



## Beyond Salvage

Rooted in the ethnographic discourses of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the principle of the “salvage paradigm” represents “a desire to rescue ‘authenticity’ out of destructive historical change,” or more implicitly, from those through whose negligence it might be lost.<sup>1</sup> This subject might seem outdated and irrelevant to discussions of contemporary cultural production, where any attempt at “cultural salvage” can only be greeted with suspicion given the contemporary discourse around Western systems of the objectification of otherness. The principle of “salvage” signifies cultural, aesthetic, and institutional practices best discarded as obsolete.<sup>2</sup> Despite this intellectual awareness, this desire persists within contemporary anthropological discourse and in the cultural practices of art collecting, connoisseurship, and practices of art production. As part of a series of Discussions on Contemporary Culture sponsored by the Dia Art Foundation in 1987, in a session entitled *Of Other Peoples: Beyond the Salvage Paradigm*, Virginia R. Dominguez states that “salvage,” in its broadest sense, “lies at the heart of most forms/practices of representation – visual, audio, literary, expository – in which the presenter uses or incorporates material or immaterial objects that s/he perceives to be the creation/property of others.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the process of “salvage,” the saving of imperiled property from loss, is alive and well in the contemporary visual practices of appropriation and the in persistence of nostalgia in contemporary art production.

How does one step beyond the paradigm of “salvage” and this desire to rescue authenticity from neglect? How does one engage with the past in a meaningful manner that opens up a critical space in the discussion surrounding practices of visual representation without simply resorting to a citation game of “salvage?” Euro/American art history is littered with narrative and allegory; stories that express profound fundamental human experiences that follow a lineage of tragedy that leads all the way back to Eden. In his exhibition *Romanian Debacle* Mathew Reichertz chooses to engage with a story that exists without biblical proportions or global historical significance, but still falls within this lineage of loss. Multilayered, indirect, and operating between abstraction and figuration, Reichertz engages with narrative without repeating what has gone before. History, politics, and aesthetics collide, providing fertile ground to explore and transcend narrative and establish a critical space in which the experience of these events occurs. In Reichertz’s exhibition, the subject of “salvage” functions both literally and allegorically. Materials and representation transcend this ideological paradigm and engage in a process of associative or semiotic autonomy through narrative with the past.

*Romanian Debacle* recounts the events surrounding the 1979 international exhibition, *8 Contemporary Romanian Painters*. The story begins in April 1979 with a financing agreement of up to \$1 billion US by Canada’s Export Development Corporation (EDC) for four CANDU reactors to be sold to Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu’s government.<sup>4</sup> During this same year, the state sponsored an exhibition of contemporary Romanian painting, possibly organized as a cultural exchange of good faith, or, given Ceausescu’s subsequent request for a ‘counter trade’ agreement where Romania would export goods instead of cash, as currency for the sale of Canadian nuclear technology to a country that could not afford it. A dubious honour for these 8 artists given the tactics of the Romanian government of the time, which during the construction of the Cernavoda reactor

### *Romanian Debacle* Mathew Reichertz

Ballroom Gallery  
February 24 - March 20,  
2004  
Artist Presentation  
March 9 at 7pm

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*A final version of this essay will appear in the Khyber Box Set, a series of writings that profile a years worth of programming in the Khyber’s Ballroom Gallery.*

transported workers from factories, farms, and military conscripts, to be used as forced labour.<sup>5</sup> Transported to Canada by air, the paintings arrived at the Halifax International Airport where, through the negligence of Air Canada employees, the crates were left on the tarmac over 6 rainy days. They arrived at Saint Mary's University Art Gallery water logged and damaged by mold. With the making of an international incident at stake, agents of the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa were dispatched to Halifax in order to salvage the works. Through painstaking technical feats, the works were reconditioned and eventually exhibited. Only to be met with very little acclaim by a Canadian public.

Reichertz approaches this subject in a series that consists of 8 large portraits and 60 smaller works that spin the narrative of these events. Moving physically between these works, the viewer mimics the intellectual dynamic required in order to move between the narrative of the experience of these events, and the broader context in which this process of representation occurs. Sourcing the original exhibition catalogue and the "implicit stereotypes" posited therein, Reichertz's tactic also involves the appropriation of the stylings of contemporary western painters. Within these works can be seen the imagery of Hockney, Pollock, Richter, and Close. Lesser-known painters such as Tony Scherman and Ida Applebroog also find a place in the larger portraits. In the these works, watery references abound, from Hockney's *A Bigger Splash* in the "Portrait of Horia Bernea," to Pollock's drip in "Portrait of Virgil Almasanu," and in the "Portrait of Georgeta Naparuws Grigorescu," a pastoral backdrop of a scenic waterfall containing echoes of Applebroog. It is in this manner that Reichertz constructs a relationship between the Romanian contemporaries and those artists that set the standards of painting's discourse. This selective appropriation defines the parameters of the taxonomy of "salvage" that occurs within the context of pluralistic contemporary painting practices.

Throughout his career Reichertz has made the manner in which individuals are remembered a part of his methodology, often dealing with the subject of memory and loss, as in *Necessary Man*, his MFA thesis exhibition at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Reichertz found himself configured within the imagery of his work, through fictional narrative, incorporating himself as model to create a multilayered exploration of memories and stories of a past in the process of being lost. Both conceptually and figuratively, the *Romanian Debacle* continues this exploration. It is within the smaller works that the narrative occurs in nonsequential fragmented forms that owe more to the filmic image layering of Kurosawa than to the realism of Courbet. It is through the question of literalness and ambiguity that allegorical narrative is explored – testimony to Reichertz's statement that "painting is non sequential, even in narrative, and narrative becomes a means of grounding a practice in painting."<sup>6</sup> Fluctuating

between figuration and abstraction in the smaller works, the viewer is confronted with images of the "Ararat Anomaly," the Cernavoda reactor in "CANDU Reactor," a portrait of an executed Nicolae Ceausescu in "Ceausescu, 25 December 1989," a series of fungal like abstracts, the signature self portrait in "Air Canada Employee." Materials and meaning combine in this series of works as the liquid form and nature of paint is pushed to its limits. The hydrophobic mediums of wax, resin, and oil betray their own molecular nature in this mimesis of water, a major player in the narrative. Water flows in and out, like the viewer moving between the larger and smaller works. From a "Wet T-Shirt Contest on Mars After Sabin Balasa," through "Wave After Ewen after Hokusai," and finally, to a delicate abstract that feels like droplets of rain on a black asphalt tarmac. The disparate imagery weaves a web of meaning that functions as narrative and denies literality. These are fragments of a larger whole that must be seen in their entirety to approach understanding; unlike the salvaged parts of a whole that are invested with the authenticity of experience. Viewing these works becomes a process of what Virginia R. Dominguez referred to as "pushing for semiotic self-determination."

The exhibition *Romanian Debacle* explores the breadth and depth of narrative, alternating between materials and meaning to open up a space for the exploration of the "story." Mathew Reichertz achieves a means by which both the artist and viewer are able to move beyond the "salvage" ideology. Not simply as a representation of allegorical repeats, but the construction of a relationship between artist, viewer, and the story of the works presented in this exhibition. Is this enough to transcend this phenomenon? Likely not, but perhaps in the space in which this exhibition situates itself a necessary condition is achieved to move beyond.

Renato Vitic

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James Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the "Salvage" Paradigm," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* No 1. ed Hal Foster, New York, Dia Art Foundation, 1987. p.121

Virginia R. Dominguez, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the "Salvage" Paradigm," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* No 1. ed Hal Foster, New York, Dia Art Foundation, 1987. p.131

ibid. p. 137

David Martin, "Exporting Disaster The Cost of Selling CANDU Reactors," in *Nuclear Awareness Project for the Campaign for Nuclear Phase out*, Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility, 1996. <[http://www.ccnr.org/exports\\_1.html#tab](http://www.ccnr.org/exports_1.html#tab)>

Paul Koring, "Grim labor conditions continue at CANDU reactor site", *Globe & Mail*, May 15, 1996. p. A4

Mathew Reichertz, pers. comm.