



Geta Brătescu

MATRIX 254 JULY 25–SEPTEMBER 28, 2014

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

A rigorous, yet playful, sense of experimentation pervades the work of the Bucharest-based artist Geta Brătescu (b. 1926), a pivotal figure in the artistic landscape of postwar Romania. For over fifty years, Brătescu has continually reinvented her methods, subjects, and formal strategies. While the artist frequently alternates among film, textile, collage, performance, installation, photography, printmaking, and more recently sculpture, it is drawing, and her variable conceptions of it, that orients her practice.

Following her studies at the Bucharest Academy of Fine Art, Brătescu worked as an illustrator. She produced pictures for many publications, including Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* and an edition of Aesop’s fables, and was the artistic director of the magazine *Secolul 20* (*Twentieth Century*), founded by the Writers’ Union of Romania. Over the years, literature and the theater have remained central influences: characters such as Medea, Faust, Aesop, and Dido populate her work, forming a kind of repertoire for her own personal mythology.

Brătescu deploys drawing more as a conceptual strategy than a literal device of two-dimensional representation. Drawing assumes infinite forms and directs a range of ideas and artistic expression throughout her oeuvre; it is an all-encompassing tool through which she envisions film, collage, embroidery, and performance. Moreover, she aligns drawing with the act of writing to the extent that, in her view, one cannot be separated from the other: “When I draw I have the feeling that I write—I write an image, I write a form. . . . When I don’t draw I have to write and the other way around.”¹ In her film *Hands. For the eye, the hand of my body reconstitutes my portrait* (1977), originally shot on 8mm film (with the aid of fellow artist Ion Grigorescu, who wielded the camera for her early films), she sets her hands above the plane of her desk, with a sheet of paper as the figural and conceptual background. This sets the stage for a series of gestural vignettes in which her hands dramatize artistic creation: she ties a knot with a string and plays cat’s cradle with it, only to crumple and disregard it moments later; she fiddles with and removes her wedding ring; she examines the creases and movement of her hands; her hands become characters she animates; she manually explores various objects (beads, a plastic cup, a sheet of ruled paper, a cigarette); she takes a marker and draws bone-like lines on her flesh. She concludes the seven-and-a-half-minute sequence by making a simple outline of her hands for the camera (what she considers the eye)—proffering a drawing as the culmination of the event.

Perhaps as much as drawing has undergirded her practice, the space of the studio has suffused and expanded it. “The studio is myself,” she asserts.² In effect, Brătescu’s studio becomes a kind of alter ego, a place for her to physically and psychically inhabit and explore. Her film *The Studio* (1978), one of her most significant works, is emblematic of this conceptual framework. She based it on an elaborate written scenario that also functions as a drawing. Separated into three primary sequences, which she envisions as The Sleep, The Awakening, and The Game, the entire work becomes a kind of playful parody of artistic life in the studio. In the first section, The Sleep, the camera (the eye) enters

the room through a door and pans the area, inspecting the objects and instruments inside: rolls of paper, printing machines, cabinets filled with jars, artwork, and the artist herself sleeping on a cot in the center of the room. In the second part, The Awakening, we see the artist at work, drawing on a large piece of paper extending from the wall out onto the floor. She lies down and marks the length of her body on the paper so that her own physical dimensions and orientation in space become the subject of the work. Finally, in the last segment, The Game, the artist makes her interest in Charlie Chaplin apparent with pantomimes of various playful gestures: she plays patty-cake with an invisible partner; she fashions a caricature out of a stool and work clothes; and she pulls her shirt above her head, transforming herself into a kind of puppet, while she plays with the objects around her, loudly clapping together wood blocks that echo in the room.

For Brătescu, the studio was a place of freedom and refuge, where her complex artistic identity could flourish despite a brutal totalitarian state that heavily censored and suppressed individual artistic expression.³ The studio and Brătescu’s adoption of fictional personae were both conceptual arenas, vehicles for self-portraiture, where the projection of an artistic self could transform into a multitude of alter egos. We see one of these composed in the photograph *Mrs. Oliver in her traveling costume* (1985), where Brătescu personifies her beloved typewriter, turning it into a costume and character that expresses her love of writing.

Although Brătescu eschews overt political references in her work, it is hard not to interpret the series of forty framed collages entitled *Memorie (Memory)* (1990), made one year after the Romanian Revolution, as an allegory for the political darkness of that period. Each of the works in the series is a tenebrous rectilinear abstraction comprising sheets of crumpled paper painted with black and indigo tempera; again she conflates drawing and writing, inscribing the word “memory” in graphite beneath each collage. Might these dark collages double as windows onto the shadowy spaces of the artist’s mind, a nocturnal place for reverie? In these drawings abstraction itself becomes a kind of self-portrait, a way to intimate the opacity of the time. “Memory and imagination,” Brătescu writes, “work together so intimately that they can be confused sometimes. Sometimes they mark their spots of intense connection by means of a sign.”⁴ In Brătescu’s oeuvre drawing becomes an ever-shifting sign that represents the myriad spaces, identities, and motifs the artist dons and knowingly manipulates.

Apsara DiQuinzio

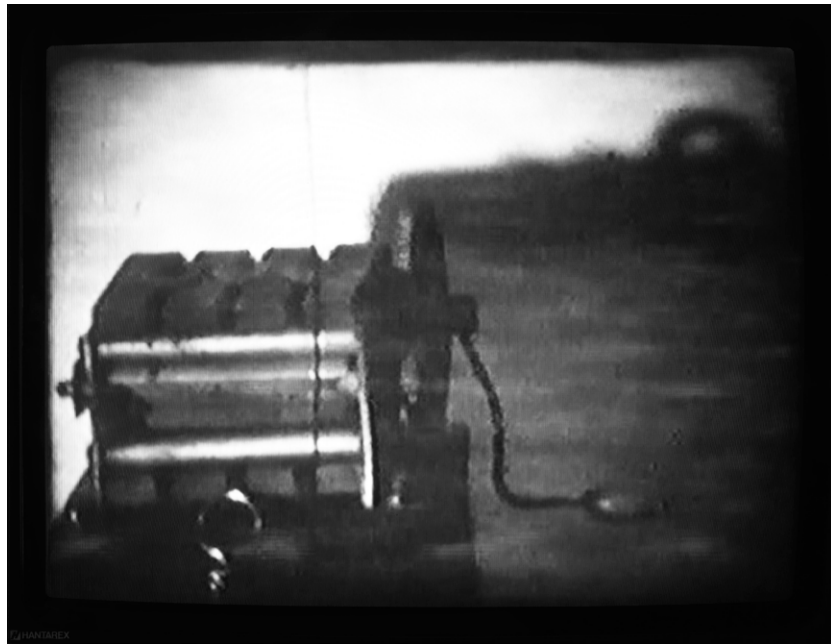
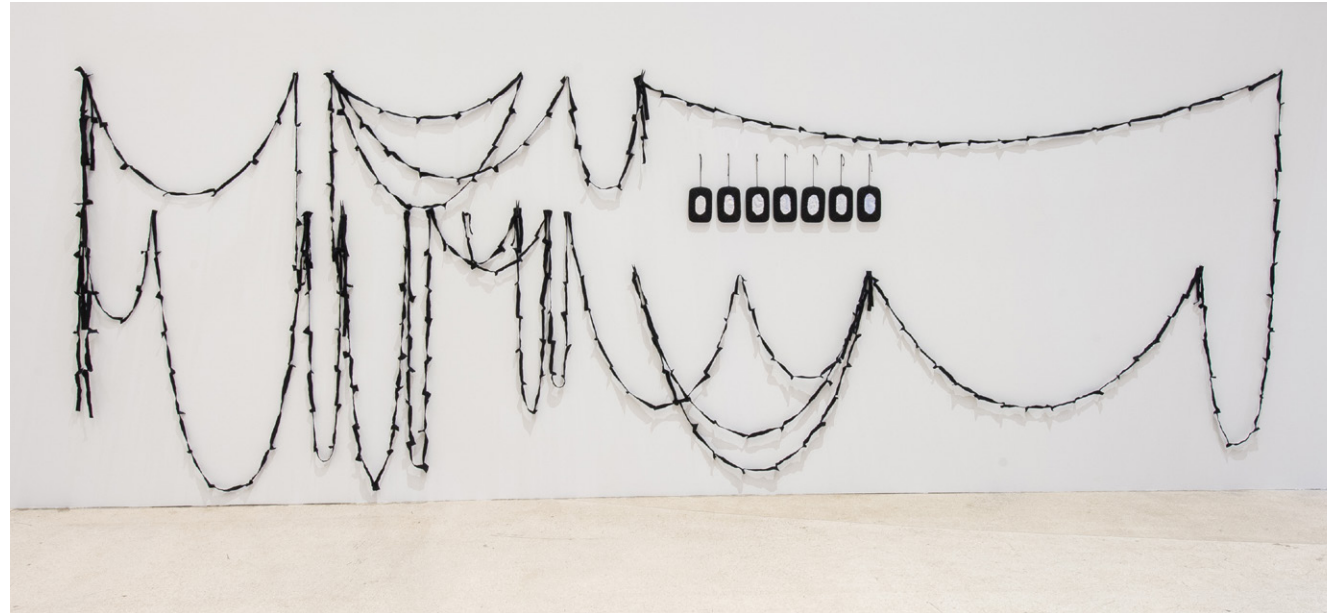
CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

1. Alina Serban, ed., *Geta Brătescu: Atelierul (The Studio)* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 158.

2. Christophe Cherix, “The Studio Is Myself: Interview with Geta Brătescu,” *Post: Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art Around the Globe*, May 2012. http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/23-the-studio-is-myself-interview-with-geta-bratescu.

3. Nicolae Ceaușescu was leader of Romania’s Communist Party from 1965 to 1989, becoming president in 1974. He and his wife Elena were ousted from power, convicted of genocide, and assassinated on December 25, 1989, during the Romanian Revolution.

4. Serban, 326.



Biography

Geta Brătescu was born in Ploiești, Romania, in 1926; she lives and works in Bucharest. She studied at the School of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Bucharest and at the Bucharest School of Fine Art. She worked primarily as a graphic designer in the 1950s and 1960s as she developed her conceptual studio practice, which began to flourish in the 1970s. She first exhibited a series of drawings in the Venice Biennale in 1960 and exhibited frequently in Romania from the 1970s through the 1990s. Since then she has been included in numerous international exhibitions. Most recently she has had solo exhibitions at Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin (2014); Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León (MUSAC), Lyon (2013); Galeria Ivan, Bucharest (2011); Galerie Mezzanin, Vienna (2010); Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck (2008); and the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC), Bucharest (2007). Recent group exhibitions include: *A World of Its Own: Photographic Practices in the Studio*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2014); the 55th Venice Biennale (2013); *A Bigger Splash: Painting after Performance*, Tate Modern, London (2012–13); *Intense Proximity, La Triennale*, Paris (2012); the 12th Istanbul Biennale (2011); Museum of Desire, MUMOK, Vienna (2011); and *Ostalgia*, New Museum, New York (2011). *MATRIX 254* is Brătescu's first solo exhibition in a U.S. museum.

FRONT

Doamna Oliver în costum de călătorie
(Mrs. Oliver in her traveling costume)

ABOVE

Didona (Dido)

LEFT

Still from *Mâini. Mâna trupului meu îmi reconstituie portretul*
(Hands. The hand of my body reconstitutes my portrait)

Still from *Atelierul (The Studio)*

RIGHT

Memorie (Memory)

Works in the exhibition

Mâna (The Hand)

1974–76
Ink on paper
21 ¼ x 17 ¾ in.

Mâini. Mâna trupului meu îmi reconstituie portretul (Hands. The hand of my body reconstitutes my portrait)

1977
8mm film transferred to DVD;
black-and-white, silent; 7:30 mins

Atelierul (The Studio)

1978
8mm film transferred to DVD;
black-and-white, sound;
17:45 mins

Doamna Oliver în costum de călătorie (Mrs. Oliver in her traveling costume)

1985/2012
Gelatin silver print
15 ¾ x 15 ½ in.

Memorie (Memory)

1990
Forty collages with tempera
on paper
24 ¾ x 14 ¾ in.

Fals Joc de-a Fapta (The False Game of Deed)

1985
Gesso, stones, glass
Dimensions variable

Didona (Dido)

2000
Felt, wooden objects with
aluminum foil, wooden laundry
pegs with tempera
Dimensions variable

All works courtesy of
Galeria Ivan, Bucharest; and
Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A
GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS
AND THE SUPPORT OF THE BAM/PFA TRUSTEES.