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Moving Dialogue: Madalina Dan in conversation with Cristiane Bouger



CNDB Ocupat

Interview date: May to August, 2011

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In December 2010 the National Center of Dance Bucharest – CNDB lost its facilities located at the National Theater of Bucharest (Teatrul National din Bucuresti). The space claimed by the institution inside the National Theater was officially established in 2004 when it was founded as a public institution subsidized by the former Minister of Culture Razvan Theodorescu. CNDB is the only contemporary dance institution in Romania supported by state funds.

The doors were shut on account of a renovation in the building sustained on the announcement the construction would not resist the effects of a potential earthquake (the most tragic one in Romanian history occurred in 1977). Even

though, speculations arise among artists concerning the truth behind the official statement. It is known by the population that many buildings in the downtown area would not resist the quiver of a new tragedy as well as it is a common understanding amongst many Romanians that the government can evacuate a building evaluated as “condemned” just to benefit its own interests.

With a [51-million euros budget](#) approved by the Minister of Culture Kelemen Hunor, the National Theater director Ion Caramitru’s project to renew the building includes the removal of the current faÅşade and the return to its initial structural framework constructed from 1963-69, during the Communist regime.

The main concern lays in the fact that once the renovation is completed in the following years, the building will display several stages for theater production, though the National Theater will neither have any studio or stage to replace CNDB facilities nor a new program dedicated to contemporary dance. In an interview given by Adriana Popescu (National Theater’s Department of Cultural Strategies, Communication and PR) for the newspaper Adevarul, a “statement of principle” is displayed at the beginning of the [interview](#) announcing the main interlocutor who can give “authorized answers” about the CNDB – as well as National Operetta Theatre and The National Museum of Contemporary Art – displacement is the ministry in question.

Without a space of its own to provide artists with rehearsal space, classes or a performance space to show the work of Romanian choreographers, the institution struggles with a considerable effort in order to keep its activities. By May 2011, CNDB was operating from an office space and had Tuesday evening at the Black Box at the National Theater. However, the borrowed space will not be available as a long-term concession.

The interview below reflects issues inspired by my conversation with the choreographer Madalina Dan during the Moving Dialogue Exchange in Bucharest, as well as by her lecture given at Fabrica de Pensule in Cluj-Napoca on CNDB-Ocupat. It sets light on some of the difficulties and outcomes brought by this new challenging context, as well as the impact of it on her own artistic work.

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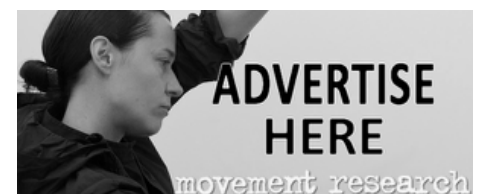
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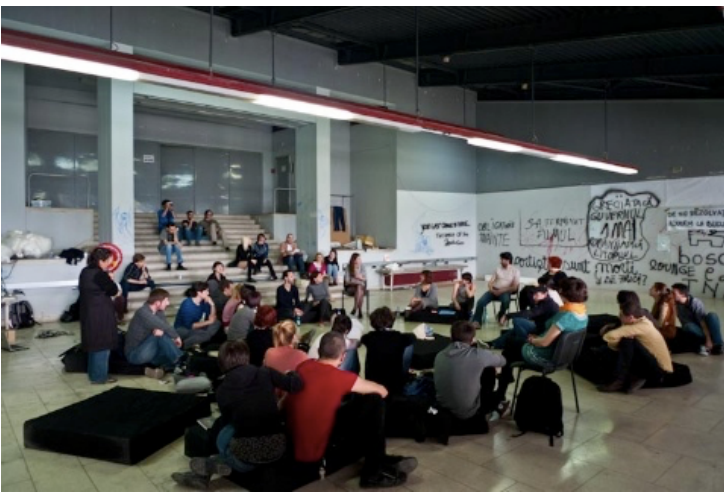


Photo: Simion Cernica



Photo: Carmen Cotofana

Cristiane Bouger: What is the importance of CNDB to the dance community in Romania?

Madalina Dan: CNDB is the only institution dedicated to contemporary dance in Romania, having the thorny position to fulfill all the needs existing for an institution such as: developing, producing, promoting, financing contemporary dance locally and internationally, creating and educating an audience, developing an infrastructure.

The existence of a contemporary dance institution with proper conditions to develop should be normality for a European Union country, but it seems that there's more to wait and more battles to give until that point. Actually the situation of CNDB is reversible because it finds itself back in 2005, before having the space. Contemporary dance in Romania is surviving in a continuous state of precarity, everything is shaky, every initiative comprises an artist's or structure's huge struggle to survive and impose pressure over the state authorities.

For the last four years CNDB was a bit more than an institution for contemporary dance; it was a model of a modern and alternative institution, opened to other interfering contemporary art forms, linked with its sociopolitical contexts. In that way I believe that the abuse of dissolving this space is a hundred times bigger than any abuse because it destroys a competent and progressive state institution.

The Center privileged the diversification of form of representation, offering the audience the possibility of watching contemporary dance performances updated to our times, meaning taking risks, imposing and fighting for its identity.

There were a lot of complaints concerning the politics and the aesthetics of CNDB over the years. It came from the inside of the dance community in Romania that was attacking the term "National" from the name of the institution (the National Dance Center) for not being representative of the Center's directions: critical perspectives, dance theory, research and experiment, attributes that can be found in an underground structure in Romania, not in a mainstream one, as the Center had to be.

Unfortunately, an aspect to be mentioned as an issue in the post communist and totalitarian Romania is the internal splits and conflicts, due to generational differences and the rigid minds, I must say.

Cristiane: Considering this panorama, what was the occupancy at CNDB and how it developed?

Madalina: CNDB Ocupat (occupied), an action initiated by artists/collaborators of this institution was a protest addressed to the ministry of culture in what concerns some clear perspectives and alternative of moving the facilities of this institution; it was also a form of artistic resistance that militates actively for the legitimation of contemporary art in Romania. In the course of three weeks, on a disassembled and demolished background, the occupation of CNDB generated an artistic but also social and political movement without precedents in the Romanian cultural landscape: choreographers, performers, architects, visual artists, writers, musicians, theoreticians and activists made a common front in an action of cultural occupation which if multiplied, could become a recurrent practice when it comes to draw attention and amend abuses and anomalies of a lazy/indolent, incompetent and corrupt system.



Photo: Claudiu Cobilanschi

Here I quote the text from the initial call for the occupation:

“Today 21st March 2011 a group of artists occupied The National Center of Dance – Bucharest (CNDB). The works to destroy the centre have finally started. The whole area is now surrounded by a fence and the interior are being dismantled. The moment that for so long has been postponed, it now arrived.

An agreement was reached with the Cultural Ministry that other rehearsals and working spaces would be provided to the artists that until now have been working in the centre.

As today we do not know of any concrete space available to us, now.

Information are vague and nobody seems to really know what will happen. Moreover it seems that the budget to construct a new space for CNDB was not yet officially approved. But again, nothing is known for sure.

In order to shed some clarity over this situation, we decided to occupy the building of CNDB until other working spaces will be available for use and the agreements for a new space finalized.

Until then we refuse to leave our working space.

This is not a private struggle of a community to keep their space, it is a struggle to avoid art to be considered as “recreation”, as a disposable “extra” instead of sustained and continuous work.

We call for other artists, students, teachers, activists, sympathizers, friends and whoever is interested, to join us. We invite you to come and use the space.

It’s big, there is studio space, wireless internet, basic sound systems... you can come to work, organize events, talks, workshops, music sessions and anything you can think of.

You can also move your normal daily activity here.

Come before they totally fence the area off!”

– THE OCCUPANTS

My first intention regarding CNDB Ocupat was to physically impose a sort of reaction to the existing situation. In Romania there is a lack of activism and protest attitude towards the political system, in regards the society being too obedient and indulgent with irregularities. The civic senses were repressed by the communism regime. Taking the action of “moving” and occupying the Center was also an intention of speculating and using artistically the desolated landscape, by activating the place when falling apart, by overusing it and opening it to everybody.

As an observation, most of the active people in CNDB Ocupat were more keen on the revolutionary and anarchistic aspect of the movement, on the “common space” ideologies and not on the Center’s identity and situation. For others, the occupation was more symbolic and it meant supporting a competent institution by culturally resisting and artistically protesting.

Sadly, the outcome of this artistic revolution was not efficient on the pragmatic point of view: the demands were not solved. But it is true that the Minister of Culture understands CNDB as a priority because the situation became such a bother to him with so many protests, letters and public scandals.

Artistically, culturally and socially speaking, CNDB Ocupat should be mentioned in the books of history because it was the first form of institutionalized squatting in Romania, which means that artists, supporters or activists were squatting in an institution under its approval. On a personal level it was an extreme and rewarding experience, which I am grateful for being a part of because it made me live and witness an active process of shaping a temporary community.

Cristiane: You have mentioned that other artists, including Florin Flueraș, prompted different actions like speeches after plays at the National Theater, as well as public protests, some of it as part of [Romanian Dance History](#) practice. What has changed since these practices and protests?

Madalina: Florin Flueraș, Ion Dumitrescu and Manuel Pelmus call their practice cultural terrorism and they make interventions and projects under the name and ideology of post-spectacle. They sometimes perform on stages or present works in art galleries or public spaces without any invitation or approval. Under this practice they hack big stages like Impulstanz with discourse about *the Romanian Dance History*, they organize camouflaged entertaining shows into the mall where they give anti-consumerists speeches, they appear live on television with a TV performance *2012 – ultima apocalipsa*, they run for presidency with the intention of dissolving the *power*.

What has changed since these practices? It is hard for me to say. Considering the *audience*, the artists observed people’s lack of reaction, how numb and indolent they are no matter what the discourse is. When *attacking* institutions

and authorities they are approached very politely and formally. Their activist and political attitude and their discursive approach create an incisive and unique *voice* on the Romanian contemporary art scene.

Cristiane: During our conversation in Bucharest you stated: "I'm not a revolutionary. I'm afraid of authorities; childhood remains. I'm getting to know this state of being because of the sociopolitical context I live in." The CNDB Ocupat seems to have encompassed a strong endeavor for you. What has changed on your artistic perspective since the occupancy?

Madalina: Sometimes I find the state of being critical and reactionary kind of unhealthy and exhausting. I don't always find the strength to be pragmatic and use it artistically.

What has changed on my artistic approach? I am more emotional in my works than before. I use my emotions on stage, I play and dig into the manipulation of my feelings, and I try to find out how to perform and represent them. I work more with the state of defeatism and self-indulgence, being activated by low spirits. I am not so picky and organized when it comes to structuring work. I prefer to show, address and share with the audience the imperfections, the disillusion, the concerns of the working process.

At the moment, I am collaborating with Mihaela Dancs on a piece with the working title (*Anti*) *aging* that aims to explore and promote a hedonist utopia, a creative sanatorium, the idea of relaxation, enjoyment and recreation as working method and as a problematic, putting away the rationality and judgments in the benefit of amusement, excitement and savoring pleasure. The issues that we deal with in (*Anti*) *aging* are: experiencing and searching for physical pleasure and voluptuousness in movement beyond aesthetics and meanings, investigating the emotional and therapeutic effects of a movement, kinesthetic empathy, affective proprioception, sexuality, the evanescence of our bodies. This piece is supposed to be remade in our 60's; so it is a piece projecting our agedness.

Cristiane: From defeatism to savoring pleasure...that is an interesting reversibility in your work interests. I would love to see the development of this piece and all the issues you and Mihaela Dancs seem to activate. This hedonist utopia is even stronger considering your current context. Yeah... because during Moving Dialogue we were experiencing your context – and by this I mean the community work developed at [La Bomba](#), the loss of CNDB amenities, the gypsy community removal, the depressive atmosphere in recurrence of the lack of interest by the Minister of Culture Kelemen Hunor as well as by Ion Caramitru in regards to the contemporary dance community. On the other hand I question how organized and engaged the artists really are in this process after the initial spark. I mean... to really promote the change.

Madalina: The Community Art Center La Bomba studios was eventually evicted. As a form of protest they made a public conference against the Romanian state and the destruction of the social system, followed by an underdeveloping project, called *without support* to continue out on the streets. So all of their activity of six years and sustained community work efforts have vanished. Artists or structures that are doing extraordinary work for their communities and developing long-term projects in Romania need energy and enthusiasm to keep on insisting. It's madness...

The big issue for me is how to insist: bureaucratically, with small steps or physically, by being active and noisy on the social scene? Both of these steps are very important. Now I believe more on the efficiency of paper works and the collaboration between specialized entities in order to change the laws.



Photo: Madalina Dan

Cristiane: What is the near-future perspective concerning a new address to CNDB?

Madalina: CNDB offices and one studio space already have an address. I have no news about the budget that the ministry of culture promised to allocate for the future CNDB. This period is also a kind of transition period for the director's change of this institution. The actual director, Mihai Mihalcea doesn't want to be a candidate for a next mandate. So the institution is on standby for the moment.

Cristiane: How is the dance community developing work under the current circumstances?

Madalina: Because CNDB has no theater or space for showing performances, the dance community that I am in contact with is disseminating in other individual projects, collaborations, venues and residencies.

It is a decentralization time, same situation as in 2005.

Cristiane: I remembered when Vava Stefanescu mentioned that during the Communist regime she and her peers used to have "clandestine classes" with teachers who had studied abroad. She was referring to the prohibited modern and contemporary dance classes during a time when the ballet schools had to follow the Soviet model.

In 2007, you choreographed [Dedublarea](#) (Duplication) as a critical commentary addressed to the educational dance system in Romania. If I put this information in perspective, it seems to me that the old model that prevailed during the regime still deeply influences the mind of those in the academy, institutions and audience. Do you know why?

Madalina: The difference between then and now is that now there is access to information with the mighty help of the internet. In communism most of the information coming from the West was censored. The funny thing is that our teachers at that time were the promoters and the pioneers of modern dance in Romania. They were experimental, brave and edgy artists and for that we respect them. But the shift of generation, the fast conditions of adaptation and

the communist frustrations made them less flexible. The art educational system in Romania needs a quick reform as other domains in Romania. The reform that occurred so far only concerns legislations imposed by the EU standards for the authorities. The content is still very dusty and traditional. The system is hollow with old teachers with high degrees that cannot be contested, with huge salaries. The system is still corrupt.

What is very tragic for me is the lack of contemporary art information and knowledge in the curriculums. Conceptual dance and contemporary art references were blasphemous in most of our courses in the University.

Cristiane: A final question: during the conversation we had in Bucharest, you said you want to be "part of the process of democratization" in your country. How do you perceive post-Communist Romania?

Madalina: Under difficult times; the communist oppression has been changed with the capitalist and consumerist religion, people lost values, media is a mass destruction, a lot of bureaucracy and corruption are blocking the reform process. On the multiple problems that this country has, its cultural problems appear like small trifles: the health system problems, the incapacities to control the financial crisis, the low standard of living, these are urgent issues and priorities for a poor country like Romania, not contemporary dance.

On the other hand, it is compelling to live here and pass all these fast transformations and adaptations. It is an intriguing country to observe, with a lot of contradictions. I get very energized by the good examples. I see more and more artists in Romania with social and political awareness, people and organizations fighting for their rights, interesting and courageous initiatives with a lot of enthusiasm in spite of all the obstacles... so things are slowly moving forward. Even the mentalities, to finish this interview optimistically.

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