Next to Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and Victor Brauner, Max Herman, known as Maxy (b. Braila, 1895, and d. Bucharest, 1971) was a (if not the) key figure of the Romanian avant-garde. His connections to communist ideas, to socialist realist practices and to proauthoritarian discourse were a long, paradigm-like process of turning avant-garde experience into advanced, progressive propaganda or “propagarde.”

Maxy started in Romania with portraits of peasants and soldiers at the end of the First World War, and as a pupil of the expressionist Iosif Iser and the traditionalist Camil Ressu he lived and worked between 1922 and 1923 in Berlin, under the guidance of his compatriot Arthur Segal, a prominent figure of the radical leftist artists’ association, the Novembergruppe. In Berlin, Maxy rapidly and thoroughly converted to cubist practices, socialist ideas and functionalist predictions. However, Maxy’s solo show at the Galerie Der Sturm in 1923 was rather a portfolio success. Back in Romania, he engaged in an art missionary project with modernity, modernism, and modernization at its core. In November 1924, he organized, together with ex-Dada pillar Marcel Janco, the international exhibition of the avant-garde magazine Contimpo-
ranul. In 1925, Maxy himself became the editor of the second-most important Romanian avant-garde magazine, *Integral*, a more coherently constructivist platform than *Contimporanul*, issuing a series of manifestos and theoretical texts that marked the late avant-garde artistic discourse of the time. Maxy also founded his own art production facility, a Warhol-style factory called Studio Maxy. At Studio Maxy, art was on offer, together with stage props, cubist carpets and interior design, prints, advertising, and almost everything connected with art and artistic handicraft. But no matter how professional and apparently adapted to the capitalist requirements of the day Maxy’s complex artistic and organizational output was, it was generally met with social indifference and cultural resistance. *Integral* disappeared in 1927. Studio Maxy went into hibernation, with only a few commissions until the 1930s.

This seems paradoxical, given the ideological standpoint of Maxy. He backed (like most of the European late avant-garde) the power system in place, the industrial/financial society, seen as the expression of historical progress, and even the authoritarian discourse, perceived as best attuned to social development. Maxy espoused a cultural-artistic Darwinism and an ideological organicism, inspired by the totalitarian discourse of the time. He promoted his own *integralism* as a thorough apology of the given, a rigorous *actualism*, characterized by a kind of utopia of the present, hypostasized as the only adequate, inspirational reality. The manifesto he published in the first issue of the magazine, *The Integral Man*, was clear on this point: “the integralists synthesize the will of life from everywhere and from every epoch and the efforts of all the modern experiences. Submerged in collectivity, the integralists produce its style, following the instincts revealed to itself in this way.”

Voluntarism and the collective instinctualism so typical of the fascist, antidemocratic discourse of the time perceivably permeated the radical modernism of Maxy’s integralism: “Democracy invented the encyclopedia and grafted it onto the soul of any shopkeeper, commissioner or usurer. This is why the new art must fight the encyclopedists [the *illuminists*—E. K.]. New art, that is ART, refuses itself to democracy, to vulgarity.”

Whereas the avant-garde boosted dissent facing the given power, Maxy’s *integralism* sported consent, expecting to be employed by the system as an autho-

---

rized cultural militia. He played the instrumentalist expert, but his expertise was not required by the society he constantly courted. His attraction to various extremes subsequently grew. In 1930, he organized Marinetti’s visit to Romania, and as a friend of Marinetti’s he participated in the fascist exhibition of futurist art in Rome in 1933. However, his early, Berlin-related, leftist penchants flourished again as his work throughout the late 1930s marked a step back from the previous cubo-futurist, constructive abstraction, to a sentimental socialist and decorative, postcubist form of New Objectivity (Neue Sachlichkeit), dominated by lumpenproletarian imagery (beggars, prostitutes and unemployed people, etc.) rendered in sophisticated, softly modernized, cubo-realist figurations.

When the right-wing parties came into power in 1940, Maxy was banned from exhibiting. During the Second World War he worked less, exhibited at home, concentrated on the Israelite Art School and the Jewish Theatre Studio in Bucharest, and connected to communist agents. In the Illegal Communist Repertory of 1951, file number 19898, Maxy states that he had been a member of the Communist Party since 1942, mentioning that he had conducted tasks for the party back in 1939.  

After 23 August 1944, when Romania turned against Germany, Maxy became a central figure in the propaganda mechanism of the legalized Communist Party. As early as 30 September 1944, Maxy cofounded a professional association of “democratic artists.” Relying on his languishing lumpenproletarian figures of the 1930s and on the rapidly processed ideological precepts of Soviet socialist realism, Maxy hurried to produce the first ever socialist realist exhibition in Romania. In July 1945, he opened the solo show *Work and Art* in Bucharest. A few months later he organized the first colloquium on socialist realist art in Bucharest. But Maxy had little or no knowledge of the proper Soviet socialist realist art, and he had had no prior artistic exchange with communist propaganda artists. He would not travel to Moscow until late 1958, but his will to import socialist realism was so strong that he somehow invented and adapted it to Romania, starting from Andrei Zhdanov’s theses on socialist realism (in his discourse at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, 17 August 1934).  

---

Maxy followed the requirements of Zhdanovist socialist realism (art ascribing to itself the task of “educating and transforming the workers in the socialist way,” according to Zhdanov) by going directly out onto the fields to feed his art to the working classes. His trip in 1945 to the destitute mining region of Romania, the Jiu Valley, was immediately reflected in his exhibition *Figures and Landscapes from Jiu Valley*, which opened in Bucharest in December 1945 (Plate 13.1). In January 1946, Medi Dinu (wife of the avant-garde friend Gheorghe Dinu, alias Stephane Roll) wrote about the show as if it were a crucial event, a “painted report” which “breaks the spider web between artist and reality” with “only the means of a slogan: Art in the people’s service,” which made it easier for the artist to access “the social utility, like that of the professor, of the journalist, of the miner or of the engineer.”

Medi Dinu was purposely employing key words pertaining to the Soviet socialist realist rhetoric, like the above-mentioned slogan or the “engineering” work of the artist, which echoed Stalin’s prescription for communist artists to become “engineers of the soul,” turned into a dogma by Zhdanov back in 1934. Later, Maxy considered that the exhibition assimilated socialist realist endeavors with “constructive and realist art . . . a scientific artistic style, opposed to far-fetched sentimental romanticism.” Condemning bourgeois “romanticism” was, again, a tactical import by Zhdanov, but the insertion of “constructive” aesthetic engineering into it was entirely his own, unmasking his will to negotiate a theoretical conciliation with Soviet socialist realism. Maxy started to reframe Romania’s and his own avant-garde history along the lines of socialist realism:

The bourgeois conception, the lack of an ideal, moral belief impoverished the human creative force and induced in the artists some autonomous, purely craftsmanship formulas . . . but some of the artists realized that art could not stay isolated in its own existence and must participate in the struggle between the advancing social classes and the static, decadent ones . . . it was only Victor Brauner who kept away from this struggle, through his firm surrealist position.

---

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
One could easily perceive that Maxy preserved his interwar organicist, aesthetic and political Darwinism ("the struggle between the advancing social classes and the static, decadent ones"), adapting it from his original pro-fascist discourse (against "vulgarity, democracy, encyclopedia" as he wrote in 1925), to a procommunist one, now courting the proletariat, described by Zh-danov himself as "the only progressive, avant-garde class."

However, mostly socialist realist observant critics had already reproached him for "the incapacity of truly deepening into the expressive physiognomy, the schematic treatment of the characters, and the constructivist decomposition of the plans, too much connected to cubism." In fact, his "socialist realism" was nothing but his previous sentimental decorative variant of the cubist-decorative New Objectivity of the 1930s, now calibrated on the "real workers" instead of the lumpenproletariat, employing the tools of Soviet socialist realist dogma. Even the schematism of the characters and the frequently misplaced joy they show in Group of Miners (1949) reflect Maxy’s sense of the Zh-danovist prescription of "enthusiastic and optimistic" representations.

Maxy promptly accumulated a few administrative and executive positions within the communist regime. Between 1944 and 1946 he was an instructor at the Department of Arts of the Communist Party. Between 1946 and 1948 he was general secretary of the communist organization of artists. In 1950, he became Counselor in the Ministry of Arts, while between 1948 and 1950 he served as the president of the Fine Artists’ Trade Union. Finally, after having been nominated in 1949, he rose in 1950 to the highest position available to a living artist, that of director of the National Museum of Art in Bucharest, which was practically founded for him. He held this position for twenty years, until his death in 1971.

This success story had moments of real tension, significant for the demodernizing trajectory of the former avant-garde during communist rule. Maxy’s worst problems occurred during the anti-Semitic campaign of purges. Inspired by the Soviet Union, the Romanian Communist Party engaged in an internal battle against its own "defectors." During the secret session of the assembly of Creative Artists’ Unions on 27 June 1952, Maxy was “unmasked” as a “formalist deviant.”

8 Oprea, M. H. Maxy, 26.
Part II · Moving Objects

Answering the accusations concerning the value and the truth of his “realism,” Maxy engaged in a reworking of his own career in order to adapt his previous work to his present condition:

In 1935 [only one year after Zhdanov codified socialist realism, implying that he had had early knowledge of it—E. K.] we tried to break free from formalism and explore the problems of socialist realism in our art. Geo Bogza and others did the same. This relationship with socialist realism brought us to the [Communist Party]. Beginning in 1937–38, we became disgusted by the ugliness of our minds, by the temptations in our art, produced by our education and the isolation of our lives. We understood that only approaching the party will lead eventually to the insertion of truth in our art. But the difference of education between what we knew and what should exist could not be bridged otherwise than by new instruction, and this was not possible until 23 August 1944. Until that moment, we were fighters along the lines of the party, but not along the lines of socialist realism.9

The subtle manipulation of Maxy consists in the surprising reinterpretation and recuperation of the historical avant-garde for the benefit of communist propaganda, introducing the idea that the quest for a realist “truth” was already contained in the trajectory of the late avant-garde. He implied that artists such as himself and poets such as Geo Bogza had already made attempts to map realism and communism long before communism was installed in Romania by the Soviet Union, that is to say, freely, and without being forced by recent historical developments. Moreover, their early exploration of communism and realism were an outcome of the limits experienced by the avant-garde, made visible precisely by practicing the avant-garde, not by abstaining from it. Maxy’s reading of the history of avant-garde art recommends it as a proper antechamber of socialist realism. Maxy’s opportunistic sophistry was destined to cover theoretically his “formalist” position, and to

---

13. On Propagarde

protect not only his endangered life, but also a certain independence, a possible “avant-garde exception” within the propaganda system of which he would actually take advantage at a later stage.

Having survived the wave of purges, Maxy consolidated his position as a leading official artist of the regime. He was present in all prominent national and international exhibitions, from Bucharest to Moscow and Venice. Maxy’s socialist realist works appear on postcards mass-produced by the Romanian postal services. His artistic production began to refer to the subjects imposed by the propaganda: factories, workers, peasants, the “liberation” of Bucharest by the Red Army and even the political detainees of the communist regime. In 1954, he became Artist Emeritus. Again in 1954, he was one of the artists to represent Romania at the 28th Venice Biennale. That same year, the British pavilion was showing Francis Bacon, and Willem de Kooning was exhibited in the American pavilion. Maxy showed monumental socialist realist, purely propagandist works such as *The Richness of the Romanian Waters*, realistically depicting happy fishermen unloading a boat full of fish. Significantly, the faces of the “Romanian” fishermen and women in the painting look more Russian (that is, quintessentially communist) than Romanian. However, Soviet socialist realism was shown in Venice only two years after Maxy. Thus, in the wake of larger, global political changes (i.e., Romania’s increasingly autonomous foreign policy), the international view of the “copy” predated that of the “original,” marking a political advance, a distancing from it. Yet, in using archetypal, Russian communist figures, the “copy” marked a proximity to the “original,” while also substituting it. Such “autonomous dogmatism” was a strong and versatile political statement, largely significant for the Romanian standpoint at that time.

Maxy’s stiff and mechanical realism, grafted upon his own variant of cubist New Objectivity developed in the 1930s, loses the original bourgeois, decorative sentimentality, while moving closer to the cynical triumphalism of the grand rhetorical, empty gestures requested by the current cultural propaganda. Some of his works of the late 1950s are not only realistic, but also (pseudo)traditionalist, as he grappled with the increasingly nationalist turn that singled out the Romanian regime in the communist camp. As if going back to his earliest tracks, to his beginnings in the early 1920s, and to his master, Camil Ressu, Maxy exploited the most codified traditionalist scenery:
peasants once again take up a prominent position in his art, minutely rendered in their village milieu, with their supposed ancient tools and clothes, dances and feasts.

He fused together the propagandist simulation of research for innovation with an ideological phantasm of the traditionalist preservation of ancient values. Maxy was to follow this path throughout the 1960s, succeeding in adapting communist propaganda even to his discovery of Pop art. He always counted on the official, perceivable ideological engagement beneath his artistic prodigies. As if in a humorous fable (clearly referring to the secret services’ practices of investigating the content of artistic exchanges of informed and journeying figures such as Maxy), his old avant-garde friend Gheorghe Dinu (Stephane Roll) was explicit on this point when assimilating Maxy with a traveler in front of the customs office: “Let’s delve into your luggage, traveler! However, customs officers know too well that you are not going to smuggle anything. All that you have are the luminous clothes of your miraculous trip, your spontaneous, sincere, naive notations. You, traveler, may pass!”

For an expert such as Maxy, fusing together tradition and innovation to create propaganda was like solving a puzzle. And he did it so admirably that his old avant-garde friend, Marcel Janco, who flew to Israel before the Second World War, wrote to him, in a letter dated 15 April 1969 and preserved in the Maxy archive (written after seeing an exhibition of contemporary Romanian art in Israel, organized through his own and Maxy’s intermediary, who was well-connected to both the communist regime and Zionist circles), that “The real surprise is your painting: neo-Dada and Pop! Bravo, you remained in the avant-garde!”

There is no exaggeration in Marcel Janco’s perception. In fact, most of the Western connections of the few avant-garde artists remaining in Romania were represented by their ancient avant-garde companions, now more or less successful émigrés, such as ex-Dada Marcel Janco or surrealists such as Victor Brauner, Jacques Hérold, and the Lettrist Isidore Isou, etc. The Maxy archive preserves an unsigned letter from one of his Romanian friends from France,

---

11 Itzhak Artzi, In Memoriam M. H. Maxy, document no. 4752, Maxy Archive, Muzeul National de Artă al Romaniei, Bucharest: “In 1945, when Romania was liberated, he becomes the first president of the Jewish Democratic Committee (C.D.E.), at a time when important Zionist circles were also part of C.D.E.”
reading like a guide: “My dear Maxy, I send you the *Express* magazine, where you will find interesting things for you on page 14.” The émigrés fueled their counterparts behind the Iron Curtain with their own perception of the development of contemporary art. Jacques Hérold sent Maxy a greeting card in 1971 (preserved in the Maxy archive) with a reproduction of one of his surrealist works on one side, and with the poem “Eclats,” dedicated by Michel Butor to Jacques Hérold, on the other side. As most of the active and successful Romanian émigré artists belonged to the surrealist movement, their Romanian correspondents took surrealism to be *the* style of the time.

Even foreign eyes peeping into the Romanian communist art scene misplaced Maxy’s avant-garde figure in the same framework. An article from an unidentified French newspaper, 13 *La Roumanie des Arts aujourd’hui*, signed by Saint-Evremond, who was apparently in Bucharest in the 1960s (invited by the communist authorities in a typical propaganda move), reports a meeting with Maxy, the director of the National Museum of Art, introducing him to the French readers as the “âme de ce palais, pétillant comme un verre de champagne, avec qui nous avons communiqué dans l’esprit du surréalisme.” To the French author, surrealism covered the whole avant-garde in Romania.

No émigré, ex-avant-garde Romanian artist fueled Maxy with information and know-how concerning Pop art, as there were no prominent ex-Romanian artists involved in Pop art at all. Maxy’s access to both neo-Dada and Pop art was entirely an exploration (and exploitation) of his own. He drew information on recent art movements from his position as director of the National Museum of Art (1951–71), and as professor at the Art Institute in Bucharest (between 1948 and 1951), or as a senior executive in various political administrative art institutions and commissions, but also as an exponent of the “new,” communist Romanian art in most of the official exhibitions abroad. Maxy was exhibited in (or he traveled in an official capacity with a Romanian art exhibition to) Moscow (1948), Prague (1956), Cuba and Poland (1958), Budapest (1959), and Czechoslovakia, Finland, Egypt, and Greece (1960), etc. Maxy had many opportunities to collect news about art, but he actually had only a few points of reference for judging what was significant, valuable and influential in contemporary art, as he only participat-

---

12 Document no. 4677, Maxy Archive, Muzeul National de Arta al Romaniei, Bucharest.
13 Document no. 4760, Maxy Archive, Muzeul National de Arta al Romaniei, Bucharest.
ed in propaganda shows, and not in competitive, nonofficial, group exhibitions, as most of the new protagonists of recent art were increasingly doing. The Maxy archive shows that after the Second World War, he had no fellow artist correspondents in the West besides Janco. Most of Maxy’s correspondents were museum directors from the communist countries, such as Max Seydewitz, general director of the Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen in Dresden, or Stanislav Lorentz, director of the Polish National Museum of Art in Warsaw, with whom he generally had an official and circumstantial exchange of bureaucratic courtship and communist slogans.

One of the special pieces of correspondence from the Maxy archive is the letter received in 1966 from the prominent modern art historian Bernard Dorival, from the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris, concerning Maxy’s participation in a collective exhibition in Paris dedicated to the historical avant-garde. Dorival expressed to Maxy his wish to show “une de vos toiles de l’époque dadaiste.” Maxy had practically no dadaist period at all, and this shows the lack of information (if not of interest) on the part of the French art historian behind the Iron Curtain. From the letter, it appears that Maxy wished to show more of his works, especially recent works, in Paris. Dorival insists: “Ne m’en veuillez pas de restreindre votre représentation à une seule œuvre.” Then he politely masks his guided interest in older works of Maxy: “je vous laisse le soin de choisir l’œuvre que vous estimez la plus caractéristique de votre période dadaiste. Ma préférence irait au portrait de Tristan Tzara.” It seems that he was indicating a portrait dated 1924, now kept in the National Museum of Art in Bucharest, which is viewed by some art historians as a replica or a pastiche made by Maxy in the 1960s. The pastiche could very well be related to the letter of Dorival, and to the perceivable tension behind it: Dorival wanted an older “dadaist work” from a nondadaist artist who possibly wanted to exhibit something else. Maxy was apparently only left with the option of counterfeiting himself, creating not a dadaist work, but a work representing the Dada pope, Tzara (against whom he wrote on several occasions in the 1920s).

15 Document no. 4695, Maxy Archive, Muzeul National de Arta al Romaniei, Bucharest.
Maxy was not misled in taking older artistic patterns (such as surrealism) as trendsetters for contemporaneous art matters. His ever-present *actualism* made him able to grasp the latest and most influential novelty, Pop art, which he linked in the 1960s to his own previous constructivist brand. He was one of the very few artists politically entitled to do so.

However, if one conducts a survey of his works of the late 1960s, characterized by constructivist, neo-Dada and Pop art influences, one perceives that Maxy always used neo-avant-garde means in the service of the communist regime’s propaganda. The fact that a prominent artist permitted himself to make incursions into Western art was, in itself, a strategy of the regime to present itself as technically liberal, open, while remaining dogmatically closed. Proof is a document issued in 1969 by the Romanian Fine Artists’ Union. It is the approval of Maxy’s earlier request to mount a solo show in the Federal Republic of Germany, supported by the German Artistic Council (the exhibition never took place, though). The approval clearly states that the show is permitted, but at the artist’s own expense. Openness (as closure) was a matter of the regime’s image, especially after 1965, when Nicolae Ceaușescu inaugurated a kind of politics of the Romanian exception in the communist camp.

But the actual content of Maxy’s works, which emanated from his incursions into the new territories of Western art, was neither innovative nor provocative. They were decorative instead. He put Pop art into neoconstructivism, onto the background of communist propaganda, as if there were no ideological tension in the background, as if Pop art were merely an art-style kit, with no political meaning. His instrumental and transideological, almost postmodern practice, meant that his late, reinnovative art was completely overlooked by foreign art scouts mapping the Eastern Bloc in the 1960s. Emerging, younger, Romanian, neo-avant-garde figures were preferred. At the groundbreaking constructivist Nuremberg Biennale of 1969, Maxy, the oldest living constructivist *en titre* in Romania was not invited, but the experimental 111 (later Sigma) Group of Timișoara was. Richard Demarco had known Maxy, too, as is clear from a greeting card from 1970, with a drawing by him and a few handwritten words for Maxy. But Demarco’s choice

---

16 Document no. 4645, Maxy Archive, Muzeul National de Arta al Romaniei, București.
17 Document no. 4674, Maxy Archive, Muzeul National de Arta al Romaniei, București.
was to promote younger Romanian artists such as Paul Neagu, Ion Bitzan, or Horia Bernea, and not Maxy.

Maxy’s position was very delicate: he wanted to appear as an innovator or, at least, an internationally connected artist. But he wanted to appear as a professional servant of the regime, too, both inside and outside the country. Mission impossible: during the 1960s, serving the regime was already a mark of lacking professionalism in the eyes of an increasingly critical, global art scene. Maxy’s fanciful technocratic, late avant-garde experiments of propagarde were assimilated with the dead-end of official propaganda.

As always with him, his borrowings were purely instrumental. It was about discovering a new arsenal and a new grammar, inspired by the ancient avant-garde structures. By far the most impressive accomplishment of this (dis)simulated research of Maxy is his assemblage of 1969, symptomatically called The Communists (Plate 13.2). It is a huge wooden panel with massive steel plates on it (symbolizing the development of industry under communist rule), onto which there is a stenciled frieze with Romania’s official, communist coat of arms, serially repeated as a pattern, precisely in the same way as Warhol repeated his iconic Coca-Cola bottles. Maxy added a stenciled poem on the steel plates, “The Communists,” written by the official poet, Eugen Jebeleanu. The massive steel plates are held together by huge screws in industrial ceramic, some technological ready-made pieces taken from electrical devices precisely to suggest communism’s contribution to the (electrical, modernizing) “illumination” of the people (Lenin’s thesis). So as not to miss anything from the official ideological discourse, Maxy has placed in the upper left-hand corner a handmade, traditional earthenware saucer, manufactured in Romania (another ready-made piece symbolizing the coalescence of the national tradition with modernizing communist society in the propaganda discourse).

The hijacking of Pop art rhetoric is done from a retrograde standpoint. Maxy uses Pop art’s tautological and antiallegorical strategies in a profoundly allegorical framework, turning innovation into simulacrum and provoked into propaganda. This challenging artistic contrivance marks the first moment of local neo-avant-garde transvestitism. Maxy’s long-standing process of demodernizing his own work and ideology is vested into a fake proof of remodernization. The work turns into the instrumentalist *ars poetica* of
an expert in visual maneuvering, building a platform on which an imported and depleted (uncritical) experiment is decoratively cohabiting with official propaganda in order to support a harmless, visual modernity, with a Western form and an Eastern core: propagarde. This way of thinking applies to a whole future artistic generation devoted to simulation and submission in the second half of the twentieth century. During the mid-1970s, the younger Romanian experimentalists chosen by Western art scouts in the 1960s entered Maxy’s pattern of mock experiment, too. For decades, aestheticized neo-avant-garde was to be subverted by bare survival, becoming—paradoxically—a regressive stance contradictorily ensuring artistic innovation and political stagnation.