

MAKING ART BY NUMBERS

1. Historically speaking, in the traditional (iconic, typically Byzantine) Romanian art there is no visible trace of a consistent preoccupation with numbers, computation and arithmetic (or schematic) visual thinking. There are no mathematical formulas of the perfect proportions of the human body, no calculations of optical laws and no interest for approximating the adequate perspective, that is nothing linked to the classical, largely utopian endeavors of Western art from the ancient Greeks to the Renaissance. Instead, one can speak about the presence of a “mystical geometry”, a fixed repertoire of some unchanging (and inspired) iconic structures, which, when combined with the codified philosophy of colors, generated a kind of two-dimensional mechanics of transcendence, that is the divine image, the Icon. Moreover, the idea even of letting this mystical geometry being investigated and constructed via rational procedure based on logic, numbers and calculation was utterly blasphemous as the credited parameters of the icons were not a matter of experiment and observation, but of sheer revelation. That is why, when one tries to explain the ultimate geometric equilibrium and hypnotic harmony of so many icons, one usually goes into the so-called “divine section” or “the golden number”. This is both a number (a proportion rather) and a revelation, an inspired relationship between the various parts of the image (that can be arithmetically re-constructed by an analyst) inherent, in fact, to the very creative skills of the artist. It is a number (discovered, however, *post factum*), but not an operation, not a calculation made by the artist.
2. Backed by such an artistic tradition and ideological-religious framework, the Romanian art of the 20th century was rather reluctant to “making art by numbers”. It was suspicious of that kind of modern art which was both disrupting and, at the same time, accomplishing the ancient propensity to disclose and employ, in an instrumental manner,

the arithmetic and geometric research on the intrinsic logic of the image. This is why, during the first decades, in the age of a futurist-constructivist, mechanical and maniacal construction of the work of art following a “productivist” logic and mathematics, the burgeoning Romanian avant-garde was especially busy with an enthusiastic desecration if not annihilation of art, as one can perceive in the various (anti)art enterprises of the “founding fathers” of Dada, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and the Surrealist Victor Brauner. Strangely by enough, they did not profit by the large amount of iconic data available all over the Romanian visual space (like in the case of any Orthodox civilization) in order to build new, constructivist-based, modern “icons”, the way the Russian avant-garde, and especially Malevitch did. Although there is an obvious link between traditional Russian icons (which are also fundamentally Byzantine) and the emergence of the new shape of “transcendence” in the visual arts by the beginning of the 20th century (one somewhat paradoxically focusing on aniconism), one cannot assume that they share the same utopian background. More precisely, they did not share the same mysticism. The new, “Suprematist” icons were founded on the visual reflection of a widespread, mechanical and positivist Utopia of a society of numbers, of calculation, formulas, schemes and structures outside transcendence, while the old icons were not at all rooted in utopias, but in ritualistic practices that have the representation of transcendence (or of its visual correspondent) at their very core.

3. These circumstances explain the course “art by numbers” (that is <neo>constructivist, abstract-rationalist art) took in Romania, especially after World War II. Then, as a reflection of the broad influence of abstract and newly-imposed experimental art, a kind of artistic research intertwining rationalism, abstraction and the pursuit of the inner logic of the visual image imposed itself on the local art scene. However, and most important, this was not at all connected, the way the first modernists (like the Russians) were, to the “abstractionism” inherent to Orthodox icons. Both because of the new ideological pressure (and censorship) of the communist atheism, and also because of the history proper of the local avant-garde, the newly emerging trend was focusing on a (seemingly) scientist investigation on the recurrent features of the image, on the construction of the two-dimensional space, and on the profuse calculations of the various, material data of the work of art. The rise of this scientist tendency was an accurate mirroring of the influential, European structuralism, and it was appropriately invested with its consequential (and credited, if not required) apoliticism, best fitted to the historical circumstances of the time.
4. By the early seventies, the most representative movements of making “art by numbers” in Romania were the “sigma” group in Timișoara

(Constantin Flondor, Ștefan Bertalan, Roman Cotoșman and Doru Tulcan) and “Kinemalkon”, the circle of experimental film in Arad led by Ovidiu Sabău. The first was intimately connected to a neo-constructivist (Bauhaus-like) practice both in creation and teaching, while the second was a rather structuralist-borne implant in experimental film-making. Although “sigma” was very well-known and held in high esteem (even by the political establishment of the time), whereas Kinemalkon was barely known at all, pursuing its research in a rather silent if not hidden manner, both groups shared, in the words of one of the “sigma” manifestoes, “the reconsideration of the environment as an object of artistic research” and they aimed, manifestly, at the development of an “intelligence able to adapt them to a future culture” inescapably marked by “the development of an algorithmic culture”. Structures, frames, schemes, recurrent invariants, technical manipulation, calculation, repetition and scientific-like insight were the main marks of their aesthetic outlook. “Organizational” and meliorist, positivist and centripetal, highly “humanistic” in a contemporary sense, such artistic endeavors are nonetheless stamped by that profoundly utopian drive of the historical avant-garde. Their unexpressed goal was to regain a certain, “alternative transcendence” for our times, one that was believed to be controllable, science-based, computational, and eventually thoroughly intelligible. Another Utopia.

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