

## FOREWORD

**T**he perennial artistic profile of a country is taken as granted, as a conspicuous, recognizable, legitimate, and coherent visual datum. Presumably, seeing the shape of a country on a (formal) geographical map, one can simultaneously see the shape of its art on an (informal) esthetic map too. It is as if people are naturally expected to paint, build or dance correspondingly, in the same particular way they speak, eat and dress. Indeed, such a profile might be easily drawn for Dutch art, for example, which is highly cohesive in its development from Jan van Eyck to Vermeer and, later on, even to Mondrian.

However, sometimes the coagulation of this expected consistency of the anthropological, visual narrative of a culture (or its artistic identity) proves to be the very problem of that culture. This was (and still is) the case of Romania in the 20th century. Historical conditions such as its state unity achieved in the wake of World War I urged the need for a national, distinct visual look by the beginning of the century. Similar to other Central European nations at that moment, the stake was not simply to make (traditional, modern or avant-garde) "art in Romania", but the conceptual framework of what "Romanian art" was expected to be, an irreducible and utterly specific visual expression of the Romanian psyche. That art was envisaged as one, as a single, deep-rooted and traditional voice ultimately spelling a unique idiom in the realm of both iconography and plastic, tactile values.

In its self-conscious, modern sense, Romanian art is basically an ideological product developed by the late 19th century and the early 20th century, in the euphoric (and at the same time phobic) atmosphere of national revival and international suspicion. It is precisely the fact that the national artistic profile emerged as "revolutionary", under political pressure and in a thoroughly ideological milieu, instead of gradually fermenting in artists' studios, that reveals the primary modernism of the burgeoning Romanian art of the time. Significantly enough, prior to the rising "national command" of the 20s, Romanian art was following its modest, vernacular, modernist path, particularly influenced by Impressionism and Barbizon School painters. It was about to get rid of the rigid, adulterated and reared parochial church-painting. Nevertheless, the resurrection of the national psyche prompted a critical revision and a rich reinvestment of the previously rejected vocabulary, now deeply reworked and enhanced to the status of a real paradigm of the specific, local cultural experience. Although often narrowly traditionalist, art was nonetheless spurred by a typical modernist, demiurge-like will to push the whole establishment forward (or even backward), to create, through a "*fiat*", a new and assertive visual paragon. Like Modernism itself, the newly-born traditionalist Romanian art of the early 20th century is scarified by the cutting instruments of its forced birth: manifestoes, programs, divergent politics.

No particular “style” particularized such national construction. An expected ecumenism (and heterogeneity) stamped its beginnings and early development. Romanian art was not characterized by an intrinsic esthetic definition of formal assets, in the way in France, for example, cubism distinguished itself from (post)impressionism essentially in pictorial, esthetic terms. The different contexts and their specific urgencies determined Romanian art to define itself mainly as the recurrent politics of the ethnic image. On the one hand, it had to prove it was necessary internally, as an automatic reflection or icon of the powerfully asserted, advocated national psyche. It had to visualize that psyche like a body of evidence, in order to make it be, to bring it to light, to turn it into a pattern. On the other hand, a distinctive national artistic image was tacitly required externally, as a means of culturally legitimizing the cohesion, autonomy and complexity of a nation whose state integrity and unity was a recent achievement. Viewed from one side or another, the outcome of Romanian art was in the end not an esthetic stance (“yet another contribution to the history of art...”), but a conscious political territorialization.

Notwithstanding, the terms of this typically modernist endeavor were basically traditionalist, and nowadays they are still so, because both internal and external pressure was perceived as unceasing, requiring statements and restatements of a national artistic presence. The main constituents of the territory of Romanian art were iconographic, and the core of its vocabulary is made of religious (Orthodox) symbols and signs, peasant-related subjects (field, work, tools, animals), national history topics and picturesque views of the countryside. The major element of solidarity in 20th-century Romanian art is neither a form (be it archetypal), nor a technique (be it the sculptures produced by Brancusi, its most significant exponent), but an image. Its organic cohesion is thus a matter of representation, therefore ultimately a theological and political issue. Credited iconography depends on *what* has to be represented (basically in conformity with a theological canon that allows the adoration of images but forbids fetishism), and on *how* and *why* it is represented (contingent upon the political bearings of the moment).

The neo-traditionalist approach converging on these issues was sometimes born *ex nihilo*, i.e. without an authentic national precedent. While neo-traditionalist trends abroad usually seem to preserve a certain (eroded, endangered, or simply forgotten) tradition, in Romania neo-traditionalist artists were frequently the very inventors of the ideal tradition they invoked. This is a striking reality in painting, where the dominant post-Byzantine (neo-Orthodox) trend makes use of an elusive “Byzantine” ancestor. The same holds true for architecture, especially in the case of the influential style developed between the two world wars, which was symptomatically called “neo-Romanian” although there is no trace of a previous, historical “Romanian” style. Tradition in this sense is falsely regressive. It is not a move towards the past, but rather a tendency to legitimize a certain present, political stance.

By the time Romanian neo-traditionalism was emerging as a necessary (though arguably perverse) effect of Modernist strategies and ideologies, the natural offspring of the latter was also developing – the avant-garde endeavors of Dadaists and cubo-futurists such as Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, Victor Brauner, and M. H. Maxy. However, they were not treading the path opened a few decades before by the local followers of the classical Modernism of the Barbizon School and Impressionism. Like the neo-traditionalists, they also achieved a breakthrough. They expanded only one segment of the modernist strategies, inaugurating their own “avant-garde” tradition, which was less concerned with specific national iconography and representation than with techniques, innovation and political de-territorialization. Their subsequent marginalization on the art scene might seem at first glance a catastrophic national misconception from the part of the cultural, institutional establishment. However, a more serious investigation would reveal that the position they assumed was marginal in the first place, and they deliberately (and provocatively) played off the main score of the national artistic “opera”, using it as a needed landmark for their own purposes. Together with the flourishing traditionalism, the freely and loosely developing early avant-garde constituted

the very image of a complex, autonomous and rich national cultural profile, concomitantly shaped by hyper-affirmative stances and utterly negativistic positions.

The advent of the socialist-realist esthetic ideology in the 50s led to a collision of the two components of Romanian art, and at the same time to the emergence of their respective doubles in the realm of official art. The repercussions of this not so surprising cohabitation and reciprocal contamination may be discovered in contemporary Romanian art, in its paradoxical intertwining of the (finally convergent) systems outlined by neo-traditionalism and the neo-avant-garde.

This issue of *PLURAL* aims to sketch the historical-political and esthetic framework that, on a national scale, made Romanian art and architecture viable in the 20th century. The scope consists of their basic concepts and intricate developments, their ideological sources and subsequent manipulations, and their relevance in the context of a cultural environment still deeply entrenched in the national psyche. Accordingly, prominent Romanian personalities such as Brancusi, Pallady and Tuculescu are not present in this book, even though autochthonism plays a major role in their works. In their cases, Romanian specificity is driven to the archetypal essence of a universal form that ultimately transcends its ethnic source. That is why, when working basically on Romanian popular motifs and structures, Brancusi was able to reach the matrix of a consistently contemporary experience of space and shape. In his turn, Tuculescu, beginning with his paintings dating from the 1940s, was independently de-structuring and restructuring the typical ornaments of Romanian tapestries, attaining such a degree of intensity in his experiments with color that was to be matched thereafter only by the members of the COBRA group. This volume of *PLURAL* deals with the mainstream of Romanian art, not its exceptions. It deals with the emblematic-legitimist exhibition of a few canonical representations that ultimately affirm and construct national identity not as a string of differences, but as a series of generic, shared affinities. Their case is one of a tacit, indeed unconscious refusal to transcend particularism toward higher, but profuse, values. Their esthetic rigor, when manifest, is actually the stamp of a political strategy, not merely an esthetic stand.

Besides two substantial essays on respectively Romanian art and architecture in recent decades, there are other sections that focus not only on significant figures of contemporary art (Ion Grigorescu, Horia Bernea, Marian Zidaru and Dan Perjovschi), but also on artists who nowadays embody the perennial dilemmas and paradoxes of Romanian art, its oscillation between narrow traditionalism and the exclusive avant-garde, between apocalyptic nationalism and subversive political correctness. The artists in question are those who propagate the most influential (visual, but not only) messages on the current scene of Romanian art. They also evince the excessive and often adverse polarization in the world of national art, its unbearable pressure and stringent urgencies. There is also a matter of proportion: two of those artists, Horia Bernea and Marian Zidaru, represent the leading trend of neo- and ultra-Orthodoxy respectively, whereas Dan Perjovschi is the major exponent of the self-propelled, militant (though still in the minority) neo-avant-garde. Special attention is paid to Ion Grigorescu, perhaps the most peculiar figure in Romanian art today. He is a rare, paradoxical case of the two contrasting trends residing in a unique (and unexpectedly coherent) creative personality. Moreover, Ion Grigorescu had a very particular relationship with the former esthetic ideology of "socialist realism". He does not appear as a possible, meliorist model of reconciliation, but as yet another paradox of contemporary Romanian art, of its decided indecisiveness that makes it perhaps not tragic, but indecisively dramatic.