

The Bureau of Melodramatic Research: HEARTBEAT DETECTION SYSTEMS

Solo exhibition curated by Cristina Vasilescu

Heartbeat Detection Systems is the first project developed and presented by The Bureau of Melodramatic Research after the premature death of Alina Popa (b.1982) in February 2019. It takes the form of a solo exhibition at SUPRAINFINIT Gallery in Bucharest centered around the production of two new works, placed in a dialogue with existing Bureau works.

Performative work, in which the two founding members Alina Popa and Irina Gheorghe were always present, was intrinsically central to the practice of the Bureau. Their presence in the performances was planned to transform in new contexts, as the artists moved towards old age. With Alina's death in 2019, this is no longer possible. The practice of The Bureau of Melodramatic Research will continue, but in the physical absence of its two initial agents, opening up for new collaborations.

Considering this unanticipated development of the work, the current project becomes all the more important for the Bureau's future activity. On one hand it marks a retrospective moment, a moment in which some of the work produced so far can be reevaluated and presented once again to the public, but also a moment of anticipation, offering a reflection on the possibilities for a further expansion of the practice, while accounting for an inevitable absence at its core.

Heartbeat Detection Systems thus presents itself both as the Bureau's set of techniques for examining affective flows in a wider social and political environment, as well as an experiment for exploring the pulsations of the heart in the Bureau's own practice. How can the vital signs of a long term practice be detected and maintained and how can they incorporate the idea of absence

The exhibition is centered around the production of a new work entitled *High Heel Communism*. Nine women are neatly lined up looking straight into the camera, with arms around the shoulders, high-heels on, sleek pencil skirts and matching colourful shirts, holding the exact same distance between their bodies, shoulders and feet, reaching the same height with the help of the high heels they wear. Precision is an important factor for The Bureau's investigations. The nine women are part of the same generation and dear friends of Irina and Alina. This time they gaze into the camera without being the subject or extension of the male gaze, and thus subvert the woman-object patriarchal narrative. *High Heel Communism* is the newly commissioned, large-scale photograph which materializes one of Alina Popa's last wishes, but which also marks the focus of this exhibition, together with another constellation of existing artworks. In 2019, a last photograph of the two artists together, as The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, was taken and that became the starting point behind *High Heel Communism*. Dressed in black and standing next to each other, reaching the same height due to the different dimensions of the heels the two were wearing in that specific moment, Irina and Alina *look at* the camera dissolving that feminine mystery.

Alongside the two photographs, the high heels from the tryptic are exhibited in a monumental form, thus elevating and celebrating stiletto shoes, a symbol of both femininity and sexism, to the level of art objects. To balance the '50s bourgeois aesthetic, a small photo part of *Gross National Heel* (2010), a performance undertaken in Chişinău, is subtly disclosed next to the plinth with the nine pairs of stilettos. All these elements highlight one of the multiple stakes of the Bureau, namely the creation of a complex

instrument that belongs to the production of stereotyped images of femininity and which allows a framework for reflection and critique on broader socio-political issues.

The passivity of women *to-be-looked-at* and the type of domestic (emotional) labor that was unquestionably assigned to them for decades continues to be contested by The Bureau's practice. *Lovegold: A Cosmic Cooking Show* (2014) is a performance and video work that presents an instructional show in which the simple domestic activity of cooking expands to a cosmic dimension. Presenting the preparation of food as a form of alchemy, they weave together the immateriality of love and materiality of gold, topped up by philosophical insertions on materialism and idealism, mystery techniques as a model for new economic exchanges. *We never know if we are weeping or sweeping; Love is the new gold; The alchemical imperative of capitalism; Capitalism as commodity animism; Gold mining melts ecosystems; Love mining exhausts affective powers* (BMR, *Lovegold* video work) – rap the two performers on stage while cooking an abstract dish. Their specific way of cooking leads to a deconstructed debate that is injected with the local socio-political situation happening at the same time, namely the long-term protests against cyanide mining for gold in Roșia Montană, a mountain region in Romania.

Heartbeat Detection Systems marks the first retrospective exhibition of The Bureau of Melodramatic Research, a dependent institution founded in 2009 by Irina Gheorghe and Alina Popa to investigate the role of emotions in contemporary politics and the new economy. Pulling together artworks that stir the future, present and past, the current exhibition infuses a sense of double-gaze: on one hand, a retrospective moment, in which some of the works already produced are reevaluated and presented to the public in a new context, and on the other hand, a moment of anticipation that pushes for reflections on the possibility of a further expansion of The Bureau's practice, while accounting for an inevitable absence at its core.

Touch, absence and melodrama blend each other in the exhibition and form a metalanguage that is strongly visible in the practice of The Bureau of Melodramatic Research.

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