

CONVENTION AND NATURALNESS

NOTES ABOUT HORIA BERNEA

Like Horia Bernea's painting itself, the comments occasioned by his recent exhibition¹ tend to be "totalizing". It has been the aim of this exhibition to make his artistic trajectory visible in these terms; and its provisional end – the *Column* – shows in a particularly explicit way this totalizing will at work. This may account for the inclination to discuss Horia Bernea's painting as a **summa**, a "foreshortened history of painting", as some critics would put it, to underline its manifestly retrospective and recuperating intent. As shown by this trajectory, painting is, or can be, all-inclusive, it can appropriate anything, appropriating itself, by the same token, *as* painting: it aims at all-inclusion and self-inclusion in ways that have to do with the personal development of the artist, with the history of the craft, and with that of representation/representability in general; and this can be read at the same time in the chronology of his oeuvre, in the series generated around a particular motif, and – on occasion – in the singular works.

I cannot hope to express this better than other critics have, and even less can I hope to express this better than it is made visible by the paintings themselves. I propose, rather, to list, in no particular order, some of the questions his work raise for me. There is a word Horia Bernea has always favored, and which he has been repeatedly and expressly applying to his own activity as a painter: the word *naturalness*. I propose to question this word, to probe into its meaning; not because I mistrust it, but because achieving the attitude that corresponds to it – and this has always been Horia Bernea's aim as a painter – veils, without attempting to obscure, the fact that such an attitude is not given, cannot be taken for granted, that it is not to be understood as being unproblematic. What is given is the gift itself; and a gift is not to be commented upon, but merely acknowledged; it is a precondition that determines nothing.

When Horia Bernea was for the first time directly confronted with Western art, in the early 70s, the international artistic community was expe-

riencing, with a certain intensity, the “death of painting”. In recently referring to this time he was suggesting that his artistic activity was shaped, from that moment on, by the need to give a polemical answer to this “crisis”. The crisis had – and still has – a component that might be described as follows: the gifted, talented artist who wishes to put this gift of his/hers to use, has no longer a use for it; the drive to paint persists, in the absence of anything or anybody able to prescribe or suggest what is there for the artist to paint. The urge to paint is (or at least can be) intact, but its use, applicability, orientation is no longer implicit, concurrent with it. Such a situation is, I would venture to say, a novelty; it seems to me that at no previous time in the history of European painting have there been occasions for artists to experience such an uncertainty (be it only half-acknowledged) concerning the use of their gift; and that – beyond any nuances the reader will find undoubtedly indispensable – in a traditional framework (which I see as taking us quite close to the present) such a problem had no opportunity to become a problem. The artist was given solutions to it before it could become manifest to him/her, even at a time when this was no longer happening as an integral part of the assimilation and transmission of the craft. I am convinced not just that this is a real problem, that the relationship between the artist and his/her “subjects” underwent in recent times significant changes, that contemporary art confronts us with numerous cases that make manifest a blurring of what had been (or appears to us so retrospectively) an organic relationship between the artist and his/her subjects, but also that the history of this problem can be told. I am only mentioning here this possibility in order to suggest that the problem I am attempting to define is not an accidental or a marginal one, that one cannot get rid of it by attributing it to individual malfunctions; and at the same time, in order to sketch a background against which Horia Bernea’s evolution as an artist might be understood and assessed. The problem I am attempting to define has been, in fact, put into words by an earlier generation. “The modern artist has been striving in order to get rid of the fetters of the subject-matter and this fight against subject matter represents the essence of his contribution to universal thought; and yet, the artist cannot paint without a subject matter”, wrote Barnett Newman in the late forties. “If we could describe the art of the first half of the century in one sentence, this sentence would be: the search for something to paint.”

If such is the context that moves an artist (prone to warn, on occasion, against the dangers of absolute freedom, of the absence of criteria and hierarchies) to reactivate discarded artistic genres (landscape, still life), or to conceive his images by taking as a starting point motifs that already possess a symbolic and/or cultural meaning, such subjects can no longer be taken over as subjects for one’s painting innocently. To resort to them means inevitably to resort to quotations, even when painting *sur le motif*, with a genuine desire to recover a fresh, untainted look, an authentic experience; one enters knowingly, if not willingly, into an already defined framework, which preexists the artist without necessarily being an active, living inheri-

tance for him; and I don't have in mind, in saying this, the countless cases where a painting "with a subject matter" is being practiced complacently and unproblematically, as if no convulsion had ever disturbed the quiet of the studio. This inheritance – or rather, isolated parts of its territory – is being revived by dint of an individual *fiat* the legitimacy of which is in question. Can one revive landscape, or still life, on one's own? And more importantly, can one revive sacred art on one's own? ("on one's own" not in a literal sense, of course; but in the absence of a cultural and spiritual context that would continue to generate the invisible but indispensable texture by virtue of which the question of the legitimacy, of the validity of such an attempt would not arise). Horia Bernea was speaking recently – thus rephrasing an idea that has been a long-time concern for him – of conventions as being the foundation of civilization. But conventions are no longer a prior "common good"; they are asserted, revived (or even formulated) and promoted as a common good by an individual; and I don't intend to suggest, in saying this, the heroizing of the individual, but to stress the unprecedented character of his/her endeavor. Whatever their nature and the realm of their existence, conventions are independent of, and in certain ways prior to the individual who espouses them; their very existence, if not the particular mode of their embodiment, does not depend on an individual decision. For a traditional artist working within them, conventions must have been a means of experiencing and defining for himself with relative clarity – not just abstractly or theoretically, but in a very direct, practical way – the limits of the application of the "gift", so that it would not be exercised in an arbitrary, illegitimate, wanton way; this was, we may suppose, particularly true for civilizations in which we believe we can identify the almost ubiquitous and forceful presence of conventions. Resorting today to preexisting genres, to forms that already have a history, implicitly means reviving a past in which entering a hierarchy, a pre-established order, meant a guarantee of the legitimacy of one's personal approach; or, to put it otherwise, and perhaps more modestly as well as more skeptically, an attempt at evoking this past: but with an awareness of the fact that this coherence, order, hierarchy can no longer be revived in their totality, that as a totality they have been irretrievably lost and can only function as a nostalgic or utopian model.

When a contemporary artist resorts to a fixed, repetitive form and conceives his/her work, or large sections of it, as variations around such a form, he/she cannot ignore or escape the question of the legitimacy of this form and of this practice otherwise than by resorting to a type of image endowed with an infra- or impersonal significance or relevance (such as the cross, e.g.), or by taking up and endowing again with meaning traditionally established genres or motifs. He builds for himself, in a somewhat artificial manner, a restrictive framework, recreating on his own and as a credible fiction the tradition which for an artist of past times was, to put it briefly, already there. The artifice, the stratagem (to call it that) has, among other uses, the virtue of ensuring a meaningful exercise of one's gifts. But this is a self-

imposed constraint, with all the implications (and dangers) such a self-restriction might carry, and in the (irrevocable?) absence of any other authority than one's own. The "redeeming", or at least comforting assumption is that still life, or landscape, say, emerged (however complex and untidy their origin may have been) out of a deep human representational necessity and that such a necessity is still active, still important and urgent and relevant enough, despite dramatic cultural changes, so that one might experience it anew and take upon himself the task of imbuing again such genres or motifs with meaning, in a way that would not make of this attempt a mere personal whim. This may mean that one would have first to identify such needs within oneself; the legitimacy conferred by their being embedded in tradition and convention, as long as they are alive, has to be compensated, in order for something to become a personal motif, a subject-matter, by its deep-seated existential roots seeking realization through painting. One might suggest that in different ways such series as *The Hill*, *The Banner*, *The Column*, are examples of this two-fold process.

Why would a motif turned into subject matter engender a series? The question doesn't concern Horia Bernea and his painting alone; the series has become, in various ways, a widespread phenomenon in contemporary art, with precedents I won't attempt to outline, much less to investigate here and now, however useful – indispensable even – such an investigation may be. Is repetition one of the modes of seeking legitimacy? Let us imagine a single *Hill*, a single *Nourishment*, a sole *Banner*, *Garden*, or *Column*. How would this alter their status and meaning? There would be a great number of preparatory sketches and drawings leading to the final result (they do exist, in fact), attempts deemed only partly successful, in relation to which the object on show would represent the final accomplishment and the sum total. But we are dealing here with a situation where between the elements of a series there is no ascending order in terms of value, no hierarchy established by "achievement". Each of them is, in a certain sense, an equally valid solution for the artist (and it is irrelevant, from this point of view, that certain representatives of the series may please more than others). Neither is seen as a failure, and the accomplishment is not gauged by the neutralizing of stylistic disparities, by the unifying of a heterogeneous vocabulary, by the reduction or veiling of discrepancies, of tensions between what might be described as different "degrees of reality" the image tolerates or even exhibits. In times past, in gradually defining his/her pictorial solution to a particular representational problem, an artist would have renounced, cast away – if not into non-being, then into the realm of a possible that was denied full materialization – a number of attempts that could have, at different stages, become actual. Here it is as if all that is possible is at the same time actual. The series is the framework that enables one to observe a phenomenon which is at the same time one of its driving forces: its individual components can be seen as completely realized, autonomous works (and are frequently purchased as such);

and yet, their very status as members of a series induces for each of them an incompleteness, a want, a dependence on what precedes and what follows.

With characteristic elegance, Andrei Plesu once said about Horia Bernea's *Banners* that "the same *Banner* is being painted over and over again; what is being painted, to put it more exactly, is the impossibility to paint the ultimate *Banner*." I would say that rather than being the symptom of an individual limitation, this impossibility has been accepted, acknowledged from the outset, and has become, as a result, the point of a crucial inversion: not *towards* "ultimate things", but "back to the things", converting the bare scheme or the ready-made object into a vital fulcrum; it is in this inversion that I see the meaning of Horia Bernea's quarrel – both declared and implicit – with the historical avant-garde and with the earlier and later "iconoclasm"; it is in this direction that I would look for a reading of such notations of his as "the artist does not create, he materializes". "The ultimate thing" (the crossing, the cross, the bare scheme, or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the complete, preexisting object: the column, the iconostasis, the turret, the church) is not and cannot be the ultimate aim. In positioning himself (however insufficient and sketchy such indications may be) between two main reference points: the historical avant-garde and its later sequels on the one hand, and the tradition of Byzantine art on the other, that both attempt to attain the "ultimate things", Horia Bernea takes them as a starting point, rather than as his aim: to confront them directly is beyond the power, the will or the endowment of a single individual.

If this is true, then what can stop or suspend the proliferation of a series? The appearance, within it or in its vicinity of a new, different motif that progressively lays claims to the artist's attention and becomes interesting to investigate on its own? The fact that there is, to the artistic practice leading to it, a side that one may characterize, in more ways than one – by resorting to an expression in favor during the Renaissance – as a *dimostrazione*, a "showing off"? A pictorial demonstration, but also a spiritual exercise, meant to show how one can make one's own, internalize, an order that is in certain ways external to oneself or self-imposed, and investigate its possibilities so as to demonstrate what and how much can be done with it, while at the same time taking care "not to show all one can do"? The point of encounter between the external, conventional, impersonal side of the motif and the inner drive to paint it (a motivation that may remain ineffable, inscrutable perhaps even for the artist himself), indicating clearly enough that the motif, the subject has been "solved", done with, as it were? The fact that explication has become an internal factor of the series dictating its development and setting its limits, which are being controlled by the interval where representation and reflection on it mirror each other?

If we let ourselves be guided by an understanding of Horia Bernea's oeuvre as a coherent whole, we might as well start – and we are invited, indeed urged in this exhibition, to do so – with his early works; with hindsight they can be seen as an *a priori* synthesis, whose components (abstract expres-

sionism, conceptual art, pop art) have lent themselves to the forging of practical and conceptual means that were never abandoned, but have all been converted. The continuities, as well as the discontinuities, are to be seen at other levels than those – no doubt suggestive – of internal echoes and of the gradual defining of motifs discernible *in statu nascendi* in these early works. A conceptualist bent has survived the conceptualism stamping of Horia Bernea's earlier works and attitude: out of it came the inclination to seek one's place within the limits specific to painting, to identify its proper territory; to accompany the act of producing forms with a self-reflective one. In its more radical form, leading to an inquiry concerning the very nature of art and examining what would still define art as art in the absence of any physical expression, conceptualism may have conferred, paradoxically, an extraordinary sharpness to the concern of giving concrete form, material shape, in Horia Bernea's art. Such a radical questioning of art may have engendered an unforeseen reversal: the awareness that the status of the image, the realm of its existence is defined, among other things, by its tradition, its history – the history of the ways and means of its making, of its structure as an object, of its "vocabulary", of its conventions; and the wish to share this awareness with others by making it manifest in the painting itself. Abstract expressionism was an occasion to investigate fully the painterly gesture, the freedom as well as the constraints inherent to it, to experience a specific way of endowing the image with life; what has survived of it is a (cautious) delving into the inner motivations of the image, while the apparently immediate character of the painterly expression and gesture underwent a complex rethinking. As for the pop art component (if he will not object to my calling it so), it may point to Horia Bernea's constant interest for kitsch, for the anonymous and popular imagery, and to the connections he seems to detect between it and the innocent, naïve image, as well as to his inclination – again, entirely reexamined and reshaped – to resort to "ready-made" motifs. To put all this into a more condensed form, what remains, in a certain sense, characteristic for his entire activity, what was already there, more crudely and at the same time more enigmatically expressed in his early works, is an understanding and a practice of painting as an artificial activity. Horia Bernea's oeuvre can be seen as an investigation, an exposing, an unmasking of its artificiality, while being at the same time a ceaseless yearning to make it into a "natural" one, to naturalize it. It is, by definition, a trajectory that can have no end within the limits of painting itself. It thus always points to something beyond it; this "beyond" is perhaps the most intense and deep motivation of a painter's practice, but it is a "beyond" – whatever its nature – that is not inherent to painting; a "beyond" the painter may strive to attain, without ever being able to achieve.