

Obituary: Paul Neagu; Influential sculptor, painter and performance artist.(Obituaries)

by Paul Overy

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IT IS always difficult for an artist to move from one culture to another, and to re-establish or develop a career in a new country is never easy. This was particularly true of those who came to work in the West from Eastern bloc countries during the Communist era.

In the late 1960s Paul Neagu was already beginning to make a name for himself as a young artist in Romania. In 1968 and 1969 his work was shown in mixed exhibitions of Romanian art in Prague, Zurich, Paris, Turin and Hamburg. When he moved to Britain in 1970 he was barely known here. However he quickly began to make a reputation with his dynamic performances and paintings and his secret and intriguing three-dimensional objects. Within five years, he had a one-man exhibition at the prestigious Museum of Modern Art in Oxford (1974) when Nicholas Serota was its director. This was followed by further major shows in London at the ICA (1979) and the Serpentine Gallery (1987).

Neagu's work was first shown in Britain by Richard Demarco, who did more than anyone to introduce contemporary Eastern European art to a British public in the last three or four decades of the 20th century. Demarco had been deeply impressed when he visited Neagu's studio in Bucharest in 1968 and exhibited his work at his Edinburgh gallery in Melville Crescent in 1969, and again in 1970.

Two years later Neagu was included in the historic exhibition of contemporary Romanian art which Demarco presented at the Edinburgh Festival in 1971. By then Neagu had already left Romania and, after spending some time in France and Scotland attempting to come to terms with "cultural shock", had moved to London. Here he was to live and work for most of his subsequent working life, although after the change of regime at the end of 1989 he spent some months each year in Romania where he bought a small house and studio in the countryside.

Although known mainly as a sculptor in Britain in later years, Neagu always worked in a variety of mediums - and often across mediums - producing paintings and drawings as well as three-dimensional works, and especially performances. During the last decade or so of his life, ill-health prevented him from realising new performances, although he continued to plan and conceptualise these,

and to draw and paint extensively. Neagu's performances of the 1970s were intimately linked to his sculpture and painting, and would often take place in front of or in conjunction with his own works as if they were "props", in a most dramatic and athletic manner. Such performances demanded an absolute fitness and physical tone of which he was intensely proud.

Although in latter years he could no longer give public performances, the performative remained an important element in his work, which often resembled the apparatus for - or relic of - a performance. Much of his earlier three-dimensional work incorporated perishable materials such as gingerbread or mamaliga, the Romanian version of polenta. Not surprisingly, these works have changed considerably in character over the intervening years (as of course he must have realised they would) - or in some cases have survived only in photographs.

While Neagu's work was international in its ambition and reception and he exhibited in Japan and North America as well as widely in Europe, it remained closely related to the traditions of Romania. He continued to make paintings, drawings and prints which were generally less abstract than his sculptures and more directly related to the human form, using organic, cell-like motifs. Like many 20th-century Romanian artists - and particularly those who grew up during the Communist era - he was able to move easily and unselfconsciously between figuration and abstraction.

When, in 1968, he had been awarded a scholarship to visit other Eastern European countries (East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary) Neagu was already 30, and this was the first time he had left Romania. Although he made the decision in 1970 to remain in the West he retained many links with his contemporaries - in particular with the painter Horia Bernea with whom he had a two-man exhibition at the Demarco Gallery during the Edinburgh Festival in 1970.

It was not until 1978 that Neagu could visit Romania again, after obtaining British citizenship in 1977. But he was frequently in France where for some years he had a house and where he would also meet visiting Romanian artists there in connection with exhibitions or on fellowships. (The historically strong intellectual and artistic links between Romania and France continued even under Ceausescu's Communism.)

Every Romanian artist working in the second half of 20th

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century inevitably had to come to term with the example and cultural legacy of Brancusi. Although Brancusi's work remained important for Neagu, the fact that he worked mainly outside Romania during the last 35 years helped him to come to terms with this. For the centenary of Brancusi's birth in 1976 he exhibited a series of drawings in which he analysed in graphic form many of Brancusi's major sculptures such as the Endless Column and the Torso of a Young Man. In Neagu's later work, the continuing use of repeated elements and simplified symbolic forms revealed something of what he had learned from Brancusi.

Although born in Bucharest, from the age of nine Paul Neagu was brought up in Timisoara, a handsome Austro-Hungarian city in the Banat close to the Yugoslavian and Hungarian borders where his father was a shoemaker. The family were Baptists and this set Neagu somewhat apart from other contemporary Romanian artists who would frequently draw on the iconography of the Orthodox Church even in their most abstract work. As a boy he learned shoemaking in his father's workshop and, after leaving school at 15, worked in a power station and as a topographic draughtsman for Romanian railways.

His experience as a draughtsman is apparent in his paintings, drawings and prints. Neagu's knowledge of the craft of shoemaking can be seen in the materials like leather and wood which he employed in the boxes and object-like works he produced in Romania in the late 1960s and during his first years in Britain. It is possible to see the energy which crackled through his paintings, sculptures and performances as related to the invisible force of electricity with which he had worked as a young man. The total immersion he had in his work, often at the expense of his own health and emotional life, could be linked to his Baptist upbringing.

Neagu originally wanted to study philosophy at Bucharest University, but this was not possible for someone from a religious background in Communist Romania, although he was accepted in 1960 as a student at the Bucharest Academy of Fine Art. He always retained his interest in philosophy and wrote at length about his own work in a metaphysical and sometimes mystical manner which was not always sympathetic to contemporary British taste.

Between 1975 and 1976 Neagu had a studio in a building in Shaftesbury Avenue. Instead of working there, he opened it as a gallery where he showed his own work and that of other artists, including Joseph Beuys. This has become relatively familiar in the London art world in recent decades, but then it was innovatory - based on what was a common practice among artists in Eastern European

countries under Communism.

It was during this period that Neagu invented the Generative Art Group, an imaginary group of artists and writers whose different members expressed different aspects of his artistic persona, exhibiting works under their names and that of the group as well as his own, as in his Oxford show of 1975.

From the mid-1970s Neagu increasingly devoted his energies to sculpture and was drawn into the world of "British sculpture". However, he remained something of an outsider in this world and some of his admirers came to regret that the diversity of his work was not truly represented in exhibitions in later years - at least not in Britain.

In contrast to the smaller box-like objects of his early years, much of his later sculpture was on a larger scale. For many years he worked on a long series of sculptures based on tripod-like forms which he called "Hyphens" - one of the first of which was shown in 1975. These were constructed of wood (the traditional material of Romanian sculpture) or fabricated from box-section steel. Another long series was the "Stars" or "Starheads" (mainly realised in steel), in which one point of the star was often left open. Sometimes these were combined, or metamorphosed into new hybrid forms.

Many of these works were conceived on a monumental scale for particular sites, although only a few of these large site-specific public works were realised. Although there is a version in Milton Keynes, the work for which Neagu won a competition for a prime site outside Charing Cross station in London remained unrealised because of bureaucratic complications. In the 1990s he was able to undertake two monumental public sculpture commissions in Romania, in Timisoara and Bucharest, both of which commemorate the 1989 uprising.

Neagu also produced a series of more introspective and private sculptures in which he employed repeated standardised geometric elements such as industrial ball bearings. In these he explored the resonances resulting from the juxtaposition of such serial elements and the devices used to display or "frame" them - usually made from manufactured materials such as iron bars or wooden laths, or organic materials like grass or leather.

While the use of standardised elements evoked production and repetition, the way these were arranged and juxtaposed suggested elements of play and change, or at least the possibility of change. In contrast to Neagu's large monumental sculptures these works were designed to be

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looked down at from above, rather than viewed from a distance, although they are not strictly floor pieces and are mounted on plinths.

From the 1970s Neagu taught in the sculpture department of what is now Middlesex University (formerly Hornsey College of Art) and then at the Slade. His teaching and example inspired many subsequently successful artists who were his students, including Anish Kapoor, Antony Gormley, Tony Cragg, Rachel Whiteread and Langlands & Bell.

Neagu was often his own worst enemy when it came to showing or promoting his work, although he had several exhibitions in London dealer's galleries - most recently at Angela Flowers. Two years ago a substantial number of his best works (mainly from the 1970s) were purchased by the Tate Gallery, and last year these were put on display at Tate Britain close to the work of the younger British artists whose work he had influenced and inspired. Paul Neagu: nine catalytic stations, a major study of his work by Matei Stircea- Craciun, was published in 2003.

Although dogged by chronic health problems in the last 15 years of his life, Neagu devoted himself entirely to his work. In the late 1980s, he contracted a kidney disease and after some months on dialysis he had a kidney transplant in 1989. The effects of a stroke he suffered in 2001 were probably made worse by his insistence on discharging himself from hospital after three days. The resulting aphasia deprived him of most of the heavily accented but fluent and animated English he had acquired after over 30 years in Britain, although he could still speak a Romanian interspersed with French and a few words of English that could be understood (albeit with some difficulty) by fellow Romanians.

But the vitality of Neagu's work remained undiminished. The drawings and paintings he continued to make in large quantities during his final years evoke the vigour and freshness of the early works he made in Romania in the late 1960s and after first arriving in Britain.

Paul Neagu, artist: born Bucharest 22 February 1938; married 1965 Sibila Oarcea (marriage dissolved 1970), 1997 Monica Omescu (marriage dissolved 2001); died London 16 June 2004.