

THE QUEST FOR A SELF IN 20th CENTURY ROMANIAN ART

INTRODUCTION

Viewed from the outside, contemporary Romanian art looks like a strange natural reserve of living and working aesthetic fossils mesmerized by such outdated and dusty principles or values as craftsmanship, religiosity and spirituality, moral rectitude and messianic visionary stances. Seeing Romanian art, one has the feeling of delving into the puzzling symbolic treasury of another time.

Indeed, here many artists are committed to ultimate problems such as the Absolute, Truth, Beauty, Salvation, and the like. Even if they represent an extreme, they are more exotic, curious, and provocative when perceived by foreign eyes. Another extreme trait acts on the Romanian art scene, focusing on completely different, opposite qualities. This one praises the corporate values disseminated worldwide. It is the general propensity towards installations, performances and video art that has determined the emergence of a new "international style", unifying artistic means and expressive idioms as well as political expectations.

It is said that the first extreme is backward-oriented, clings to the past and is bound on the traditionalist, rural, Orthodox culture, just as the second one is forward-oriented and seeks international recognition by employing a universal neo-avant-grade artistic language and imagery. Contemporary Romanian art is torn between the conflicting ideals of an unchangeable matrix, deeply specific and valuable for the national psyche, and what boosts and stresses the changes and the sheer impermanence of our times.

Several conflicting strata coexist in this landscape. These multifarious layers preclude the coherence of a normal, organic cultural life in contemporary Romania. The whole bulk of contemporary art is appropriated by each of the two trends, that appear as the proper public image of the local art world (inside and outside the country). The tacit supposition that lies beneath this propensity resides in the keen will of outlining a representative, peculiar

and unique Romanian aesthetic idiom. This must be obvious, encompassing the odd, contradictory features of Romanian culture and psyche.

Recent art appears unbalanced between fractured aesthetic and axiological landmarks that foment either an exasperating nationalism, a metaphysical traditionalism, an Orthodox religious exaltation, an introverted, contorted existentialism, or a cynical ("avant-garde") voyeuristic and critical detachment. Thus, many unyielding, split poetics emerge, culturally mirroring the schizoid feature of a deeply confused and inert social mentality, presiding over a deadlike, thoughtless body. This is disputed between aggressive minority factions each defending and propagating some self-sufficient, parallel discourse that ignores or negates the other's means, principles and targets. Art and culture turned into a desperate war for symbolic power, a battle exacerbated by the serious problem of communication that affects vernacular art and its public. Contemporary Romanian art lacks a real liaison with the public because of its being highly cultural and intellectual. Things happen differently in Western countries, where social life, politics, religion and culture are more or less distanced, entering into a non-reified space, normally deprived of immediacy and fanatic commitment. There the means (including the artistic ones) and elements of social, political or visual discourses often coagulate culture around some basic, equally shared principles. Here, in Central and Eastern Europe, conflictual polarization induces intolerance and reciprocal distrust. Neo-traditionalism claims and warns against the oblivion of a profound though ethnically-tainted truth, while the neo-avant-garde stresses the danger that Romanian culture and civilization may disconnect itself from the technological and mass-culture realities of this era.

Although these debates may seem childish or rarefied because of the turning of cultural simulacra into real entities, they are significant for the actual state of Romanian society. Moreover, the issue of the national cultural specific is one of the most disputed political problems in contemporary Romania, dividing the progressive, democratic intelligentsia. Even the stubborn national-Orthodox visionary stances are justified, if one takes into account the exasperation of a chronically dissatisfied and (self-perceived) deceived civilization. Eschatological propensities appear especially where the vicissitudes are more aggressive. Aesthetics merely reflect social psychosis.

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Yet, rooted precisely in these inconsistencies and frustrations, as well as echoing the spiritual, mental and aesthetic dynamism that they generate, most of the recent Romanian art is characterized by powerful, striking involvement and authenticity. Here art is still innocent, and the artists remain inside a neo-romantic conceptual framework, accentuating the rhetoric of genuine, deep intuition, of geniality and originality, of skillfulness and talent, of social relevance of the work of art and its subsequent perpetuity.

In an effort to map the recurrent features of contemporary Romanian art, its permanent tags and redundant issues, its implicit presuppositions and explicit, programmatic ideology, "The Quest for a Self" ocuses first on a

brief history of 20th century Romanian art, then on its major iconography topic, which is the human figure, and will end with a chapter dealing with recent developments in experimental art.

I. A HISTORICAL SURVEY

1. The "Nationally Specific" Art and Regional Politics after 1918

There are some invariants in the Romanian art of this century as concerns both the stylistic structures and the ideological background on which they adhere or against which they detach themselves. Their delineation was perceivable during the second and the third decades of the century, and their repercussions are still to be felt nowadays. These invariants stamp the trajectory (and the extreme limits) of an artistic production which seems to be apparently out of any ordering criterion.

Avant-garde manifestations in Romania were keenly received by the major part of the artistic milieu, which was (at that time) looking for a coherent identity and a historical legitimacy. This group was coagulated around the issue of the "nationally specific" art that generated the most important ideological and aesthetic debate in the Romanian culture of the period between the two World Wars. The artists and theorists preoccupied with this issue contrasted the genuine national art and the avant-garde movements. In this connection, even the way they stressed the idea of a "nationally specific" art represents an option obviously directed against the avant-garde programmatic tendency towards an ideology and artistic language able to transcend cultural and national boundaries. As a reaction to such propensities, those interested in the specific Romanian mark in art were not inclined to underline the similarities between the national and the European art of the time, but to explore those features that particularized a supposed specific artistic expression. Thus, to the avant-garde's essentially urban spirit it opposed the Romanian rural specific; to the issues of speed, mechanisms and communication they opposed pastoral and intensely spiritualized features, and to the most important stylistic dimension of experiments it opposed a deep interest in the picturesque and the structural qualities of the work of art. Similarly, to the avant-garde's constitutive ideological exasperation (oscillating between a radical leftist option and the uninterrupted search for a new spirituality, even a new religiosity), the "nationally specific" art opposed the calmness of a natural religiousness, reinforced and promoted in its Orthodox-Byzantine matrix. It circulated values rooted in tradition, authenticity, and national spirit. This rhetoric is transparent not only through the implicit or explicit orientation imposed by the expression of public taste (i.e.

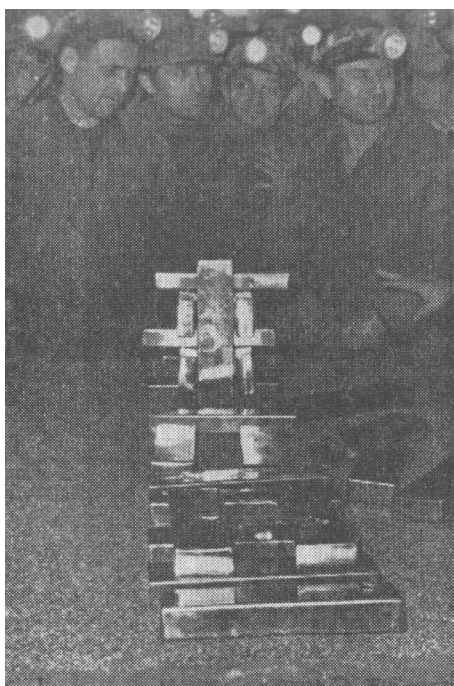
art history and theory of art criticism), but even from the intimate inclinations of the artists as these appear in their works. This state of affairs can be explained not only by the autonomous evolution of the Romanian culture and civilization, as there is not a mere tendency to configure an epoch's style. There is a complex matter at stake that can be only schematically treated here. The evolution of artistic expression and of the aesthetic expectations of the Romanian civilization between the two World Wars was profoundly connected with the historical transformations of the country. One must not forget that 1918 is one of the most important years in Romanian history. Transylvania and Bessarabia united with Romania, bringing about national unity for the first time. These events changed the configuration of the internal political scene because of the influx of mainly Transylvanian politicians with national and Christian backgrounds. Romanian's geo-political status also changed as it emerged as a significant medium power in its zone, leading a type of Balkan-oriented defensive politics (Romanian and Balkan countries share the Orthodox-Christian faith). Concerning internal politics, the new influences stamped the Romanian civilization in many ways, as the Transylvanian unionist parties and movements were supported basically by the rural population. As they do now, Hungarians and Germans concentrated in urban centers, while the majority of the population, the Romanians, dwelt in villages. In any society, the rural population is inclined towards traditionalism, national and religious-spiritual values. This happened in Transylvania and Bessarabia too. There such values constituted the very core of the Romanian unionist militancy. They generated an entire culture – a rural-oriented traditional art. After 1918 this culture entered the mainstream of the Romanian civilization, exerting a strong influence on its developing make-up. A significant part of the superior intellectual people originated in Transylvania – for instance LUCIAN BLAGA, the most important Romanian philosopher between the two World Wars (in his philosophy of culture, the village represents the specific Romanian spiritual matrix), LIVIU REBREANU, perhaps the best novelist of his time, whose favorite source of inspiration was the peasant's world, or OCTAVIAN GOGA, a poet whose national ideals drove him eventually to nationalist politics. Inherent tendencies of this kind also met an influential cultural program based on a traditionalist-rural ideology, explicitly anti-urban and antiindustrial, coloured with nationalist shades and known as *poporanism* (literally “pertaining to the people”).

As an approval and a consecration of these tendencies, even the Court (from the German royal family of Hohenzollern) promoted a cultural policy inclined to national and traditional ideals. They even tried to integrate themselves into the spiritual and national cultural milieu (not only as a hobby, sometimes the queens wore Romanian traditional clothing and participated in popular feasts). The urgency of defining the specific national culture was a problem of politics as well as a consequence of normal developments of

the civilization, which tended (especially after 1918) to return to itself, towards those profound cultural strata where, precisely in the field of the national tradition, there was a strong resemblance and correspondence between the previous Romanian culture and the newly unified territories, whose cultural development till that moment had been in fact relatively autonomous, hence particular. Historical logic validates this kind of cultural self-definition of a nation whose unity is accomplished only at the beginning of the twentieth century. The avant-garde's program was not able to support this task. It was not only different from the specific genetic data of the Romanian civilization, but also inherently versatile, unsuitable for lasting definitions. The avant-garde occasioned a reorientation and a redefinition of some mature cultures which were strongly (perhaps too strongly) structured. There the avant-garde had targets for its movement of contestation and rectification. Likewise, a well-established major official culture. Concerning the Romanian civilization, its most acute urgency then consisted precisely in the delineation of a coherent "official" culture. It was actually a matter of time.

2. Inventing Tradition

Similar problems confronted other Central and Eastern European countries too, but the particular data changed the evolutions. In Soviet Russia, the issue of cultural self-definition was equally urgent, as a completely new society was emerging. But this was grounded on an explicit refutation of the traditional Russian civilization. That is why a coherent cultural tendency was abstracted from the multitude of avant-garde possibilities, which were grounded mainly on a similar innovative propensity and professed a related leftist spirit in politics. The cultural orientation agreed upon and endorsed by the Soviet power at its beginnings derived from the constructivist part of the avant-garde, which, as it were, became the official Soviet aesthetics: "The Group of Constructivists has set itself the task of finding the communistic expression of material structures" (Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, *Program of the First Working Group of Constructivists*, 1922; in *Art in Theory: 1900–1990*, p. 317)¹. But this abbreviation of the avant-garde was deeply impoverishing, and eliminated some of its basic features such as the spiritual-religious inclinations, the hypertrophy of the creative ego and an intrinsic vocation for artistic arbitrariness. Yet it preserved technological optimism, a social Utopia and the propensity for involvement in politics, together with a longing to elaborate on a new plastic language. But these resembled the initial avant-garde only as much as Dorian Gray's final portrait resembled his first portrayed persona. So, the "(inter)national specificity" of Soviet culture, although originally avant-garde-like, was due rather to a renunciation to many of the essential avant-garde dimensions. It was practically a matter of politically-managed reductionism. How this mechanism



Mihai OLOS, *Gold and Wheat, Performance* (1972)

functioned is evident when, by abolishing the constructivist look, socialist realism advanced “by itself” as the normal “portrait” of Soviet culture, marking thus a progressive adequacy – a driven one, naturally.

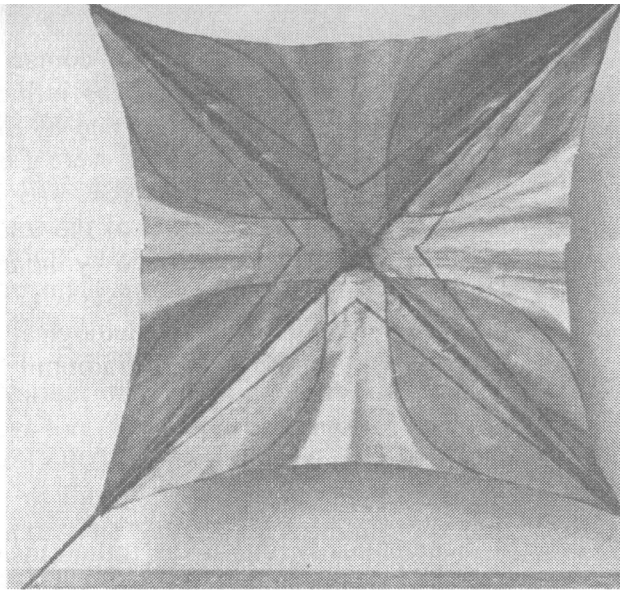
The Hungarian avant-garde, like the Russian one, played an important role in the national culture of the time. It was also stamped by a constructivist orientation: “What we want in painting is not science, not the play of emotions, but intelligence, the disciplined work of the human brain.” (K. KERNSTOK, *Explorative Art*, in *Nyugat*, 1910; apud SYLVIA BAKOS, 1988, p. 9)². But having to deal with other social demands and being framed by other historical events, the Hungarian avant-garde combined innovative tendencies and a national messianic propaganda. Although it seems a contradiction in terms, the Hungarian avant-garde was indeed a “national” one: “The world of ancient legends

and folk art constituted the root of these motifs, which assumed unique significance in the early twentieth century as a symbol of timely content”. An “...interest in painting themes of the «Golden Age» represented the «Arcadian» branch of the Hungarian avant-garde, which was coupled with interest in the machine, beginning 1917–1918. These two thematic concerns underlie Hungarian modernism in the twentieth century” (both quotations: SYLVIA BAKOS, 1988, p. 18 and 19). Besides the ideology promoted by the most influential avant-garde journal MA(TODAY) and by such prominent personalities as LAJOS KASSAK and LAJOS TIHANYI, one has to remind the ample program developed at the beginning of the century with the co-operation of the Finnish artist AKSELJ GALLEN-KALLELA. They established phalanster-like workshops based on the real kinship of the two peoples, but aiming at a utopian resuscitation of a common cultural “clan” spirit, viewed as a panacea for all the civilization’s evils. They were searching for a primaeval, mythologic Finno-Ugric communion able to support a new historical development, at least (as it always happened with the avant-garde’s huge but subsequently diminishing goals) a new artistic expression, a new style. Last but not least, the national involvement of the Hungarian avant-garde artists is powerfully stressed in the circumstances of the 1919 Hungarian communist revolution, in which they activated even as leaders of the movement: “Every single member of the Group of Eight and of the Activists played some part in the artistic activities sponsored by the revolutionary government” (LAJOS NEMETH, 1969, p. 72).³

Such phenomena of reactivating an (even legendary) tradition endorsed by avant-garde movements developed all around Eastern and Central Europe. Sometimes avant-garde tendencies are suppressed and the return to tradition takes definite and radical national features. In Poland, art was also polarized on extremes: "L'extrême droite est représentée en Pologne par plusieurs cercles numériquement assez forts que distinguent un programme proclamant le respect de la tradition, l'adoption des thèmes locaux et aussi un naturalisme suranné, de la forme et la néophobie, c'est-à-dire une aversion prononcée pour les nouveaux courants dans l'art" (M. TRETER, 1930)⁴. In Greece for example, one can find the militant "Hellenocentrist" cultural ideology reverberating even in work by such poets as KAVAFIS and SEFERIS, besides many others who made the national-traditional theme their favorite source of inspiration. In Croatia also, the remarkable sculptural works of IVAN MESTROVIC was based on the revitalization and re-interpretation of some medieval archetypes, characterizing a profound artistic spirituality, in which traditionalism and modernism met.

Generally speaking, those European nations who tended to promote their national cultural identity at the beginning of this century, were allegedly inclined to employ that national-traditional artistic argument, be it perpetuated, invoked or even (re)invented. This was the ideological engine that propelled an art no doubt designed to be (chiefly) "nationally specific". This happened not only in the Central and Eastern regions, but also in the South (in Spain there was a radical cultural movement arduously promoting the specific "Hispano-Moorish" style) and in the North too (in the Finnish Karelia the "Kalevala" style flourished, inspired by the national saga with the same name).

It is true that the avant-garde itself cultivated sometimes a movement towards traditional artistic and ideological models. PICASSO's case is obviously significant, as he was attracted by the old Iberic sculpture. FRANZ MARC also displayed close connections with the religious traditional Bavarian glass-painting. But their preoccupations were strictly culturally mediated and not nationally-oriented. They pursued autonomous stylistic searches, and these were quite varied, even contradictory. Thus, PICASSO was equally (or maybe more) preoccupied with neoclassical art, African and

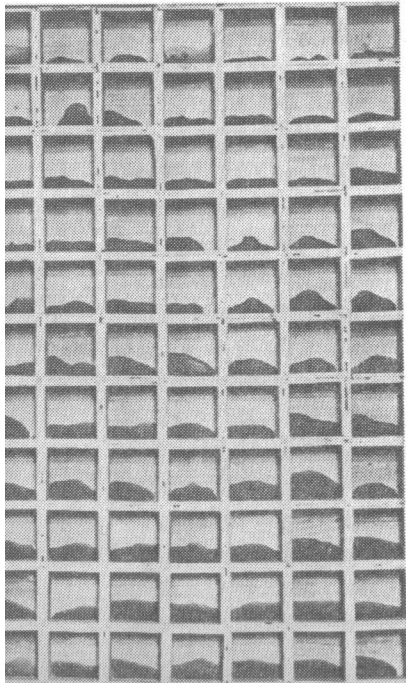


Horia BERNEA, *Umbrella Vexillum*
(1973)

other primitive masks, and of course the art of his avant-garde fellows. Idenically, FRANZ MARC was influenced by the particular ideology of KANDINSKY, by theosophy and by the French school of his time. Avant-garde explorations of this kind were grounded on a very special status of the artistic experience. KIRCHNER and NOLDE were also influenced and obsessed by the resurrection of the traditional German woodcut. However, stylistically they were stamped by the influences of MUNCH, VAN GOGH, GAUGUIN and other modernists who promoted an essentially individualistic style whose plastic and ideological issues are discharged by a manifest conformity with the national tradition.

3. The Romanian Case

Schematically, this is the milieu inside which the Romanian "nationally specific" art developed. It was a general movement toward the national cultural extreme, combined or oven opposed to various avant-garde trends, which sometimes polarized on national specific issues determined by historical circumstances. Even in Romania, some modernist elements were interpreted in a national key. Thus nationally specific chromatic, compositional and decorative matters appeared. Many buildings were erected in the so-called "neo-Romanian" style (although there was no previous "Romanian" architectural style). The most important figures of this trend were ION MINCU and PETRE ANTONESCU. They tried to give a "national image" to Bucharest, the capital of Romania, erecting on neoclassical premisses various



buildings with numerous interventions from the Romanian traditional architectural vocabulary (small towers and specific curtains). The decoration of these buildings was borrowed from the late-medieval Romanian patterns (mainly the Brancovean style). "Nationally specific" painting was theorized especially by FRANCISC SIRATO (a basically modernist painter) and illustrated by CAMIL RESSU, STEFAN DIMITRESCU, OLGA GRECEANU, COSTIN PETRESCU, CECILIA CUTESCU STORCK and many others: "What we want is a national style, in the sense of a subjective individualism in expressing the forms and phenomena characterizing Romania... Art has a homeland and it is national by birthplace and universal only through its effects, like all the cultural elements"⁵. Nowadays even the most important Romanian modernist painter, THEODOR PALLADY (a life-long friend of MATISSE) is perceived as displaying in his works influences of the Romanian

traditional religious fresco⁶. In the field of sculpture MILITA PATRASCU and CORNEL MEDREA stood out by their insistence in employing the national theme. They illustrated even some extremely old, legendary moments of national history which, although not documented, seemed genuine.

In this connection, the most important international cultural and ideological manifestation imposing the Romanian artistic "national specific" was constituted by the 1925 Paris exhibition of Old and Modern Romanian Art, a national manifesto addressed to the European conscience, signaling not only the existence of a vernacular variant of modernism, but also its commitment to national traditional values too. The aesthetic ideals of the most important art historian of that time, GEORGE OPRESCU, converged on the same issues – "Around and among us there are other nations. Sometimes they outdo us, sometimes they equal us. The Saxons have produced pottery which is more varied and of better workmanship. The Balkan peoples, the Bulgars and especially the Serbs, have often woven tapestries of finer texture, of larger size and frequently with cleaner and finer designs. (...) None of these peoples, however, can claim to have shown their originality in so many different ways, to have cultivated all the arts, or, anyway, to have cultivated them with equal success. This the Romanians can say".⁷ Later on, he was more direct – "...the works of art predestined to last must bring, and they do bring, something new; but they cannot be conceived beside or against tradition. In the case of a great artist, the living and persistent tradition will form the basis of this oeuvre, although he does not realize it".⁸ One must not forget the field of music, especially ENESCU's remarkable ROMANIAN RHAPSODIES composed earlier in his career. They are a kind of melodic summary of the Romanian musical vocabulary, an exaltation of the national tradition and spirit. Their importance is enhanced by their being developed with the specific means of the French impressionist musical school. This means that they are embodied in a modernist artistic shape. ENESCU's paradigm was followed by a whole school of national composition whose most significant consequence is the BYZANTINE ORATORIO of PAUL CONSTANTINESCU, that desired to provide the national Orthodox divine service with a musical element compatible with great religious works that Italians and Germans offered



to the Catholic divine service. Precisely by its title, the BYZANTINE ORATORIO confesses its spiritual and stylistic affiliation with the traditional religious music of the Romanian Middle Ages.

Feeling tradition as a living and enlivening autonomous spiritual stream was proper to the "nationally specific" art, while the culturally-pragmatic approach toward tradition as a style-improving device is pertinent to the avant-garde point of view. There is no hierarchy in this distinction. Very often, avant-garde pragmatics of form succeeded in exploring and renewing the genuine and perennial assets of traditional morphology, definitely better than neo-traditionalism itself did. But they had another purpose at stake, and their success in a *sui generis* revival of traditionalism was not a goal in itself, but a means among many others.

4. The Avant-garde and Its Technique of International Synchronization

Although not numerous, the Romanian avant-garde produced leading personalities of the international avant-garde movement such as TRISTAN TZARA, MARCEL IANCU (JANCO), VICTOR BRAUNER, etc. BRANCUSI occupies a very special place. His ideology and stylistic orientation equally transcend the avant-garde and tradition. However, his relationship with national tradition is not the same as PICASSO's. It is more intricate, as is shown in the structure of his work (a stack of books has been written about Romanian motifs in BRANCUSI's art) and some of his sayings (the aphoristic substitute of aesthetics). For instance, his proclaimed confidence that in Europe no nation has mastery over wood-carving, except the Romanians. So he had a subtle but strong connection with the spirit of national tradition, which he tried to preserve even in his daily life and work in Paris, as his workshop proves at the Center Pompidou.

Those preoccupied with "nationally specific" art endeavored to accomplish a diachronic synthesis of the spiritual and stylistic elements recurrent in the cultural tradition. Contrariwise, the avant-garde movements were attracted by the cultural enterprise of opening the Romanian mentality to the newest features of European civilization of the time. The avant-garde was therefore searching for (and practising) a kaleidoscopic synchronicity with a diversity of artistic trends. That is why it praised and it followed the programs of dadaism, futurism, cubism as well as those of expressionism or constructivism. There was no ideological and stylistic orthodoxy (although some leaders claimed so), but an uninhibited propensity for assimilation and syncretism. They were not concerned with what individualizes the Romanian artistic spirit but with the means of transposing at home the most characteristic features of the European (and international *Zeitgeist*) then. To a keen national awareness and artistic observance, they opposed a true cosmopoli-

tan awareness. That is why their attention was directed precisely towards the issues rejected by the "nationally specific" art of their time. The most important one, defining twentieth century civilization was the issue of technology (with its major corollaries – innovation, industry, communications, urbanism, speed, mass-production). Technology was antagonistic to the spiritual ideal that "nationally specific" art was searching for, focusing on artisanal features, archetypal religiousness and history.

The avant-garde was solitary, pertaining to an aesthetic minority. But it realized, for the first time, a technique of synchronization as well as a synchronicity of technique.

In Romania, the avant-garde proper was obsessed with the technique of synchronization and it was clearly stamped by that futurist energetism which underlines the entire innovative artistic movement of that time. The "Activist Manifesto to the Youth" published by CONTIMPORANUL (May 1924) is full of references to technology, looking like an ideological machine producing a series of refutations of what they considered to be the "old" and unrestricted approval of the "new". Epitomized in their vision by "towns, roads, bridges and plants" they required "the strict and rapid graphic expression of Morse signals". Such "expression" cannot be offered by traditional artistic means and techniques, but only by new ones, by photography for instance, which was supposed to replace painting. Identically, the manifesto published by the INTEGRAL magazine (March 1925) invites on a trip to a paradise of technics, marked by such magical formulas as "rhythm-speed", "the dance of the machines" and "nerves of telegraph". The most authentic and pertinent occurrence of this spirit in the 1920s and the 1930s came in the first issue of the magazine UNU, precise in the eschatological decalogue signed by SASA PANA. The manifesto enumerates some of the acknowledged masters of the avant-garde (MARINETTI, BRETON, TZARA etc.), and also some technical innovations such as "airplane", "wireless telegraphy-radio", "television". These innovations were viewed as a necessary context of artistic renewal. There is nothing more significant to the problem of synchronicity than the reference to "television" in this poem-manifesto from 1928. Of course, as LOVINESCU pointed (EUGEN LOVINESCU, 1989, *passim*), there is talking about "extremism" and "guidance" and about a driven modernism/avant-garde. This a tendency missing a real basis in the Romanian civilization of the time, but nonetheless expressive, intense and prophetic.

The avant-garde (here including the Romanian one) makes references to technology by artistic means; SASA PANA's manifesto is a literary one, in which the ideological option for technical aspects such as "wireless telegraphy-radio" materializes in a laconic, elliptical and telegraphic writing and a similarly typographical character. The poem looks like an enciphered urgent military order sent to vanguard units. Nevertheless, the author uses neither telephone nor radio to transmit his message. The technical mania of the avant-garde never goes so far as making references to technics by means of

technics itself. There is always a caesura that makes it possible to elaborate on a work of art, in which technology is appropriated in a symbolic, purely suggestive way, as a technical gear for a battle with essentially aesthetic purposes. They made "aviogrammes" but they never projected airplanes. Technology was only an artistic motif, a traditional "source of inspiration" completely transfigured in the work of art. More precisely, art aped technology as in mimicking a train, a machine gun or a soda siphon, without actually employing something from a train, a machine-gun or a soda siphon.

Art was then dedicated to the synchronization with technology, not in the territory of technology, but within the confines of its own realm. Inside its vital and formalized space, all things, however explosive they seem, are only signs. Art only quotes technology, which is activated as expression and experience, not as an objective reality. The lyrical mood is specific to this attitude. The avant-garde gives technology a soterial vector. It was supposed that by internalizing technology, one could surpass ("automatically") the old and insignificant creative formulas. The *metanoetic* value of technology suggests that it can be viewed as a space ship (see the "Telegraphic poem" by VIRGIL GHEORGHIU), or as an underground vehicle (for instance the "Oil-bearing poem" by GEO BOGZA).

Technology intermediates between the avant-garde artist, taken as a part of a collective daily monotony and an unknown territory strangely situated precisely at the very core of that generic monotony which is accessible only to a technically privileged point of view. This is why the creative personality of many avant-garde artists was very indebted to their technical orthodoxy; only a few of them had succeeded in imposing themselves beyond their initial option of a canonic vision (be it dadaist, constructivist or surrealist). Contrariwise, the longevity of the literary surrealist nucleus, for example, was due to the obstinate preservation of the technical dogma, as also happened in the case of surrealist painting.

5. Socialist Realism: Subjecting Technology and Modernism

The "grand vision" on technique of the avant-garde (as both a regulator mechanic of social and individual life and an infallible artistic mechanism able to guide the poem, the painting or the sculpture to an absolute relevance), was replaced during the 1950s by another perspective on the artistic modality of representing technology and on the artistic technique itself. Socialist realism was a typical technique of synchronization. This synchronization meant a dis-synchronization for Romanian culture. Despite this reality, one recognizes that the socialist realist technique of synchronization assured (like the one of the avant-garde did) a complete success for that artist who carefully observed its principles and consistently manipulated some

formal and iconographic items. As an artistic technique, socialist realism had a soterial vector itself, consisting in the capacity to propel the artist somewhere out of the obsolete artistic formulas by means of a connection with a reality – the only one true and permanent then – legitimizing the artist himself as a part of an immovable absolute. In a certain sense, it was true that “socialist realism was the only ideology and the only creative literary method”⁹. And not only in the field of literature.

In the visual arts, socialist realism assured a general (although very peculiar) synchronicity and it was more successful than the avant-garde. Of course, it was impossible to overlook the political endorsement of socialist realism by those in power. Nonetheless, it is a mistake to believe that this endorsement was the only cause of its success. The aesthetic causes are much more significant and are connected with the technical aspects of these artistic products and with the aspect of technology represented by the respective works of art. Because socialist realism perpetuated the avant-garde tradition of metaphorically employing technology, one must underline that nearly all the coordinates of this matter were turned upside down. So technology is nothing else than a heraldic shield legitimizing the key-character of every socialist realist work of art, the one than can be denominated as “the creator of the new”.

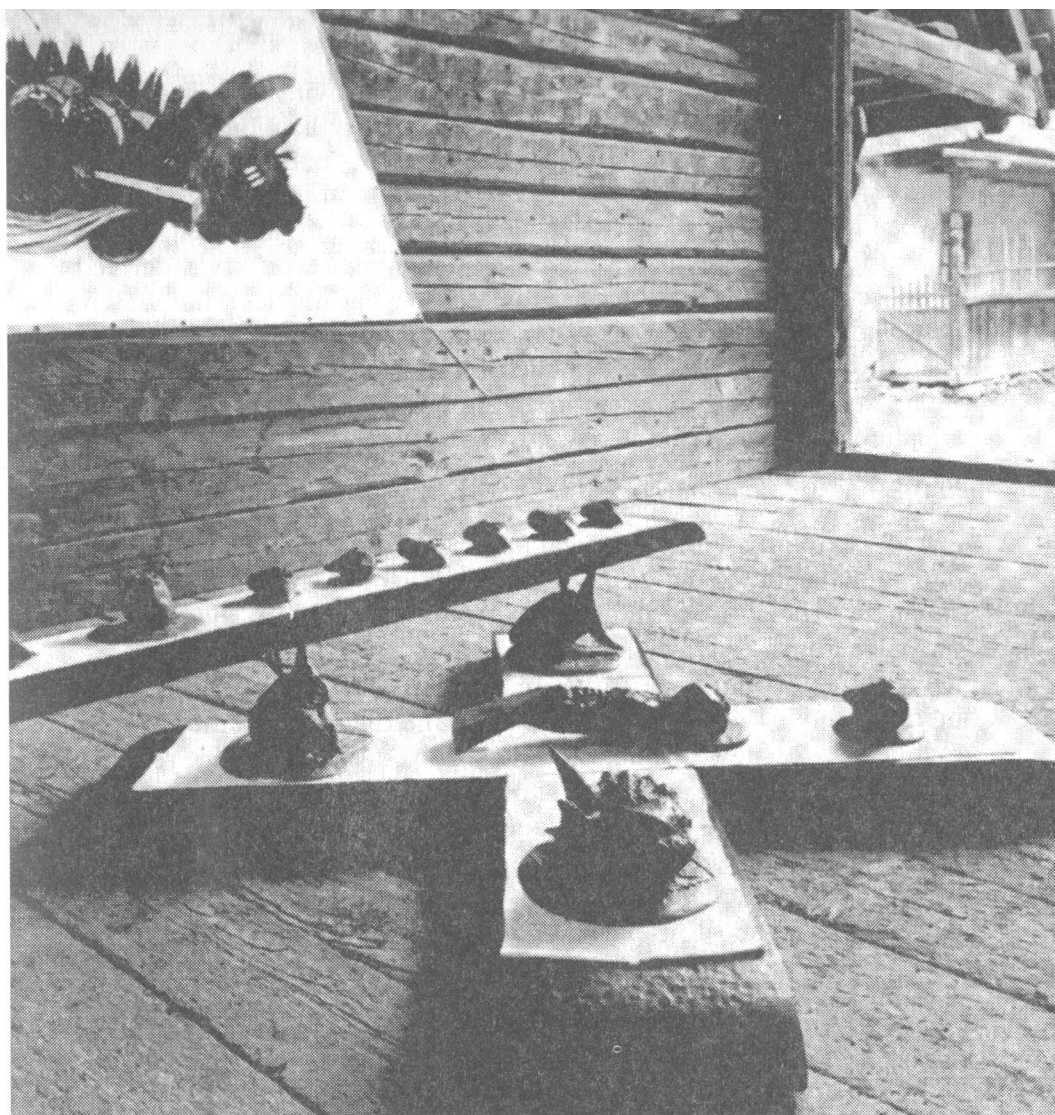
The mystical fanaticism of the avant-garde to technology was replaced by a superficial pragmatism. The infantilism characterizing this modality of viewing technology is primarily illustrated by the way cranes, machines or complicated installations appear to the eyes of the artist. Vapid realism and an over-determined symbolism combine in a naive, awkward manner. Let us recall (between the innumerable examples of this kind) some works pertaining to such artists, not lacking skills, BORIS CARAGEA for instance, whose 1953 “Miner” is charged with such a strange upsurge that he obviously pierces the invisible rock before him without using the sledgehammer somebody left in his arms as a sign proving his identity rather than a real working device. There is nothing in it resembling the dramatic tension of an avant-garde work on the same theme, for instance Epstein’s “Rockdrill” (1914). The socialist realist variant presents man and machine as two profoundly differentiated species, the machine being nothing else than a docile tool in the powerful hands of the man; between them there is no possibility of communication, of a transfer of roles, or an interpenetration to which man and technology are always inclined. In Boris Caragea’s work, everything is enlightening and intelligible. The symbolic mastery of man over technology is illustrated without any special artistic technique – there is no influence of the subject matter on the specific modality of representation. The calculated archaism and the simplicity of the artistic rendering of technology tend to obliterate the complexity of the phenomenon and of that very object which is configured. Consequently, the object becomes a kind of inoffensive toy, which is often full of ridicule, as it is manipulated by a self-assertive and

essentially paternalistic art which, behind its false naïveté, succeeds in depleting technology of any appeal and of any mystery. In such paintings as "Homage to Nicolae Ceausescu" by TRAIAN BRADEAN or "Working visit" by VLADIMIR SETRAN (a work of the 1980's), technology is managed in such a way that it becomes the props of a strange play, one which lacks any drama. Technology is only a pretext (in the first work there is a power plant, and in the second there is a chemical installation), as it is part of a thematic program – including also national history and peace etc. – circumscribed to the matter of the ideological legitimization of the communist civilization.

"The soul of technology" which the avant-garde aimed to make actual during its sessions of artistic spiritism is completely exorcised by socialist realism, which banished all the "spirits" from the obedient machines of "the new era". The triumphal paragon of this compliant reification is the tractor. All the over-represented mechanisms and installations, cranes and derricks are in fact reducible to the meek, insipid and stupid figure of the tractor, which is "the first wonder of technology" in the socialist realist perspective. By being represented in this way, technology is dismantled, eventually castrated. Art becomes a repressive medium and because it refuses any research for an artistic technique too, it becomes also a self-repressive medium. It becomes itself a tractor.

The avant-garde viewed technology as a matter of conscience, of artistic communication. That is why its artistic technique was so characteristically violent and anxious but transparent and dynamic at the same time. Socialist realism required an opaque technique, a clearly impersonal one, although very productive and profoundly optimistic. Such a technique was designed to control everything by means of representation (with the exception of the technique of representation itself). But it did so in a non-communicative, alienating way.

The insistence on technology was multifarious, as it was motivated by internal necessities of the communist ideology which fitted also important tendencies in the international art theory of the time. That included the appearance of a "general synchronicity". Thus, in the only Romanian art journal in 1970 a translation appeared of some chapters from a forthcoming book by RENE HUYGHE, *Art and the Modern World*. The chosen chapters contained ideas of this kind: "For twentieth-century man, it was not easy to adopt a stable point of view on the complex state of affairs of his time. That is why he searches for a symbol able to extract a precise and clear image from this acute disorder. This was the machine. (...) Its widespread employment determined innumerable consequences both in the material and, as a ricochet, in the psychological order. Indeed, it counteracted against nature (...) it separates man from Nature"¹⁰. This is obviously an alibi for the many representations of man subjecting nature by technical means that occurred in the Romanian art then (and a long time after).



Marian ZIDARU, *Bloody Christmas*
(1985)

6. Socialist Realism: Subjecting Tradition

But in the seventies the ideological background of official art changed. Although the matter of technology survived as a major theme of many artists and supported various (although inapplicable) investigations in design, there was another trend which prevailed in the so-called "social demand". It was the subject matter of national tradition, including issues such as national history and customs, folklore and legends etc., the religious-spiritual area excepted.

Therefore, socialist realism succeeded in employing the consequences of the avant-garde way of viewing contemporary civilization through the perspective of technology, and the older tendency of "nationally specific" art. It was a surprising compromise between the two conflicting artistic ideologies between the two world wars. But the paradox is only apparent. As with the issue of technology (which all over the communist world was derived from the Soviet primary adoption of a constructivist aesthetics), the way mechanisms and people interacting with mechanisms were represented, was in fact a distortion of the avant-garde poetics of technology. Identically, national tradition (as both opposing experiment and imposing an identity), was only a caricature of the original movement.

The employment of the rethoric of technology in the early period of socialist-realist art was based on the required compliance with a model allegedly extolling work, technical innovation and science as the needed aesthetic impetus for the masses. The explanation of the national tendency in the Romanian official art of the seventies also springs from ideological shifts, especially from Ceausescu's new orientation, clearly visible during the 1968 intervention of communist armies in Czechoslovakia. Romania's condemnation of the move (which enhanced a lot its international position), was in fact grounded on its new cosmetic political look. Artistic affairs reflected this evolution. Romania insinuated a simulacra of alternative politics, and it also competed to insert a seemingly alternative artistic universe which, as its political "option", reflected an ex-centric, particularizing inclination. Practically, the problems connected with the Romanian national specificity in art were a matter of propaganda but they succeeded in imposing an alternative to the major theme of socialist realism, that is "technical progress". At the same time, using national rhetorics, the new artistic ideology presumably assured a continuity with a traditional twentieth-century issue in Romanian art. Identically, the previously dominant subject matter was seemingly reinforcing the connection with "traditions" of the Romanian avant-garde. Then this idea was practically stressed by the appointment of a leading avant-garde artist, M.H. MAXY, as the Director of the Romanian Museum of Art during precisely the period of "orthodox" socialist realism.

This new orientation satisfied many of the Romanian artists at the time, and also the art historians and theorists, who by virtue of their jobs were much more sympathetic to traditional artistic values than to the ideals of the avant-garde, as they were corrupted and alienated by the communist aesthetics. In addition, the new orientation appealed to those art critics who distrusted experimental art, especially the one practised in Western countries at that time (happenings, body art, environments, video etc.).

As in the case of the original movement centered around the issue of "nationally specific" art, the new revival was not only supported, but also obviously required and used as a subtle propaganda contrivance by those in power. Later on, art theorists pointed out that "Contemporary Romanian art

benefits in many ways form the premises of an original understanding of the concept of initial reality, that is tradition... Tradition as a harmonious value of the past and present, tradition as not only collective memory, but collective action too, represents a decisive reality of Romanian culture..."¹¹. Historical battles and legendary figures together with the representation of folkloric traditions and the resurrection of the landscape as an ideological means of praising the beauty of the country proliferated, joining such cultural empiric "solutions" of reviving the tradition as the institutionalization of a high prize attributed to the creators of popular art (mainly peasants), during the festivities of awarding the annual prize designed for professional artists. That was a clear manifestation of the role and place that tradition occupied in the cultural hierarchy of the Establishment.

In fact, at a certain moment, the iconography of national tradition and that of technical progress converged, as they were different means of accomplishing a single task – supporting the legitimacy of the communist civilization, which previously was seen as the only one founded on advanced premises ("progress through technique") and now was presented as the only one promoting the true values and traditions of national culture. As ION FRUNZETTI said, "the new Romanian art sacrifices the unnecessary and superfluous analysis as it praises the plastic essence of art, inspired by the model of true Romanian art..."¹² The ideological layer of this artistic "efflorescence" was widely claimed even by art critics: "So the demonstration which the exhibition implies (that is the anniversary exhibition 25 YEARS of ROMANIAN ART, dedicated to the proclamation of the Republic in 1947, note E.K.) is that our progress toward socialism, towards the assimilation of socialist ideals, was always achieved by our best artists. And the profound convergence of politics and aesthetics can be verified any time"¹³. But the "socialist ideals" were substantially reworked and adjusted to the new ideological requirements. Thus, the widespread communist motif of the socially engaged and active artist, was reinterpreted and all its initial internationalist content was obliterated. In the introductory essay to a public inquiry about "Engaged Art", the editors of *Arta* stated that: "To be engaged means, for instance, to express an imperative national consciousness, virtualized not only through iconography, but through an entire process of a modern redefinition of the national artistic language, which is not the sum of scattered individual idioms, of styles and pseudo-styles, but a coherent trans-individual system"¹⁴ However, this "coherent trans-individual system." never emerged, because it was not grounded on inherent artistic principles, on distinct and assumed aesthetics. It was only an ideological scheme which supported many stylistically divergent renderings of the same matter which was not extended but inexhaustingly repeated. The artists counting on the another major theme, "technical progress", continued to represent plants, pipe-lines and tractors. Sometimes they even changed the roles, precisely because they had no real option.

7. The Neo-Avant-garde

Besides the matters of pseudo-traditionalism and pseudo-avant-garde affected by socialist realism (and later on by the so-called “official art”), in Romania, beginning with the seventies a true neo-avant-garde and a genuine neo-traditionalism developed. Those trends encompassed most of the really significant contemporary artists. But their fate was very different.

The neo-avant-garde was grounded less on the historical Romanian avant-garde, because most of its representatives emigrated and the rest of them were mesmerized by socialist realism. The major influence was exerted by the international neo-avant-garde movement. This means that another typical Romanian avant-garde issue was at stake, that is the preoccupation with an international synchronization. No wonder if, consequently, the Romanian neo-avant-garde was especially involved in matters of technique. But the concrete Romanian conditions interposed as a filter of their options – thus, the first significant movement of this kind was backed by (neo)constructivist ideals. In this direction, there was even a Romanian source, that is the work and theory of HANS MATTIS-TEUTSCH (1884–1960), a Romanian-born member of DER STURM movement from Berlin, who was, later on, strongly connected with the BAUHAUS movement. From 1919, he was a teacher at a Brasov college in Romania. In 1931 he published his “Kunstideologie”, a typical avant-garde program, continuing some ideas of Klee, with an evident constructivist mark. His aphoristic theories sound like this: “Subjecting the natural forms through the means of art. Subjecting the natural forces through the means of technique. The epoch’s technical spirit – technique consumes and it is consumed...” and “What is the goal of plastic arts in our technical and accelerated epoch? It consists in returning man to himself...”¹⁵. Although he was rather isolated in the Romanian artistic milieu after the Second World War, he nevertheless perpetuated both a constructivist technical preoccupation and a utopian social vision. The last one was strongly connected with communist principles, as some issues from his “Kunstideologie” prove, like the active role of the artist in society, the poetic significance of the work and workers, the artistic mass-communication, etc. His model facilitated the perpetuation of some Bauhaus principles in the programs and activities of one the most important Romanian neo-avant-garde movements, that is the Timisoara based “Sigma” group. This was the most consistent, active and persistent artistic nucleus in contemporary Romanian art. Contrary to other movements and tendencies, “Sigma” elaborated and original and coherent aesthetics, published as programs and analyses by its members in exhibition catalogues or journals. In fact, in the visual arts there was no other group in the post-war period to pursue such a wide experimental investigation, both in theory and practice. Artistic factions were constituted on other criteria – around the personality of a master (for instance the school of painting founded by the poetics of ALEXANDRU CIUCURENCU) or

around a specific site (the movement of "sculpture camps" started at MAGURA in 1970, or the correspondent movements in painting, POIANA MARULUI and TESCANI). An important artistic movement was determined, in nearly the whole country, by the so-called WORKSHOP 35 ("The Workshop of the Youth"). But this covered a state of mind rather than an organized movement backed by conscious ideals and determined aesthetics. It was involved in various manifestations, ranging from experiment (installations, environments, happenings, etc.) to the most traditional exhibitions of painting, sculpture, ceramics, etc. These formed the bulk of their activities. Even in the case of the famous (already legendary) 1988 Baia Mare "Exhibition of the Youth", "the total absence of the avant-garde was evident. Except for some modest inter-media installations, the modernist area of environment and the ephemeral is ignored in favor of stability and permanence"¹⁶ Previously, these avant-garde apprehensions of the young artists inclined to a rather compromising attitude towards official ideology, as in another "Exhibition of the Youth" (Bucharest 1975), which was "characterized by a profound humanist orientation, rooted in the actual problems (in the general idea of the humanist sense of work as a fundamental principle of the socialist civilization); the exhibition pleads for an accentuated social responsibility of the artist, implying a better acquaintance with the «material of reality»"¹⁷. Behind the big words, there stood "an ample thematic program referring to contemporary civilization, showing phenomena connected with urbanism and industry, the modernization of agriculture..." (idem). Obviously, the purest conformist pseudo-avant-garde was at stake.

The major members of "Sigma" were CONSTANTIN FLONDOR, STEFAN BERTALAN and DORU TULCAN. They met in the Timisoara Ion Vidu Art College. Their activity started in 1962 and lasted till the end of the seventies, practically in the same formula and with the same goals. They experienced nearly all the artistic means provided by the classical avant-garde and by the dynamic contemporary neo-avant-garde. Most interesting is that they succeeded in preserving their personality (as a group and as artistic individualities too) throughout their endeavors, which were at the same time specific "Sigma" enterprises. Last but not least, their subsequent evolution in the post-"Sigma" period was (and still is) extremely significant for the possibilities and limits of any (neo)avant-garde movement developing in Romania. At the Art College in Timisoara, they pursued alternative artistic teaching based on avant-garde ideas, completed with an openness to and influences from contemporary artistic means such as installations, environments and, later, video. At the very core of their activity was the ideal of artistic education as a complex and permanent awareness based on communication. Their actual program was rooted in a utopian constructivist exaltation of science and technology. As FLONDOR writes, they were trying to assure "the emergence of a bridge between art and science; the reconsideration of the environment as an object of artistic research; the coordination of

the creative activities and the artistic education.”¹⁸ The supposed practical results of their effort were “the development of a prospective thinking of the students and of an intelligence able to adapt them to a future culture; the development of an algorithmic thinking; the emergence of constructive thinking and of a technical competence of the students”, and of a technical competence of the students”, and so on (*idem*). All their endeavors involved a “positivist” starting point, although they finally attained a lyrical intensity in their activity, as happened in the case of the historical avant-garde too. But there was a clear difference between the avant-garde artistic outlook on technology and the technical outlook on art of “Sigma”. The difference was determined by the influence of the current communist ideology of both education and artistic expression. As was shown previously, socialist realism implied the artistic superseding of technology. Now, in its optimistic propensity, “Sigma”’s inference was that as a result of education and cultivated skills, technical means themselves could be turned into art. This means that art not only controls technology by means of representation (as happened in the case of the early socialist realism), but can manipulate it towards artistic purposes precisely by means of technical knowledge. Although it was inspired by the international neo-avant-garde, this way of viewing the relationship of art and technology was convergent with the official attitude on these matters. There prevailed an insistence on the issue of integration of education and practice, of the theoretical background and productive abilities, an orientation that eventually degenerated into a disorganization of the educational process, exceedingly polarized an superficial technical competences, with many severe consequences on the quality of instruction, especially on its humanistic purposes. But at the beginning of “Sigma”, these issues were benign, as they were propelled by well-intentioned artists and theorists. Nevertheless, there were many signs of the future tendency. Let us quote another member of the group: “There must be a bridge between science and art, between art and the consumers. This requires a shift from pure originality (extreme subjectivity), which is today an obstacle, to the creation of an organized milieu, starting with the productive industrial practice... Thus the premises appear for an art that fits much better those societies increasingly influenced by science and technology”¹⁹. In fact, the Romanian civilization of the time was less and less influenced by technology and science, as the communist economy was lagging behind. But an ideological issue was at stake. Subsequent to the 1970 “Sigma” exhibition in Bucharest (in the Herastrau park), the Ministry of Education decided to support the Art College from Timisoara (i.e. the “Sigma” group) in its endeavours toward an artistic educational program with experimental features. But it was design that prevailed then in their preoccupations – in 1970–1971 at the Timisoara Art College such specializations as Advertising, Aesthetics of Usable Forms (i.e. design) and even... Packages appeared²⁰. In 1973, “Sigma” was involved in the “aesthetic projection” of parts of Timisoara’s industrial zone

(idem). Later on, their scientific propensities were directed towards "Artistic Education as a System of Conscience", elaborating puzzling "Tests of Perception and Semiotics for Workshop of Visual Communication", and working with redundant concepts like "field of stimuli", and "codified signal"²¹. This drive to transform the workshop of the artist in a "workshop of visual communication" is quite strange. Although the tendency was in full swing in the West (as a consequence of the emergence of video and computer art and the subsequent inter-media virtualization of communication), it is surprising to find this idea promoted in Romania, where, for example, even a color television network was not yet developed. However, "Sigma" was preoccupied with a continuous synchronization; along with the artistic means and ideals they promoted, this represented their major avant-garde feature, as they regained the missionary spirit characterizing the historical avant-garde. If they unconsciously complied with some of the official communist ideals in education and artistic expression, one must not forget that this happened even to many avant-garde artists like Malevich, to cite an instance. It seems that the avant-garde had a special predisposition to comply with authoritarian, apparently progressive politics.

8. The National Neo-Traditionalism

The true spirit of the national-traditional art was embodied in a less formalized tendency than the neo-avant-garde, but it comprised many more artists and it was definitely more successful. As it happened during the 1920s and the 1930s with the "nationally specific" Romanian art, now modernist and even contemporary artistic means were included in this matrix. This was an important element of continuity, making visible that at the beginning of the century and also then, the way artists promoted the true Romanian specific was centered on some spiritual issues, not on stylistic or material invariants. What differentiated the official pseudo-national/traditional art from the national neo-traditionalist art, consisted especially in the spiritual-religious (neo-orthodox) element which the former allegedly rejected, and the absence of the historicist mania that characterized pseudo-traditionalism. Stylistically, national neo-traditionalist art employed sometimes experimental expressive means (while the pseudo-national art was always diffident towards innovation, confusing conservatism and tradition). The employment of experimental artistic features may have been a means of disguising and hiding the real content of the work. However, this is not essential, because alternative artistic means continued to be employed in expressing religious propensities, even when there was no danger to avoid.

Mainstream neo-Orthodox ("nationally specific") art can be detected in painting. Artists started from different outlooks – many of them were (conventionally speaking) authentic modernists. Others were traditionalists while

others started even from post-modernist premises. But they obviously shared the concern for an alternative spiritual background of their art, different from the exhausted official pathways and from the cynical opportunism of those artists who merely imitated the developments of the international art scene, making popo-art today and – if needed – expressionism tomorrow. In fact, it was not was not altogether true that: “Today most interesting Romanian artists practice at least two styles: a public style for commissions and official exhibitions, and a private, personal style for their «own» work”²². But there was no rupture between their so-called “official” work and their “own” work. It was only their creation as it reflected a certain incoherence euphemistically designated as “openness” to comply with the official demand, that was not actually obligatory. Contrariwise, the neo-Ortodox and “nationally specific” artists tended to delineate particular aesthetics and a coherent expressive structure, which were sometimes so enciphered that their work (though misunderstood) was even praised by official institutions and internationally exhibited, managing to impose a new and autonomous personality of Romanian art. Even in this case there was perhaps an implicit compliance with the official tasks of communist ideology, because by exhibiting such works of art, the cultural authorities desired to attain a better political look, nonetheless remaining consistent with their formalized, sanctioned artistic alternatives. In a certain sense the national neo-traditional art resembled the approved pseudo/national/tradition art, as they dwelt on a seemingly common horizon. But the differences were obvious. Especially in point of style (precisely because there was a real style), and the ideology that upheld the new artistic investigations of the national spirit.

At first an individual discontent emerged vis-a-vis current artistic modalities. “Purely visual art is worn-out; its sophistication and enclosure propel my need for sincerity, for the evidence of the object’s life (...) I want a presentation, an embodiment of the creative act itself, coinciding with the created object”²³.

One of the leading artists of the new orientation, HORIA BERNEA, gave a better insight into what led him to search for a new expression – it was, as he stressed in the title, “a certain disorder”, forcing him to proceed to “the creation of emotional-transcendent symbols, a notion that tries to delineate more clearly the spiritual feature of the created entity and the intention to make it act without intermediaries or associations...”²⁴. The same discontent and the same spiritual solution appeared that PAUL NEAGU had proposed previously. The incongruity between these artists and the official aesthetics was deeper, as their vocabulary proved. Notions came forth never used before (and even prohibited) came forth by the cultural ideology of the time – “transcendence”, “spiritual” etc. These were the very concepts that prefigured the poetics of the new orientation and even its future hermeneutics.

Another important artist, SORIN DUMITRESCU, confessed that he was longing for “a sacred quality, the vertical sense of consciousness, the immense mythological memory.”²⁵ He assumed that “the whole realm of

visibility possesses a mythological heredity converted in infinite ensembles of signs" (idem). The key-words were "sacred" and "mythological memory", revealed through "ensembles of signs" hinting at the artist's search for the same archetypal dimension that BERNEA and others were looking for. By mentioning "the vertical sense of consciousness," SORIN DUMITRESCU insinuated that his investigation aimed at a new ground for the disabled consciousness of the people of his time who, missing "verticality" tended to comply with the current ideology. This is one of the most important issues the new artistic tendency had at stake – laying a new foundation for those who consciously tried to oppose the current ideology and politics. Although seemingly surprising, they insisted that the new grounds were the old ones, genuine Romanian archetypes of living and thinking, including mythology and the sacred Orthodox signs. Here we have the explanation of a paradoxical situation in contemporary Romanian art – the leaders of the artistic resistance against the all-pervading and all-perverting communist ideology, were not the young experimental artists programmatically preoccupied with continuous "artistic liberation" and "non-conformism". They had in fact a strangely insignificant audience and practically no communication with the people, less interested in the ethic values of happenings or in the ecological issues raised by land-art, than in the spiritual-traditionalist value of the neo-Orthodox trend, which in fact was not the champion of freedom and openness, but of resilience and preservation. The communist culture threatened the foundations of national culture; it perverted folklore, literature, the visual arts, and, in the late eighties, it endangered even the basis of traditional culture (villages and churches were dismantled and demolished).

In these circumstances, a coherent artistic tendency of re-evaluating and promoting the old national-traditional spirit and its "signs", was predestined to a real public appraisal and critical recognition. Thus the work of MARIN GHERASIM is supposed to mediate the access to the "subtle region of archetypes"²⁶. No wonder the themes recurrently employed by the painter echoed powerfully into the mind of the Romanian intelligentsia: he repeatedly painted the motifs of "Apses" (the most important and sacred part of the church, where the altar stands), "Reliquaries", "Arks", "Fireplaces", "Gates" and "Thrones", all of them suggesting deep connotations in the Romanian collective psyche, being associated with the issues of genuine religion, true law, homeland and hope. It was in fact a well-established visual rhetoric. This created the possibility for many virtually abstract-geometrical works of art to be fully grasped by the same spectators who refused proper abstract art as too intellectual and purposeless. Actually, many works by MARIN GHERASIM, SORIN DUMITRESCU, PAUL GHERASIM, ION NICODIM, HORIA BERNEA and others, are essentially abstract paintings, as they either represent symbols or reduce the object to its symbolic shape – thus, MARIN GHERASIM's "Apses" represent monochrome squares with a gently rounded upper part, SORIN DUMITRESCU's "Places" are circular "fences" with zigzag shaped features inside, and PAUL GHERASIM's recur-

rent theme, the "Vault", is in fact a pierced star-shaped pattern on a uniform chromatic field. ION NICODIM employs the symbol of the bleeding heart (that materializes in a red patch on gray background) while BERNEA's famous "Banners" are also backed by a geometrical grammar, whose basic element resembles the way Veronica's veil is represented in medieval painting. Because of the symbolic ambivalence of the geometrical shapes, SORIN DUMITRESCU even baptized a series of his works "Hypersigns", emphasizing their spiritual charge. This opened the way to multiple (although equivalent) interpretations converging on the spiritual kernel of the works, which either displayed "the symbolism of the relic" or that of "the key-stone", but they undoubtedly aimed "to invoke the primordial values"²⁷. His series of "Places" enabled a tough Heideggerian approach and references to "the realm of Closeness" and to "a symbolic reiteration of the cosmic act of Genesis"²⁸. There is obviously a redundant metaphysics in many appraisals. In connection with one of the exhibitions pertaining to the cycle called "Prolog" (still continuing nowadays) it was written that "The Prolog exhibitions (*prologos*, i.e. before the word) are nothing more than anticipations of the Logos, a meeting of some artists... preferring to wait for the healing sunrise of a new belief."²⁹

Artists themselves displayed a growing appetite for theory, delineating more and more exclusive aesthetics to support their findings: "Art can not remain under the haphazard rule of the purely formal experiment. The image needs new semantics. The investigation of archetypes. Instead of appearance, the hidden essence, the significance. The image charged with spirituality"³⁰. The radicalism of the national neo-traditionalism is sometimes deeper than that of the artists of the 1920s and 1930s. MARIN GHERASIM claimed that "The two-dimensionality of Byzantine art is the space of the absolute." (idem) Mention should be made that his art is two-dimensional too...

Reflecting precisely on the matter of the "national specific" in art, he stressed that "The national specific is not a preconceived program..." (ibidem), implying that it matters to the national spirit and not to the inflexible conventions (as those promoted by the official pseudo-national/traditional art). Thus, his way of activating the "national specific" is rooted in "the idea of an equivalence of the visual construction and the architecture of spirit"³¹ which is defined mainly by such "values that lead the mind of the public to the very grounds of our ancient art" (idem). The artist personally experienced "the emphatic assimilation of the significance of the Byzantine icons, medieval frescoes and embroidery, and of old architecture as an ordering principle..." (idem).

Besides these ideological/philosophical implications, even the pictorial assumptions of the neo-Orthodox tendency were praised as an artistic deserving valiancy in the face of the experimental wave (that depreciated the work as artwork, praising the work as process), and of the monotonous, inflating production of official art. "The novelty of HORIA BERNEA's painting was grounded from the very beginning on the acceptance, up to a

certain point, of the tradition of easel painting, precisely in a moment when this tended to be relatively marginalized”³². Obviously, critics praised an artistic expression that, being Apollonic and omniscient, was at the same time full of chromatic flesh and compositional stability, both of these being appealing qualities to many theorists that loathed the visual precariousness of official art and also the incontinent dynamics of experimental investigations. They were favorable to such paintings that “respect themselves, as well as respect the onlooker”³³. Their creators were designated as “a silent and strange avant-garde *à rebours*, surveying not the future, but a certain perennial element, and attentive not to the continuous expressive innovation, but to the moral (existential) virtualization” (idem).

9. The National Neo-Traditional Epilogue of the Neo-Avant-garde

The most significant phenomenon characterizing the contemporary Romanian artistic scene is based on this wide acclamation of the spiritual, ideological and “purely visual” features of the national neo-traditional (“Neo-Orthodox”, “post-Byzantine”, “nationally specific”) art. That is the substitution of the avant-garde by the national neo-traditional tendency. This substitution ranges from the concrete matter of “alternative” artistic means to the quite essential avant-garde spirit, characterized by certain aesthetic structures (specific expectations and satisfactions developed during nearly a century-long autonomous progress of avant-garde vocabulary and actual experience). It is an evolutive process of assimilation and appropriation of the typical avant-garde poetics. Besides the real tradition of “nationally specific” art employing modernist artistic techniques, the explanation of this phenomenon must be derived from both the specific position of the national neo-traditionalist art inside the parallel (alternative) culture opposed to the previously dominant communist culture, and from the actual inefficiency of the neo-avant-garde movement proper which either developed a specific (but inapplicable and unappealing) metaphysics of technology, or pointed out an aesthetic freedom that was neither the ideal for the Romanian intelligentsia nor an accessible “desublimation” for the larger public. The ideas of authenticity, tradition, national spirit, and artistic values, were the “credentials” on which the success of the new “nationally specific” art was grounded. One must not overlook the massive endorsement this trend received from a correspondent metaphysics, which although sometimes too “heavy” and grandiloquent, nevertheless accomplished the crucial task of a coherent theoretical legitimacy. Just like the nationally specific art in the period between the two World Wars, national contemporary Romanian neo-traditional art succeeded to outline a particular national aesthetics, implying specific themes, symbols and artistic values. It seems that the recognition of an inter-

national event designed to acknowledge the vitality and the intrinsic consistency of Romanian art was duly expected, be it a remake of the previously mentioned 1925 Paris exhibition.

The appropriation of the neo-avant-garde artistic means emerged as a necessity, in order to correspond to a progressive aesthetic sophistication of the public and to explore a new syntax. There have been some significant moments of this process, that marked its trajectory and increasing importance. One of the most important exhibition events, "Writing", was organized by the artist WANDA MIHULEAC and the art critic MIHAI DRISCU in 1980, in Bucharest. It encompassed performance, installations, paintings and graphic works, "objects" and projects. The 90 participants in the event represented practically a selection of the most important Romanian painters, sculptors, architects and designers, together with the most significant writers, musicians, stage directors and, of course, art critics. It was a synergeric action unifying different artists around the central theme of creation – writing, conceived in its broadest (Derridean) sense, as "impression", thus being relevant to poets and novelists as well as to painters and sculptors or musicians. It pointed to a certain "archetypal", primeval creative space, a mythological and poetic issue that was underlined by critic: "the manifestation has taken us to the Romanian Middle Ages, when 'to paint' and 'to write' were interchangeable..."³⁴. Indeed, such eagerness to intertwine contemporary searches and medieval (or even older) traditions, shows an already established pattern of thinking and projecting recent art in terms of coincidence with a genuine, essentially unchangeable national spirit. This archaic framework propelled a hermeneutical vector too, and the feedback of the hermeneutics on the creation proper was a consistent source of augmentation for the national neo-traditional rhetorics.

The 1980 "Writing" exhibition succeeded in grouping neo-avant-garde artists together with national neo-traditionalists around a metaphysical-mythological program that was not the proper ambient of the former trend. Later on, the neo-avant-garde specificity altered more and more, as proven by a 1982 conceptual project of WANDA MIHULEAC. She was one of the significant neo-avant-garde figures, although not a coherent artist, moving from pop-art (in the seventies she did, for instance, the "Portrait of the Sewing Machine"), to hyper-realism (some of her works of this kind were praised by those in power), and also explored land art, installations, performance, etc. The 1982 conceptual project consists of a series of graphs displaying a kind of subjective interrelated algorithms, as a rhetoric repertory



in nuce. Surprisingly, the central concentric graph reveals the pervasive action of the national-traditional discourse – the “Fireplace” stands in the middle of the graph, and is designated as the “ultimate unity of the territory”, merged by the “vast space”, whose periphery is governed by “Utopia”.

However, it could be only a matter of conjecture exploited by an artist specializing in conjunctures. But the impressive 1983 “The Place – Act and Metaphor”, an environmental installation of contemporary works of art in the ethnographic “Village Museum” of Bucharest, was the clearest instance of a major shifting in the neo-avant-garde positions vis-a-vis national-traditional rhetoric. Together with national neo-traditionalist artist (such as BERNEA, GHERASIM, etc.) some of the leading neo-avant-garde personalities, including WANDA MIHULEAC, “Sigma” pillar CONSTANTIN FLONDOR, and experimental artist OLIMPIU BANDALAC, among many others of equal importance, exhibited “objects” and installations. Besides the obvious option revealed by the milieu (with which the works inter-acted, thus interfering with the national tradition epitomized by the village, the acknowledged Romanian cultural matrix), there was an entire theoretical effort that endorsed and evaluated the manifestation. This was viewed as an instance of “recuperation, especially among the new generation (preponderant in the exhibition) of the true formal and spiritual tradition whose offsprings they are”.³⁵ So the purposes are stated explicitly – the young artists were a kind of prodigal sons”, gladly received by the homeland spirit. Or, as stressed, the exhibition marked “a regaining of perennial values by means of equivalent structures”³⁶. Therefore, tradition seems to be inescapable, and its deep spirit appears even when the credited, common expressive means are replaced by equivalent (that is alternative) structures. Some of the theoretical conclusions were plainly exaggerated, connecting the event with official rhetoric. The artists were taken as “the natural heirs of that art developed in the space within the Carpathians, the Danube and the Black Sea (...) Romanian artists insist on order, measure, and harmony in their works, every artifact being a symbol of the whole...”³⁷ Although Romanian artists were not exactly Greek-like paragons of classical art, a pragmatic reading of the exhibition will show its major significance – the irrevocable inclination of the neo-avant-garde for such issues as “implicit mythologies”, “spiritual foundations” and the like.

Such developments enabled the artist-theorist MARIN GHERASIM to conclude in an essay unequivocally entitled *Directions in contemporary Romanian art* that “nowadays, there is a new dimension of sensibility and thinking, stamped by the prevalence of spiritual life, the exploration of genuine artistic expression; symbolic images are charged with significances of permanence.”³⁸ He added, seemingly conciliatorily but emphasizing in fact, that “traditionalism and the avant-garde are not irreducible, irreconcilable terms, as tradition lives actively, with a strong vitality in the innovative movement of our time”. (idem) These conclusions mark in fact the dis-

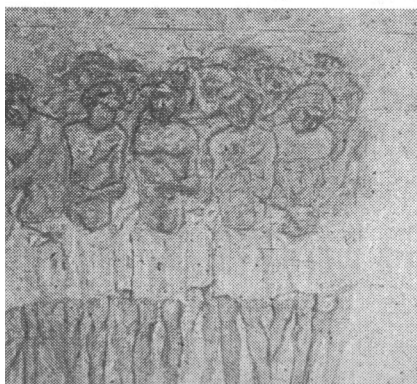
putable triumph of nationally specific Romanian art, as it propagates its ideals and even its spirit unto the neo-avant-garde movement.

Surprisingly enough, even the most fervent and orthodox neo-avant-garde figures, namely the "Sigma" members, who built exemplary programs and pursued perpetual experiments, eventually dwindled in the already commonplace rhetoric of national neo-traditionalism, adding a paradoxical (but not at all inconvenient) constructivist patch on the spiritual covering of contemporary "nationally specific" Romanian art. Thus, in the post-"Sigma" period, "while STEFAN BERTALAN inclined to "another direction of professional orientation" by studying the formal relations and their succession in space, CONSTANTIN FLONDOR and DORU TULCAN evolved from international aesthetics to the complex problems of a general semantics of the image, that implies a shift from purely formal research to a reconception of the contents"³⁹. So they moved from an abstract syntax to a practical, emotionally and spiritually involving semantics, that is from a formalized universe to an ambiguous, indefinable world of wanted significances. Here they obviously needed not the structural, scientific-oriented analysis of the image and its compounding parts. Now they sought a strong hermeneutical criterion requiring the active role of a subject observing well-defined rules. What rules? Well, the most genuine ones – those pertaining to national tradition. "In his last movies, as in the one called *The Linen*, TULCAN makes a study of the constructive values of the traditional rural environment, not without poetical qualities." (idem) As to STEFAN BERTALAN, he declared in the catalogue of the 1978 "Study" exhibition that his newest performances strove for "a reintegration inside modern man's life of an ancestral and primitive soul, a unity of the subject and the perceived object"⁴⁰.

NOTES

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3. Lajos Nemeth, "Modern Art in Hungary", Corvina Press, Budapest, 1969.
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6. Marin Gherasim, "Câteva direcții în pictura contemporană românească" (Directions in Contemporary Romanian Painting), in *Arta*, nr. 8/1984, p. 18.
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12. Ion Frunzetti, "Arta acestui sfert de veac" (The Art of this Quarter of a Century), în *Arta*, 12/1972, p. 19.

13. Dan Hăulică, "25 de ani de artă românească" (25 Years of Romanian Art), în *Arta*, 1-2/1973, p. 13.
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17. Mihai Drișcu "Expoziția tineretului," București (The Youth Exhibition, Bucharest), in *Arta*, nr. 10/1975, p. 26.
18. Constantin Flondor, "Armonia creație-educație" (The Creative-Educative Harmony), in *Arta*, no. 8/1970, p. 33.
19. Stefan Bertalan, "Fragmente dintr-un posibil jurnal" (Excerpts from a possible diary), in *Arta*, no. 8/1970, p. 34.
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31. Marin Gherasim, "Confesiuni despre un demers" (Confessions Concerning a Progres), in *Arta*, 10/1983, p. 8.
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33. Magda Cârneci, "Ion Dumitriu", in *Arta*, no. 7-8/1982, p. 31.
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36. Anca Vasiliu, loc. cit, p. 29.
37. Ion Frunzetti, "Locul – faptă și metaforă" (The Place – Act and Metaphor), Exhibition catalogue, UAP/Workshop 35, Bucharest, 1983.
38. Marin Gherasim, loc. cit., p. 20.
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II. REALISM, FIGURES, MASSES

1. The politics of figures. From Giotto's "The Kiss of Judas" to Leon Golub's "Riot" series, the image of acting individuals and groups ranges among the compulsory themes of any ideologically saturated representation, be it Christian, communist or feminist. A figure, unlike realism, is a matter of power. Neither conceptualism nor the happenings and performances succeeded in providing some tough, crushing "icons" of political relevance able to equal the effect of an image like, say, Che Guevara's effigy. It is not the realism that really matters here, but the striking impact of a suddenly emerging behavioral model that fully incorporates and emanates dogma, transcendence, vitally and sheer empathy.

The persistence of portraits and group scenes turns into an iconographic fatality, linked rather to the need of visualizing textual exhortations, than to the keen will of depicting nice people and their funny dealings. In fact, there is no "innocent" portrayal of people at all. Any representation of a group involves an implicit **moral**, be it the mere physical laws of agglutinating bodies, or the subtle politics of silent preaching figures.

People trust people. People follow people. This is why ideology has never employed still-lives and landscapes in order to penetrate into the collective psyche. Instead, a dazzling visual semiotics of enticing, passionate gestures, attitudes, and energetic group actions was developed by every official aesthetic system of propaganda. The communist one makes no exception. Leadership, cohesion and visual community-making strategies constituted its genuine iconographic treasury.

The major part of the current local art scene has its subjects and objects constructed before '89. Here, today, the artistic skills and "ways of world-making", the needs, the targets, the values and hopes are extracted mainly from a reality given through the past, communist experience. Anthropological and psychological types, attitudes and abilities, fears and pleasures change in Romanian society. However, as they are a conservative, memory-bound stratum, artists resemble some miraculous, sophisticated but hapless creatures preying on the dead body of collective expired experiences. They are not retarding, but archiving.

Contemporary Romanian society is actually a chaotic, non-traumatic, irresponsible, optimistic, idle and consumption-oriented one. To it, *before* '89 nothing really mattered (except for circumstantial rhetoric). Contrariwise, the art scene is dominated by a "conspicuous dis-consumption", by a gloomy, pessimistic, introspective and profound stance. Artists responsibly analyze, interpret and keep living past worlds and traumas. For

them, *after* '89 counts as a meaningful, genuine experience. They are strangers in their time. Only a few of them deal with actual contemporary, emerging issues and up-to-date inner experiences. Nine years were seemingly not enough to configure a new, major and general representational framework, new art subjects and objects. Paradoxically, much of the young Romanian art born after '89 is also clinging to the former, dated model. This makes the task of exploring the relevant premises more appealing.

2. The Socialist thematism. Usually, official communist art ("Socialist realism") is viewed as a stylistic block, stamped by a coherent Realist stance. The profound Constructivist genealogy of Communist art is thus neglected, in favor of a late, though long-living, academic ideological offspring. This was embodied in paragonlike works of Soviet masters such as Sergei Gerasimov, who revived the Russian "good painting" of the late 19th century, adapting it to fit the requirements of Soviet propaganda.

These requirements configured some canonic, needed themes: the representations of workers, peasants, (liberating) soldiers, revolutionary figures and party events. Therefore, Socialist realism is not essentially a matter of realism *stricto sensu* (as a "form" and a "style"), but one of **intentionality** and **thematism**. Similarly, feminist and ecologist art are centered on mainly ideological and thematic, not on aesthetic or formalist issues. Cubism and minimalism, for instance, could be defined in the essentialist terms of pure visuality. On the contrary, Socialist realism is only a conceptual umbrella of topics, attitudes and engagements, protecting the plain incoherence of divergent traditions, interests and skills.

Realism was predominant among Socialist themes only because the canonic themes and issues were focusing on the activities of "the New Man", communist man. In socialist countries such as Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, the academic, figurative Socialist realism was rapidly internalized in its most dogmatic, Soviet variant. In Romania, the evolution followed another path. Here ideological, official aesthetics were embraced not only by mushrooming Realist servant-artists, but also by significant, established masters of the local avant-garde (which was developing in the period between the two World Wars.) Artists like cubist-futurist M. H. Maxy (one of the acknowledged pillars of the Romanian avant-garde, together with Tristan Tzara and VICTOR BRAUNER), or the surrealist Jules Perahim, and the expressionist Iosif Iser, ranged among the key-figures of the communist aesthetic system. Others, like Der Sturm member and Bauhaus-affiliated abstract artist Hans Mattis-Teutsch, were not directly involved in official art and ideology, but were sympathetic to it, on the grounds of a common utopian standpoint, as the latter's program-manifesto "Kunstideologie" doubtlessly proves.

Consequently, the main feature of the initial vernacular Socialist realism consists in its **modernism**, that goes beyond realism proper, towards a kind of magical, dream-like cocktail of cubist-futurism with expressionist, surrealist, naive, and even abstract-constructivist accents. It was not a stylistic

program and commitment, but a skillful, rhetoric verve, an amoral combination of detachment and virtuosity. This eclectic, redundant mixture was coagulated by one thematic cohesive principle, which is the canonic representation of those figures erecting the "future": the enthusiastic, "progressive" masses and their illuminated leaders.

3. Aesthetic engineering. Indeed, the '60s in Romanian art meant a time for man. Man making history. A collective, massified subject made up of figureless, blank people whose particular features melted into the work of their hands, into the hasty movements of their muscles. It was also the time of a general terrorism of portrayal. Industry, power stations, urban areas, agriculture and party demonstrations, all these furnished and required representations of many acting people, men and women busy to move forward, symbolically, the enormous social mechanism of the new civilization. Communism was (at least theoretically) a matter of numbers and masses, an implicit, perpetual plebiscite of a community on its becoming.

However, from its very beginnings, communism accused an acute deficit of (social) ritual. Party sessions and mass manifestations constituted practically the only official admitted social liturgy. The portraits of communist leaders and the written slogans ornamenting reunion halls were the only credited ideological icons (that blended paradoxically, the Orthodox iconodule tradition of representing superior beings, and Islamic iconoclasm, that credited only written words of prayer as decor). This strategy of community-making was too poor. People coalesced easily into amorphous masses, but they formed no significant groups and real, civic associations based on affinities. They were not really sticking together. Hence a chronic underdevelopment of commonly shared gestures of attachment and sympathy. The true figures and gestures of affection, attachment and communion went deep underground, where representations were not circulating or were even prohibited.

Posing workers, peasants, intellectuals, party activists, students, actors, everyone expressed adhesion to the given ideology, but no actual cohesion between them was perceived in official representations. These were filled with rhetoric, grandiloquent and inhuman gestures, a primitive, rigid vocabulary of abstract feelings and experiences. When assembled in groups, they formed either a handful of some chosen, very determinate people totally submerged into action in a paranoid fashion, or, conversely, an indeterminate crowd, a featureless, catatonic mass whose presence is only a justification for its agitated, prominent leaders. In both cases the representations had a certain visionary, aggressive and unnatural, forced appearance. Socialist themes were putatively "realist", but not necessarily plausible. Communism was a shape, a peculiar static figure. It was learnt the way Swedish gymnastics is learned, through accurately mimicking individual models. The genuine abstract art (in *Mondrian's* terms) was precisely the Socialist-thematic one, because of its favorite representation of figures and groups whose acts

follow the laws of "the civilization of pure relationships". The most frequent relationships were those of dominance and force, of compliance, unity and cohesion.

Artists, especially the painters, were supposed to deliver such accessible, visual models of behavior. They were seen as a kind of documentary-workers and aesthetic engineers analyzing and reporting on the tremendous metamorphoses of the physiognomic and anthropological structure of the population. If there were no transformations, they were free to invent them, to improve, to idealize. The visual and figural myth of the (communist) "New Man" thus emerged. It was actually a myth deeply rooted in European culture and mentality, in Renaissance and Baroque imagery and in Enlightenment thinking.

The Communist *bon sauvage* dwelt especially in the field of the visual arts, cinema and literature. This was the real ideological Arcadia of the regime. Any archaeology of communist mentalities and representations must delve into this thick land of superposed phantasms, projections, and wishful seeing. The visual arts propelled the very shape of the "New Man", its concrete appearance. As one can grasp it in retrospect from the official Romanian portraits and group scenes of the time, in the "New Man" was a kind of hairless, happy Neanderthal-humanoid. It was assertive, sure, strong, white (rather bright, even luminous), and predominantly young or youthful (because communism, a definitely younger civilization was supposedly a civilization of young people too). The "New man" was also particularly social (one could say essentially gregarious), extremely reliable, proud, radiant and smiling (he was saying "cheese" even when cheese was lacking). But, first of all, official art presented the "New Man" as tremendously dynamic, plunged in a tumor-like, ceaseless activism. There were no doubtful attitudes, no hesitations at all. Movement and movement again, this was the accurate ideological definition of the "creative power" of the new civilization.

4. Mapping anonymity. The typological and elemental figure of the "New Man" was painstakingly spread all over by the reporting artists. They followed, portraying, all the stages of industrial processes. Beneath them, they found the same man. They depicted the research in labs (boosted by the forced boom of the oil and chemical industries), the building sites (provoking an authentic flood of portraits of constructors), the mining activities (miners remain the favorite epitome of workers here), and the noble, prestige-endowed workers of the steel mills. In agriculture too, the artist was minutely following the seasons and the peasants tilling the land. One finds group portraits of people sowing, of tractor drivers, mowers and reapers, etc.

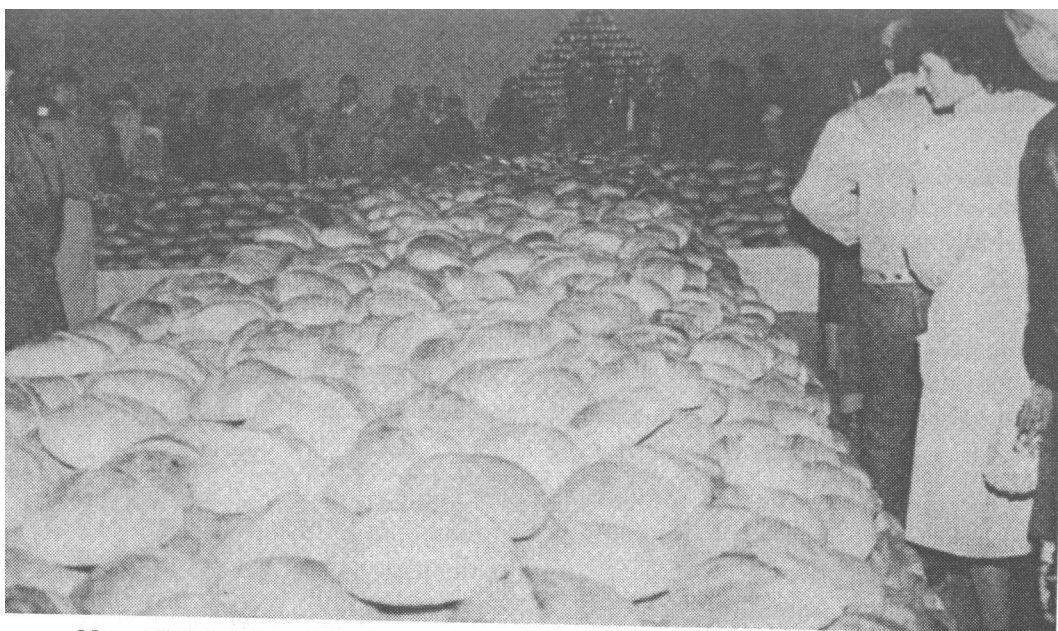
As the activities were more and more diversified, the artists dug deeper into the so-called division of labor, climbing to portray crane workers or visiting chicken farms to portray chicken-farmers! This endless and ludicrous mapping of the job list is intertwined with an increasing conventionality and

abstractness. It was believed that the portrayal of specialized individuals would give a glimpse of the variety of the new society, of its richness and originality. Instead, a new formalism was emerging. The portrayed workers gradually lost their individual features, tending toward a medium-type, seemingly involved consciousness, showing no relationship to the work, to the environment, and to reality. Their competence was an idea, a declamatory image-competence. Like much of Romanian society then they were skilled in posing as skilled. The official communist portraits and group scenes represented featureless people manipulating various instruments of legitimization: tools, books and vehicles. Thus, the better the represented individuals were specialized, the harder they were falling into the anonymity of a job-list exemplary position.

5. From pantomime to allegory. In this context, in the '70s, allegory progressively became the main feature of official communist art. A paradoxical feature, because the initial Socialist realism proposed a kind of pantomime-like representation: a portrayed miner or steel mill worker posed as both himself ("comrade X"), and also as an exemplary, "model" miner, steel mill worker and so on. During the seventies, this figuration of paradigms acting through extrapolation was replaced by more abstract, faceless and nameless figures, that ceased presenting themselves as identities. They were real archetypes of the working class, and later on allegories of work itself.

The figures were increasingly unreal as they were increasingly idealized. Pantomime aimed (and sometimes even succeeded) to describe, to portray the actual state of affairs, working as a mute picture of reality, an intelligible and sensible, even sympathetic one. Allegory, in its turn, neglects and dismisses concrete reality. Pantomime corresponds to a primordial moment of the communist civilization, when official art was literally mimicking reality, thus validating each other. Allegory corresponds to a later, disillusioned and resigned stage, when the ideological system acquiesced the hiatus, its eventual disconnection from the actual reality, accepting its status of a conventional code, instead of a mirror of things. From that moment on, official art became really an autonomous closed circuit, freed of the encumbering prejudice of conformity with the concrete situation. It became purely allegoric, non-realistic, and not functional, literally gratuitous. Art ceased to work as a productive protagonist of the ideological system, turning into a beneficiary (or victim) of it. Art reflected or echoed ideology's reality, not the actual reality.

Official art became a paradoxical art for art's sake, completely obedient, even exultant, but equally inoffensive, powerless. A mere shop window. Moreover, a significant majority of official artists was recruited from among the less important artists. They were used as a kind of forerunners and prefiguration of the communist order, the same way Christians depicted Plato



Marcel BUNEA, *Bread and Wine*
(1992)

and Aristotle as precursors of Jesus' teaching. They constituted a real, but low-rank caste, a closed guild, increasingly disconnected from the vernacular artistic world and its mechanisms of validation and hierarchy-making. Precarious amateurism reigned. Significantly enough, there is not a single official work that ranges among memorable masterpieces, not even from a purely aesthetic (not ideological) point of view. During the '70s official artists particularly produced representations of the "heroic" national past that functioned as a legitimization of the present. Again, portraits and group scenes especially flourished. Positive, liberating leaders of the wise and warrior type, revolutionary figures of the 19th century together with medieval or Modern uprisings, and invented portraits of remote ancestors (Dacians, and so on), populated the huge ideological compositions. They were also employed as behavioral models of resolve and authority, as exemplary individuals. Similarly to the Christian one, the communist projective recuperation of the memorable figures was not combined with a real interest in the past. Historical monuments were decaying all over the country. The same contradiction riddled the other thematic elements deployed during the period by the official iconography (the exaltation of the working class, of the masses and individuals, the paranoiac, war-like endless campaigns for peace, etc.).

An acute divergence between official art and the ideology that upheld it emerged then. The latter still viewed and needed art as an accurate description of reality, whereas the former was already out of reality, dealing only with the words of propaganda (topics, themes, issues), and not with its spirit. A crucial point in this evolution of reciprocal discontent is the National Conference of Plastic Artists of Romania, in June 1973, that analyzed the

entire activity of the artists during the delicate period 1968–1973. The conference was accompanied by a huge, national exhibition of official art. Nicolae Ceausescu underlined in his speech that: “In this exhibition you presented moments from the rather remote past of our people, and we would like you to present in the next years, in the same fashion, other exhibitions mirroring moments from the present history of our people, from the present of its work and life... its powerful mass enthusiasm.” (in *Arta*, no. 6/1973). Nonetheless, the experts of official art, such as TRAIAN BRADEAN, BRADUT COVALIU, VASILE CELMARE, SABIN BALASA, DAN HATMANU, VASILE POP-NEGRESTEANU, ZAMFIR DUMITRESCU, etc., were qualified fictionalists, passive designers of fantastic and metaphorical props that had no connection with current reality, not even with its ideological, propaganda prototype. It was plainly fanciful. Official imagery followed the “pleasure principle”, enveloping each representation in an ecstatic aura, as if they rendered poetic, delightful matters. Ideologically “hard” works (like those of VINTILA MIHAESCU) that strictly respected the “reality principle”, that is the purely propaganda function, were becoming rare. The dominating official allegories were continuously personifying concepts, but not in realistic terms. Allegory was a consequence of official art’s ineffectiveness as a description of reality. And this happened precisely because reality had failed to comply with ideology. Artists filled the gap with allegorical imagery, in a fetishist fashion, elaborating that drug of official art that satisfied the narcissistic needs of the ideological system till late in the ‘80s.

6. The reversed reading. Official art fostered a twofold allegory, a visual and a literary one. Visually, the figures they represented were necessarily in movement, forming relationships with one another. In literature, they were expressing commitment, self-confidence, eagerness to act, and happiness. It was a coherent code: such and such image represented such and such concept. However, this happened only in the framework of ideological semiotics, of official reading, which was rather a minority, though canonic, reading. Nonetheless, the majority practiced a reversed reading, counter-experiencing, as it were, official art. What was dogmatically represented was perceived straight as the reverse of what really was. Thus, a certain anti-empathy, estrangement and detachment functioned as a comforting (though perverted) experience of current ideology. In such a versatile and traumatic, double (or parallel) code-system, the official allegories of youthful dynamic groups and reliable individuals (originally meant to express the communist radiant future) were read as accomplished allegories of paranoia. Nowadays too, Socialist-thematic iconography should be read both through the “text” of political requirements or expectations and through the subtext of the actual misgivings of the time. The same is available for the non-official (and the rare anti-official) art of that time.

The non-official allegory does not reside in the represented image of a work of art, but in the very way of representing it, that is in the artist’s atti-

tude, which is implicit in his imagery. Allegory was into the act, and not into the image. Official artists kept no implicit attitude in their work. They made everything explicit. Significant non-official artist such as ION GRIGORESCU (one of the most important figures of the artistic underground in the '70s and '80s) attempted to work on precisely the same territory as official art, but at a completely different (opposite) level. To Socialist themes opposed (in a manner reminding of Bulatov) a puzzling hyper-realism that doubled and re-doubled the official imagery, whose inertia, pointlessness and redundancies were thus laid bare in a sharp way. His works, such as "Reporting from the county of Gorj", are provocative precisely because they are not showing "real people" and "facts", but they constitute some pictorial representations of the commonplace mass-media image of "real people" and "facts". His is a representation of a representation, thus subverting the officially claimed recourse to reality. His "pop-propaganda" works stressed the vanishing of the actual, immediate reality under the pressure of the visual propaganda that made use of it. Reality was simply mimicking ideology, people acting as if merely creating an image in a newspaper or for television news. ION GRIGORESCU's subtle mock-propaganda works revealed the eventual ineffectiveness of fine arts as ideological means. Art was superseded by the mass-media. Art was a customer, an imitator of the mass-media. This is why the (faint) "heroic", seemingly retarded and canonic realism of ION GRIGORESCU was correctly perceived by official ideology as its plain criticism, and subsequently banished. The "real", tolerated and needed realism of the time was the dominating non-realistic, metaphoric and eclectic thematism professed by official artists.

7. Silent dissent. However, except for ION GRIGORESCU, there were practically no artists able to appropriate, to deconstruct and subvert official standard representations by employing their stuff (portraits, groups, and crowds), and poignantly changing the code. Non-official art of the time was deepened into tolerated, ineffective (because too intellectual) pluralist research, of the culturally-stamped, dated "Faustian" kind. This started in the early '70s, in a trend significantly parallel (and obviously dependent) to the expanding official art that employed itself a (grotesque) Faustian-like imagery of the Party Leader Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife. They were presented as major philosophers and scientists, constructors and explorers, as some Renaissance and shining humanist figures of perpetual researchers.

The "personal explorations" and "authentic visions" in non-official art were mainly clinging to constructivist and abstracts models, like in the case of the paragon, experimental Timisoara-based "Sigma" group. Such artists focused mainly on artificial, arithmetic and geometric structures, experimenting temporal and spatial processes, and analyzing material textures and technological operations. Alternative modes of expression were preferred precisely because they were impenetrable and uncontrollable by the regime. The dogmatic correctness of a figurative painting or sculpture could be

established by merely reading its "content" (the proper representation), while the canonical feature of an installation or a video work was practically always uncertain because such works refuse to turn easily into "texts". However, this incertitude made the entire "alternative" genre to be suspected as unreliable by the authorities. Alternative art technique acquired therefore a certain allegoric function, because although it was a means of producing representation, it became representational in itself, facing the official semiotic system. It "represented" unstable statements and unverifiable meanings. This enciphered, esoteric and rather snobbish genre constituted the most comfortable and least risky artistic opposition. If official art was essentially obedient and later on truly complacent, non-official art was mainly escapist. It hardly conquered a place, and this was a place for plain ineffectiveness.

Any downright opposing art should be an ideological, propaganda art (be it a counter-propaganda one). And it has to cope with representations of groups, figures, and leaders. This was the case with the flourishing, militant Polish poster, for instance. In Romania, such an art was absent. Here no special opposing competence developed in the art world. Artists were excessively self-referential, as to erase the explicit reference to external matters and to fall into (social) autism. The hypertrophy of the ego gives a substitute of the mass through the tacit presupposition of a large representative function of one's "public", universal ego. The specific "universal" assumption of major Romanian non-official artists explains, partly, the acute concrete social ineffectiveness of their work *hic et nunc*. They were seemingly dealing with too important, eternal matters, so they were not eager to join a precarious confrontation with official art.

Non-official art refused to build up another distinct figurative art, to counterbalance the official one, and to recover a major segment of the public visual field. Instead, they preferred an implicit opposition. At that time, any figurative work of art was considered, in a certain way, as backing official ideology and its "realist" fixation. Individualism in non-official art was manifested through the dangerous rejection of representing the individual. By abstaining from the figural, non-official art also was in a perpetual state of mutiny. But, while leaving the figural, non official art refrained from challenging official art on its own territory, thus implicitly consenting to be deprived of the actual means of changing mutiny into opposition. In fact, it was a paradoxical situation, an antinomy. There was a bit of tragedy in it. Non-official art was tacitly in agreement with the current ideology, on the very ground of preserving itself from not being official. At that time this seemed to be a serious battle, useful for both official art and for its non-official counterpart. It was a *modus vivendi*, an accepted limited liberty, similar to the one outlined by the initial Socialist-thematic art that indulged itself in packing ideological iconography with cubism, surrealism, expressionism and the like.

8. Transfiguration and trans-figuration. Leaving aside the image of leaders and masses, non-official art practically prohibited serious commitment in portrayal and in social impact. Eventually, this resulted in a certain break from the social body and a subsequent loss of the sense of community as its main long-term consequences (which have been painfully experienced up to this day). This happened precisely during the '80s, when official art ceased professing its previous distorted and perverted "modernism" and became more and more radical and regressive, that is "realist", probably under the direct influence of ideological imports from China and North Korea. Simultaneously, the fall of a *sui generis* cultural curtain made exhibitions of relevant and important Western art (the only landmark of aesthetic normality) extremely scarce in Romania, and at the same time their place was taken by huge exhibitions of Soviet and other "orthodox" communist art. In the numberless homage works of that time (the "homage" was the epitome of official art in the '80s), the represented leaders gradually (and pathologically) detached themselves from the brutish, amorphous masses that functioned as a merely human pedestal for the totalitarian, party figures. The previous figuration of archetypal workers, of the "New Man", practically disappeared. Official art bolstered a unique thematic grid, that is a "new", immediate, direct visual contact and contract between the aggressively hypertrophied leaders and the fully disindividualized masses. There are no more portraits of party activists and other personalities at all. The two leaders and their uncritical, supporting mass, were the only stars of official art. Strange enough, during the same period, the abstract-constructivist, alternative and hyper-realist critical and subversive art activities entered a period of hibernation too.

The "Faustian" research of non-official art was then directed toward the exploration of (religious) signs and symbols. Obviously, this marked the most intimate, secret and non-social form of resistance, an inchoate, deep, but voiceless one. Convergent with this inclination toward the innermost self, a non-official, strange, "confessional" portraiture emerged, with the artist himself as a favorite protagonist. It is not only a matter of real introspection, but also **religious transfiguration**, like in the works of CORNELIU BABA or HORIA BERNEA. They "Christified" their figures in order to comply with the religious, Orthodox commitment of their art, thus regaining a personal iconism that echoed and marked a difference from the repressive "state iconism" of official art. But, again, non-official art refused to become anti-official, because such portraits represented a shift from the previous "universal" values detached from concrete reality, to the opposite values of a stubborn vernacular particularism, the religious one of vernacular Orthodoxy. Yet, again, it is about internal, intransitive dealings of the hypertrophied creative ego. No opening toward a counter-propaganda imagery is possible. Moreover, transfigured portraits were not at all the crux of such neo-Orthodox art flourishing in the '80s, but the religious (geometric) symbols, the landscapes and still-lives! All these were coherent in the

neo-Orthodox system, expressing humility before God's creation, and so on and so forth. But they were clearly unable to coagulate into militant imagery. The ban against representing the "personality" simplified the course of non-official art to the pure, sign-residing symbolism, which was capitalized on (and still is) by the neo-Orthodox trend. Non-official art's defiance of figures, persons and especially masses, was total; the only figure possible to represent was the Christ-like one, and the only possible mass was the Christian faithful community. From the very standpoint of ideological rigidity, neo-Orthodox iconography was as exclusive and intolerant as the communist one! It could not be the kernel of an anti-official imagery able to federalize social discontent. It was still ineffective, although extremely searching and frequently genuinely painful. And this is why it was tolerated by the regime.

Official art even employed some image-gadgets developed by non-official art. An example consists in the most striking feature of numerous homage-works like those of CORNELIA IONESCU and EFTIMIE MODILCA that represented the Leader, Nicolae Ceausescu (often together with his wife), as "trans-figured" and really "hovering" above frenetic, acclaiming masses. The Leader is therefore not represented in the same register as the masses. He is not actual, but dwells in everyone's mind. The crowd is merely present, being constituted by undifferentiated individuals (its amorphous feature is not an impressionistic licence, but a means of suggesting immediacy and sudden fusion). Leaders appear only as official representations of themselves, as a vision of some conceptual, tutorial principles. They impose their effigies, as pure "icons" flying over faithful supporters.

9. The missing body. If one neglects the ideological and aesthetic points that differentiated official and non-official art, one might stumble upon some unexpected, profound similarities. First, both of them were mainly administering, in a patent modernist fashion, a regional and exclusive thesaurus of signs and visual concepts (hence the striking overlapping, interference and reciprocal appropriations). Second, both of them eventually dwindled into an acute estrangement from the masses (official art as a consequence of excessive manipulation, and non-official art because of its elitism and suspicion). Third, either by aggressively boosting anonymous portraits and group scenes, or by self-censuring their representation (and subsequent sublimation into transfigured, religious figures), both official and non-official art completely overlooked the consistent matter of the body and its actual corporeality. The body is, paradoxically, the great absent in all those decades of fighting over the representation of man, that gave various anonymous dictators and Christ-like figures, but eventually no significant insight into corporeality proper (except the insignificant, a historical and academic representations of nudes).

The battle over human representation was a battle of ideas, of codes and conventions. Existentially and psychologically stamped individuals or featureless, typological exemplary workers simply obliterated the rendering of

an immediate, phenomenal and substantial presence of corporeality. In this way local artists precluded the real experience of that powerful anxiety linked to the body's being in the world, emerging in art after the Second World War, from Francis Bacon to happenings and Fluxus. Moreover, neither official art nor its non-official counterpart expressed their sexual attitude. They were ruled by a similar paternalist (but not entirely masculine) stance, that induced an infantile representation of a neutral and masochist, sexually indeterminate self, that happily acquiesced to a merciful, castrating domination of ideology.

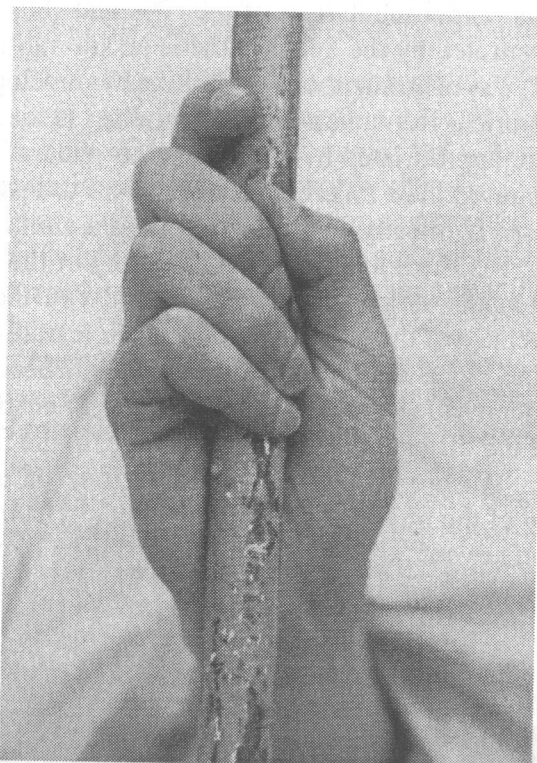
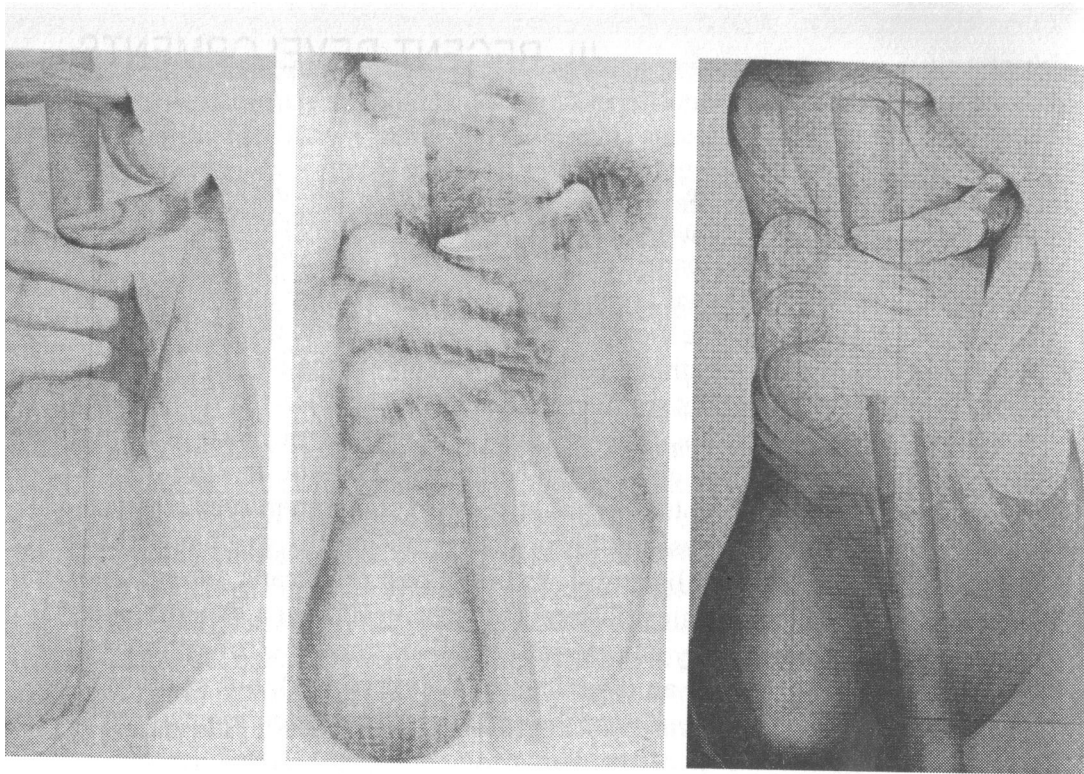
Among the very few artists who dealt in a meaningful way with corporeality and one's concrete presence in the world, we must signal the deconstructing and demystifying photographs and actions of the same ION GRIGORESCU and the correspondent works of GETA BRATESCU. The 1976 "Masculine-Feminine" photo-action of the former and the 1978 "Smile" photo-action of the latter point explicitly to a poetics of body-estrangement and personality-blurring processes, particularly significant in the confines of the Romanian public visual space which was filled with dogmatic, counterfeited, rigid and aggressive prefabricated postures and personal roles. Experiencing one's body as the proper subject of reality was dangerous both for the official ideology (that claimed itself as the subject of real experience) and for the neo-Orthodox art too (that envisaged the access to a superior being as the subject of a real experience). They both shared a keen presupposition of transcendence, thus contributing to a **loss of the sense of corporeality** that converged to the loss of the sense of community.

10. One, two, many. Things did not radically change in Romanian art immediately after '89. Except for official "homage" works, historical scenes and Leader's portraits, the bulk of the local art remains the same. What was working during the communist period is still worth nowadays, even as an ideological product. Insinuating transformations occurred later, in 1993–1994, and they are of a piece with the needed restructured polarity of Romanian art that split into neo-traditionalist (neo-Orthodox) and neo-avant-garde (alternative) art. This was intertwined with a convergent movement of neglecting the human representation and a tremendous rush toward the body, which is hastily recuperated by artists from different generations and camps. However, here we are not dealing with a real crisis of the corporeality, but with a rapid recuperation of current Western ideological issues (again an idea, be it the idea of a body) like feminism and gender, minorities and human rights, etc. A complete circuit of the absent history of the body is closed. The circuit started with depictions of anonymous, model workers in the '60s, was followed by the acting, devoted groups of the '70s, and the representations of the two Leaders hovering above plebiscite-like crowds of the '80s, and in the end drowned in the inflated rhetoric of elusive, exasperating body exhibition. The haunting figure of man, a major means of propaganda, has finally left the stage.

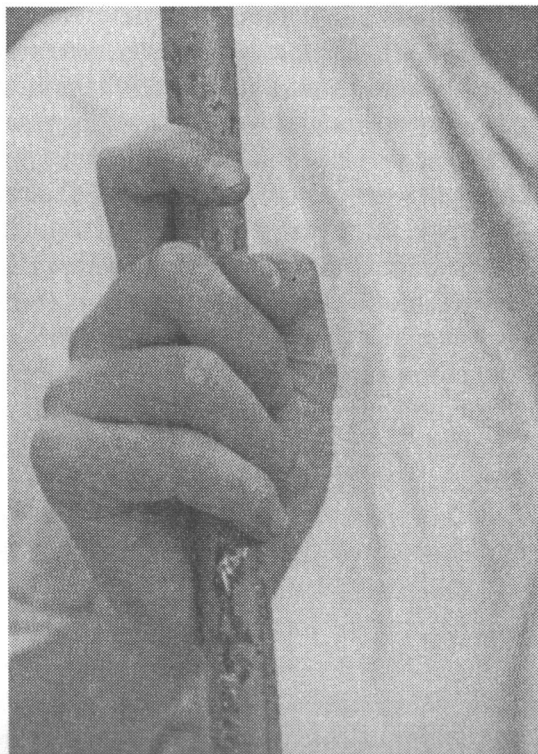
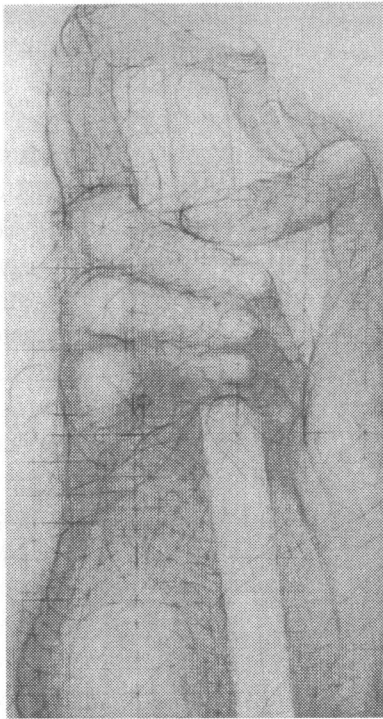
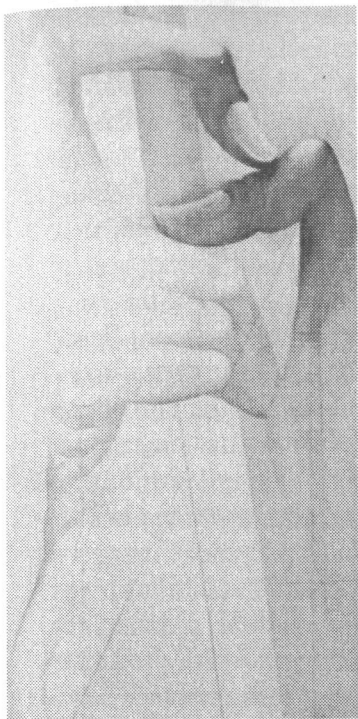
III. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

1. Top experiment. The '90s in Romanian art. The backwardness in artistic education and information in the '70s and '80s (understandable given the well-known historical background) meant that only after 1989 did the most profound and extensive confrontation with experimentalism occur in Romanian art. Both from the viewpoint of its emergence on the art scene and of the impact on public aesthetic perception, experimentalism is a thing of the '90s in Romania, and not of the previous decades, when the first experimentalists attempted actions, debates and explorations on a confessional basis. However, these semi-clandestine beginnings contain, *in nuce*, all the visual, technical and conceptual issues at stake in contemporary experimental practice and theory. Thus, the history of vernacular experimentalism is reflected in the experimentalism hysteria of the past few years, although not in an evolutionary, genealogical fashion (because in Romania experimentalism manifested itself mainly as a series of autistic ruptures¹ of continuous artistic development, not as an organic, structured process), but as a consequence of a fundamental identity of the specific nature, intention and representation of **any** Romanian artistic endeavour.

2. Aesthetic acculturation. The typical feature of the historical Romanian experimentalism of the '70s and '80s is that it has no history. It was constituted by the keen aesthetic acculturating will, manifested through successive synchronizations with the new developments in international art. This historical Romanian experimentalism is the offspring of a genetic permutation, appropriated by a spontaneous generation of artists who voluntarily de-natured their inherent traditionalism to institute themselves as experimentalists, by means of "proferring" and assuming a crisis of artistic media. Such a crisis, such a temporary bracketing of the art work and its perception was untenable as legitimate in the context of the official aesthetics of the '70s, because of the essentially optimistic feature of the latter; faced with the crisis, the chief engine of experimentalism became obviously pessimistic, ideologically illegitimate. This was the very suspicious and defensive viewpoint of the official aesthetics of the time, in the face of "experimental temptation": "We are in a relatively calm zone of international art, where the industry of the image has not yet covered, in its irrepressible tide, the idea of an artistic event/.../ in such a cultural milieu like the Romanian one, where the notions of art and contemplation are not emptied of real sense and the notion of environment is not imposed as a seismic imminence of the material medium, the object and language are still joint in an entity, which is the work of art in its traditional sense..." (Editorial, in *Arta*, no 2/1970, p. 5). Such anti-experimental discourses outline the aggressive background of the



Sorin DUMITRESCU,
The Hand of the Archangel Michael
(1993)



first non-conformist events. The aesthetic schizoidism of this context is remarkable: in the pages of the 5th issue of the same review, *Arta*, in 1970, PAUL NEAGU's famous manifesto "Palp' Arta" was published that refuted, precisely the ideas claimed in the above quoted Editorial: "The worn-out purely visual art, its sophistication and impenetrability, made me long for sincerity, for the evidence of the object's life/.../. I want a coming-into-being, a presentation of the creative act itself..." (Palp' Arta, p. 34). The imbalance between conflictual extremes, the successive reprimand and promotion of experiment is significant for the year 1970 – the 8th issue of *Arta* of the same year published one of the most important manifestos of the Timisoara-based experimental group "Sigma". In this text, among the tasks of the above-mentioned group, the author Constantin Flondor states precisely "the consideration of the environment as an object of artistic research" and the "emergence of active competences in acting on the environment". ("The Harmony of Creation and Education", p. 33). In view of completing the landscape of theoretical debate, one has to remember some spectacular proposals made by GETA BRATESCU (an artist with an authentic experimental vocation) in the same year: "The American 'pop art' reflects in a violent manner the American reality and this is why its syntagmas are inefficient if adopted elsewhere." (in *Arta*, no 12/1970, p. 34). Paradoxically, this "retraction" functions as a counterpoise – perhaps required by the authorities – for the theoretical excesses in the experimental art of the year 1970. In such circumstances, the "heterodox" experiment (understood as a multifarious effort of subversion, as an eclectic diversion targeting the official aesthetic ideology) proliferates in an unexpected fashion, surpassing in amplitude the "orthodox" experimental works, those inspired by a coherent Western dogma. The need to negate "traditional art" required by the above quoted Editorial, becomes an (act of) "experiment" in itself, fostering a fruitful "aesthetic anomaly", detectable in works by MIHAI OLOS, ILIE PAVEL, etc. International experimentalism followed the path of the intrinsic crisis of the representation and of the artistic object, but the Romanian brand was characterized by heteronomy being forced to follow especially the contradictory developments of the official aesthetic system. The questioning of the creative object and subject has not the character of a "crisis" lacking any criteria and landmarks, but gains a paradoxical function as a refuge for a new (and surprising) "estheticism". This is a kind of estheticism *à rebours*, finding an artistic refuge in "non-art", in a territory still uncontaminated by official ideology. Strange enough, inside the heteronomous Romanian experimentalism estheticism and militantism mixed, which is significant for the ambiguities of local experiment. "Non-art" as an ultimate refuge for art is also explained by the systematic versatility of the majority of significant Romanian artists, accustomed – during the '70s – to profess two different aesthetics: one for the official demands and the other for the private "shel-

ter", where experimental research was allowed. Such "endeavor" were exhibited only in exceptional exhibitions, that promoted a kind of "experimentalism for exhibiting", specific to such public events as "The Study" (1978), "The Writing" (1980), "Space-object" (1983), etc. The peculiarities of the early Romanian experimentalism spring from such complementarity between the need of synchronicity with international experimental art and the need of conscious dis-synchronization from the local official art.

A. Spiritualist experimentalism. In the '70s, the authors of artistic manifestos that called for renewal and a radical change of conceptions and manifestations in art² were PAUL NEAGU, HORIA BERNEA, MARIN GHERASIM and SORIN DUMITRESCU. If the latter were reputed (as early as the end of the '70s) as the pillars of orthodoxist neo-traditionalism, the former, PAUL NEAGU, seems to be a genuine and pure experimentalist. In fact, his personality and oeuvre is a perfect paragon of the split character of vernacular experimental art. His beginnings are placed under the sign of an explicit spiritualism – how else could one characterize "Cake-man", a work (theoretically supported by his manifesto *Palp'arta*) that intertwined eucharistic symbols of spiritual feeding and a quasi-religious ritual, contradictorily overlapping the *actionist* core of his artistic enterprise, visibly influenced by the performance models of that time?³ Later on, the career of PAUL NEAGU continued to function – even from a distance – as a paradigm for the ambiguous Romanian form of experimentalism⁴. His conceptual-sculptural works from the "Hyphen" series are inspired by a retarded constructivism, symbolically and spiritually tainted, although suffused with ritualistic actions and performances. The same constructivism, ardously experienced as experimentalism, is to be found in the endeavors of the Timisoara-based group "Sigma". They set up their activities on the avant-garde basis of a Bauhaus-type artistic school, though the type of acculturating experience that they internalized (actions, happenings, installations), pertained to and characterized a civilization living in a post-or even anti-Bauhaus framework, in an anti-corporatist, centrifugal and not centripetal, dissolving and not cohesive scheme. This fundamental contradiction (between vocation and means) was demonstrated by the individual evolution of these artists. The recent "Catalytic sculptures" by PAUL NEAGU are strenuously tied into an obsolete theosophic spiritualism, probably inscribed onto the religious mystery of his experimental beginnings. Similarly, CONSTANTIN FLONDOR, a pillar of the "Sigma" group, has for years opted for the orthodoxist neo-traditionalism of the "Prologue" movement, and this preference demonstrates the unconscious duality inherent in the historical Romanian experimentalism of the '70s.

B. Recoiling synchronization. The '80s brought the second important experimental movement in Romanian art. This renewed attempt at synchronicity with international artistic developments once again brought a

recoiling, retarding synchronization. This was because the first generation of experimental synchronization absorbed (from the deep pool of international experimentalism) the quasi-constructivist element, at a time when experimentalism was oriented not toward the rationalist, constructivist and technological side, but toward the element of action, performance and happenings, toward the irrationalist heterogeneous nucleus of the activities of **Fluxus**, for example. The echo of experimentalism was filtered through the cultural data and the aesthetic apprehensions of the vernacular art world. Thus, from the great experimental wave, the feature that was adopted was precisely the one to which the Romanian artists had natural inclinations, even if that feature was not the most innovative part of experimentalism at the time. Due to a historical paradox, the generation of the '80s connected itself precisely to the irrationalist previous dimension of experimentalism, experiencing body-art, performance and actions, as in the case of the exemplary event in Sibiu, in 1986. This new recoiling synchronization marks a new des-synchronization, a limiting option for a minority segment or fraction of international experimentalism, which is extrapolated as the mainstream of innovation. This time, as in the '70s, the emphasis in international experimentalism was on something else, on the imposition of new technological artistic means and media (video art, computer art etc.).

The propensity to spectacular-subversive manifestations like performances and actions was generated in Romania by the unprecedented political-ideological pressure that was impossible to overlook or dodge by means of spiritualist art. There was a need for provocation and contestation, even if only in a symbolic form. The official reaction to such happenings (the repression at Sibiu in 1986, for example) led to a confusion which persists to this day. Following the discrimination and implicit sidelining of those artists inclined towards such manifestations, a strange hero-making trend emerged. The plus of (aesthetic) danger inherent to any marginal event contributed to the dissemination of a belief in performance and actions as a heroic genre of art (because repressed by the authorities). Therefore, this genre of art was tacitly viewed as the most progressive one. This flawed inference, connecting marginality and progress⁵, meant that – to this day – the manifestations of any progressive artist must include an action or a performance. Or, in fact, sidelining and repression (more or less symbolic) are not at all a political plus for the happenings and performances in Romania, but are inscribed in their very nature and definition all over the world, as they tend to be projected onto the provocative zone of the underground. It was only the oppressive political context of that time and place that gave those manifestations a (false) ascendent over other artistic genres. All of these conceptual-perceptive misunderstandings, generating confusions and some long-term aesthetic prejudices, require a definition of experiment.

3. Experiment/experimenting. As a coherent artistic tendency, experimentalism is a specific product of the second half of this century. The present type of experiment was prefaced and prefigured by the scientific spirit applied to the visual arts at the end of the 19th century (investigations into the diffusion of light, the decomposition of movement etc.). Yet it was only a few decades ago that the investigation of artistic means detached itself from the background of artistic practice proper, proposing and imposing itself as a self-sufficient artistic practice. Experimentalism creates a series of media and artistic methods that not only contain their specific message, but determine their expression too, which is fundamentally different from traditional art. Experimentalism is not an artist investigating the nude, the still-life or the landscape, from realism to surrealism or expressionism. The experiment is, first of all, a problematic view of artistic means and media. As in science too, there is no experiment without the help of a (*sui-generis*) lab, in which empirical, methodical research can be conducted, and also mental research. As there is mental experiment in science, so there is mental experiment in art, for example conceptualism – even in this case the idea of lab remains plausible, though the empirical lab apparatus is substituted by mental operations that turn, themselves, into an artistic, creative apparatus. This explains the rising importance of the artist's lab in experiment, of the studio as lab, of the exhibiting space as lab, of the social of mediatic inter-medium as lab, of virtual, numerical space as lab etc. In spite of its paradoxically diverse features (ranging from installations, video and computer art to environmental works, action and body art etc.), artistic experimentalism marks a fallacious extrapolation of scientism not only because it claims an investigation on (and with) a lab apparatus (which is applicable especially to the technological aspects of video and computer art) but also because it operationalizes, formalizes and professionalizes the supposedly unmediated impact of the artist on his milieu. Thus, even the irrationalist aspects of experimentalism (happenings, performances and body-art) are codified by means of a scientification (and an implicit split) of the creative personality. This is a consequence of the extraction and instrumental extrapolation of the mythical, idealized, romantic view of the artist as an exemplary personality whose feelings and inner senses have paradigmatic, universal significance.

4. Manuality substituting mentality. Viewed as a derivation of the contemporary scientific mentality, artistic experimentalism can be understood as an activity of experimenting, as a process that very often produces practically nothing as object, but gives a finalizing vector to the perpetual search, avoiding any materialization of an experimental product, a prototype of innovative aesthetic experience. An experimental masterpiece seems to be a contradictory phrase, the simulacrum of experiment, a process circumstantially crystallized in the shape of a traditional exhibition. It is not by chance that many experimental manifestations in Romania present artists that are

not at all engaged in lab research on artistic means and media, but produce, punctually (and conjuncturally) experimental works on demand. This situation reflects the unequal growth of mental and manual abilities in the Romanian art world. Such manifestations are as if experimental, but propelled by a series of manual capacities, not by a proper experimentalist mentality. Thus, the experiment converges finally, in a peculiar way, towards traditional art, being just a bastard medium transited by the same old-new creative potentialities. Practically no contemporary Romanian artist indulges in putting in the exhibition room only an experimental piece, installation or other artistic object that is formally unelaborated and deprived of beauty. Seldom are such artists able to transfer all their aesthetic information into an action or performance, without any other material that is aesthetically beautiful. This other material (usually painting, sculpture or graphics), is the rhetorical supplement of vernacular experimental endeavors, actualizing the whole devotion to beauty of the Romanian art world. The specific message of Romanian experimentalism is essentially unspecific. It can be communicated via traditional means, precisely because it represents a translation in the shape of experiment of a rhetorical entity that is neither concomitant nor cosubstantial with its appearance in a particular medium.

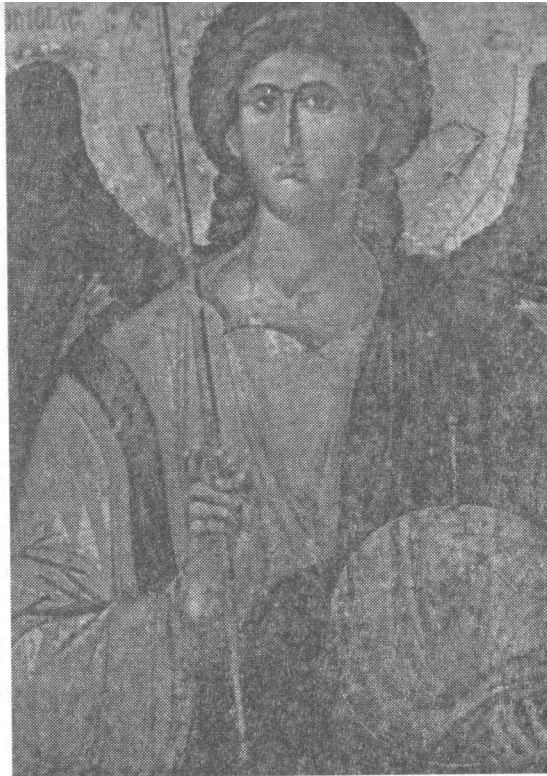
5. Experimentalism now: social and aesthetic credit/discredit. After 1989, experimentalism was the artistic tendency that received the greatest institutional support of all the areas of Romanian art. Some of the causes of this phenomenon lie in the historical development previously sketched, namely the wish for aesthetic synchronous acculturation, together with the heroic aura bestowed by the particular political circumstances of the '80s.

Subsequently, after '89, the genealogical tree of vernacular experimentalism suddenly blossomed, enriched by movements and manifestations practically hidden for a long time, such as the rediscovery and wide circulation of the abundant activity of the "**Kinemalkon**" group from Arad, whose continuous experimental practice – in photo, movie and video art – although started in the '70s, won a real audience only in the past few years. Thus, on the one hand, the powerful presence of experimentalism after '89 is due to this movement of historical restitution (representation of the past), that became – paradoxically – the first actualization of events that manifested themselves for the public only at the moment of their rediscovery. This positive recall of past experimentalism is concurrent with a first advance of synchronicity with the international experimentalism of the time, still dominated by the technological fashion of the '80s (photo, video, computer art). This tendency (alternative art⁶) is coagulated into a corporatist structure which is still in expansion and, consequently, permeable to the ascensional attempts of artists coming from (not only aesthetically) disabled countries such as Romania. Similarly to other types of quasi-missionary activity characteristic of emerg-

ing cultural structures, this kind of experimentalism tends to assimilate in its hierarchies those local artists that build up social ascensional mechanisms. Alternative art provides opportunities for (still) young Romanian artists, in the face of a progressive closing up of the power structures of international (traditional) art, governed by the impenetrable system of galleries and evaluations controlled by the art market. Alternative art has no real market yet, except a virtual one, and that is why competition is a positive phenomenon for all contributors.

In opposition to the accreditive influence of expanding cultural structures stands the symbolic discredit continuously insinuated in recent years by the exponents of the orthodoxist neo-traditionalist movement in local art. Boosting the post-Byzantine iconism backed by the ideology promoted – for example – by Catacomba Gallery, this movement is characterized by reactive aesthetics, defining itself in opposition to the internationalism specific to experimental art, which is viewed as an expression of the decadent, alienated and despiritualized contemporary civilization of the West. This vernacular symbolic conflict constitutes a real socio-professional springboard for experimental artists, who receive in this way (being discredited by a vernacular reactive structure) a subsidiary symbolic credit in the art world, as they continue to be linked with the idea of progress. This cultural interplay legitimizes, reciprocally, the protagonists from both camps, by means of a circumstantial reiteration of the artificial aesthetic charisma of innovation, traditionally opposed to the equally artificial charisma of tradition. This happens at a cultural moment characterized by the loss of the sense of conflict between tradition and innovation, both concepts being discredited, emptied. As a conclusion, the strong presence of experimental art in contemporary Romania is explained by this continuous transaction between a past re-invented by recuperation and a future prefigured by synchronization, both of them magnified by a convulsive, militant and progressive present.

6. Access to experiment/experiment as access. In recent Romanian art, experimentalism is also given a boost by the historical coincidences of the period after 1989, when at least two phenomena aroused people's interest.



The Archangel Michael

On the one hand, only after 1989 was it possible for artists to have access to alternative creative means (video, computer, advanced communication methods – fax, e-mail etc.). The emergence of the lab characterizing experimentalism was possible only during the past few years. This opening was favored by the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, and it was reflected in all the annual exhibitions organized till now: Ex Oriente Lux (1993), 010101 (1994), Me(di)a Culpa (1995) and, of course, the 1996 exhibition dedicated to Experiment. The fact that all these exhibitions were, essentially, experimental, clarifies the coherence of a policy of taste and the availability of materials, means and know-how. On the other hand, it was after 1989 that real access was gained to free expression, and this created conditions of legality for many manifestations of those artists who were interested in happenings, performances and actions connected with political, anti-institutional criticism and individual revelation, emphasizing expression as a subversive tool. Without this mutation, some remarkable exhibitions and manifestations such as the Festival of Performance and Art, Art Unlimited S.R.L. (Arad) or Orient-Occident (Timisoara), would not have been possible.

7. The period of Romanian experiment. The real explosion of new media, and the emergence of a market for alternative artistic means of expression, has condensed into a short period, and has affected not only the generation of artists that was on the rise at that time, but also other generations, in an oblique way. The older generation thus received a belated encouragement to use alternative media (for example, the contributions of HORIA BERNEA and ALEXANDRU CHIRA to the 1994 SCCA exhibition, 010101). The middle generation, grouping such artists linked to the experimentalist wave of the '80s as TEODOR GRAUR, OLIMPIU BANDALAC, ALEXANDRU ANTIK, DAN PERJOVSCHI, SORIN VREME, DAN MIHALTIANU etc., received a confirmation and an impetus for their searchings. The younger generation, cutting its path after 1989, was confronted with experimentalism as an established style best fitted to a dissipated reality (SANDOR BARTHA, ALEXANDRU PATATICS, and recently MATEI BEJENARU, CATI ORBULESCU and COSMIN PAULESCU). This kind of diverse and contradictory (though simultaneous) reactions to the same stimulus generates a parallel coexistence, in the same cultural space, of many different layers and experimental trends, foreign to each other and often incommunicable, stamped by different (or even divergent) skills, intentions and conceptualizations of alternative artistic means. The young artists, not yet integrated into the local art market, investigate experimental art because they target an abstract auditory, an international one, the one that they imagine beneath the informational wave of contemporary art (from reviews, movies and exhibitions). In this way a new "awareness of being outlandish" is imposed in their own country. This boosts a kind of juvenile experiment, a kind of "art of the time", seen as the most suited to the dissolution and to the incomprehensible

recent historical events. The employment of experimental means is also a psycho-social reflex of young artists, driven by the keen will of accumulating the codes and current languages. The stress is therefore laid on the storage function, not on active technical and expressive competence. The features of juvenile experiment consist precisely in the un-problematization of the means, in transforming them into a strict repertory, and not into an object of vivisection. This is also the source of a new individualism of the new generation of experimental artists, that is the impossibility of crystalizing into coherent groups of tendencies, caused by an exacerbated "subjectivity" (a normal consequence of the rising atomization of the creative energy nowadays). Experimentalism understood as the development of some specialized language competences creates multiple spheres of aesthetic interests that tend to be more and more closed. Thus, one can see a typical difference between the feminism of the '80s, embodied in the vehement (neo) expressionist works of ANIELA FIRON, and the same feminist viewpoint, expressed in a more specialized, recent codified fashion by such artists as, for example, MIRELA DAUCEANU and AURORA DEDIU, where any vehemence is purged, and masculinity is resorbed, for the benefit of a subdued expression, the femininity being refined till in turns into asexuation.

8. Know-how and experimental monopoly. If the different artistic generations practice no continuous transfer of education and information about the aesthetics of experiment, they are essentially bound by their monopolist practice of experiment as a guild privilege of artists. On the international art scene, the alternative and experimental artistic means are developed by artists coming from very different areas (sociology, computer science and electronics, literature etc.). They penetrate the visual space as a consequence of the complete opening that was operated by the (already) institutionalized experimentalism on the image system of civilization. Thus, the visible has become a favoured expressive space, with a rich capital market. On the other hand, in Romania, the exercise of experimentalism is monopolized by the artistic caste produced by the academically (traditionally) accredited institutions. This professional control creates a sharp contradiction with the original cultural relationship developed by experimentalism in its (Western) emerging areas. There, it expressed a shift of mentality, outlining an alternative to the aestheticism of traditional art, while here experimentalism is denatured through re-aesthetization, being practised as a kind of alternative craftsmanship, a (putatively) superior evolutionary state of traditional manual skills and aptitudes. There is a perverse interplay between, on the one hand, the traditional identity and legitimacy of artists (painters, sculptors etc.), which seems unproblematic and coherent (determined by talent and accomplished expression), and, on the other hand, their alternative identity, as experimental artists, which is disputed, elliptical and fractured, opposed to and contrasting with the identity of the undisputed traditional fine artist. Such an implausible split of the creative personality into two contradictory



Gheorghe ILEA, *Dung Heap*
(1994)

halves (a circumstantial straying that overlaps a well-established modernist-traditional finding) can be perceived with many artists of the middle generation.

9. Experimental prospection and ad-hoc experiment. The will to preserve and exhibit the traditional artistic potential simultaneously with the exercise of experimental art generates in recent Romanian art a kind of trans-experiment, a concurrent of successive prospection of a multiplicity of artistic genres and expressions⁷, conventionally unified under the banner of experiment. Thus, many artists make a visual conceptual stroll through numerous genres and artistic media, ranging from realist representation to installations, conceptualism and performance, often erecting installations with paintings or even video art with paintings and sculptures⁸, where experimentalism is drowned or saved by painting, sculpture and graphics (among the

young generation of artists, this is a characteristic of works by ANDREEA FLONDOR, CATI ORBULESCU, COSMIN PAULESCU etc.). In this case, there is the same kaleidoscope – a kind of recirculation of all the abilities (mental, manual) available to an artist, the experiment being still understood as a challenge addressed to the artist, not as a natural consequence of his unrestricted expression. In the same environment of the young generation of artists, there appear some experimental events which are not perceived as such, for example the action “The Dung Heap” by GHEORGHE ILEA (1994), or the recent interventions in the social milieu realized by GRATIAN GÂLDĂU (“Vote for Jean-Claude van Damme – An Iron Fist for Bucharest Town Hall” – 1996, a counter-political, mock-electoral poster), or ELENA COPUZEANU (the counter-advertising criticist poster “Homage to Mandela”, 1995). Such cases of ad-hoc experiments, practised in a punctual manner to impose a problem (sometimes only peripherally artistic) borrow precisely the alternative means adopted to the real problems investigated. Although such experiments are required by reality, they are only attempts by the authors, not engagements in an experimental research.

10. The science of experiment. The fact that the academic institutions credited to produce the future monopolists of experiment do not have a curriculum of study and research of experimentalism for students, is reflected in their archaic vision of it, seen as a mere artistic style easily appropriated like any other one. Such institutions as the Bucharest Academy of Fine Arts have chosen to introduce their students only into the secrets of technological experiment (photo, video, computer-art etc.). The different (and still more difficult) problems of body-art, actions and performances receive no institutional teaching. The kind of mentality that perpetuates these options is clearly determined by the '70s fashion of viewing experimentalism as a set of abilities and technical skills, professionally assimilated through a traditional educational curriculum. Such pseudoavant-garde efforts produced no experimental artists, but mainly graphic designers, specialists (technical staff, not creators) of an experimental, productive field. This is why, in spite of the unprecedented experimental wave of the past few years, really remarkable work remains rare, especially among young artists. The only artists who produced significant works in this field are those able to detach themselves from technical data, and turn them into a suitable medium for transmitting the sheer immediacy of artistic intuition. By far the most prominent name in juvenile experimental art of the '90s, ALEXANDRU PATATICS is a perfect exception from the rules previously sketched for vernacular enterprises of this kind. An exclusively experimental artist, Patatics presents his media lab (a compound of electro-mechanics, audio-video and computer technology) as the work itself. His multimedia installations promote synthetic images, amalgams of virtual, auditive and visual concepts that intermingle into a transgressive aesthetc experience that alienates each image-producing element precisely by the accurate (though perverse) functioning of the other image-producing elements. This technological jam-image is, in fact, the image of the mechanism that produces the image, a mechanism whose functioning provokes, automatically, a continuous disturbance of its elements. Thus, disturbance becomes the rule and algorithm of functioning, a kind of syndrome or tumor of the normal metabolism of technique, that appears to be so immune. This ability of his to reveal so profoundly the vicious circularity of the engines and automata that control and (de)regulate our perceptions, marks out ALEXANDRU PATATICS as one of the few contemporary Romanian artists able to install in the three-dimensional space the image of an interior, diffuse perception embedded in actual abilities and mentalities. If one looks for a genealogy of this technical position and mental disposition, one could consider the work of ALEXANDRU ANTIK, a coherent experimentalist from the early '80s, whose main target was the exteriorization, by means of experimental media, of those inward intuitions and perceptions that feed confusion and preclude the emergence of sense. Another artist who belongs in the young generation of experimentalists is MATEI BEJENARU,

whose work of mapping the historical landscape of artistic experiment drove him from photography to assemblages, video-art and environmental works, installations and actions etc., balancing between the technological side of experiment and provocative, irrationalist events. Similar in many respects, the work of COSMIN PAULESCU is characterized by a permanent prospection of contemporary (rather than historical) experimentalism, insisting on performances and actions with pregnant political implications. He often trespasses the boundaries of other artistic genres, such as theater. Some of these performances ("The Pitesti Phenomenon", Bucharest 1992 and "The Sacrifice of the Innocents", Timisoara 1993) simply enact and reiterate in a transfigured symbolic shape events that took place in reality (the communist repression, the Romanian revolution of 1989 etc.). It is about the same re-sthetization (in an alternative fashion) of experimental searchings which was presented earlier. Besides this, the traditional artistic vocation of COSMIN PAULESCU the painter is usually exhibited and integrated (as canvases) in his alternative pieces. These features characterize the work of another young experimental artist, CATI ORBULESCU, a work divided into two: traditional graphic aptitudes, and a permanent, though diffuse exploration of video and computer art, sometimes linked in all-encompassing traditional-experimental exhibitions.

Such fractured visions and vocations are slightly caricatured in cases like the action-exhibition of the New Wave group (composed of graduates and students from the Bucharest Academy of Fine Arts), in August 1994, at the Group for Social Dialogue in Bucharest. Then, the events and performances were a kind of superfluous parenthesis on the first and last days of a purely traditional and common exhibition of paintings, sculptures, ceramics etc. In such cases (and they are quite frequent among the young generation), alternative means (especially performances) are conceived as a modality or style of making more fuss around the real works of art. Thus, an "experimentalism" is emerging, understood as an ideological, protective umbrella. Such experiments are similar to those specific to the '70s, though the principles – practically the same – are interpreted upside-down: nowadays, the experiment becomes the "official" aesthetics that marks and shelters traditionalist aesthetics.

11. Feed-back or play-back?! These manifestations are not ludicrous, though they might seem so. They reflect in fact the duality of vernacular experimentalism. As the circumstantial political radicalism of experiment prior to 1989 faded in the '90s, it was replaced by an aesthetic radicalism that often conceals the social conformism of the artists who are integrated into the institutionalized experimentalism. S.C.C.A. is the main administrative structure accrediting experimentalism, which is widely supported by other institutions such as the Museums of Arad and Timisoara. Such institutions have already crystallized (and even mummified) their impact on the milieu

of unchanging groups and factions who periodically transmit their aesthetic information to each other, in a vicious circle. Thus, the institutionalization runs the risk of provoking the exact opposite of experimentalism, reduced to a common structure of cultural pressure that determines its feedback, suddenly turning into playback, as in the exemplary case of 010101, the 1994 S.C.C.A. exhibition. Such a risk is inherent even to an analytical enterprise like the 1996 exhibition on Experiment, that tends to posit a fictitious body of Romanian experimentalism, where one can find "Sigma" and BITZAN, BERNEA and OLOS, ZIDARU, GETA BRATESCU, ANTIK and PERJOVSCHI together. Yet, very often, the essential problem of the creation of these artists is not the experimental research, but something else, something related to history, politics and ideology, manuality, traditionalism, and modernism or even religion and mysticism. Talking experimentalism in a loose sense, one can discover a multitude of relations and realizations, while, regarded as a strong concept, vernacular experimentalism becomes suddenly lighter and clearer. That is why the illusory originality of Romanian experimentalism in the '90s proves to cover an ex-experiment, a local hybrid of traditionalism, modernism, politics and alternative art, combining spectacular and circumstantial-ironic visual Witz, pragmatic and topical politics or an imported version of feminism, appropriated as a formal vocabulary before being intimately understood (glosses over the feminist dogma of the organic, violence, and sexual identity) and the multitude of mutants of international video art, tirelessly zapping the channels of blunt dilemmas of communication and media.

Erwin KESSLER

NOTES

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1. One has to mention two significant phenomena: first, the historical self-absorption of the Romanian avant-garde proper gradually deprived of any experimentalism (some of its pillars, as M. H. Maxy, becoming prominent figures of socialist realism); and secondly, the individual self-absorption of experimentalism in the second half of the century (a paradigm is the case of Horia Bernea, whose career started as an experimental artist, though nowadays he ranges among dogmatic neo-traditionalists).
2. Precisely this idea marked an irreducible experimentalism, clearly standing out on the background of the official art of the time; the reflection on artistic means and purposes represents the first act of experimental dismantling of an aesthetic, officially backed system.

3. In fact, an early work by Paul Neagu, "The Great Metronome" (1966–1968), although made up of various "experimental" crafted matters (wood, steel, aluminium, mosaic etc.), resembled an altarpiece or icon (see Paul Overy, *Paul Neagu – A Generative Context*, Ceolfrith Press, 1981, p. 14).
4. Paradoxically, the beginning of spiritualist orthodoxism acquired such experimental features because of the background of worn-out modernism that reigned in Romanian art of that time. This belated modernism was convergent with the official "open" aesthetics of the late '60s.
5. As a sign of the peripheric cultural condition, the faith in artistic progress undermines the real experimental practice, which is viewed not as an alternative (completely different) of the traditional art, but as a state of evolution characterizing contemporary fine artists. Thus, such an artist is *up-to-date* and, obviously *progressive*. In the international art world, the idea of progress (and the evolutionist and meliorist contraposition of experiment to traditional art) is avoided in any serious analysis of contemporary art.
6. Alternative art is a genre of art characterized by the predilect (or even exclusive) usage of a single aesthetic channel, the experimental one. An alternative to traditional art, alternative art is constituted by the corporatization of experimentalism. This is integrated into an aesthetic compact paradigm that is rooted in the specific mechanisms of contemporary civilization. This compound is grafted on a leftist political recessive gene that omologates innovative provocation (aesthetically destructive) as a critique of social environment, periodically shown as regressive. Nowadays, experimentalism proper is relatively effaced, but alternative art (a technicization of capitalized experimentalism) follows the path of a continuous self-dissemination.
7. In contemporary Romanian art, the prospective experimentalism is properly embodied – together with its contradictory spiritualist background – in the artistic personality of Ion Grigorescu, who practised body-art and video, hyper-realist painting (as a critical paraphrase of socialist realism!), photography and installations in a poverist key, constantly manifesting himself as an orthodoxist social artist.
8. Exemplary in this connection are the video "Beauty Will Be the Redemption of the World" by Horia Bernea (S.C.C. Annual exhibition, 1994 – 010101), that presents one of the artist's canvases and the videos of Marian Zidaru, that show his sculptures combined in some scene with props for his mystic-artistic events and actions. Such cases of video movies without video art mark the annihilation and re-instrumentalization of a medium (video) *opened* and explored by experimentalism, and not simply employed as a documentary prsthesi. The disconsideration of the intrinsic potentialities of video (as art) leads to a conception of the tele-visual as a mere transit medium (not expressive in itself), used to support a primordial expression that invariably transcends it, sometimes in a humiliating way. Experimentalism is placed inside parentheses precisely by practising the creative means it provides, only as an amplification means for another work. Genial and genuine, "Creation" surpasses the alternative means, deprived of their specific ideology by a traditional fine artist that simply trans-poses his own image and ideology into a media system that is actually neglected in itself. The videos made by Bernea and Zidaru are intimately connected with their art, but profoundly disconnected from video art and experimentalism. The spontaneous sublimation of experimentalism under the pressure of spiritualism happened many times in different events and alternative art actions in recent Romanian art. For example, the action "Bread and Wine" by Marcel Bunea (1992, Bucharest National Theatre) was a Beuys-like exhibition event that articulated a personal mythology and configured a vocabulary of signs-symbol specific to it. But, in fact, it was only a liturgic paraphrase, aesthetically invested. The inherent contradiction of this para-eucharistic action (that was not at all inspired by similar works of Paul Neagu and Constantin Flondor, but shared their attitude) reflects once more the equivocal feature of Romanian experimentalism. A paradigm of contemporary experimentalism, Beuys practised permanently a de-naturation of current signs and idioms, advancing a personal, idiomatic vocabulary. Although an enterprise connected with his model, "Bread and Wine" was, inversely, a mere trans-figuration (transgressive figuration) of some given signs, an aesthic investment of a trans-personal language which is spoken by everybody. In Beuys's case, the signs

of his personal soteriology are predominantly fur and fat, that is psychopomp vehicles invented by himself, and not taken from a predetermined repertory. In the case of the "Bread an Wine" action, the psychopomp vehicle was practically identical with the eucharistic sacrament administered (without experiment) by the Crhistian church. The mentality specific to this action has reverberated in the milieu of young artists in precisely the same hyposthesis and with the same contradictions, for example in "The Sacrifice of Innocents" by Cosmin Paulescu (performance in Timisoara, 1993) or in the "Spaceinstallation" (The Art Academy of Vienna, 1994) by Marcel Scutaru. In these cases, the metaphORIZATION and spiritualization (redundant because of aestheticism) of a given symbolic repertory led to the reiteration and transgressive figuration of the same eucharistic theme.

Alexandru PATATICS, *Video Installation*
(1995)

