

**Related Programs:**

**Friday, January 15:**

Opening Reception

**Saturday, January 16:**

New Romanian Cinema Festival at Doc Films, 1212 E. 59th Street

Discussion with Alex Baciu and Irina Botea, and moderated by Olga Ștefan

**Sunday, January 17:**

New Romanian Cinema Festival at Gallery 400

**Tuesday, January 19:**

Curator's Talk with Olga Ștefan

**February, date TDB:**

Premiere of New Performance Commission by Rozalinda Borcilă

**Saturday, March 12:**

Closing Reception with Romanian food

*Additional programs to be announced.*



***Few Were Happy with Their Condition***  
**Video, Film, and Photography in Romania**

**Curated by Olga Ștefan**

**January 15 - March 12, 2016**

Dan Acostioaei, József Bartha, Irina Botea, Răzvan Botiș, Claudiu Cobilanschi, Ștefan Constantinescu, Alexandra Croitoru, Cristina David, Bogdan Gîrbovan, Alex Mirutziu Ciprian Mureșan, Vlad Nancă, Mircea Nicolae, Cristi Pogăcean, Ștefan Sava, and Mona Vătămanu & Florin Tudor

**GALLERY 400**



*Few Were Happy with Their Condition* was previously exhibited at Kunsthalle Winterthur, February 26-April 6, 2015, and Motorenhalle Dresden, September 9-October 17, 2015.

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**Gallery 400**

School of Art and Art History  
College of Architecture, Design, and the Arts  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
400 South Peoria Street  
Chicago, IL 60647

**Hours:**

Tuesday–Friday 10am–6pm  
Saturday 12–6pm

312-996-6114

gallery400.uic.edu

Front:  
**Mona Vătămanu & Florin Tudor,**  
*Rite of Spring*, 2010, video still

Back:  
**Ștefan Constantinescu,**  
*On the Other Side*, 2015, video still  
Design by Lavinia German

## ***Few Were Happy with Their Condition*** **Video, Film, and Photography in Romania**

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*Few Were Happy with Their Condition* explores life in post '89 Romania, a time of hope and enormous disappointment characterized by an unstable capitalist economy, extreme poverty, systemic political corruption, and a return to traditional and religious values. Focusing on video, film, and photography—still young artistic media and those initially developed to document and facilitate the organization of everyday life—*Few Were Happy with Their Condition* addresses the topic of discontentment in a society that, after twenty-five years of post-communism, still struggles to reconcile its past and present as it moves into an uncertain yet constantly longed for future.

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The current feeling of general malaise and unhappiness with the state of society is illustrated by the November 2015 protests in the Romanian capital Bucharest and during which more than 20,000 people came out in front of the headquarters of the Romanian government to express their discontent. These protests, which were triggered by the devastating Colectiv nightclub fire that resulted in more than 60 deaths and hundreds wounded, brought down the government perceived by many as corrupt and incompetent. In subsequent weeks a new governing party has made initial strides to include younger and more progressive platforms.

The artists included in this exhibition started their careers in the late 1990s or aughts, fully within the post-communist period. Looking outward with critiques of society, the political climate and social injustice; backward toward the country's dark past; but also inward, with personal narratives and reflections on the human condition, the artists attempt to create meaning out of a seemingly meaningless existence.

Whether using readily-available video and digital technology that issues from our contemporary context, as in Cristina David's two short videos (one of which inspired the title of the exhibition) that allude to alternative autobiographies and death, or using analog techniques which may still impart a material aura, as in Claudiu Cobilanschi's photo series of the artist performing in various positions in open space and his studio, the artists use the recorded image to capture and interpret the world around them and their place in it. At times through journalistic means and at others through poetic and abstract language, the immersion into the "reality" of the image—which according to Barthes is "an emanation of the past into the present"—is seamless. However, though as André Bazin wrote, "photography and the cinema...are discoveries that satisfy once and for all...our obsession with realism," we remain only too aware that often images lie. They can easily be altered, or represent a constructed and false reality, with their meaning manipulated. Cristi Pogăcean, for example, removed the lone protester from the iconic footage of the tanks in Tiananmen Square, thus creating an entirely new scenario.

In analyzing the complexities of the present, the majority of the artists in *Few Were Happy...* try to make sense of it through various forms of investigation. The objects of study and means of looking are diverse in works such as Bogdan Girbovan's photo series of the ten floors in his 1970s building and the residents living in its identical studio apartments; Vlad Nancă's *No Parking* photo series depicting objects used by Bucharest residents to reserve public parking spots; Alexandra Croitoru's *The Cabbage Process* that relates the story of an art professor who makes sauerkraut every year with his students; Irina Botea's *Picturesque*, which follows a tour guide as he talks about the deserted villages in the Apuseni Mountains; Mircea Nicolae's

photographic diptych of Bucharest residents waiting in bus stops; or even Razvan Botiş's video *Impulse* that shows two graffiti artists drawing on a wall with aerosol deodorants.

As Marshall McLuhan observed, "the artist is always engaged in writing the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present." But it is not only the future that is being written when analyzing the present. The past, in a country like Romania where the transition seems to be continuing endlessly, imposes its powerful, oppressive, and ubiquitous hold. Looking back are Ștefan Sava, whose *Pașcani* photo series and video addresses the Romanian involvement in the Holocaust, and József Bartha whose two lightboxes juxtapose his past to his child's present.

Additionally, a number of the included artists thematize time as a cyclical phenomenon either through video loops that seem to have no clear end or beginning, through metaphoric content, or through visual repetition. Ciprian Mureșan's *I'm Protesting Against Myself* uses repetition to reveal the ridiculous and weak characteristics in humans and himself. Ștefan Constantinescu's film *On the Other Side* loops to underscore the patterns of behavior in amorous relationships and the distance between lovers. Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor's video *The Rite of Spring* also loops, as do the years and the tradition depicted. Dan Acostioaei's *What Goes Around* exposes the persistence of Romania's corruption through the metaphor of the ever-circling ski lift. And Alex Mirutziu's subtle video, which can easily be confused for a still projection, parallels life's own patterns and small variations.

Romania's economic woes, lack of institutions that support artistic production, and the meager means at artists' disposal could also be understood to be reflected in the modest production value of some of these artworks, which focus on a search for profound meaning rather than on exercising technical sophistication. And yet, a frustration with this modest mode of working imposed by circumstance is evident, as well. As Ciprian Mureșan proposes in *I'm Protesting Against Myself*: "I'm protesting against myself because I accepted to be thrown in a garbage bin..." Production quality seems the necessary reaction to the artists' and the country's penury.

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*Few Were Happy with their Condition* presents a post '89 generation working with media, that have been largely absent from the focus of attention that Romanian art has received of late, one largely concerned with painting circulating in the contemporary art market. Since the 60s when artists first started using video, photography and film in an art context, they have critiqued the ever-growing hegemony of media itself on society's perception of a reality manufactured by Hollywood films and television, while resisting commodification. Gathered in the exhibition is a generation consumed by an existential struggle, an oscillation between optimism and resignation and a desire to build despite the many obstacles it faces. They use the tools invented for the purpose of documenting and ordering, criticizing and resisting, to bear witness to, analyze, and critique this period of uncertainty.

—Olga Ștefan

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