A.O. *The reviews of your recent exhibition, as well as earlier critical comments on your work put a certain stress on the retrospective, recuperating character of your painting. I have the feeling that you are not entirely happy with an assessment of your work in these terms.*

H.B. One might look for a connection between my relatively recent activity as a museum director and curator of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, and the changes in my painting over the last years, due to the fact that I started working – to put it briefly – with already existent objects. The museum work was a strain for me at first; it was something quite similar to the time when I started to paint the ***Iconostasis*** motif, when I felt so terrified by the subject, so *limited* by it, because it left me no freedom; in time, I regained a certain freedom, and this enabled me to move beyond the documentary, stylistic, historical aspect of my subject. Something similar happened with my curatorial activity, which had at first a much more prosaic side to it; after a while I became less restrained and started behaving much as I do in my studio, though on a totally different level. This experience helped me realize that there was something critics failed to notice: the rediscovery of a joy inherent to painting, to the act of painting, in my work; my feeling is that it is precisely this side of it that has gone unnoticed. The art critic Anca Arghir was the first to remark, years ago, on the retrospective and recuperating aspect of my painting and on the fact that I was attempting a kind of compendium of painting. This is only true within certain limits, of course; this mustn't be understood too literally. Anca Arghir was discussing at that time the formal, stylistic features of my work, but this side of it, the joy of it, went unnoticed by her. Lately it has been always there, present in each gesture; at any rate, when a work is any good, it's owing to this.

A.O. *You do agree, then, that there is a retrospective and recuperating side to your work as a painter?*

H.B. At that time, in her first essay on my painting, Anca Arghir was characterizing it as a "mathematical expressionism"; on the face of it, expressionism and mathematics don't go together. That's what it was about: an attempt at integrating things that are impossible to integrate, at reconciling attitudes that are not to be reconciled; a retrospection, in terms of subject-matter, through which a motif is pushed beyond its proper limits, if I can so put it. This is particularly true for the ***Banner***. There is a certain degree of elasticity in a motif that is frequently transgressed in the ***Banner***. What saves my paintings is this joy; and this has become more and more true in time; proof of this are the ***Columns*** and the way I introduced and handled in them the decorative element; in other words, a return to strictly pictorial means, this is also true from an emotional point of view.

A.O. *The fact that you have been resorting to the decorative element in the Columns should be seen in this light, then?*

H.B. Certainly. There is an extraordinary tension between the very realistic aspect of some of the elements and the introduction of others that belong to an entirely different convention, into a program which comes from an altogether different world, from a yet different convention of the image. This was already quite obvious in the ***Banners***, but now it is cruder, more direct and uninhibited, and at the same time more palatable, more acceptable.

A.O. *Would you explain in similar terms the appearance of the nude in your paintings?*

H.B. Yes. It has to do with the wish to make the problem I am confronting more difficult and complex.

A.O. *Where does this wish come from? Or is this an impossible question?*

H.B. It may have to do with the lasting impression left upon one by early readings. One would read about a famous painter saying to his apprentice: you paint with too much ease, why don't you try painting with your left hand? At a certain point I must have conceived of the idea that one has to face a higher degree of difficulty, not necessarily in technical terms, but in the way one solves the painting as a stylistic articulation, in the way one experiences it intellectually.

A.O. *But the attempt to reconcile things that are difficult or impossible to reconcile doesn't seem to me to be in your painting a question of mere virtuosity.*

H.B. It is something more stringently motivated. This is what I have been attempting to achieve with the ***Hill*** motif: I wanted to show that the resources of the image have not been exhausted, that they can be endlessly enriched. On what condition, though? The risk would be to slide into a frivolous postmodern play, where things can be left unsolved. To solve them, this is the real challenge; to make them really stick together. I was told that some of my concerns are typically postmodern. But an allegiance to postmodernism would have allowed me the mere enunciation of the problems, without any attempt at solving them.

A.O. *Postmodernism is, however, a frame of reference that might enable you to make your own stand clearer.*

H.B. And my strength as well.

A.O. *Your "retrospective" attitude seems to me to be motivated, prompted by concerns that ensure that retrospection is selective without being arbitrary. What are these concerns?*

H.B. I have been speaking again and again of *congruence*; stylistic, even dogmatic congruence. I recently had the – perhaps belated – revelation of the world of the Roman painting; I am speaking mainly of the late Roman painting, preceding the early Christian one. I was impressed by the extraordinary congruence between means and ends, so that in comparison with it Renaissance painting seems to me almost barbarous. Roman painting is so well-rounded! But my interest for it stems from the same obsession. It seems

to me, for instance, that this convention which is inherent to painting – to work with two dimensions – must be somehow observed. And observing it is all the more praiseworthy when one is not really working two-dimensionally. When one makes carpets it's very simple. But what about a painting into which one introduces three-dimensional elements and which one has to, wants to treat as a carpet? This needs some stomach; I would introduce here an almost biological suggestion.

A.O. *Your exhibition included works from an earlier period, little known to the general public and possibly surprising for some. Yet, you see your evolution as a painter as a coherent one.*

H.B. I think my feeling that this is a coherent trajectory is due to the intensity of my involvement. I have been doing things that are quite different, with different means and with varied degrees of intensity. But I always approached painting with the same ardor. On the other hand, all my exhibitions had a retrospective character, in a certain sense.

A.O. *There have always been in your paintings elements, aspects pointing backwards, threads left hanging, so to say, which you would take up later, sometimes years later. All your previous exhibitions offered pointers indicative of this continuity, but never to such an extent. We are dealing here with almost 30 years; how do you propose that we read this trajectory as a consistent one?*

H.B. Years ago I thought that there were two kinds of artists: on the one hand what I would call "one painting" artists, such as Bonnard, for instance; and on the other – my example will surprise you – artists like Van Gogh. In him too one can find a formal continuity, over entire periods, but he seems to me to be the painter of the last painting. His trajectory is not a continuous one; he keeps setting for himself entirely new problems. It seems to me this is the category to which I belong, and not the one where the development is a linear one. Among the Romanian artists, Pallady would make a suggestive example: his is an oeuvre of continuous reworking and polishing of one and the same image. If there is a constant aspect in my own work, it is to be found, I would say, in the tension and intensity with which I approach things. I must have always felt the need to show that the appearance of the ***Banner*** is not due to chance, and that it is, in some ways, the same thing as ***Nourishment***, precisely because in my painting different motifs do not directly engender one another. I felt the need to include in this exhibition a ***Self-portrait*** in order to show that it too belongs to the same family as the ***Banner***, that the ***Banner*** is a central element for me in more ways than one, and that this centrality should not be understood in its merely literal sense. Still, certain similarities are surprising and they are, I would say, the result of an organic and natural growth, if this doesn't sound too presumptuous. I was surprised to discover that between ***Production Graphs*** – the large panel made up of several pieces, from a much earlier period – and the **Column**, say, there is an incredibly close relationship.

A.O. *How do you mean this?*

H.B. Visually, even, in terms of surface values, at skin depth; how can this be? The Graphs were an almost malicious gesture, at any rate, the expression of frustrations and tensions; the Column stems from a state of mind that is much closer to what might be termed a painterly bien-être, and in spite of this they look alike; this means that there are certain constant features in my painting, much as in Bonnard's, features I can't set aside, no matter how playful I may be.

A.O. *There are, however, disparities, at different levels in your work. Looking back, would you be able to identify a break in the continuity?*

H.B. 1971 was such a breaking point: my show at the Paris Biennial, the "iconography of post-cognition", which was a "browsing" through the whole history of art. Then Hill I, the first and very timid series devoted to this motif; and in fact, timid it stayed till the end. I left the paintings from this series in a realm of ingenuousness, in a way. I could have taken the motif farther. I didn't feel this was necessary. Out of this came a sort of reconciliation with the image. It is perhaps as a result of this reconciliation that I feel the need to increase the difficulties in my work, in my program.

A.O. *There has been over the last few years an inclination to invoke sacred art, to speak of painting as an icon, in connection with the work of a number of contemporary Romanian artists; you have been one of the most frequently cited examples in such approaches.*

H.B. In the interview we made together in 1987 I would have stressed, had it been possible to do so at that time, the role of the image as a witness, its confessional role; the fact that when I started painting churches, or the Iconostasis I wanted to paint just that: churches and the Iconostasis, because churches were being demolished. It was something that had to do with the immediate context and I cannot say that were I to paint such motifs now, they would have the same significance. It was a reaction. It would be inconsistent of me to pretend that I have always been the same. In the 70s I was saying and writing that one doesn't need to paint an iconostasis in order to aim at making one's gesture as a painter recover its sacredness. This should be achieved through the painting itself, whether one paints potatoes, a bottle, or an iconostasis. It should be a gesture intrinsic to painting.

A.O. *Yet your paintings show a conjunction between this kind of intentions and their explicit subject matter.*

H.B. In the case of the Iconostasis there were other things at work: besides the need to be more explicit, I was attracted by the formidable difficulty of the motif; just as, in the case of the Banner, I was attracted by its simplicity, by its poverty even: a square with bisectors and diagonals. The Iconostasis motif attracted me by its extraordinary complexity. It is a complete object, a construction, a painting, a sculpture, a stage set; and here I am, singling it out and repainting it: a pleonastic gesture, if there ever was one. It was a challenge, in a way. But I don't think this would have been reason enough for me to approach this motif. I still think it is a motif of an almost

insuperable difficulty; and also a very sterile one, offering little from a pictorial point of view.

A.O. *What, then, draws you back to such a motif?*

H.B. The challenge of transforming it into a plausible image, so that one wouldn't exclaim, when seeing it: what an improbable, inappropriate thing to paint. This has been a very interesting exercise and I don't think I'm over and done with it yet; I'll come back to it.

A.O. *When do you feel you are "done" with something?*

H.B. When I feel that the motif has ripened and that I succeeded in going beyond a certain kind of "unprofessional" tackling of it, beyond the ingenuousness a motif always has when you start painting it. This is what I mean in saying that the ***Hill*** never really went beyond this stage. I should tackle it again, with my present means; and the same goes for the ***Banner***. To come back to the possibility of speaking about sacredness, religiosity in connection with contemporary art: there is a terrible sloppiness these days in the use of such terms, due perhaps to a poor visual culture. This needn't mean, however, that sacred art is an impossibility in contemporary art. There was a time in European art when there was an almost complete overlapping between icon and painting. This unity was broken. But the break doesn't appear to me to be an irreversible one. But ours is a time of revolting amateurism; the phenomenon you refer to is probably of a similar nature. There are a lot of impostors around. I would hesitate in discussing such questions from a theoretical point of view, although I made an exhibition of icons at the museum I am directing. I made it in a very cautious way, moving in this field prudently and going as far as I felt I was able to go.

A.O. *I am more specifically interested in your attitude towards current artistic practice in Romania in connection with this kind of ideas.*

H.B. This may be a risky remark: were I to analyze the history of the icon, I would say that a large number of icons, from the 15th century on, must be set aside, because they have no connection with the sacred; nobody seems to notice this. There is a lot of rash talk about the sacred in secular painting, while at the same time people do not seem to notice that many icons are themselves the result of a mechanical, uninspired gesture that would exclude them from the realm of sacred art, because such a gesture is inappropriate to it. In Western art, at times when sacred themes are so overwhelmingly present, as in Mannerist art, for instance, there is a complete inadequacy between subjects and means. Three-dimensionality has no place in sacred art. It is a convention that generates a powerful realistic effect, much too strong to be appropriate when coping with an emblematic image.

A.O. *Unsuitable in coping with a representation of the sacred, but not perhaps with access to the sacred.*

H.B. I do use three-dimensionality; at least I am trying to use it. The ***Column*** itself is a very strongly three-dimensional element; it would be foolish to say I oppose three-dimensionality. In late Roman painting these elements are so beautifully combined, lived through, solved: you have three-

dimensionality, you have perspective, and at the same time I have never seen a painting that sticks so well to the wall, that is so consubstantial with it.

A.O. *Leaving aside the history of sacred art and the hazards of individual choice, what I have in mind is a tendency within contemporary Romanian art. I am not disputing the quality of singular works; what seems to me arguable is the possibility of invoking, in connection with them, sacred art, the icon, at the risk of producing a connection that might not be pertinent between art and the sacred, and that would be debilitating for both.*

H.B. Don't you think there is also at work here a genuine need for categorizing, and that this is a need common in humans?

A.O. *But I am not just speaking of a label applied from the outside; I am thinking of artists who claim to belong, who use this reference as a means of self-definition.*

H.B. Aren't we speaking, here again, of impostors? There is a lack of critical discrimination in the visual arts nowadays here, especially since so many prominent critics have died. In other fields, such an absence of criteria would be impossible. In our field everything goes. We went through a time of phony hierarchies, now we are living through times of their total absence.

A.O. *But those who invoke sacred art in the contemporary context assert, on the contrary, a wish to reinstate hierarchies, to impose them, to produce almost by an act of will a foundation that is felt to be absent, lacking within the present society and culture. My question is how viable is such an attempt.*

H.B. It seemed to be a convincing attempt when the "Catacomba" art gallery, devoted to contemporary sacred art, was opened. Its motivations appeared at first as being legitimate, and its aims noble. Unfortunately, one cannot go on illustrating a certain type of program without forcing the facts to conform to one's preconceived ideas, whether one does this unwittingly or not. There are not enough good examples around in order to demonstrate the existence of such an art on a monthly basis. This has resulted in an artificial program. Had the aim been to identify and show works that are the result of a genuine artistic gesture, this endeavor would have a truer ring to it.

A.O. *What you mean is that there should be a really good art gallery around.*

H.B. When a good painter starts a gallery and gives up his own artistic vanity, the result can only be good, because he would never show bad works. What seems to me questionable is the inclination to provide solutions for others. I didn't start from a preconceived idea; I didn't start by thinking that for people in traditional societies work was a pleasure and that I should make the recovery of this joy the aim of my own work. It is something I discovered on my own; this didn't spring out of my head, definitely not. In looking back at my work over the last few years I see that whenever there was a promise of something interesting and significant to come out, it only did when this deep, almost visceral need was present: the need to express something, which is always the same.

A.O. *In your earlier years you felt a closeness to certain contemporary artists: at that time you used to mention Barnett Newman, Pollock, Beuys. How do you feel about this now?*

H.B. At that time I was convinced that new art is a fundamentally new phenomenon and that everything I was doing was fundamentally new. I no longer believe this. What was fundamentally new was the wish to start anew, to take nothing for granted. In this respect I felt then, and still do, close to them. I was impressed with a certain quality of despair in the way Beuys approached art. Now I see him in a different light; I don't mean at all to suggest that he was less candid than I thought him to be, that he was less intensely involved in his work, or that his artistic stance is less important; but I am less interested now than I used to be in this kind of work; for me, if you bear in mind what I am doing, he steps outside the convention inherent to painting.

A.O. *But at that time you too wanted to go beyond painterly conventions.*

H.B. I *was* outside painterly conventions. The evolution of the ***Banner*** motif is perhaps the best illustration of my trajectory from this point of view: first came the steel spears, the attempts to carry it on my back, the penetrations of landscapes, of human beings, etc., the drawn "umbrella" and then the three-dimensional object, and finally the ***Banner*** as a painting; it is an evolution that can be seen as a gradual narrowing and getting closer to what convention would mean. For me convention is the very foundation of civilization. At some point certain conventions may explode and others are being created; agreed. But I find it essential for an artist to claim belonging to a convention. Newman felt this very keenly, I'm certain; so did Pollock.

A.O. *Conventions can be self-imposed, in other words.*

H.B. When they no longer exist... when anything goes... I keep transgressing them; is that what you mean?

A.O. *In your painting self-imposed conventions coexist with recovered ones; with conventions at work, or that were at work, at other times.*

H.B. This may be because I start from conditions inherent to human nature.

A.O. *What conventions would you name?*

H.B. Matter would be one. I came to value matter more and more, especially during the last ten years. I believe that the materiality of painting has a significance and value comparable to any other essential feature one may wish to attribute to culture as a whole. This is a recent discovery for me. Roman painting provides a splendid confirmation. I have never seen such a "fleshy" painting, in the best sense of the word. It is a painting that has formidable substance. Take, for instance, a few diamond-shaped forms: they are not just monotonously displayed. They felt the need to endow such forms with an extraordinary materiality. By the way, I saw a wonderful "banner" at the Villa dei Misteri. I found the similarity amusing: it seems to me useless, futile to look for such precedents. I mean to say that in fact, each historical epoch in European art experiences again and again the same problems and that we shouldn't see the history of art from the perspective of originality, but from that of quality and involvement. The crucial, all-encompassing con-

vention, summing up my whole work, is two-dimensionality. For a time I stuck to it with a certain ostentation, as any neophyte would. When I discovered the importance of conventions I started painting – and did so for years – on square canvasses of identical size, and for a time I restricted my color-scheme to two or three colors. I wouldn't allow myself to load the brush with too much paint, so as to avoid any thickness. I was running thus the risk of a kind of iconoclastic dryness. In using the word iconoclasm I refer here to the elimination of matter.

A.O. *"Iconoclasm" is one of the terms currently in use, frequently applied in an improper manner, it seems to me. What is your understanding of it, with reference to its historical meaning?*

H.B. There is no overlapping here. What I mean to say is that I notice in the aspiration of modern artists towards the spiritual an inclination I would call "iconoclastic". The use of the term is forced, obviously, as is that of the term "consubstantiality". The fundamental convention of painting is that we express ourselves through *matter*, in two dimensions. When I speak of iconoclasm I refer to a slight deviation that results in the elimination of the materiality of the painterly gesture. I think the present world is widely infected by this kind of understanding. When one seeks the spiritual, one is liable to come to believe that materiality is a hindrance. There is an iconoclastic *reflex*, or bias in seeing matter as something bad. And this is wrong. I have been carefully looking at Islamic art, for instance; it is full of a formidable materiality. This is what saves it as art: this fabulous materiality; one finds it in the carpets, as well as in the mosaics or in the pieces of mirror on the vaults. When speaking of European art, it seems to me obvious that Rembrandt is no less spiritual than Mondrian. Getting rid of materiality has nothing to do with the aspiration towards the spiritual; on the contrary, the spiritual adheres better to matter. And it pertains to the human condition; to risk another terminological blunder, it pertains to the condition of embodiment, of incarnation. Much that is valuable in the European theological tradition has been holding to this moderate point of view, which opposes an understanding of matter in purely negative terms. It is one thing to see flesh as leading to sin, and quite another to wish to destroy it, thus destroying the very container of spiritual life. These are not things understood through reading, they are personal discoveries. After having had the opportunity to come into closer contact with Roman painting, I had the feeling – this may sound odd – that the icon is already there, that it exists there in a more complete way than it does in Paleo-Christian painting, which was quite more careless in its means, perhaps owing to its aspiration, to its wish to achieve expression at the expense of the means used. Roman painting comes, in a way, close to what was worrying the iconoclasts: an excess of carnality. They didn't know that the rejection of matter, of carnality, can become a terrible pitfall.

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* The National Museum of Art, Bucharest, February-March 1997.
The curator of the exhibition was Ruxandra Balaci.

A. O.