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***Independent art galleries in Romania: types of organization and  
aesthetic functions (2000-2020)***  
**ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL THESIS**

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**Key words:** independent art galleries in Romania, commercial art gallery, types of organization, aesthetic functions, art gallerist / dealer, artistic discourse, art world, white cube, aesthetic environment, aesthetic experience, aesthetic profiles, relational space, symbolic value of art, value economics of art, art collector, curator, art market, post-communism, cultural-artistic identity, “cultural archive”, profane space, Plan B gallery, artistic and curatorial practices, contemporary art production, cosmopolitan, trans-national, “The other Europe”, “Cluj School”.

## **Synthesis of the main ideas**

### **The problem**

This paper is an investigation of the types of organization, objectives and aesthetic functions of commercial art galleries in Romania. The research of the evolution of the independent Romanian gallery segment is based on the preoccupation of knowing the specific capacity of this regional artistic system in incorporating and projecting locally the dominant spirit that covers the current functioning of the world of contemporary art. An in-depth study of the emergency process of Romanian commercial art galleries gives us significant indications on how the adhesion of these Romanian artistic organizations to the world of global art has led, in the last approximately twenty years, to (re) writing the history of contemporary art in Romania and to the transformation of the internal and external vision on the local artistic production. The choice to dedicate this thesis exclusively to the theme of independent commercial art galleries starts from the fact that, since the 2000s, they have emerged on the local art scene as the main artistic organizations capable of actually generating and establishing economic and symbolic value for contemporary artists. Starting from such a premise, the more specific goal of my theoretical approach is to identify the particular skills of Romanian independent galleries in transposing to the art scene in the region: dominant aesthetics, certain types of self-organization, specific knowledge, competitiveness, the cultural identity and subjectivity of the contemporary artist in relation to the frequency of art as a consumer good, currently manifested mainly in the world of contemporary art.

### **Hypotheses**

The fundamental hypothesis of this work is that with the emergence and development of commercial art galleries in the cultural-artistic context of Romania, there is a change in the presence of contemporary Romanian artists in the world of international art. This phenomenon is due to the ability of commercial art galleries to insert local art production into the economic and

symbolic circuit of the global art world. At the same time, the premise is that the galleries with a coherently articulated aesthetic and managerial profile, which stand out since the second half of the 2000s, are the main artistic organizations that transform the way of perceiving Romanian art internationally.

The aim of this paper is to follow their participation in writing and rewriting the history of contemporary art in the Romanian cultural and geographical space. Thus, a fundamental question is whether commercial art galleries finally manage, through capital and international success, to change, due to their activation within the global art world, the external vision and narratives of Romanian artists and artistic production in the region? A major premise is that the effects of the galleries' effort to be a functional and recognizable part of the global artistic system have consequences in terms of changes in artistic discourse but also in the cultural identity of Romanian artists. Simultaneously, as artists discursively change their work and individuality, depending on their subjective and professional experience in the art world, by incorporating the effects of international status recognition, galleries in turn become a malleable social space that changes their aesthetic and organizational approaches. This is done in order to ensure longevity and connect to the innovations of the contemporary art world.

### **Objectives**

1. A redefinition of the concept of art gallery as “relational space” configured through the connections and dynamic exchanges of knowledge, cultural, intellectual but also economic values between art professionals participating in its structuring and functioning: art gallery / dealer, artist, the curator, the collector, but also the audience segment (Chapter I).
2. Identifying the socio-cultural context and paradigms that the local visual art scene faced during the transition stage, and what effects these circumstances have on the defining moment of the emergence and further development of independent commercial art galleries in Romania (Chapter II).
3. Selection and mapping of independent galleries on the art scene in Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest in order to create their individual gallery profiles, starting from their own types of self-organization and the aesthetic preferences of those who lead them. At the same time, following the correspondence between the two regional art scenes through the connections made by the art galleries (Chapter III).

4. The role and particular significance of a commercial art gallery on the process of transforming the cultural artistic identity and the local artistic mentality, through an example in a case study addressed to the Plan B gallery (Chapter IV).

### **The structure and methodology of the paper**

This thesis is divided into four chapters, built with the help of a varied methodology, given the strong interdisciplinary character that resides in the subject of the research. A first method is that of a conceptual analysis based on the bibliographic research of some observations and theories from philosophy, sociology, art history and, to a lesser extent, art economics. Positioning in a multiple disciplinary-theoretical perspective, highlighted from the first part of the work, proved essential to the need to redefine the art gallery in the form of a complex relational “ecosystem” with diverse philosophical implications and meanings within the contemporary art world. In the present paper, the relation of different discursive-theoretical areas can be noticed at the level of applying, experimentally, some philosophical concepts on some data and empirical considerations regarding the art gallery. Here, a suggestive example is the attempt to conceptualize the art gallery as an aesthetic medium in the sense of the philosophical argument of the phenomenologist Arnold Berleant, or the recognition of the capacity of "cultural archiving" and innovation of the art gallery in contemporary art production, starting from the terms theorized by Boris Groys.

Another method used in the elaboration of this work was that of a synchronic and diachronic comparativism applied mainly to art galleries. Here, the term synchronic refers to a "horizontal" comparison of the galleries with each other, but also of other artistic institutions examined in the second chapter of the work. While the phrase of diachronic comparativism represents a comparative approach between what the gallery meant in the transition stage and what the commercial gallery presupposes and defines now, able to integrate the artistic production in the international value circuit.

Another methodological procedure of maximum relevance was that of the case study in the last part of the paper. The final chapter dedicated exclusively to Plan B gallery was based on the case study method. Here, we followed a selective collection and interpretation of data about Plan B, but also a description of some representative moments for the "philosophy of life" and the cultural-artistic impact of this gallery.

## Outline of the chapters

The first chapter of this paper involves a redefinition of the concept of gallery starting from the component of its agents (art gallery / dealer, artist, collector, curator, art world audience) and the dynamics of relations between them, as a way of organizational organization. The course of this reconceptualization of the idea of a commercial art gallery takes place in accordance with the reception of its evolution over moments and markings in the modern and postmodern history of the visual art of the twentieth century. A classification, but also an examination of the self-organization capacity of the galleries, is made through an investigation of established gallery models, of profiles of dealers or gallery owners who marked the history of art and, last but not least, analyzing the current situation of the main agents of interest with whom the galleries work directly in the art world (the collector, the curator and the public).

The first chapter takes into account the philosophical views on the art world of Arthur Danto and George Dickie, but also the interactionist approach of the American sociologist Howard Becker, to explain the conformation of the gallery as a relational environment - consisting of the interaction of its characteristic characters. At the same time, following Brian O'Doherty's remarks on the dominant ideology of the *white cube* gallery, but also the phenomenological perspective on what can be seen today as an *aesthetic environment* for Arnold Berleant, I investigated the aesthetic potential of a contemporary art gallery. The quality of the gallery to become an aesthetic environment was examined in accordance with the influence brought by its exhibition space on the final aspect of the artistic object and its reception by the public. The identification of the way of structuring and the aesthetic functions of an art gallery from this first chapter later had a major role in shaping specific aesthetic and managerial profiles of the independent galleries in Romania.

The second chapter deals with an updated overview of the situation of the art scene and the main institutions in Romania, from the '90s to the early 2000s. This approach is necessary in the thesis to set the context of the local art scene before the actual appearance of private commercial art galleries in Romanian. The construction of this chapter focused on describing the artistic context of the transition stage in terms of local narratives, institutions and key concepts that help us understand the artistic production of the period and a priori factors of development of commercial art galleries. These factors presuppose the fragmented, conflicting aesthetic, politico-institutional and discursive artistic frequencies, starting from: the appearance of new private artistic institutions on the art scene; coagulation of artistic groups and generation of new relevant



institutions and organizations at the local level; the essential importance of the exhibition as a form of accreditation of artistic status, in the absence of galleries and commercial structures capable of creating international visibility for artists and, last but not least, the professionalization of cultural actors and the emergence of the role of curator. Such a framework is useful for an understanding of the origin of the international way of seeing Romanian art, which is also decisive for the birth of the local gallery sector. In an overview, this part of the work aimed to observe where myths such as the “exoticism” associated with artistic production in post-communist regions are rooted, as well as the ideological or aesthetic overlap with something that has been assimilated in the western public conception as the label of a "Balkanism", "Eastern Europe", "The Other Europe", etc.

The third chapter is central to the body of this paper and consists of a detailed presentation and analysis on the mechanisms of organization and aesthetic profile of independent galleries found on the art stages in Cluj and Bucharest. An approach to them is needed to understand the evolution and guiding spirit of the independent art system and the local art scene. With the advent of private commercial art galleries, we are witnessing the highlighting of the commercial character of contemporary art in Romania. The chapter considers a selection of 24 private arts organizations, in order to outline their distinct aesthetic profiles and their significance in terms of augmenting the local art scene. The mapping of galleries undertaken in this part of the thesis is a personal one, based on the following considerations: articulating a coherent and relevant aesthetic and managerial profile in relation to contemporary artistic production, their ability to constantly contribute to the dynamics of art platforms in Cluj and Bucharest. the power of inserting and distributing artists in the macro-international plane of the art world, the validation of represented artists and their own status in a thriving art history, the ability to work with the entire global institutional artistic network, sustainability and maximizing financial capital; last but not least, the impact on familiarizing society with contemporary art. Given the rise and international success of the private segment of art galleries since the mid-2000s, the final subchapter of this part of the thesis deals with the relevance of galleries in shaping the local art market, but also in shaping the collector's mind by articulating and revealing distinct typologies of the recent Romanian collector.

The last chapter of the paper consists in an investigation of the gallery's capacity, as a system of the art world, to (re) write the history of contemporary art of a certain cultural and geographical context, through the contribution to reconfigure the local artistic identity in accordance with the multicultural spirit, transnational and collaborative of the global art world. Consequently, Chapter IV verifies this premise through a case study dedicated to Plan B Gallery, considered by far the most successful model of Romanian commercial art gallery. Drawing on the organizational model and aesthetic interest of the Plan B Gallery, this part examined the contribution of a gallery in really taking part in the solidification of the profile and artistic imagination of the moment and, if it has an interest in assuming a position (self) criticizes the construction of the cultural-artistic identity of the last thirty years. The capacity of Plan B gallery to “enroll” exemplary in the process of (re) writing the history of Romanian contemporary art and of an identity-artistic narrative from non-marginal positions was signaled by a presentation and analysis of the curatorial approach in the exhibition *When History Comes Knocking: Romanian Art from the 80s and 90s in Close Up* (Plan B, Berlin, 2010-2011). Also, the quality of this gallery to exemplify the character of the *aesthetic environment*, adaptable through artistic discourse, was presented in the last subchapter of this part by an illustration of the artistic intervention in the gallery space of the artist Cristian Rusu, in the exhibition *The Only Thing I Am Sure about in This Life Lies above My Head* (Plan B, Berlin, 2020).

### **Conclusions and personal contributions**

The general conclusion of this work is that, since the 2000s, galleries are the main artistic organizations that have decisively increased the visibility of contemporary artistic production in Romania. Their way of acting internationally has been part of a mutation of society and the collective mind from the local to the global, an aspect felt even in the daily lifestyle. This work aims to highlight the decisive role of independent art galleries in changing the international and local reception of contemporary Romanian artists, through their ability to participate in the process of artistic consecration.

Commercial art galleries have developed as an expression of the maturation of the artistic system in Romania. By setting new perspectives with the help of commercial art galleries, the confusion and tumult of the transition reflected previously and at the level of the local art scene are preceded by a strengthening of confidence in the assumption and self-capitalization of their

own cultural resources, but also the generation of innovative creative-artistic forms. They contribute to the change in the internal and external reception of artistic production, acting directly in the core of the global art world. Thus, the Romanian galleries participate in writing the history of contemporary art from updated positions by consolidating a cultural and economic capital to the artists they represent and, at the same time, by their capacity to archive contemporary creation. Demonstrating in the first chapter that art galleries behave like relational “ecosystems”, made of actors with expertise in the art world, I came to the conclusion that they represent common “spaces” of founding and distributing artistic value. Due to the capacity of the commercial art galleries to achieve the economic and cultural transfer between the local contemporary artistic production and the global international plan, we are also witnessing a mutation of the discourses of the Romanian artists. This discursive transformation takes place in terms of assuming a cultural-artistic identity detached from the context of trauma and the post-communist condition. At the same time, the transformation is partially encouraged by the policies of differentiation and the cosmopolitan background characteristic of the global logic of the world and the art market.

Therefore, this paper examined the evolution of the commercial art galleries sector in Romania and under the impetus to understand the correlation between their way of acting internationally and the current meanings of the identity-cultural condition of Romanian artists. The final conclusion we have reached is that a consequence of the effort to internationalize Romanian contemporary art by art galleries involves their inclusion in the maintenance and promotion of the transnational, transcultural and migratory condition of the contemporary artist; in fact, they themselves assume such an identity. For the Romanian galleries and the artists represented by them, the principle of diversity and cultural differentiation, which covers the global spirit of the art world, has significantly contributed to creating the right moment to find their itinerary and individual place in the history of contemporary art.

The originality, but also a potential limitation of this paper, lies in the brief and episodic treatment of the subject of Romanian independent art galleries, in the academic context and of local art criticism. The contribution of my research consists in a personal, selective mapping of commercial art galleries in Cluj and Bucharest to capture the dynamics, mission and contribution of the Romanian gallery segment to changing the paradigm of local contemporary art production and how is assimilated, both locally and internationally. Even if, finally, this work did not inventory and proposed for exhaustive analysis all the commercial art galleries in Romania, the

intention was to outline the organizational-aesthetic profiles of some galleries in Cluj and Bucharest, which challenge us to rethink the philosophy behind the functioning of such organizations as well as the aspirations of those who lead them. Given that, in the literature, the theme of the contribution of commercial art galleries in Romania to international artistic consecration is a secondary one now, this thesis aims to highlight artistic innovation and updating the local art scene through the rise of Romanian art galleries.

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