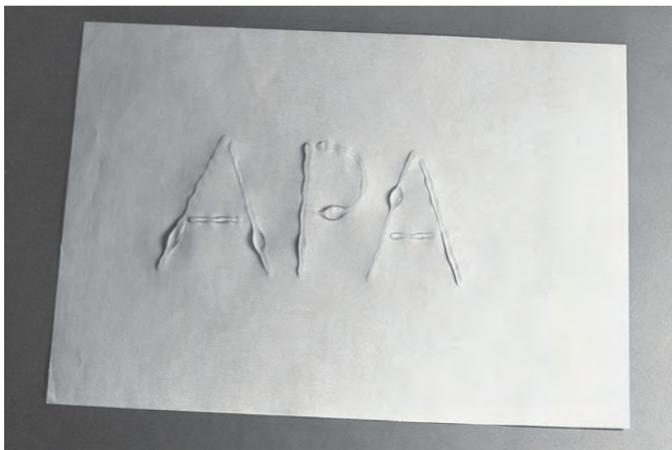
The performative dimension of Decebal Scriba's works from this period – sometimes implicit resumed at a mere conceptual intervention, understood as an act of re-signification of an existing situation, of a readymade, in the purest Duchampian tradition), other times, explicit – like in the case of the work *The Gift* (“Darul”) of 1974 – is not negligible. On the one hand, it nuances the possible comparisons and inclusions of these works in an “analytical” direction, specific of North American conceptual art, interested in the nature and functions of art, and, in the subsidiary, in the critical analysis of visibility and of the artistic object. For instance, the series of conceptual interventions achieved in 1973 and suggestively titled *Actions* (“Acțiuni”), describe a matrix of the possible interventions on an imaginary object, starting from verbs all starting with the letter “a”: they expose a possible alphabet which maps the creative process and also describes art as a field of the transformations and operations occurring within a (signifying and power) system defined by permutations, combinations and positionings. Abbreviation, absorption, abrogation, abuse, acclamation, abolishment, abandon, absolutization, seizure, accuse, accreditation – all designate conceptual operations which can also materialize in the social space, where they can modify or introduce relationships of power in an existing (artistic) situation, accompanying the more neutral additions, accelerations or updates. The process of obliteration of the signifier, specific of the transition from an entropic stage to a disordered stage of transmission of information and its recovery at the level of the interpretative process is analysed in the works A-Z and *Process A*. In A-Z, each capital letter is

Decebal Scriba, *The Gift / Darul*, action, 1974, argentic edition. Courtesy of the artist

composed of the opposed letter, multiplied and printed in a small size: "A" from a series of z-s and respectively, "Z", from multiple a-s. A bag of earth is exposed between these graphic signs. Although it has the appearance of an enigmatic calligram, the work offers us both a meditation on language and its limitations and a possible meditation of the materiality and the finite character of any human action (with the beginning at the end and the end at the beginning). The concept condenses here the entire creative process, which can subsequently materialize, with the work being in its turn a representation of this process of conceptual condensation. In *Process A*, the artist experiments the capacity of regeneration of a natural system taken as a model, exploring the shift from order to disorder and back to order through the progressive erosion of a sign – the English word "word". Both in its complete physical form and in the situation of its imaginary, dematerialized existence, the artistic sign generates information. Whereas the work *Water* documents a similar (de)materialization process, which explores the relationship between the properties of the signifier and its conventional signification through the agency of the tautology insistently explored by Joseph Kosuth only a few years before, the intervention achieved in the more complex work *The Word as Sign*, becomes the pretext of expanding an enunciation made by decomposing each word into an alternative system of mathematical codes, which are later on recombined, using elementary principles from the theory of series and multitudes. The recomposing of this text,

although possible, is secondary here to the process through which, with their passage into an adjacent signification system, the capacities of generating and sending information are modified, in turn. On the other hand, the archived images of such conceptual actions can be understood as having a significant emotional charge, which attests to a claustrophobic feeling specific to many East and Central European artists. From this perspective, the lack of social communication the artist feels seems to become acute, and the minimal, discreet formulas or visual expression propose a poetics of inter-human relationships and a potential reconfiguration of the social tissue. As to the latter aspect, they attest to the failure of the therapeutic dimension of socially committed art in the Romanian society of the seventies, existentially assumed, similar to the representations of the personal failures achieved with a comparable candour by Bas Jan Ader. This feeling of isolation has also generated the spontaneous intervention from the series of *The Separating Systems*, in which the windows of the study were marked according to a combinatory matrix, reversing the relationship between the interior and the exterior, between the artist's study (as a space for solitary thinking) and the world. In the photo-performance *The Gift* (1974), the artist walks the streets on Bucharest holding an imaginary rectangular object in his hand, which might suggest a box. The series of four photographs records the artist's solitary walk, as he walks around, almost unnoticed by the passers-by. The artist's

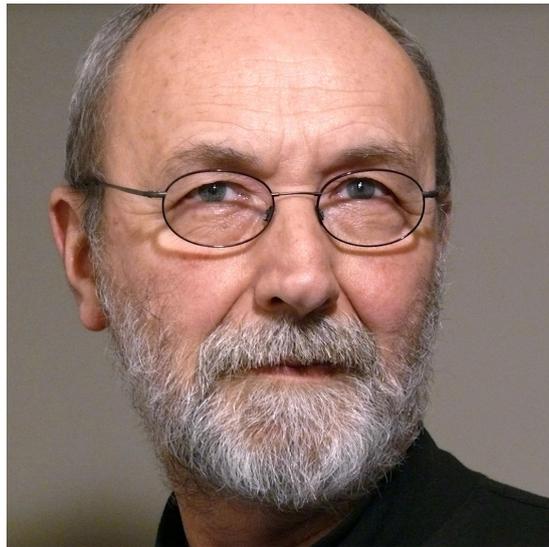
involvement in a private mental experience and the lack of interest of the unaware onlookers turned into an ad-hoc audience, incapable of collective agglutination under the gaze of the photographic camera, suggests the distance separating the process of thinking art from the fragmented social space where the former cannot fit. Thus, art becomes an implicit statement of non-conformism in relation to an ideologically predefined social space. At the same time, the artistic act can be seen as a social experiment, it is clear that nobody takes over the artist's gesture, who would have hoped that his altruistic symbolic gesture, essential to a fundamental asymmetrical economy, based on generosity (and on the specific excess of the donation in relationship to the negotiation and the exchange), can become a catalyst of the subsequent transformations undergone by the subject constitution, in the infra-epithelium of the public sphere of the Romanian society of the time. From this perspective, the photographs recording this poetical and solitary activity can be associated with the photographic documentation of the subversive and at the same time almost imperceptible gestures made by Jiří Kovanda in the oppressive context of Prague, after the Soviet occupation of 1968. In his work *Contact*, made on September 3, 1979, Kovanda lightly touches the passers-by, and this performative process is captured from a distance, like an observer who monitors the public space, staying at the same time under cover in a paradoxical immanent exteriority. Whereas in Decebal Scriba's case we can speak of "resistance", it is present however, only at the level of the withdrawal from a mentally autonomous space, which contests the interference of the political ideologies in the process of artistic conception, as well as the dominating conventions of everyday life, by re-codifying the visual language and examining its capacities of signification and aggregation of information. In all these processes of transformation and re-codifying of the visual signifier that he provokes, Decebal Scriba assumes the fact that "less means more," that any loss in material details is compensated by a new field of possibilities of signification, generated by the (necessary) interaction with the audience, who is invited to participate in a cognitive way in the process of artistic perception and of aesthetic interpretation. Actually, the often tautological character of the relationship between the signifier and the signification is used by the artist in a programmatic way, to limit the unavoidable deformations in the process of communication, where the viewer, participant in the situation of the artistic communication thus constructed, recomposes the image in his/her imagination.

Decebal Scriba, *Water / Apă*, 1972, argentic edition. Courtesy of the artist

**Aluring**

24.11.19

## **ALURING\***



## **PRÉSENCE**

NOVEMBER 24, 2019

A la galerie Anne-Sarah BENICHOU au 45, rue Chapon 75003 Paris /// Jusqu'au 7 décembre 2019 /// Exposition : PRÉSENCE

*“Au milieu des années 80, la vie culturelle en Roumanie était réduite à des rares manifestations officielles. Dès la deuxième moitié des années 70, non seulement le contenu des manifestations a été de plus en plus censuré, mais les expositions ont été fermées par le régime. En réalité tout était bloqué...”* confia-t-il un jour. Et d'ajouter : *“Afin de pas abandonner complètement notre pratique, afin de stimuler tant bien que mal notre créativité et finalement pour témoigner indirectement notre désapprobation de la doctrine officielle, il ne restait qu'une seule solution : l'espace privé”*. Révélatrices d'une avant-garde roumaine, ses oeuvres abordent les questions du langage formel et textuel. S'appuyant sur la représentation spatiale ou les symboliques des formes, sa pratique artistique trouve toute sa légitimité dans des travaux intégrant les champs de l'installation, de la photographie, de la vidéo et de la performance. En effet, la démarche plastique de Decebal Scriba (Photo ci-dessous Crédit@GalerieAnneSarahBenichou) est portée par des réflexions philosophiques et politiques interrogeant le rapport à autrui et à l'art. Le visiteur appréciera ici - au coeur de ce group show équilibré - des marques de spiritualité bienvenues qui soutiennent un corpus d'oeuvres animées par un langage manuscrit et corporel où les marqueurs culturels et des mathématiques ne sont jamais absents. On aime par ailleurs cette gestuelle tournée vers les nouvelles formes d'expressions artistiques ou des aspirations interdisciplinaires emprunts autant d'improvisation que de liberté !

ARTPRESS.COM

09/11/2019

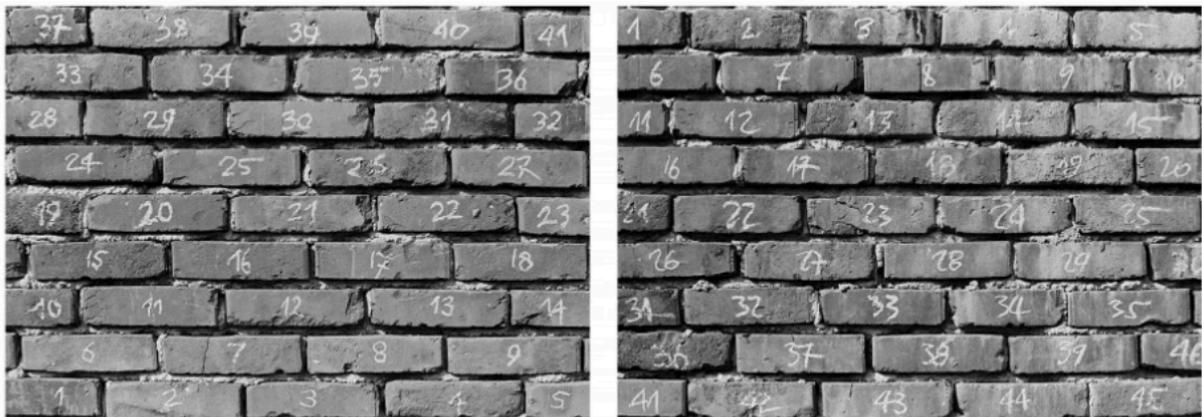
art  
press**DANS LE PANIER D'ARTPRESS : THE WALL DE DECEBAL SCRIBA**FICTIVEMENT ACHETÉ PAR ANNABELLE GUGNON. DECEBAL SCRIBA, *THE WALL*, 1973.

GALERIE ANNE-SARAH BÉNICHOU, PARIS PHOTO, GRAND PALAIS, PARIS, 7-10 NOVEMBRE 2019.

**Deuxième acquisition fictive à Paris Photo, nous retenons aujourd'hui, en écho aux 30 ans de la chute du Mur de Berlin, cette photographie d'un autre mur, en Roumanie : *The Wall* de Decebal Scriba.**

Ce mur n'a pas été érigé par Decebal Scriba. L'artiste roumain l'a utilisé au cours de l'une des nombreuses actions conceptuelles qu'il se risquait à réaliser dans le Bucarest soumis à la dictature de Nicolae Ceausescu et sa police politique. En 1973, dans l'espace public, avec juste une craie en main, il signifie par un geste minimal que, puisqu'un mur se construit brique après brique, il peut également se déconstruire une pierre après l'autre, jusqu'à disparaître. Decebal Scriba écrit un numéro sur chaque brique, d'abord en ordre croissant, de 1 à 45, sur un pan de mur, puis décroissant, de 41 à 1, sur un autre pan, avant de les photographier. Par son geste, il détruit l'idée d'un mur inébranlable, tout-puissant, établi par le pouvoir politique dans le réel, mais avant tout dans l'imaginaire des citoyens. L'intense portée libératrice de cette photographie, *The Wall*, est de rendre le mur vulnérable. S'y attaquer, c'est peut-être réussir à le faire tomber. A contrario, l'image montre qu'un mur s'érige vite et, dans son ombre, le sentiment d'impuissance face à la violence et à la dictature.

Decebal Scriba est né en 1944, il vit en France depuis 1990. Figure marquante de l'avant-garde roumaine d'après-guerre, il est un artiste de la performance, du dessin et de la vidéo. La photographie tient une place de choix dans ses œuvres qui, toutes, engagent poésie, résistance, courage et liberté.

**Annabelle Gugnon**

Decebal Scriba, *The Wall*, 1973, tirage gélatine argentique noir et blanc, diptyque, 30 x 45 cm chaque, Court. Galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, Paris

## ARTPRESS

Numéro 465 avril 2019

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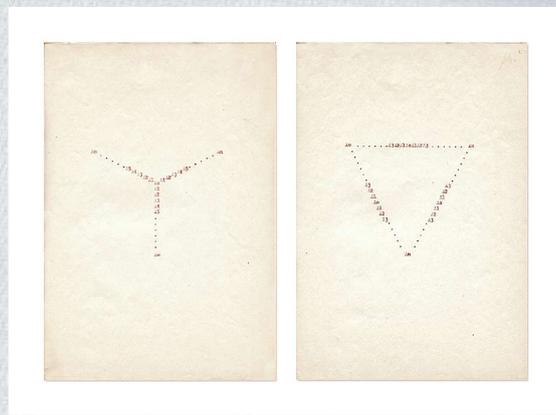
artpress 465 | 77

## EXPOSITIONS REVIEWS

## PARIS

## Decebal Scriba

Galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou / 26 janvier - 23 mars 2019



Comme nombre d'artistes roumains de sa génération restés sur place, et dont le travail témoigne d'une affinité « conceptuelle », le curriculum vitae de Decebal Scriba se résume à quelques lignes. Il est né en 1944, a effectué des études à Bucarest et a eu de rares occasions de montrer son travail avant la chute du mur de Berlin. Installé en France depuis le début des années 1990, ses expositions sont plus nombreuses, principalement en Roumanie. Cette première présentation parisienne, dense et contrastée, d'œuvres produites dans les années 1970 et 1980, est donc bienvenue. Absent des différentes manifestations majeures montées ces dernières années en Europe de l'Ouest et aux États-Unis sur le conceptualisme « global », ou des pays de l'Est, Scriba aurait pourtant pleinement mérité de bénéficier d'une visibilité plus importante, tant son œuvre, à la croisée de la performance, du photoconceptualisme et complétée par des travaux à base de langage, s'inscrit indéniablement dans les préoccupations auxquelles se sont attachés, des deux côtés du rideau de fer, les artistes de sa sensibilité. D'une grande précarité et traduisant des gestes ou des attitudes à la lisière d'une dématérialisation de l'objet d'art souvent imposée par le contexte politique et social, Scriba a su composer une œuvre captivante, s'articulant autour de médiums ou matériaux – comme les pelotes de laine, récurrentes et obsessionnelles – représentatives de ladite précarité. Une belle découverte.

Erik Verhagen

«Vector Sculptures 04», 1973. Documents originaux, texte tapé à la machine à écrire sur papier. Diptyque, 30 x 21 cm chacun

Like many Romanian artists of his generation, who have stayed put, and whose work testifies to a "conceptual" affinity, Decebal Scriba's curriculum vitae can be summed up in a few lines. He was born in 1944, studied in Bucharest and had rare opportunities to show his work before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Settled in France since the early 1990s, his exhibitions are more numerous, mainly in Romania, and therefore this first Parisian presentation of works produced in the 1970s and 1980s, is welcome. Absent from the various major manifestations of global conceptualism that have arisen in recent years in Western Europe, the United States, and in Eastern countries, Scriba would nonetheless have fully deserved to benefit from greater visibility, given how his work, at the crossroads of performance, photoconceptualism and supplemented by works based on language, is undeniably concerned with the preoccupations artists of his sensibility have attached themselves to on both sides of the iron curtain. Highly precarious and translating gestures and attitudes on the edge of a dematerialization of the art object often imposed by the political and social context, Scriba was able to compose a captivating oeuvre, articulated round media and materials – such as wool balls – representative of said precariousness.

Translation: Chloé Beker

ARHITEXT

Février 2019

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## GATES / PASSAGES

## DECEBAL SCRIBA

DECEBAL SCRIBA s-a născut în 1944 la Braşov – un oraş din centrul României. Sosit în Franţa în 1990, locuieşte şi lucrează în Fontainebleau – Avon.

Lucrările sale sunt considerate relevante pentru avant-garda românească de după al Doilea Război Mondial. Datorită unui corpus coerent, elaborat pe suporturi heteroclitice – fotografie, instalaţii, performance-ul, video – artistul abordează atât arta conceptuală, cât şi performativă, chestiunile limbajului formal şi textual, reprezentarea spaţială, simbolică gesturilor şi a formelor. Semnul – omniprezent în opera sa, trimiţând atât către limbajul scris, cât şi corporal – devine suportul unor reflecţii filozofice ce chestionează raportul artistului cu lumea, cu existenţa, cu arta.

În ultimii ani a participat la mai multe expoziţii colective («La Brique» / «Cărămidă», 2019 – Kunsthalle, Mulhouse; «Art Encounters», 2017 – Timişoara Art Biennial; «The Poetics of Politics», 2012 – galeria «Propaganda», Varşovia), cât şi personale («Memory Clouds», 2018 – galeria «Anca Poteraşu», Bucureşti; «Separating Systems», 2017 – galeria «Călina», Timişoara). În luna martie a acestui an galeria «Anne-Sarah Bénichou» a găzduit prima expoziţie personală pariziană («Passages») a lui Decebal Scriba.

DECEBAL SCRIBA was born in 1944, in Braşov, a city in the heart of Romania. He arrived in France in 1990; since then he has been living and working in Fontainebleau – Avon.

Beginning with the end of the Second World war, his work begins to be regarded as relevant for the Romanian Avant-Garde. By virtue of a coherent corpus, elaborated on heteroclitic supports – photography, installations, performance, video – the artist approaches both conceptual and performative art, matters of formal and textual language, spatial representation, as well as the symbolism of gestures and forms. The sign – omnipresent in his work, which appeals both to written and corporeal language – becomes the support of philosophical reflections that question the artist's relationship with the world, existence, and art.

In the past few years he has taken part in several collective exhibitions («La Brique» / «The Brick» / «Cărămidă», 2019 – Kunsthalle, Mulhouse; «Art Encounters», 2017 – Timişoara Art Biennial; «The Poetics of Politics», 2012 – «Propaganda» Gallery, Warsaw), as well as personal ones («Memory Clouds», 2018 – «Anca Poteraşu» Gallery, Bucharest; «Separating Systems», 2017 – «Călina» Gallery, Timişoara). In March this year, «Anne-Sarah Bénichou» gallery hosted Decebal Scriba's first personal Parisian exhibition («Passages»).



«The Wall», 1973–2018, fotografii alb-negru, diptic, 30×40cm  
(prin amabilitatea galeriilor «Anne-Sarah Bénichou», Paris și «Anca Poterașu», București)

«artistul, evocând implicit și dimensiunea politică a zidului, figurează acest simbol separativ și izolant, sugerând totodată posibilitatea programată de a-l escalada și chiar distruge, cărămidă cu cărămidă.» \*



«The Wall», 1973–2018, black and white photography, diptic, 30×40cm  
(courtesy «Anne-Sarah Bénichou» Gallery, Paris, and «Anca Poterașu» Gallery, Bucharest)

«the artist, implicitly evoking the political dimension of the wall, depicts this separating and segregated symbol, while also suggesting the programmed possibility of climbing it, and even destroying it, brick by brick.» \*



«The Clew II», 1977–2018, black and white photos, diptic, 30×30cm  
(courtesy «Anne-Sarah Bénichou» Gallery, Paris and «Anca Poterașu» Gallery, Bucharest)

In the first picture, «a stranger put a ball of yarn on the sill of a window.» \*

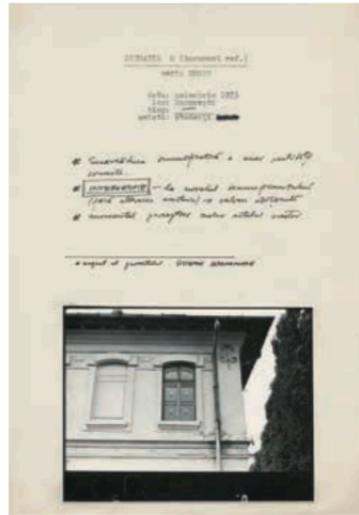


In the second one we learn about «essential elements of life – bread and water. The ball of yarn, a recurrent motif in Decebal Scriba's work, has a strong symbolic and philosophical dimension, as the thread/twine is associated with the idea of the path of initiation and/or with the thread of life. (...) Is it the representation of the duality between the desire for emancipation, even for escape, and a reality that wraps upon itself?» \*



«Separating Systems» (1) (2) (3), 1973  
(colecție particulară, România)

În seria «Separating Systems», reprezentarea spațiului în suși și a propriilor sale frontiere și praguri, «artistul intervine pe geamul ferestrei atelierului său, simbol pe cât de transparent, pe atât de concret al separației dintre spațiul privat unde se naște gândul și spațiul public unde el se transformă, se realizează și se difuzează.» \*



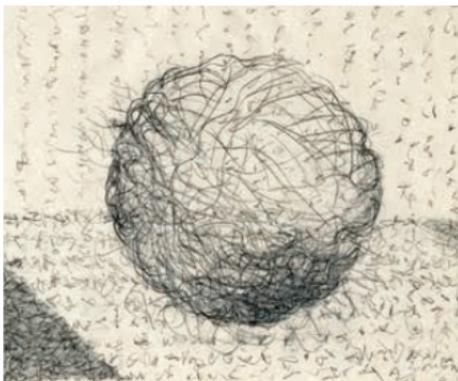
«Separating Systems» (1) (2) (3), 1973  
(private collection, Romania)

*In the series «Separating Systems» – the representation of the space itself and its own borders and thresholds – «the artist intervenes on his workshop window, a transparent – as it is concrete – symbol of the separation between the private space where the thought is born and the public space where it transforms, achieves and diffuses itself.» \**

\* Anne-Lou Vicente, extrase din textul catalogului expoziției Decebal Scriba, «Passages», 2019, galeria «Anne-Sarah Bénichou», Paris

\* Anne-Lou Vicente, extract from the catalog of the exhibition Decebal Scriba, «Passages», 2019, «Anne-Sarah Bénichou» Gallery, Paris

→ Pagina 48: «Separating Systems» (1) (2) (3), 1973 (colecție particulară, România)  
«Separating Systems» (1) (2) (3), 1973 (private collection, Romania)



«Clew», study, 1977, graphite drawing,  
15x19,5 cm  
(the artist's collection)



«Labyrinth», 1984–1985, black&white photo,  
10,7x16,7cm  
(courtesy «Anne-Sarah Bénichou»  
Gallery, Paris and «Anca Poterașu»  
Gallery, Bucharest)

*«the stripes evoke impasses, paths without exit that seem to convey the (reverse) image of another realm, being in fact an unseen portion of the same, unique reality, from which we can not escape.» \**

LE QUOTIDIEN DE L'ART

29/01/2019

Par Juliette Soulez

Le Quotidien de l'Art

Mardi 29 janvier 2019 - N° 1649

**Vu** EN GALERIE

Ci-dessus :  
Decebal Scriba,  
**Mask #2,**

série « Masks », 1976/2018,  
tirages gélatine argentique  
noir et blanc, triptyque,  
30 x 30 cm chacun.

## Decebal Scriba

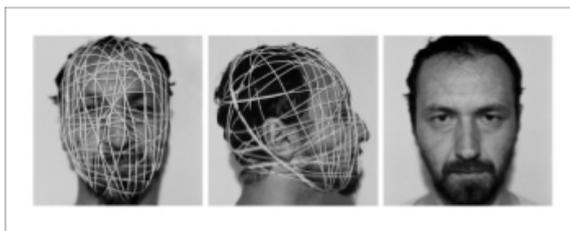
GALERIE ANNE-SARAH BÉNICHOU

L'intime et la dictature



Decebal Scriba,  
**The Gift,**

1974/2018, 6 tirages gélatine  
argentique noir et blanc,  
30 x 20 cm chacun.



Les œuvres : Courtesy Decebal Scriba et galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou.

Dans le cadre de la saison « France-Roumanie », Decebal Scriba, né en 1944 et émigré en France dans les années 1990, montre une sélection d'œuvres réalisées en pleine dictature. Datant des années 1970, elles expriment le rapport intime de l'artiste à la création et sa dimension politique, sans pour autant qu'il s'agisse d'un programme de dissidence ouverte, presque impossible à l'époque. La série des masques - trois photographies du visage de l'artiste strié par des cordes - aborde la question des traces visibles et invisibles du régime et de sa puissance d'oppression sur l'individu. Le diptyque *The Wall*, où sont inscrits à la craie des chiffres en ordre ascendant et descendant, est comme le symbole d'un mur démontable pierre par pierre, préfigurant de manière visionnaire la chute du mur de Berlin, tout en faisant référence aux constructions autoritaires de cette période. J.S.



« Passages »  
Jusqu'au 23 mars,  
45, rue Chapon, 75003 Paris  
[annesarahbenichou.com](http://annesarahbenichou.com)



Vue de l'exposition  
« Passages », consacrée  
à l'artiste Decebal Scriba, à la  
Galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou.

Photo: Juliette Soulez

Paris Art  
26.01.2019

parisart

ART | EXPO

# Passages

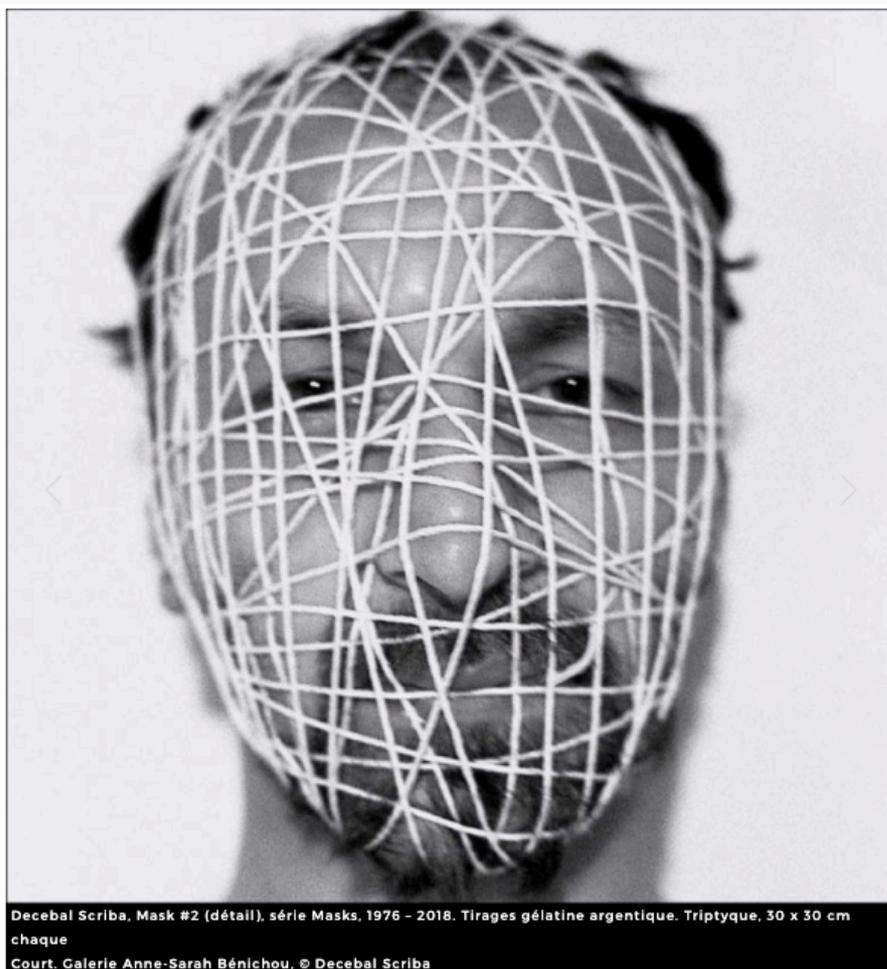
26 Jan - 23 Mar 2019

Vernissage le 26 Jan 2019

📍 GALERIE ANNE-SARAH BÉNICHOU

👤 DECEBAL SCRIBA

L'exposition « Passages » réunit à la galerie parisienne Anne Sarah Benichou des œuvres photographiques, graphiques et performatives de Decebal Scriba : un corpus cohérent à la forte dimension conceptuelle et politique que l'artiste roumain a produit durant la dictature, dans les années 1970 et 1980.



Decebal Scriba, Mask #2 (détail), série Masks, 1976 - 2018. Tirages gélatine argentique. Triptyque, 30 x 30 cm  
chaque

Court. Galerie Anne-Sarah Bénichou, © Decebal Scriba



L'exposition « Passages » à la galerie Anne Sarah Benichou, à Paris, retrace à travers des œuvres historiques la recherche performative, photographique et graphique que Decebal Scriba a menée durant la dictature roumaine.

## « Passages » : les œuvres réalisées par Decebal Scriba durant la dictature roumaine

Présenté pour la première fois en France, le travail de l'artiste roumain Decebal Scriba l'a pourtant affirmé dès les années 1970 et 1980 comme une personnalité marquante de l'art contemporain. Au cours de ces deux décennies qui furent celles de la dictature communiste de Nicolae Ceaușescu en Roumanie, Decebal Scriba s'illustra par des œuvres poétiques et personnelles dont la forte dimension critique et conceptuelle en ont fait des moyens d'opposition à l'idéologie dominante.

## Decebal Scriba, entre art conceptuel et performatif

La pratique de Decebal Scriba se tourne vers différents médiums comme la performance, la photographie, l'installation et la vidéo, pour aboutir à un corpus cohérent qui explore autant l'art conceptuel et performatif que les notions de langage formel et textuel, la symbolique des gestes et des formes ou encore la représentation spatiale. Le signe, élément central dans l'œuvre de Decebal Scriba, renvoie à la fois aux langages manuscrit, corporel, mathématique et culturel. Il se fait le support de réflexions philosophiques et politiques, portant notamment sur le rapport aux autres et à l'art.

## Une œuvre à la forte dimension politique aujourd'hui réhabilitée

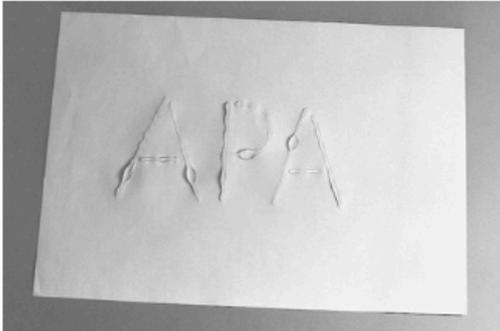
Les photographies *The Clew II* et *Rope Clew*, comme le dessin *Clew*, témoignent de la récurrence du motif de la pelote dans le travail de Decebal Scriba. Empreint d'une forte dimension symbolique et philosophique, la corde renvoie au fil de l'existence, avec ses nœuds, ses croisements, ses emmêlements, comme autant de dilemmes. Dans la série *Masks*, la corde devient une pelote entourant la tête de l'artiste, et symbolise les contraintes auxquelles sont soumis intellectuels et artistes en période de dictature.

Longtemps voué à l'oubli en raison de sa dimension politique, l'œuvre réalisée par Decebal Scriba au cours de la dictature roumaine bénéficie depuis quelques années d'une réhabilitation sur la scène artistique européenne. On redécouvre ainsi des créations aujourd'hui considérées comme représentatives de l'avant-garde roumaine d'après-guerre.

## ARTFORUM

31/05/18

## ARTFORUM



Decebal Scriba, *Water-Apa*, 1972, gelatin silver print, 17 1/2 x 23 1/2".

## Decebal Scriba

ANCA POTERASU GALLERY  
56 Plantelor Street Sector 2  
May 9 - June 30

The works in “Memory Clouds,” a survey of photographs from the 1970s and 1980s by the Romanian artist Decebal Scriba, incorporate semiotics, structuralism, and the philosophy of language to reveal what Deleuze called “lines of flight” and “reterritorializations” in

Romania under Communist rule. Contrary to common belief, '70s Romania was marked by a certain cultural openness, as artists began to immerse themselves in both international art magazines and theory. Inspired, perhaps, by his reading, Scriba returned again and again to the deconstruction of words and signs. He also dipped a toe into Land art, often through seemingly private conceptual gestures documented in black-and-white photographs. For instance, in the sly *Mirror series #2*, 1983, Scriba deployed a long strip of mirror both to interrupt natural landscapes—a sea horizon, clouds, a patch of sand—and to open up discussions about repression.

But can these artworks truly be interpreted as direct criticisms of the regime? Scriba and other Conceptualists of his generation managed to carve out autonomy by making mentally provocative art. His documented public performances and his tautologies—such as the photograph *Water-Apa*, 1972, which depicts the word “APA” (“water” in Romanian) written with water—risk feeling redundant in a political system rife with emptied words and fake scenarios. Yet ultimately, Scriba’s avant-garde works question the possibilities of expression itself in a Communist country where human contact is perennially and forcibly reconfigured and reduced to signs and codes, where affections are ritualized until they become one with the body. Perhaps most powerful about Scriba’s bewildering approach is how, in his milieu, it begins to feel almost logical.

— Daria Ghiu

Revista ARTA

21/03/17

Revista—ARTA

By Rareș Grozea

## Life beyond words



1/8

EXHIBITION VIEW, PHOTO CREDITS: ȘTEFAN SAVA

*Situations and Concepts* at Salonul de Proiecte is the continuation of a more ample process of historical recovery of Romanian conceptual art and of the traces of the activity of artists associated with the movement. 2016 saw a re-exhibiting of old works by Decebal Scriba, alongside some of his newer material, in the exhibition titled *in-side / out-side*, at Victoria Art Center, as well as in *in-side / out-side II*, at Calina Gallery in Timișoara, both curated by Olivia Nițiș, and four day after the opening of the exhibition at Salonul de Proiecte, IDEA press released *house pARTy. 1987, 1988*, which documents two “alternative artistic actions”, performed and recorded on tape in the Scriba couple’s house, and attended by many relevant artists of the time.

A historical revitalization is necessary for the entirety of the Romanian underground, experimental, not-addressed-to-a-wide-audience, art. A tempting perspective is to understand such manifestations as pure escapism, be it in nature (e.g. land art, with which Romanian artists start experimenting in the ’70s) or in words/objects (some works like Julian Mereuță’s *Captured*, in which the artist appears naked, in fetal position, and bound by ropes, can only stack up layers of interpretation). The reality is more nuanced, and this transpires from the exhibition, in which the restrictions of the regime are rarely explicitly acknowledged or made visible (though of course one shouldn’t overlook them either). The theoretical basis came straight from the West, where conceptual art,

detached from all social discourse, came into being as a theoretical, intellectual effort of dematerializing art, starting from minimalism, and not as a response to the political climate of the time (though connections can be found in the institutional critique that stemmed naturally from the problems raised by conceptual art). And theory was accessible at the time at the Union of Artists' library, which was subscribed to numerous foreign publications, accessible to anyone interested. The contact with Western discourse came therefore in the most natural manner.

The exhibition presents itself as the outcome of archival research, being comprised of disparate documents (objects, sketches, posters, etc.) on the lives and work of artists Horia Bernea, Pavel Ilie, Julian Mereuță, Paul Neagu, Mihai Olos, and Decebal Scriba, who, though they never formed a group, are bound together by their sporadic collaborations, by the conceptualist principles to which they adhered (each bringing a personal interpretation to an art that is, according to Sol Lewitt, an intuitive, and therefore a universally intelligible one), and by their status as expats.

We don't get a linear story told through historical sources, but instead the traces of complex series of personal interactions (conceptual, institutional, epistolary, etc.), most of which take place in the '70s, and which are also linked with an international historical context. There are the exhibitions in London and Edinburgh, as well as the letters of Czech art critic Jindřich Chalupecký, in which he offers Julian Mereuță advice about how to make do as an expat artist, alluding to the unfavorable circumstances in their native countries (a side-by-side display of the Romanian artist's responses would be interesting). Then there are Decebal Scriba's happenings, such as "The Gift", in which the artist paces the streets of Bucharest holding before him in his hands an invisible object, reminiscent of Jiří Kovanda's actions, but also in his style of documenting them, and of Karel Miler's works, based on corporal positions and binarity. In the exhibition texts written for *Situation and Concept*, which took place at Atelier 35 in 1974 and from which the current exhibition takes its name, updating it for the present, Decebal Scriba and Antonio Albici offer personal theorizations of the concepts with which they work.

Praxis is therefore infused by local color. Pavel Ilie, for instance, is unique in the respect that he puts into practice the aforementioned theories by means of traditional materials (adobe, wicker, wool, wood, etc.). His "Object", for instance, is formally reminiscent of minimalist works, but is not a singular piece of perfectly shaped and smooth metal or glass, materials which appealed for the minimalists' aspiration towards geometrical perfection, but instead a small hollow wooden cuboid, placed at foot-level, with two rectangular openings from which one can view its contents: a block of clay. We have an intrusion of the

organic into the pure geometric shape, an object that emanates a presence which ties in a more mystical sense (the subject emergent from and dissolving back into nature) to what Robert Morris states about the minimalist sculpture, namely that it must “include the beholder”. His *Projects* sketches also make use of objects from nature (Pavel Ilie also extensively experimented with land art), sometimes combined with man-made materials. Mihai Olos (present in the exhibition through a reproduction of a work which he enthusiastically gifted Decebal Scriba in the *Situation and Concept* exhibition) was also guided in his art by a dogma-free spirituality stemming from rural tradition (though this aspect of his work – the one that is present in the space is more linked to minimalism and perhaps op art – doesn’t transpire from the exhibition, it is worth noting). In Paul Neagu we see a desire to go beyond the “metaphorical speculations” of unrealized concepts, towards embodiment and transcendence (from his letter to Decebal Scriba, dated August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1974), and Horia Bernea in a fragment from his *Essay on Space / Iconography after Knowledge*, tries to establish a universal language for the knowledge and communication of art, not grounded in formal logic or language, like with Western conceptualism, but in mystical thought. None of the artists limits himself to a single medium and a single style/ concept, and the diversity of the objects displayed underlines their refusal of a singular label.

Traces (a concept explicitly tackled by Scriba in his text for *Situation and Concept*) are an important theme for the exhibited artists. Overall, the exhibition offers the physical traces of the activity of artists who sought and experimented with the possibilities of a universal artistic language and experience in repressive circumstances. The objects therefore cannot be evaluated only as aesthetic or conceptual objects (many were not conceived as such), but as indexes towards mentalities and styles, as things with a historical function, which unearths, especially given that some of the material is exhibited for the first time, an art in tune with the international context of the time, but with local hues, and which is still remains to be explored.

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Par Anouk Lederle

## « HOUSE PARTY » EXPÉRIMENTATIONS ROUMAINES AVANT 1989. INTERVIEW DE DECEBAL SCRIBA



expérimentations artistiques 1987-1988, Roumanie

« Bonjour **Decebal Scriba**. Vous êtes né à Brasov. Plasticien multimédia, l'art conceptuel est votre champ d'investigation, et le langage, l'un de vos domaines de prédilection. Vous avez quitté la Roumanie en 1991 et vous vivez en France depuis cette date. « house pARTy », recueil d'expérimentations artistiques de 1987 et 1988, vient juste de paraître à Bucarest. L'ouvrage est encore tout chaud. Il aura fallu un peu plus de trente ans pour que ce livre voit le jour. Revenons sur le contexte de ce projet issu des années les plus sombres du régime de Ceausescu. C'est vous, **Decebal Scriba**, qui êtes à l'origine de ce projet et aussi de ce livre ? Comment est née cette série de performances artistiques ?

Bonjour Anouk, merci pour cette interview. Pour répondre à votre question, je dois préciser que si moi et Nadina, ma femme, avons été en quelque sorte à l'origine du projet « house pARTy », la publication de ce recueil concernant les deux éditions de 1987 et 1988, s'est faite à l'initiative d'une petite équipe éditoriale composée de Raluca Voinea, Roxana Gibescu, Dan Mihaltianu et moi-même.

« house pARTy » est paru dans la « Collection expositions » de IDEA à Cluj. Il a reçu le support financier de l'AFCN (administration du fonds culturel national de Roumanie) et de « [tranzit.ro](http://tranzit.ro) » Bucarest.

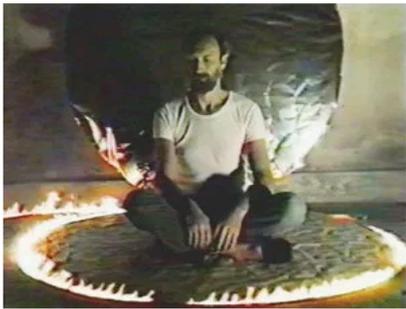
Quant à la question « comment est née... », la réponse est un peu plus complexe. Pour comprendre d'où vient ce projet alternatif, il faut revenir brièvement sur le contexte socio-politique. Au milieu des années 80, la vie culturelle en Roumanie était réduite à de rares manifestations officielles. Dès la deuxième moitié des années 70, non seulement le contenu des manifestations artistiques a été



Dan Mihaltianu, 1988

de plus en plus censuré, mais les expositions ont été fermées par le régime. En réalité, tout était bloqué. Dans ce contexte, il n'y avait pas de solution, pas d'accès aux espaces publics. Afin de ne pas abandonner complètement notre pratique artistique, afin de stimuler tant bien que mal notre créativité et finalement pour témoigner indirectement notre désapprobation de la doctrine officielle, il ne restait qu'une seule solution : l'espace privé.

Ce n'était pas nouveau. Nous n'étions pas les premiers en Europe de l'Est à avoir choisi cette démarche. Nous étions un groupe d'amis : artistes, historiens d'art, architectes, solidaires, avides d'expérimentations, de recherches interdisciplinaires, de nouvelles technologies. Nous n'étions pas regroupés autour d'un programme ; d'une édition à l'autre, la liste des participants a évolué sensiblement. La diversité de nos interventions – installations, actions ou performances – dans la forme et dans le contenu, témoigne de l'éventail de nos démarches artistiques.



*Decebal Scriba, 1988*

*Un projet entre quatre murs. Une expérimentation qui questionne l'ambiguïté de l'espace – intérieur/extérieur, espace privé versus espace public. Une double interprétation politique et psychanalytique. Diriez-vous que cette double lecture est un marqueur/une spécificité de l'art issu du bloc communiste ?*

Oui, je crois que cette double lecture peut être considérée comme un des marqueurs essentiels de l'art de l'Europe de l'Est, sachant que les conditions des pratiques artistiques dans ces pays étaient très proches.

De même, il y avait un nombre très réduit de solutions

pour préserver un minimum de liberté de création. Pour nous à l'époque, en tant qu'artistes, le choix était simple : il fallait se situer à « l'intérieur » ou « à l'extérieur » du système. Mais tout en choisissant de rester « à l'extérieur », nous étions contraints à vivre « à l'intérieur ». C'est cette lourde ambiguïté qui nous a marquée et qui, sans doute, traverse et imprègne nos créations.

*Difficile de construire des alternatives au sein d'une situation sociale et politique totalement bloquée, « house pARTy » inscrit la subversion douce comme force de résistance à l'absurdité du régime. Une réaction normale dans un contexte anormal. Est-ce qu'« house pARTy » est une initiative unique comme performance artistique alternative ? Que saviez-vous des autres tentatives au même moment en Roumanie ?*



*Nadina Scriba, 1988*

Non, bien sûr, « house pARTy » n'est pas la seule manifestation artistique alternative de cette période en Roumanie, même si elle est singulière. Il y a eu toute une série d'autres événements artistiques, happenings, installations, qui ont eu lieu à Timisoara, Cluj, Oradea, Sibiu, Baia Mare et même à Bucarest. Bien sûr, l'impossibilité de communiquer entre nous, le souci de confidentialité ont contribué à une désinformation. Nous n'étions pas toujours au courant des initiatives des autres. Nous allons les découvrir beaucoup plus tard.



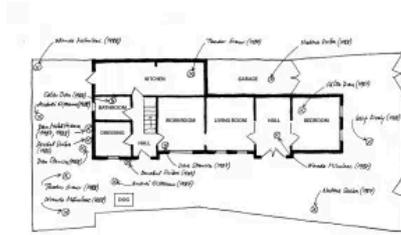
*Dan Stanciu, 1988*

*Qu'est-ce qui tisse ce fil rouge entre les deux expérimentations de 1987 et 1988 ? Comment lire aujourd'hui ce passage entre la spontanéité de 1987 et l'écriture plus construite de 1988 ? La problématique de celui qui regarde et qui est regardé, de la création et de la manipulation de l'espace est une thématique récurrente en Roumanie. L'œuvre de Constantin Flondor « Toi, moi, témoin » (1979), un manifeste. A-t-elle été une source d'inspiration ?*

Le fil rouge, s'il y en a un, c'est peut être notre envie à tous de refaire une nouvelle fois l'expérience de la vidéo pour oublier les frustrations du début et tester de

nouvelles idées. L'explication du décalage entre la spontanéité de la première édition et la rigueur – au moins apparente – de la deuxième, est relativement simple : pour l'édition de 1987, l'enregistrement vidéo était une surprise du tout dernier moment due à un contact personnel de Wanda Mihuleac. La plupart des participants avait préparé des interventions de type installation. La seule documentation de la manifestation que nous pouvions espérer était la photo en noir et blanc. Nous avons eu la chance d'avoir d'excellentes improvisations comme celle de Dan Stanciu. Pour la deuxième édition, en 1988, tous les participants ont présenté des actions et des performances à partir d'un petit scénario, d'où cette impression d'une construction plus rigoureuse. En réalité, ce n'était pas si simple. D'ailleurs, les contraintes techniques et le manque d'expérience se lisent dans les vidéos (1987, 1988).

Quant à la problématique de « celui qui regarde et qui est regardé », de la « création et de la manipulation de l'espace »... oui, je crois qu'une telle lecture est possible (cf le texte de Carmen Popescu), mais à l'époque, je pense qu'aucun d'entre nous n'y pensait ! Au sujet de l'œuvre de Flondor, je ne sais pas pour les autres, mais personnellement, je n'en ai eu connaissance que bien plus tard.



Plan des expérimentations



Les deux éditions de Wanda Mihuleac, 1988 « housePARTY »

se sont déroulées dans votre maison au 5 rue Petru Cercel à Bucarest, dans une zone qui avait été rasée par les bulldozers pour construire le Palais du peuple. « house pARTY » s'érige au sein de cet environnement en construction-déconstruction. Ce n'est pas anodin. Pourriez-vous nous parler plus en détail de l'occupation de votre maison ? Quel rôle dévolu à quelle pièce ?

La maison se trouvait effectivement dans une zone proche de l'ancienne partie de la ville rasée pour faire place au Palais du peuple, actuellement le Parlement. La destruction d'une grande partie de la vieille ville et la démolition de quelques monuments importants, a été un événement dramatique que nous regardions avec effroi. L'intervention de Iosif Kiraly de « house pARTY » 1988 est une allusion assez transparente aux campagnes de démolition et de « standardisation » des villes. Il n'y avait pas de pièce de la maison dédiée à telle ou telle installation. Nous avons laissé à nos invités la liberté de choisir l'espace qui convenait le mieux à leur projet à l'intérieur ou à l'extérieur de la maison, dans le jardin, en leur demandant gentiment de ne pas trop abîmer les murs. L'intérieur était occupé par quelques meubles, l'extérieur offrait évidemment beaucoup plus de liberté. C'est là que se sont déroulées la plupart des performances. Et puis, c'était l'été, il faisait chaud et c'était beaucoup plus agréable à l'extérieur que dans la maison.



Iosif Kiraly 1988

Le groupe d'amis<sup>[1]</sup>, artistes, historiens d'art, philosophes, qui a participé aux deux éditions « house pARTY » 1987 et 1988, compte aujourd'hui des personnalités reconnues. Cette renommée contribue à la légende d' « house pARTY » mais pas seulement. Racontez-nous ce qui constitue le ferment de ce groupe ?

Naturellement, la vie de chacun a suivi son cours. La plupart d'entre nous sont devenus des « noms », des personnalités de la scène culturelle roumaine. Mais ce n'est pas pour autant que l'expérimentation « house pARTY » a été reconnue comme un moment important de

l'art contemporain roumain.

Le groupe que nous étions à l'époque était né au hasard des rencontres, dans un milieu culturel et intellectuel relativement restreint. Un groupe, intéressé directement ou indirectement par les nouvelles formes d'expression artistique ou par des projets interdisciplinaires. Certes, par la force des choses, avec quelques-uns, nous avons des liens plus étroits, des aspirations communes et nous nous voyions plus souvent.

*Vous dites ne pas avoir eu conscience de ce que vous aviez réalisé à l'époque et que vous vous étonnez encore aujourd'hui de la qualité de cette expérimentation. Pris dans son ensemble, le résultat contient une incroyable unité. Cette vidéo, tournée dans un style documentaire, fait aujourd'hui référence. Elle est un des rares témoignages des expérimentations artistiques des années « 80 ». Diriez-vous que cette expérimentation fait référence ? Pour moi, elle est un point de repère dans l'histoire de l'art contemporain roumain. Qu'en pensez-vous ?*



*Andrei Oisteanu, 1988*

Si notre travail des années 80 fait référence ou non, c'est encore trop tôt pour le dire. C'est plutôt au jeune public d'aujourd'hui de mesurer la valeur de nos expérimentations. Mais pour que cela puisse se faire, il y a encore beaucoup de travail de collecte, d'enquête sur tout ce qui a été fait pendant toutes ces années pour pouvoir appréhender les expérimentations dans leur ensemble, reconstituer le contexte et seulement après faire le tri, reconnaître les valeurs, les références, identifier ceux qui ont moins d'importance et ceux qui résistent au temps. »