

A CHILD OF SOCIALISM

The endeavours of those around me – while I for one was concluding my academic studies (1967-1970) – went to making socialism as little felt as possible so that we could enjoy the liberties offered – information and creation – in our day to day life. For instance, I claimed to be able to come up with books, even from a secret holding but once I found them I was supposed to forget the way I had got to them. Most of the exhibition of French books was pillaged by Romanians and what was left went as a donation to the Romanian libraries. That was the time when the French, Italian and American Libraries had opened in Bucharest. Even before that the cinemathèques had been established: a public one and one for writers.

That was not a sort of practical training for the socialist world but something general meant for a world that belonged to everybody. I had come to a psychoanalytical and structuralist manner of thinking (most speculative) that, on the one hand, made me relive the Greek pagan mythology, and on the other, become aware of and generalize those experiences as current methods of study.

I had seen a good part of the films made by the great film directors, I knew what had been produced and I used to build up my own world of images, without any camera. At first, I would write, then I would use photographs, films and a cassette-recorder. In a sort of competition with the world, though with slim chances of meeting it. Perhaps that stemmed from what is called an inner need for confirmation or assertion of the ego.

The loneliness of an actor studying his part! It had nothing to do with the type of society and I think I would have done that anywhere. Written scripts, body-art, image and optics studies that put forth a question: What exactly is true? Or more exactly, although the same thing: What is faked, what is not art, what is kitsch? Has my life thinned because of this severe check? A guy knows that cannot be so.

I was in a hurry to throw myself in the arms of the Union of Fine Artists, in a hurry and greedy of “performances”. The exhibitions of 1972, the group ones at the Galeria Noua in 1973 and 1974, the lithographs, the drawn strips, the photos, montages of images, the exercises of style – I had started to make a name. One of my works was given as an example by Tamara Dobrin (a high communist party activist) – a lithograph on cloth with pyramids of sportsmen, the Grant bridge and the portrait of Rica (famous goalie with Rapid and the national team). At home I did a photo-report against the Cultural revolution, and in my notebook I poured out a long criticism in connection with political education and the habit of whispering into the ears of party members.

All these daily details kept me busy for a while (the film “Dialogue with Ceausescu”: What topics can you discuss with a guy who hides himself, who imposes a hot-air ideology – put on one more coat because I cannot supply enough heat to your homes). Have some hot air, it will do you good! Discuss the components of hot air? (Scientific communism – see Ion Iliescu or Artur London and Belu Zilber) Perhaps the idea dawned on me when I heard the rumours that an interview granted to a British newspaper hadn’t come out all right, although Ceausescu demanded to see and approve all the questions beforehand. I don’t postulate such terms, but a conversation in a drunken spree-style: we have had something to eat and to drink and what is there left to do but to exchange heated arguments. That’s how it is. But it was absurd because Ceausescu knew how it was and wouldn’t allow himself to be sweet-talked. The art of talking his ears off, pleasing him with jokes. I did what they did at Ceausescu’s trial: Why did you make people live in cold homes? Why didn’t you give them food? I told him he had destroyed the intelligentsia and he replied that as an artist I did not have a social foundation, I was up the tree, and the people connected with him, not with me.

He banished me; in fact, I had even come to the conclusion of being a deceitful artist, an artist for art’s sake, a loner who did not know it was difficult to get on a tram, bear and raise children, get milk and meat.

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After 1976 there emerged this verdict on my own activity: as a painter I had nothing new to say; the same went for other further concerns – critical articles, history of photography.

After 1976 I collaborated with Pavel Ilie, making a written presentation of his words and resuming for myself the mystique by the phrase: “His works (at the time I had not stumbled upon the term ‘installation’) need a liturgy, that is you feel they lack God when His presence is required.” Unfortunately, Ilie defected. In 1979, at Prilep, in Macedonia I saw mountains with graves dug up in the rock, covered with grass and water, churches for a single per-

son, clearings with young trees that splintered the rocks where they grew, a scenery for my films that today are called "performances".

Finally, the break with the Union and with exhibitions occurred. Mihai Driscu, sitting in a jury: "Texts are no longer accepted in a creation." I opened photo exhibitions at Schiller House, in a last-ditch effort.

When I had finished high school I had liked thinking in French, imitating dodecaphonic music, painting Fauve water colours, *lire Proust*, postulating mathematical worlds. I wanted to go to university, that is follow the rules, provided it was something that had nothing to do with politics. Painting had to do with anatomy and perspective, while biology was subject to the Soviet science. I had not forgotten the discussions in *Scanteia* and *Contemporanul* on decadent art, but the '60s were free, even decadent years; at least what my brother, Octav, did in his workshop at home prompted me to believe that the political had disappeared from the arts.

Freedom was always great as compared to the past (Vasile Grigore, "Girls on mowers" and Alin Gheorghiu, elements of icons). In 1969, a great event, the smart set crowded the small Galateea showroom where Mereuta and a ghost drawer of his own making exhibited (after a while I learnt about Paul Neagu and two similar *alter ego*, simultaneously in action in Bucharest-London).

A fresh graduate, I displayed as much as I could in order join into the Union, and although I knew Andrei Cadere who did not mingle, I did not think of a dissident alternative. There existed a wide net in which the old socialist realism (a phrase no longer utterable) would catch "the diversity of styles". After an exhibition of French contemporary art, with a few abstract artists, there came another, of American painting, mostly pop art. The early '70s also brought an exhibition of contemporary Chinese paintings which I perceived as 100 per cent American painting through their realism, a show that also travelled to Kassel and Venice. We did not realise it was similar to the Iraqi pop art of today. The artist who had joined the Union was no longer the apolitical person I was in high school, but belonging to structures (luckily, not "party" ones) had something conformist about it. An engraving exhibition was organised in Galati with an opening symposium "Art and Politics" and I enrolled because the topic seemed attractive, and also because that was the condition to have the transportation to the varnishing paid for. I gave a speech that shook up the sleepy ones. From the text I had written in a notebook I remember the question: "Is not the electrification of Costica Popovici the electrocution of Mihai Mihai?" Then I quoted the harsh (and political too) criticism of Millet's works, today regarded as idyllic. Finally, I mentioned the case of *Der Arme Poeta* by Spitzweg, stolen from the museum and taken to the Turkish Gastarbeit district. The same case I wielded again

against a corny (inebriated?) discourse by poet Nichita Stănescu at a Workshop 35 literary circle, where he was invited to speak about dissidence. He was authoritatively yet friendly warning Petre Romosan "to shut the hell up" so that I felt I was given a cue, as long as "there is this tone that we are not allowed to..." and I provided a few examples of dissidence.

My attitudes were snappy and ignorant of people. Nichita and Petre knew each other very well while I was a stranger to them. Similarly, I had been infuriated by the contest for the tapestry to decorate the National Theatre: my favourites, Gabrea and Ciubotaru, had not been awarded any prize but, without my knowledge – I was ready to march in the street with slogans – they had arranged to make three tapestries instead of one.

My first public address occurred during a high-life reunion discussion on "Art and the City" at the Galeria Noua: Haulica, Dragut, and several architects turned out ideal, exceptional ideas about street crossings. Nonetheless, the city was rather subject to an unconsciousness that had resulted in the incongruous squares of Romana, University, Union (at the time).

It was a pleasant thing to be against and explode in the presence of calm personalities. In '75 I occupied a seat at the back, in the last row, on the side of the Union leadership. It was an open party meeting on "Art and History", an exhibition that had been lashed against in the Scanteia newspaper by Adrian Petringenaru, Raoul Sorban, Sabin Balasa ("the people must not be shocked") and Piliuta. In the Masons' room, then the headquarters of the Union of Fine Artists, in front of the fireplace stood the presidium made up of Frunzetti, Haulica and Almasanu, with Prut, Radu Bogdan, Sorban (whose shiny shoes I had willingly stepped on his shiny shoes) in the first rows. Somewhere in the middle stood Costica Craciun who was keen on expressing his stand: "The cross on the handle of the ax is not mystical but comes from the cord that tied the blade to the wood, therefore its history is not spiritual but material." At the back, there was an apparently unitary group that derided the revolutionary-cultural stances in which Petringenaru excelled. Sorban went out of the hall, feeling his opinions stifled by the presidium and shouting "I'm going to Scanteia!" After that, Anatol Mandrescu, realizing that the end of a period of bien-être in the galleries and the Arta magazine was drawing to an end, pronounced the fatidical: "It will be a moral assassination." So strange was my unchecked adhesion to that leadership of whom I benefitted so much, both in matters of exhibitions and friendships, and whom the socialist phrase "enlightened despots" suits so perfectly! Things did not go the same with the new leadership (Viorel Marginean). There was this tacit understanding: in your workshop you can do what you please, and even show your work to some strangers. With that you entered a new category. People like Richard Demarco, introduced to this duty-free shop of the

Union by the new management, gave the green light to a trend of foreign currency + trips abroad, achieving a production mode that was something in between socialism and capitalism (the *Securitate* pattern?). For some, money came from both sources. For others, only from a single one, giving them the chance to say later that they did not make any compromise with the Establishment, unfortunately only as far as their images were concerned, but not their relations with the *Securitate* customs officers.

That's what it meant to play the game of the Union: you could go as far as you liked provided you didn't forget the name of the game. For a time, not very long, perhaps until 1976, I liked to believe that I was testing them. I realized I could no longer display anything political because it came back with the tag "rejected". In fact, that petty squabble was not worth the candle. When I sent works mixing conceptualism and mythology I noticed the censorship would be on their guard from the very moment they heard my name. As to one-man shows, the one in 1982, with the mishaps, made it clear that I was at a dead-end. At the time, an exhibition had to be backed by 10 colleagues, part of them sitting on the board of the painting department. You got their OK with no questions asked. Who would have ventured to doubt one's spirit of self-preservation? Who would have acted the censor in a private conversation? That was it. You had a choice, to pick the 10 persons who looked at you more kindly. For the catalogue 10 photos were necessary and someone from the Executive Bureau (vice-chairmen only) had to OK them. Then you waited for a few days. The answer came to my brother, Octav: "This is not a good moment." But if I was keen on it I could present the photos of all my works. A refusal was always mixed with some kind of benevolence. "We appreciated his works." Mr. Marginean tried to dissuade me directly, yet if I insisted I could bring over all my works so that they could be seen (not in my presence). Vice-chairman Horia Flamandu, who is about my age, excluded some groups of works. I was told and shown which (by the director of the Union's Exhibition Office, Adrian Dobrescu).

Finally, before the varnishing, Mr. Flamandu left aside a work that I had not presented to the censors. He whispered: "It's spring out there!" Which translated that it made no sense to get myself into trouble. After a few days I learnt that the censors were dead serious, scared by a huge scandal that had broken out a few days before, in connection with "transcendental meditation". They were simply protecting me while also saving their bacon. "Everything reflects on the Union." Extremely difficult dilemmas for an author. But the hardest to understand for an artist was that not what he created but his actual name should not exist. The catalogue stayed at the printing house; it received the OK for publication only in summer when everything had been forgotten. Andrei Plesu was the head of the criticism depart-

ment until the scandal, and what with the show being postponed, I met him in the Christian Tell Street, going to the Union headquarters. We then stumbled on chairman Irimescu who shook hands with us and then told Mr. Plesu, who started to apologize for not having attended the meeting: "It's all right. Ion Grigorescu does not mean business. He hasn't brought us all the photos. Good-bye." We shook hands again. I for one had given them all the photos. Who was lying and why?

It felt very good to be thus in the focus of the top-siders. It was a civilized battle that stimulated me. Instead of exhibiting for a group of colleagues now I could be seen by people who wouldn't anyway have come to my show. Some rumors could reach the ministry, too. I cannot forget how I screened four films at the ministry for an architect called Mihai, four long, boring movies to be sent to the Sao Paulo Biennial (1981, curator Radu Procopovici).

Most of the information on the Union and the Ministry was second- and third-hand. A masterpiece of the genre came from Cristian Paraschiv who, after the 1982 exhibition, recommended me for the prize of the year in painting. The jury that accorded the prizes had not been warned by anyone in connection with me so they gave their vote. The leadership did not approve, without giving reasons, thinking that their refusal was in itself influential. But the second vote came in the same, Paraschiv being a young and very enthusiastic party member, a harsh critic and theorist on top of it. Then vice-chairman Alin Gheorghiu intervened: "The Ministry is not agreeable to the man! Change your vote!"

I got this news in the countryside, in the Suici village where I was working on my first restoration of murals for a church. The atmosphere exuded such a charm that I could no longer deal seriously with the excitement coming from the Union. *Contemporanul*, the organ of the Ministry of Culture, had published a review (mockingly) warning me to quit. C. R. Constantinescu had written more than usual about nearly all the exhibits (mystical, ugly and on the fringes of art). The review ended with a question: How come he was allowed to exhibit?

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I finally realized the timing was not good and I left the Union to cross swords with the '80s Generation. Yes, I was a coward and I quitted. It so happened that I had won over a completely new world, more easy to swallow, with welcoming committees, priests and faithful that were not my colleagues. In the church I could always hear: "Confess your sins to each other." Quite the opposite of what I had found in all the institutions of socialist Romania.

I had had very good friends to whom I had opened my heart, with whom I had had exhibitions. For a time, I had tried to avoid getting all those approvals from the Union by using the Schiller Culture Club of the German

minority where I had organized several exhibitions, "Photographs Made by Fine Artists" (1976-1983). They tempted my colleagues to exhibit, to take photos, but as exhibitions they did not amount to much. For my friends I had also helped set up Studio I and II ('79 and '81), each with about one hundred exhibitors. That could not have been done without visiting nearly all the workshops available.

My closest pals, preoccupied with their own destiny, could not be stopped from defecting eventually. Between 1978 and 1984 I said good-bye to Ilie Pavel, Matei Lazarescu, Andrei Gheorghiu, Florina Coulin, Iulian Mereuta, Peter Pusztai, and Cristian Paraschiv. I suffered because I had been left alone. I was jealous because they had found (or simply looked for) someplace else, something better. I suffered because the cultural standards in Romania were dropping, and after 1990, when none of them returned, I accused them of leaving the country in the hands of the party activists who had not let them live, and because of whom they had emigrated. It was the second time they renounced Romania, and me, implicitly. But what did I actually represent? To the end of the '70s I had realized that I was not bringing anything new. I had lived with a certain gusto, perhaps blindly, the first ten years after my debut. Thus, my withdrawal in the '80s came somehow easy. All the genres that I had dabbed into had dwindled. I did no more photos or films (activities that aroused the interest of art historians – "Out of Objects, Body Art from 1960 to 1980", MOCA Los Angeles, Vienna, Tokyo, Barcelona, 1998) or painting.

While in the film *Ame* I see in each frame a cultivation of the image in itself, of beauty, and a symbolic evolution from "phallic art" to "circumcision", Kristine Stiles perceives me as an epiphenomenon of totalitarianism, of its schizophrenia.

A child of socialism who has not run away from home, who does not live in the gutter, who does not do drugs, is not HIV positive, and is not a victim of pimps. But whose victim is he and why hasn't he left Romania? (He is his own victim, the victim of his own stupidity.) What can he find in Romania? Did the Socialist Republic of Romania give him the occasion to perfect his talents? Is there anything to gain for him?

The last important but young people to take any interest in me (who am now 53) tested me like this (to see if I was worth an investment): "Are you still interested in what is going on in the contemporary art? Do you continue to seek information (like you did once)?" I replied too hurriedly: "No." I was thinking of the prerogative of age, no longer to care about the others, to be interested in the others, so I also answered in the name of some great figures of the West.

In 1976 Bernard Rancillac visited Romania. Sent by Ion Nicodim, he came to my studio in my absence. We then exchanged letters. The fact is that

in 1977 I actually got a passport and a phoned him up. I visited him at Boran sur l'Oise (a l'Ecluse). He brought me back to Jean le Gac and Boltanski. I realised my clock was showing the same hour as them and that if I had been French I would have been part of that group. "Mais oui, l'histoire de l'art se fait a Paris." But if in Bucharest I was synchronous (to mention Lovinescu, too) then I'll go and continue to live in Bucharest. I told Ben Vautier: "Try to exhibit this in Bucharest!"

In 1992, thanks to Win Beeren, director of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, I exhibited together with and came to know Ger Van Elk with whom in the '70s I had found a common interest in macro-photos. A somewhat futile meeting as we no longer had anything in common. He had remained spell-bound by alliances struck over the years, a thing that I myself, a cynic, had done. I have always loved people; perhaps in this I am dutybound to communism, even to Stalinism. Perhaps it was the only duty, the only lie that convinced me (in my family, we were all "reactionaries") because "love" had been stolen from Christianity. The matter was made crystal-clear by Nae Prelipceanu and Ion Draganoiu one evening, in '76 or '77, when they suggested the creation of an academy of ironists. This came to be after 1990 but I for one am aware of the lack of appeal. Irony and cynicism seem to be youth maladies. I refrained from taking pictures of people in misery. Such reporting campaigns are always supreme artistic failures. Man cannot be treated at the speed pictures are taken.

Ion GRIGORESCU

Ion GRIGORESCU, *Dogs and Children*
(1991)

