

Rewriting the Canon of Visual Arts in Communist Romania

A case study

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Submitted to Central European University
History Department

In the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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Budapest, Hungary

2007

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Abstract

This paper explores, interprets, and contributes to the studies regarding Romanian “unofficial” art during the communist period. I will analyze the role of what was called “underground” art in communist Romania between 1965 and 1980, focusing mostly on four artists, whose work was regarded as part of the mainstream “unofficial” art during Ceaușescu’s rule.

My analysis focuses on the visual productions of: Ion Grigorescu, Ștefan Bertalan, Geta Brătescu and Ana Lupaș, in order to provide possible answers to the question of how art can be politically committed yet still art, and what technique of survival autonomous artists used during the communist regime.

The use of oral history methods in the form of the interactive interviews represents not only an element of novelty in approaching the visual culture of the Romanian communist period, but also an attempt to reconstruct the artist’s intentions. Another element of novelty is the analysis of some primary sources (anti-communist artworks and documents) which have publicly been unknown so far. Interpreting representational paintings and analyzing interviews with the artists involve the reconstruction of the recent past. The aim of this paper is to analyze visual artworks and to interpret the information about unofficial artist’s personality in order to reveal what is usually called “the artist’s condition” and intentions under dictatorship.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors Ilona Sarmany-Parsons and Constantin Iordachi for their assistance, suggestions and patience. Special thanks are due to the artist Ion Grigorescu for his constant support and for the curator Carmen Iovitu who guided my visit into the basement of the National Museum of Contemporary Art from Bucharest. I truly appreciate the discussions offered by Professor Istvan Rev this academic year, which opened new doors in my way of understanding historical studies.

This paper is dedicated to the artist Ștefan Bertalan. To me he represents the man of vision. His picture-texts embody a contradictory state of being. On a philosophical level, he is disabled by the conflict between art and protest. He is my type of “hero on the margins”.

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INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF RE-WRITING

“What goes wrong then with the political interrogation of the cultural significance of art?”¹

My research has as its point of its departure the idea that not everything in a communist regime could be explained through a single party's monopoly. Not all art and visual productions that were created in the age of Ceaușescu can be defined as “official art”. I re-assert the modernist idea according to which art has the crucial ability to transform the meaning and the value of the surrounding society. In the case of Romanian communist art, the avant-gardism was not an inescapable artistic fate or a process inherent in the history of art. It was a social strategy by which artists both engaged with and differentiated themselves from their contemporary field of cultural politics.

My starting point is the premise according to which I regard the artist as a “hero on the margins” whose natural or necessary state is belligerent independence of propaganda's constraint. The strategy of intellectual survival under dictatorship was not only a technique of making the best of precarious means, the imperfections of evil, and the meanderings of arbitrariness. Building on one of Andrei Pleșu's commentaries we could ask ourselves if the technique of survival was at the same time and an exercise of marginality².

From the point of view of this study, the canon of modern art under the communist regime is the commitment to socialist realism and to its “aesthetic” categories and methods. As defined by the “official” literary critics, art critics and historians, socialist realism is an artistic and literary-theoretical intervention consisting of a specific cluster of works of literature, film and

¹ Felshin Nina, “But is it art?” in: *The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Bay Press, Seattle, p. 18

² See Andrei Pleșu, “Intellectual Life under Dictatorship” in *Representations*, No.49, Special Issue: Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe Before and After 1989. (Winter, 1995), pp.67-69

art. The official theoretizations of art were produced in communist Romania by a bureaucratic system which regarded “reality” in terms of “philosophical principles”. As Katerina Clark argued, in order to understand the function of socialist realism we have to go back to Hegel’s insight (advanced in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and elsewhere) those particular stages of cultural development produce particular cultural forms³.

Socialist realism, the single concept imposed on the cultures of the Eastern European bloc, was not directly integrated in Romanian culture, although it generated many works of complacency solicited by political propaganda, in an attempt to create its own mythology. Most of these cultures (and Romania is one of them) rejected it, when it became a factor in the genesis of certain original phenomena, these are relevant precisely as phenomena of opposition. This study emphasizes the role of what was called “underground”, “alternative”, or “apartment-art” in communist Romania between 1965 and 1980. This period represented a movement of openness, experimentation and borrowings from Western art. In the political sphere, the first part (1965-1971) coincided with Ceausescu’s “cultural liberalization”, which allowed freer circulation of information, of persons, and even of art. The relative political and cultural “opening” experienced by the communist Romania around the 60’s and the 70’s was more prominent between the mid of the 60’s and the early 70’s but, it continued with a few “spasms” till 1980. Starting with 1981 the situation in Romania was already incomparably worse than during the period of pretended “liberalization” and this is the reason for what the freer production of visual art was much reduced. This does not mean that after the 80’s the attempts of “unofficial” actions in visual arts were stopped, but they were very isolated phenomena.

³ See Katerina Clark, “Socialist Realism with Shores: The Conventions for the Positive Hero”, in: Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (eds.), *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1997

According to the art critic and historian Magda Cârneci, the Romanian communist period can be divided into three parts: a period of “revisionism” (between 1945 and 1960); a period of “normalization”, in which the communist regime looked to “consolidate the socialist society” (1960 – 1975); and the so-called “post-totalitarian” period (between 1975 and 1989, and later in 1990)⁴. Each political period was represented in art by three different artistic “prototypes”. The first was the “totalitarian art” – or, in other words, the conception according to which art must have a realistic style, but has to be idealistic in its content (between 1945 and 1960). The second was the coexistence of “official art” with “alternative art” (between 1960 and 1975). The third was represented by the dichotomy between “permitted art” and “real art” (between 1975 and 1989). This dichotomy illustrates, in fact, another opposition: “legal society” versus “real society”⁵. In both “societies” the artist performed an important role. I have chosen for my study the second period (according to Cârneci’s scheme) and the first five years from the third period because in my view this period of time (1965-1980) represents the pick of “unofficial” manifestations in visual arts.

My study intends to investigate unofficial art, and its reformulated expressions and motivations, focusing mostly on the activity of four artists: Ion Grigorescu (b. 1945), Ștefan Bertalan (b. 1930), Geta Brătescu (b. 1926) and Ana Lupaș (b. 1940). They represent the mainstream in Romanian “alternative” art during Ceaușescu’s rule. Ion Grigorescu and Geta Brătescu still work and live in Bucharest. Ana Lupaș lives in Cluj. In the case of Ștefan Bertalan (as far as I know, he is in this moment the patient of a mental institution from Germany), Romanian art critics consider that his main work was his own existence, constantly rebuilt and

⁴ Magda Cârneci, *Artele Plastice în România: 1945-1989* (Visual arts in Romania: 1945-1989), Meridiane, București, 2000.

⁵ I use Fr. Fejtő’s distinction, according to which the communist regimes split the society into “official society” (the society desired to be) and “real society” (the society *de facto*). See Fr. Fejtő, *Histoire des démocraties populaires*, Paris, Seuil, 1979, vol.II, p. 341

constantly scrutinized two aspects: spiritual growth through the active contemplation of nature, and tactical evasion from the political and economical oppression at work in Romania at that time.

Having these examples in mind, I will argue that, thorough the period of Ceausescu's rule, there was a double culture and a double aesthetic language – official art simultaneously coexisting with unofficial art. I will focus on the relationship between the vanguard and official art in Romanian communism, in order to illustrate a neglected, or a misunderstood aspect, namely that the official canon used traditional artistic forms (which are aesthetically inoffensive), as tools for the most radical critique of the traditional conditions of life. In fact, the official canon did not reject the avant-garde, but used it as a source of inspiration for the “psychedelic-ecstatic”⁶ character of totalitarian art.

One of the most important aims of my investigation is to draw an overview regarding the artist's condition in the communist regime. In this respect, I will interview official and unofficial artists who were active in the communist period, in order to address the problems of the “captive mind”⁷ and of “how can art be politically committed yet still be art”. My analysis is oriented toward the relationship between the artist and their work, in a period when this relationship was distorted by censorship. My study will examine individual artists and their work in order to determine whether they were merely “state” artists, active only in the service of the power. Also to what extent the themes were chosen by the authorities or by the artists themselves? The relative aesthetic freedom (available for example between 1965 and 1975), and in some cases the almost ironic compositional approach to a theme of “national importance”, led to the assumption

⁶ Boris Groys remarked, in the article “IRWIN Group: More Total than Totalitarianism”, written in 1990, that the committed art of communist regimes is more reminiscent of vanguard's phenomena of Surrealism or Magical Realism, than the sober mimetic realism of the past

⁷ I use here Czeslav Milosz's term “*La pansee captive*” (used in the book with the same title, edited by Gallimard, Paris, 1990)

that many of the authors of these images were “independent” artists, who also produced such works, acting from diverse motives. Future monographs on the artistic production from the communist period, and historical or sociological investigation regarding the position of visual artists in Romanian society under Ceaușescu, should help to clarify the possible interdependencies between “private” and “state” production but, unfortunately, this type of research is missing or is incomplete and too general.

The reason I decided to approach this subject is because in Romanian studies about communism visual culture is largely neglected. Romanian historians⁸ focused almost exclusively on the political situation during Ceaușescu’s time, neglecting the controversial subject of art and the artist’s condition. In Romanian literature about the communist period there are two studies regarding Romanian Plastic Arts. In my view, both Magda Cârneci’s book (*Romanian Plastic Arts: 1945-1989*⁹) and Ileana Pintilie’s monograph book (*Grigorescu Ion: Actionism in Romania, during the Communist Era*) constitute relevant literature regarding the visual arts in the communist regime. Magda Cârneci’s study provides a good summary for all aspects of art between 1945 and 1989, and Ileana Pintilie’s book is an exhaustive biography of Romanian contemporary artist Ion Grigorescu. However, I consider that Magda Cârneci’s study does not go into a deeper analysis of the artistic phenomenon under communism, some aspects remaining “unaddressed” (for example, the relationship between “legal society” and “real society”, the context of “the condition of the artist”; the relationship between the “official art” and the “unofficial art”, the analysis of the peculiarities of the Romanian “official style” in arts during Ceaușescu and so on). Nevertheless, her inventory of names of the artists, artistic movements, art

⁸ Lucian Boia, *Miturile Comunismului Românesc* (The myths of Romanian communism), Nemira, Bucharest, 1998; Ghiță Ionescu, *Communism in Romania*, Oxford University Press, London, 1964; Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism pentru eternitate* (Stalinism for eternity), Polirom, Iași, 2005

⁹ Magda Cârneci, *Artele Plastice în România: 1945-1989* (Visual Arts in Romania: 1945-1989), Meridiane, București, 2000

magazines, art critics, galleries, and art collections remains very useful for an exhaustive view over the phenomenon. My study will be, on the one hand, a continuation of her study and, on the other hand, a more comprehensive analysis of the relationships between the “official art” and the “unofficial art” during Ceaușescu.

My approach is totally new, because in Romanian studies of the genre there is no analysis of the communist period from the point of view of visual culture, historians focusing almost exclusively on the political and social aspects. An element of novelty in my research is the analysis of the condition of the artist, in the context of the dichotomy between official art’s life and life in all its facets under Ceaușescu’s dictatorship. The use of the methodological procedures of oral history in the form of the interactive interviews represents also an element of novelty in approaching the visual culture of the communist period. As many of the artists who lived and created in the communist period are still alive, oral history is a very important method in approaching and reconstructing the recent artistic past.

According to Theodore Adorno¹⁰, there is a distinction between “committed art”, and propaganda. Art should oppose itself to society (in this way being autonomous), but at the same time it must still remain a part of society (in this way being committed). Propagandistic “art” serves the official goals of a government, or political party. I intend to argue that in the Romanian communist regime, between 1965 and 1980, the unofficial art¹¹ remained in a good part separated from the noxious excess of dogmatism, which defined the official art. Of course, “grey zones” (semi-official art, or tolerated art) existed, and I would take them into consideration, but my

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, “Commitment”, in: Andrew Arto and Eike Gebhardt (eds), *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, New York, 1992

¹¹ I have to mention here that unofficial art means not only “autonomous art”, or “vanguard’s art”, but also “political art”. I don’t identify “political art” with official communist art and its canon

primarily interest is to correct the canon of visual arts of the communist period by including “unofficial” art in. In a way, my paper is “a criticism of criticism”.

My study it is therefore neither a report on the history of Romanian socialist realism, nor a close reading of one or more texts in order to elucidate that concept, nor is it another repudiation of the genre. This paper is a chapter of recent cultural history, and it researches the way the iconography and symbolism of communist art has changed: from the official paintings during Ceaușescu’s time – an oppressive totalitarian symbol, *nomina odiosa* – via established contemporary references, such as Ion Grigorescu (one of the most known unofficial visual artists in the communist regime¹²), SubREAL, Calin Dan, Iosif Kiraly (artists of the 90s), up to the young generations that began to refer with a lot of irony to Ceaușescu’s Palace as an absurd symbol of Bucharest.

For a long time, the official art of the totalitarian regimes was seen as a “foreign element” in the context of twentieth-century art. The works of art created by totalitarianism were hidden in the dark basements of the museums; this way, was underlined their total exclusion from the world of art. On the contrary, in our days museums are constructed in order to “preserve” totalitarian art and culture in order to document the past¹³. For the first time since 1989, MNAC exhibited “the most popular” official paintings of Ceaușescu¹⁴ (the exhibition took place in March 2005, and the paintings exhibited with that occasion are now kept in the basement of the museum). Today, they can be read in a relaxed way. Some Romanian art critics underlined the need to deconstruct imposed myths by exhibiting and re-reading communist art. The exhibition proposes to present

¹² The unofficial side in communist Romanian art is represented by Ion Grigorescu (the author of the article “*On the realist artist*” – published in the Romanian official art magazine *Arta* in 1973 – and of the imaginary script “*Dialogue with Comrade Ceausescu*” – 1978, and also by Stefan Bertalan, Constantin Flondor-Strainu, Horia Bernea, Paul Neagu, Decebal Scriba, Geta Bratescu, Peter Pusztai, Mihai Oleg, Doru Tulcan, and many others

¹³ See *The House of Terror* (Budapest), *The Holocaust Museum* etc

¹⁴ *National Museum of Contemporary Art* (Bucharest) preserves many official paintings, representing: dictatorial couple, workers in factories, totalitarian spectacles and so on

together official paintings (bombastic propaganda tools) representing portrayals of Nicolae Ceaușescu and dissident works, as in Ion Grigorescu's "*Dialog with Comrade Ceaușescu*" (1978), or as in very recent works, like Cristian Pogagean's "*The Actors of Subliminal History*". This new mixture of official and unofficial art is also something I will examine in the general context of art and culture.

As primary sources I will consult the official art-press (the official art magazine "*Arta Plastica*" (which was renamed in 1969, *Arta*), the newspapers such as *Scânteia* and *Almanahul Flacăra*). All these written sources can be found in the *University Library* of Bucharest. For the special case of unofficial art, I will use the catalogs of the exhibitions which were organized in the National Museum of Contemporary Arts from Bucharest and the catalog "*Experiment in Romanian Art since 1960*" (edited by Soros Center of Contemporary Art Bucharest).

Besides "official" and "unofficial" artistic representations I will focus also on publicly unknown works of art and documents (such as private letters of the artists, which circulated among them) in order to envisage the relationship between the public and the private spheres of artist's life during communist period.

I have conceived my paper as being formed in four chapters: the first one focuses on *the relationship between the official and unofficial art* during the communist period called "the political liberalization". A comparative analysis of the both types of art and art production is unavoidable in order to distinguish the main peculiarities of what I will call "autonomous art"¹⁵(unofficial art); the second chapter emphasizes *the relationship between artistic modernism*

¹⁵ Autonomous art means in my approach art which survived Realism socialist's constraints. In my view art should not be directly political committed but it is indirectly committed, being sociopolitical in its nature (because it appears in society, as a form of human activity.) Autonomous works of art can be (and sometimes are) political (see "feminist art", "performance art", etc.). Contemporary art's critical approaches emphasize the distinction between *political art* and *activist art*. In this view, both terms (political art and activist art) are engaged with political issues, questions and concerns – but a clear distinction is mandatory. "Political art" is not a broader umbrella term. It designates instead the type of art that explores political subject matters, but this is not made in a way that involves political action

and totalitarianism in communist Romania ; the third one analyses and interprets *the condition of the artist during Ceaușescu's rule* and the fourth chapter surveys *the transition from the "pictorial hymnology" (the official art) to the exhibition's of "semionautes" artists*¹⁶. The last chapter (the fourth one) will be an analysis of the reception of the so-called "official communist art" in our days both in terms of re-reading and in terms of documentation of the recent past. Interestingly, the main-stream of Romanian contemporary art is constituted by former dissident artists such as Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brăteanu, Wanda Mihuleac, Călin Dan and so on. They are considered in our days still "unofficial" artists by the broader public (not in the sense of anti-socialist realists) but in the sense of "non –academic" artists.

Romanian contemporary artists use their totalitarian heritage mimicking the rhetoric of the propaganda not only to shock their audience, but also to reveal its aesthetic mechanism. The subversive pastiche of communist symbols is interpreted by Călin Dan¹⁷ as being the art of "our days", a combination of elements of consumer society and socialist iconography. Călin Dan, along with Dan Mihăilțeanu (sculptor) and Josef Kiraly (photographer), formed *Sub-Real*, an artist group that takes as its subject the clichéd images and stereotypes associated with Romanian culture and politics, such as the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. The group often uses founded images as material for its installations, as in the case of their "Art History Archive" project, for which they utilized the discarded photo archive of the official Romanian art magazine *Arta*. Sub-Real group offers a relevant example of imagistic re-writing of the official art of the communist regime.

In the context of the dichotomy between committed (official) and autonomous (unofficial) in the visual arts, I consider useful to stress the actuality of this debate (official versus unofficial

¹⁶ Borriaud's term

¹⁷ Călin Dan is a Romanian art critic, curator and media artist

in art), exemplifying it with a very recent event. The National Museum of Contemporary Art (from Bucharest) was created in 2002 under the initiative of the former Prime Minister Adrian Năstase¹⁸. The museum is located in Ceaușescu's Palace (*The House of the People*, the second biggest building in the world, after the Pentagon¹⁹). A debatable matter in every sense, the new MNAC location – a vast insert into the E4 wing of the Palace, meant to play a radically opposite role to what the dictator had in mind – is an extremely challenging project. Romanian contemporary artists (some of them representing the unofficial side of the communist period) had divided themselves into two camps: one sustaining the project, and the other one rejecting it. This debate is still alive in the Romanian Press.

Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

Historical interpretation –despite all the hopes and previous efforts to the contrary – cannot be formalized in a mechanical way. As Istvan Rev remarks, “the historian might fail, even if he or she tries to be truthful, faithful to the two virtues of truth: sincerity and accuracy, which become essential virtues and guarantees of serious scholarly work, especially in the absence of easily formalized rules of historical reconstruction”²⁰. My attempt in achieving objectivity, nevertheless, does not equal with certainty because I cannot know all the relevant facts: important details can be misrepresented in the surviving documents, some important details for my research were never recorded, if some of them were recorded the document is no longer exist end so on.

¹⁸ Adrian Năstase was Romania's Prime Minister between 2000 and 2004

¹⁹ Ceaușescu ordered its building in the 80s. For the construction of this enormous palace a quarter of the historical center of Bucharest was demolished (including private houses, historical monuments and churches)

²⁰ Istvan Rev, *Afterthought ,The only thing the historian can offer*, (draft, March, 2007)

Carlo Ginzburg²¹ criticized the attitude according to which the historian is considered a “*supreme and imperturbable judge*”. The historian has no entitlement to moral judgment. Following this line of argumentation, I am not intending to assert if an event was ‘good’ or ‘bad’. My intention is to discuss a peculiar type of discourse and to reconstruct a few mental landscapes and mechanisms of survival of the art and the artist during the communist regime. In my approach there is a specific *moral particularism*²² at work.. According to it, “a fact that can make a moral difference in one case can make a completely different difference in another case. Facts-pertaining to possible moral outcomes- can have variable relevance (and the historian does not even know whether a particular fact, or the lack of it, is relevant or not)”²³.

In my research I will deal with three types of sources: oral sources (in the form of interviews with official and unofficial artists), written sources (communist daily newspapers and art-press; letters written by “unofficial” artists) and visual sources or works of art (politically committed paintings and “autonomous” works of art which appear in the catalogues of some important exhibitions²⁴). According to Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, it does not matter “how these sources are described because no piece of evidence can be used in the state in which it is found”²⁵. They must undergo the action known as the *critical method*.

Two remarks seem to be useful at this point: on the one hand, each type of source requires a different methodology and, on the other hand, all three types of sources are indispensable in reconstructing the status of “unofficial” art. This type of subject is inherently

²¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian*, London, Verso, 1999

²² See Jonathan Dancy– “Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties”, *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 92, No. 368, (Oct., 1983)

²³ Istvan Rev, *Afterthought, The only thing the historian can offer*, (draft, March, 2007, p.22)

²⁴ For instance, the catalogue of the fourth annual exhibition organized by the Soros center for Contemporary Art in Bucharest (National Theatre, Etaj 3 / 4 Gallery, November 1997) and in Cluj (National Museum of Art, February 1997). The catalogue is entitled: *Experiment –în arta românească după 1960/ Experiment in Romanian Art Since 1960*

²⁵ Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, Orlando, Florida, 1985, p. 156

difficult to study because it involves activities which the participants (official or unofficial artists) will probably try to hide or to distort. Primary evidence in the form of interviews, letters, newspaper accounts, and other records of someone who witnessed the event concerned should be verified using external criticism (which proves the authenticity of evidence), internal criticism (regarding the credibility of evidence) and the interpretation of the evidence (which determines the difference between literal and real meaning).

When we talk of unofficial art under dictatorship, we must therefore be aware of the danger of indistinctiveness between what is private and what is public in an artist's narrative or between what is truth and what is a lie. According to Robert Jones Shafer²⁶, the historian should be interested in lies as well as in truth (perhaps he had in mind those historiographical's findings which emphasize the impossibility of approaching the past "*as actually happened*", as Ranke claimed), but he must be able to distinguish between them. This is the task of internal criticism: to determine the credibility of the sources. This account is possible taking into consideration: the conditions of reporting (author's intention, when did he report etc); how well the author could observe the thing he reports; whether he was intimidated by the *Securitate*²⁷; whether the real meaning of the statement is different from its literal meaning etc.

As I have mentioned, eyewitness accounts may be purposely distorted in order to avert blame or to bestow praise on a particular individual or group. Without intending to misinform, even on-the-scene judgments can be incorrect. Sometimes, as most historians argued, the closer you are to an event, the more emotionally involved you are, and this distorts your understanding of it.

²⁶ See Robert Jones Shafer, *A Guide to Historical Method*, Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, California 1980, p.149

²⁷ *Securitatea* is Romanian denomination for the Secret Police.

The use of oral history can serve to fill information which misses in the written records and at the same time, perhaps the most elusive feature of any oral memoir is its sense of the atmosphere of the period under consideration. In the case of unofficial art, the reconstruction of the communist period's atmosphere is crucial because the so-called "underground" art could appear in private basements, apartments, gardens and "minds" and every single detail (such as Ion Grigorescu's daily surroundings: his little kitchen, his plants etc) completes in a way the appropriate image about past. Oral history remains a useful element in approaching the past since our minds are living museums, because of the ideas we hold (for instance freedom, beauty, and democracy).

Besides the positive aspects, oral history is exposed to deliberately and involuntary distortions. The motives of deliberate distortion in reporting are (as Shafer²⁸ observes) "as varied as human hope, fear, and hate". To overcome these difficulties, I will consult reference works as required to resolve doubts.

In written and oral source's analysis I will train myself to be aware of jargon, *clichés* and tricks of speech, because they are not only simply sets of words or faults of writing, but also forms of escape. They can denote a failure of courage, an emotional weakness, a shuffling refusal to be pinned down to a declaration.

In Ion Grigorescu's²⁹ case, I have to be aware of the possible *cliché* which may appear in his declaration. In his case (much more than in the other unofficial artist case) the involuntary distortion can appear because of at least two factors. On the one hand, it is "generally known" the fact that after a period of (self?) banishment ensued between the early 80s and 1990s, he became for the international curators visiting Romania the impersonation of the intellectual surviving in

²⁸ Ibidem p. 157

²⁹ I mention Ion Grigorescu at this point because I intent to take an interview with him.

the margins of oppression, while documenting this unique existence in the most suggestive way.³⁰ On the other hand, given the fact that Grigorescu's artistic activity during the 70s was labeled as "*anti-communist*" art, there is the risk of my own biases or preconceptions (in the form of cultural *clichés*) which can distort my view of the oral document.

When we discuss the visual source's analysis few preliminary remarks are required. My visual sources are not only static images (such as paintings, photos, sculptures and so on) but also images in action (such as video art, performance art and installation etc.). Some of the visual sources are not merely images, but propaganda's distortions of an image. If we take into account this aspect, we have to be aware of the fact that an official "work" cannot be interpreted using the same methods as for an autonomous "work of art". In the case of committed images, the allegorical sense, the symbolic sense, and in some situations also the literal sense are subsumed by the "ideological sense".

According to David Carrier³¹'s insight, interpreting representational paintings often involves attempts to reconstruct the artist's intentions. Usually, we distinguish between an account of what the image represents and how we think about what it represents. An analysis of the content of the image is less difficult than an account of the artist's intention. But the structural analysis of an image is not enough in documenting and reconstructing the past.

I have to mention here that the so-called "official" art of the communist regimes obviously cannot be explained using traditional art historical methodology. Following Carrier's line of thought, we can assert that "words are not the privileged medium for the revelation of

³⁰ Ion Grigorescu documented in the form of video art and recorded performance art his own existence (the physical/corporal existence and his existence as an artist under dictatorship). His most important dissident works of art were two videos: *Masculine/Feminine* (made in 1976 - 8 mm standard pellicle, black and white, 14 min) and *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu* (made in 1978 - 8 mm standard pellicle, black and white, 6 min) and the collage entitled: *Cultural revolution*

³¹ David Carrier, "Theoretical Perspectives on the Arts, Sciences and Technology: Artist Intentions and Art Historian's Interpretation of the Artwork" in *Leonardo*, Vol.19, No.4. (1986), pp. 337-342

intentions... the problem for historian is to find words that adequately describe the visual artwork; those words aim to present the artist's intentions as they are manifested in the artwork"³². In my view, to find words that adequately describe the visual artworks is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one because – perhaps – the words which describe the artist's intention (“as they are manifested in the artwork”³³) are relevant only in presenting artist's “apparent intentions” (the real intention remaining hidden).

It is possible to find some artworks (for instance paintings which represent peasants or urban industrial landscapes) and to be tempted to interpret them as having a political meaning. Their authors can declare that they painted many images with peasants and industrial landscapes without political connotation. In this case background information is valuable insofar as it guides interpretation. We can admit the fact that the more we know about an artist's political, personal and artistic interests, the more we can say about his or her painting. Taking into consideration the content of contemporary artworks, we can claim, following Roskill's argument, that they can be explained “only through an intermediate... ‘experience’ that is not supplied by the visual image itself”³⁴.

I would like to add the fact that my research is based on the historical observation and this “historical observation explains why we ask an artist to explain what his or her work means, or what it is intended to represent or express and why it is relevant to gather information about that artist”³⁵.

³² Ibidem p. 341

³³ Ibidem 9

³⁴ Ibidem p.341

³⁵ ibidem 11

Artistic and Political Context

This chapter provides an overview of Romanian communism between 1965 and 1980, both in terms of art and politics, in order to make intelligible the ambiguity of Ceaușescu's cultural politics. From this background arose the most important anti-Socialist Realist art productions, which epitomize a heroic psyche dedicated to internal freedom. This insight in the artistic and political context should clarify the evolution of the artistic strategies after the 60s as well as the development of the two models of art: the ideological model and the aesthetic model.

I have chosen these fifteen years (1965-1980) of Romanian art during communism, in order to investigate the dichotomy between official and unofficial in the most important visual productions. This period represents, in my view, the most prolific phase of the communist regime regarding the alternative visual arts because of the so-called “politics of relaxation and liberalization” proposed by Ceaușescu beginning with the late 60s. The period of relaxation meant: a freer traveling of artists, of artworks and sometimes of ideas; a food “liberalization” (during the early years³⁶ in office Ceaușescu decided to put food on the shelves); wages were increased, the number of private cars rose, and the price of household and electrical goods actually fell. As Martyn Rady³⁷ suggests “...dull, grey blocks of worker accommodation thus sprang up to ring each of the major cities. Nevertheless, for families who used to live in a single room and to share the kitchen and the bathroom facilities with others, the new apartments were a considerable improvement on what had gone before”.

³⁶ Following Gheorghiu-Dej's death in 1965, political power in Romania was formally shared between Ceaușescu as party leader, Prime Minister Ion Maurer, and the new Head of State, Chivu Stoica. By 1969, the collective leadership had been effectively superseded by the rule of one man: Nicolae Ceaușescu

³⁷ See Martyn Rady, *Romania in Turmoil*, IB Tauris & Co Ltd Publishers, London 1992, p.40

The literature about Romanian communism³⁸ underlines Ceaușescu's tactic of winning support for his regime from historians, writers and artists. The party was depicted as leading the nation through Socialism toward the fulfillment of its aspirations. Dennis Deletant forcefully argues that any criticism of the Party or its leaders by Romanians "whether inside or outside the country, could be branded as treachery to the nation, a charge that was leveled in the early 1970s against dissenting voices, in particular Paul Goma"³⁹. The emphasis placed on the nation in Ceaușescu's discourse was reflected in cultural developments by the search to identify the *national characteristics* of Romanian culture. In visual arts the expression of this *national identity* was the so-called *nationalistic kitsch*, a kind of Socialist Realism with strong influences from Romanian traditional art (inspired by folkloric themes).

In July 1971 Ceaușescu enforced the esthetic principles of the ideologically-based *Socialist Humanism*, invoking the name of the celebrated Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga: "Anticipating the principles of our aesthetic today and, indeed, voicing a fundamental aim of true art of all times, the great Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga said 'the man who does not create for his whole nation is not a poet'"⁴⁰.

The political evolution of the communist regime decides in fact, the destiny of the artistic tendencies and the notorious "July theses" of 1971 can be interpreted as a new "cultural closeness" which follows a period of benefic relaxation. After a visit to China and North Korea, Ceaușescu decided to impose a "cultural revolution" in the Chinese's style through which intellectuals are reduced to the status of agitprops. These theses underline working class' right to intervene in literature, visual arts and music and denounced liberal and intellectual trends. This

³⁸ See Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate, Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989*, Hurst&Company, London, 1995 and Katherine Verdery, *National Identity Under Socialism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991

³⁹ Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate, Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989*, Hurst&Company, London, 1995, p. 174

⁴⁰ Nicolae Ceaușescu quoted in Dennis Deletant, p. 184

re-establishment of culture based on Socialist Realism meant a regression to traditional communist values.

In spite of the prohibitions against experimentalism (starting with 1974), and in spite of the *Socialist Humanism*, the so-called official culture was successfully doubled by an alternative culture and the few remarkable autonomous visual actions created for a while the sensation that the totalitarian regime tolerated the autonomous field of art. This more or less apparent “liberty of expression” was the result of a deceitful political tactic. One of the survivors of the Nazi camps and Ceaușescu’s Romania gives us a sense⁴¹ of this pretended “liberalization” arguing that both “abolition of censorship” and “free emigration” of the 70s represented in fact false ingredients of the so-called “new-democracy” and contributed to intimidating any attempt of opposition outside of the country.

After Ceaușescu’s refusal to invade Czechoslovakia (1968) and after his vehement critique regarding the intervention, he became very popular in the Western world’s opinion. He was already popular because of the reforms he had introduced. In this framework, he came up with the idea that censorship should be “abolished”. In fact, instead of direct censorship, the “multilaterally developed” socialism refined institution of power and employed “well educated, cynical, intelligent people in censor’s positions. The methods used become more ‘delicate’, in short, more perfidious”⁴². The censor was often perceived as merely an “inoffensive and well-intentioned advisor”.

This deliberate ambiguity in the area of “liberty of expression” was followed by the ambiguity in foreign policy. For instance, the “free emigration” policy served the old nationalist

⁴¹ Norman Manea is the winner of The National Jewish Book Award, an extraordinary man of letters who interprets the pretended “liberalization” during the Romanian communism. See especially his collection of essays entitled *On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist*, Grove Press, New York, 1992 pp. 64-65

⁴²Ibidem 6

dream of “purifying” the population. Both strategies won the dictatorship a stupefying sympathy in the West, leading to the conception according to which in independent communist Romania ⁴³ the individual’s “freedom” was respected, and even more than this, it was encouraged.

In what follows, I will survey the emergence of the most important organization of the artists (in fact during communism there was only one), which played the cardinal function in sustaining the artist’s image. Even if this organization was founded earlier than the 60s its role was unavoidable during the whole communist period, also in the period of “cultural liberalization”.

In 1950 a decision was made, and nobody ever revoked it, to found the Union of Visual Artists (UAP) – “a new, superior form of organizing the artistic life”⁴⁴, “an expression of the unity of the creative method of the young artists in the entire country”, which was to establish the matter of the “profound assimilation of the Socialist Realism as a method and to clarify the fundamental notions of the Marxist-Leninist aesthetics”. In the same year, *The National Gallery for Painting and Sculpture* was opened, a gallery meant to develop a “new type of museographers”. Four years later, UAP, together with the Ministry for Education and Culture, founded the *Arta Plastică* magazine, renamed later (in 1969) *Arta*, a propagandistic and socialist educational organ for artists and their audience. This artistic micro-infrastructure was going to be the tool of iconographical legitimization for the party-state, which kept engraving their influence on the young minds. The part of ideology which was elaborated for the visual arts (especially painting, graphics and sculpture), implied adopting and creatively transforming “socialist realism” - already tested by soviet artists “in the fight for employing art in the service of the people, and of the socialist cause”.

⁴³ Independent in the sense of braking away with Soviet Union’s influences

⁴⁴ I have to note that all the quotations are part of the “Wooden language” of the communist period

Connected to the “sensitivity, feelings and aspirations of the people”, socialist realism was defined by the attention paid to the national characteristics, which were triggered by “the fight against foreign influences and tendencies - hostile to realism and against cosmopolitanism”, and also by a certain sense of concreteness - for instance the “direct experience of life in factories, construction sites and collective farms”.

Starting from 1965, the official art magazine *Arta Plastică* substantially changed its “political language” and little by little began to inform the Romanian reader about the international artistic movements. Between 1970 and 1974 the magazine describes in its pages the most fashionable international trends in visual arts: industrial design, op art, kinetic art, conceptualism, installation, the artistic ecologist, mathematical realism and so on. The references to the official visual culture were not totally eliminated but they were considerably reduced.

Between 1970 and 1972 the magazine was named (renamed) *Arta*, and presented articles on experimental artists, namely: Paul Neagu’s Eat-Art⁴⁵; Bertalan’s early Constructivism; Ana Lupaș’s “Flaying carpets”; Ion Grigorescu’s photographs. The works discussed in the magazine were (of course) stylistically experimental but they lacked any direct political message.

⁴⁵ See *Arta* 1970 (no.5) , 1971 (no.1, 10, 11 and 12) and 1972 (no. 8 and 9)

Chapter 1. The Relationship between Official and Unofficial Art

1.1. Socialist Realism and its Canon: an Impossible Aesthetic?

“...this is the situation of politics
which Fascisms rendering aesthetic.
Communism responds by politicizing art”⁴⁶

In what follows, I will examine the “aesthetic possibilities” of official art in communism in order to make intelligible at least few aspects of the controversial relationship between aesthetics and politics. In many writings (and especially in the Western European studies), official art of communist regimes is interpreted as the incarnation of the anti-aesthetic, namely: dry, lifeless, colorless, didactic, lacking in style or design, not attractive, sometimes meaningless, traditionally described by the term *propaganda*, etc.

One of the most pertinent analyses on the impossibility of socialist realist’s aesthetic is Regine Robin’s study *Socialist Realism: an Impossible Aesthetic*, which continues the classic discussion of the unfeasibility of socialist realism as a literary canon. According to Cynthia A. Ruder⁴⁷, Regine Robin’s book provides a good counterpoint to Boris Groys’s innovative approach in his work *The Total Art of Stalinism*. In my view, (despite of the main critique according to which the historical perspective is distorted by this postmodernist viewpoint), Groys’s study is a welcome addition to the literature which argues that modernism did not disappear with the adoption of socialist realism, but it simply went underground. As Vyacheslav Ivanov remarks, “Groys’s book should be consulted ...as an important text serving as a testament

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arto and Eike Gebhardt, New York, 1982, p.242

⁴⁷ Cynthia A. Ruder, *Review* : (*Untitled*), in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol.38, No.1. (Spring, 1994), p.180

on the postmodern movement...the book itself represents an historical document no matter how far from real history the author's ideas are"⁴⁸.

One of the most striking traits of socialist realist aesthetics and criticism in Romanian communism, is that visual art were committed to represent the "beautiful": leaders, working class, rural and industrial landscapes, and even flowers which draw the map of Socialist Romania. I would like to mention at this point that the category of beautiful in a socialist realist understanding of the term, is a reflection⁴⁹ of the "real" which can be found in the natural world.

The most important peculiarity of "Socialist Realism" is the so-called "Reflective theory". Early Marxist aesthetic theories saw the relationship between the arts and the economic base as essentially a reflective one. I have mentioned Marx's theory here, because Marxism is the first example of a politically motivated aesthetic theory, and this theory points out the didactic role of the arts. "Reflection theory" claims that the value of art lies in its being a recorder of social trends. The artist must reflect what the political ruler decrees that reality to be. Art as a form of *social engineering* is a concept of which Plato would have approved. In Plato, as in Socialist Realism, political considerations are always primordial, and the didactic imperative is the only one acceptable for artistic activity (*paideia* was the Greek educational ideal). Many of the concerns of Socialist Realism are prefigured in Neo-classicism, an aesthetic theory heavily based on the writings of such classical figures as Plato and Aristotle, and which dominated European aesthetics from the Renaissance to the later eighteenth century.

According to this understanding there existed not aesthetic qualities, but objects and phenomena possessing aesthetic qualities. In other words, if the subject-matter of a painting is considered beautiful, the painting itself is treated as a beautiful one and vice-versa. The

⁴⁸ See Vyacheslav Ivanov, "Reviewed work: The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond, by Boris Groys" in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 52, No.3 (Autumn, 1993), p.601

⁴⁹ The Reflection theory (Plekhanov)

contemporary reader of communist art, as Alla Efimova⁵⁰ remarks, hardly calls to mind any association with aesthetics of beauty. But realist socialist's rhetoric claims that art must not merely instruct or educate but 'powerfully attract'. This statement speaks of an aesthetic intentionality that contradicts the view according to which the communist art was not conceived to be "attractive" but to "tell the truth".

In the Romanian case, a relevant example in this sense is the work of the most appreciated official artist of Ceaușescu's: the mural painter Sabin Bălașa⁵¹. He presented himself as the creator of the so-called "the cosmic romanticism" and described his work as being "beyond the time". As the Romanian art critic, Pavel Susara observes, Sabin Bălașa build his fame through heroic exploitation of nationalism and through the hypostatization of the dictatorial couple in an exemplar context. The most "attractive" element in Bălașa's official painting (and not only in those commissioned by the Communist Party), is the use of a special type of *blue* color with which the painter wanted to "powerfully attract" the viewer. All his official paintings representing the dictatorial couple or scenes from the "heroic past of the Romanian nation"⁵², are intentionally beautified. They are not only a depiction of "the reality" as such, but also a deliberate attempt to express an aesthetic of beauty.

⁵⁰ Alla Efimova, "To Touch on the Raw, The Aesthetic Affections of Socialist Realism", in *Art Journal*, Vol.56, No.1, (Spring, 1997), p72

⁵¹ Sabin Bălașa was considered the best painter in Ceaușescu's preferences. In our days his paintings are still appreciate by the nostalgic of communism and they are sold for very big amount of money. In spite of the art critics' opinion according to which his art is an immense kitsch, he still believes that his art is an "beyond the time" production and equals as value Michelangelo, Rubens and Picasso's art

⁵² I am using here one of the propaganda's formula for Romanian history



Photo 1. Nicolai Constantin, *Ceașescu and the People*, 1970
(source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art)



Photo 2. Sabin Bălașa, *Homage to the miners*, 1974
(source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art)

In Bălașa's painting (representing one of the most respected social categories of Ceaușescu's rule), the miners are painted as shiny characters, bearing in their hands miraculous minerals. The blue is the predominant color of the whole composition and its function is to "heroicize" the miner's figure.

The Romanian art critics (after 1989⁵³) underline that Sabin Bălașa's "mechanisms of attractiveness" are cacophonous and his blue is not a plastic color but "a medical color, which can be bought from an average shop for little money". The main "merit" of Sabin Bălașa's "innovation" in painting, as Vladimir Bulat⁵⁴ argued ironically, is the fact that he put "blue spots" over an entire epoch, achieving an interesting chromatic effect with the official color of the period- red.

According to the canon of official art of the communist regime, every ugly aesthetic detail must be "beautified". Another important aspect of the canon of socialist realist's aesthetics is the emphasis on *humanism* as a counterpart or a rejection of *dehumanized* non-representational art.

⁵³ Pavel Susara, Radu Ionescu, Vladimir Bulat

⁵⁴ See Vladimir Bulat: <http://www.nettime.org/List-Archives/nettime-ro-0528/msg00018.html>

Nicolae Ceaușescu stressed in a speech from 3-rd of August 1983⁵⁵ (*The conference from Mangalia*) the importance of art in the construction of the “new man”: “Comrades, I do not understand why we must encourage such movies and theatres, which do not represent the accurate image of the working class and of other categories of peoples {besides working class⁵⁶}...We don’t need this type of film and theater which distorts the image of the human being....we need an art which represents the essence, the model of the new man, which must to be constructed through art, comrades...”.

The idea of a leading role for arts in the construction of the “new man” obviously has roots in Nietzsche’s assertion that the world as it is can only be justified aesthetically. As Alla Efimova⁵⁷ argues, in the case of life under communism, art and politics do not just borrow categories from each other; together they play the role of doctor-engineer involved in the project of a major surgical intervention in the organism of life. The instrument of this operation, according to Todorov, is aesthetics, understood as the “sublimation of the political”⁵⁸.

Another aspect of the socialist realist’s canon is the so-called “emancipation” of the women⁵⁹ in arts. In Romanian’s case, the visual arts emphasized almost obsessively, the representation of Elena Ceaușescu. The dictator’s wife appeared not only in the representations in which she has to complete the image of the dictatorial couple, but also in images which suggest her “huge contribution”⁶⁰ to the progress of sciences (especially, Chemistry). Elena Ceaușescu

⁵⁵ In 1991 TVR 1 (the Romanian National Television) presented for the first time one of Ceaușescu’s speeches in which the dictator presented the tasks of communist art

⁵⁶ my emphasis

⁵⁷ Alla Efimova, “To Touch on the Raw: The Aesthetic Affections of Socialist Realism”, in *Art Journal*, Vol.56, No.1, (Spring, 1997), pp.74-76

⁵⁸ Ibidem 12

⁵⁹ For example, Irina Gutkin discusses the new Soviet man, and the construction of the new woman and her symbolic meaning within the socialist realist love plot (in *The Cultural Origin of socialist Realist aesthetic, 1890-1934*)

⁶⁰ In the propagandistic newspaper *Scântea* (*The Spark*), as well as in the monthly magazine *Femeia* (*The Woman*), Elena Ceaușescu was periodically called “the first woman of the nation”, “the most important scientist of Romania”, “academician, doctor, engineer, Elena Ceaușescu”, etc

epitomizes “the new woman”, “famous scientist”, politician, wife and mother, model for all the women in Romania (of course, these images are propaganda’s productions). According to Cristina Lianu Olteanu⁶¹, at the beginning of his career Ceaușescu wanted to appear in every single photograph together with his comrade and wife Elena, in order to furnish the perfect image of the united family.

Little by little Ceaușescu’s cult is extrapolated to Elena Ceaușescu, who in January 1989 receives the highest communist distinction “Hero of Socialist Republic Romania”, which surpasses the symbolic distance between her and her husband. The official newspaper *Scântea*⁶² (*The Spark*) celebrated in January (1979) her birthday, publishing an engraving signed by Natalia Matei Teodorescu and a painting by Sabin Bălașa. The engraver represents Elena Ceaușescu receiving flowers from children and Bălașa’s painting represents an everlasting young and delicate portrait of the same character⁶³, surrounded by very young and fragile women.

This visual homage to Elena Ceaușescu (as a key –image of the communist woman) was followed by a large “improvement” both in terms of technique and symbolic subject matter of the visual productions. For instance, Cornelia Ionescu (one of the favorite painters of the regime) depicted Elena Ceaușescu as an empress of the 20-th century: she is dressed in crinoline, has long and curled hair and jewelry⁶⁴. This is only a single example of forced beautification which can be interpreted as a part of the socialist canon, even if the realist part is not so evident.

⁶¹ Cristina Lianu Olteanu, *Femeile in communism (The Women in Communism)*, Editura Politeia-SNSPA, Bucharest, 2003

⁶² *Scântea*, XLVIII year, no.11314, 6 January, 1979,p.3

⁶³ It is generally well known the fact that Elena Ceaușescu was not such a “beautiful” heroine

⁶⁴ But on the other hand it was well known the fact that with many occasions Elena Ceaușescu criticized women’s “bad taste” in bourgeois societies

Another example of forced beautification is the work of Ruxandra Popa Cebuc. The painters was present in the exhibition of socialist art⁶⁵ (organized in the *House of People*) with two big paintings of Elena Ceaușescu realized in the “Renaissance” style, but with a “Socialist Realist” subject matter.

The communist woman *par excellence* is represented as a royal figure sitting on a throne in a palace. She is smiling in an elegant red dress. The dress, the ambient, the décor and the hand’s posture are a product of the artist’s imagination. As far as we know, Elena Ceaușescu was such an active person and did not enjoy posing as a model. In oral history remained the information according to which she enjoyed only the portraits in which her face was represented as being young and incredibly beautiful.



Photo 3. Ruxandra Popa Cebuc, *Portrait of Elena Ceaușescu*, 1979
(source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art)

The so-called “official style” of communist art is the result of avant-garde influences, rather than a result of Realism’s influences. In the 19th century’s understanding of the term, “Realism” means simply to portray the facts of daily life as they are, without idealization, morality or sentiment. In this understanding, an artist is not considered Realist – whether he or

⁶⁵ In March 2005, *National Museum of Contemporary Art* (MNAC) which is located in the wing E4 of the *House of People* organized the exhibition entitled ironically *The Museum of Painting*. The exhibition was curated by Florin Tudor and it put together almost seventy official artists of the communist period

she depicted the common people, the lower class, the humble places, or the sufferings of the poor and humble – because his or her commitment went deeper. Realism’s commitment was *to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!* In Courbet, Millet and Daumier’s time, this demand becomes a moral and epistemological, as well as an aesthetic imperative.

Socialist Realism is not a “species” of Realism, because “its truth” is an ideological truth, and in most cases the reality itself is mystified. Socialist Realism does not depict the common people and the worker class as they really are, but depicts “heroes”, “comrades”, and “super humans”. While Realism was defined as a protest against official painting⁶⁶, Socialist realism was quite the official style of art in totalitarian regimes. In this respect, the official art of totalitarianism is reminiscent of the avant-garde, even if both Communism and Nazism repudiated the avant-garde. After 1935, in both regimes, the language of Communist and Nazi’s rhetoric became more sloganistic as well as the language of art becomes less “realistic”, and more “sloganistic”.

In conclusion, we can accept the fact that the term *–aesthetic–* is a notoriously ambiguous term. If we coined this term (aesthetic) with the term ideology, the result (*aesthetic ideology*⁶⁷) is even more controversial. Currently, the term aesthetic is variously identified with irrationality, illusion, fantasy, myth, sensual seduction and indifference to ethics. A characteristic description of this understanding of the aesthetic we can find in Nietzsche’s writings: “...the first politicians were borne rulers...whose work is an instinctive imposing by forms. They are the most spontaneous; most unconscious artists that exist...These men know nothing of guilt,

⁶⁶ After a decade of participation in the official salons, Gustave Courbet opened a one-man exhibition in 1855 to protest against the official painting (at that time represented by academic painters as Ingres, Delacroix etc.). Courbet entitled his exhibition *Realism*

⁶⁷ The term was coined by Paul de Man

responsibility, consideration...”⁶⁸. In the case of “aesthetic ideology” the understanding of the term should be different. The aesthetic in question is not understood as opposite to reason, order and symmetry, on the contrary. The link between aesthetic judgment and politics in communist dictatorships serves as a useful reminder that the aestheticization of politics leads to dismal ends, especially when the censorship phenomenon is unavoidably present in.

1.2. Art and Censorship between 1965 and 1980

“‘Censorship is the mother of metaphor’, wrote Borges and truth in Romanian art was forced to find refuge in obscurity and ingenious codes, surviving in equivocal and obscure forms”⁶⁹

The image of the censor, as Ruxandra Cesăreanu⁷⁰ argued forcefully, appeared in lithographs, drawings, caricatures and engravings presents the censor as a pyromaniac in the majority of cases. The main difference between the censor occupied with *combustis libris* and the communist censor lies in my view in the difference of how each of them was perceived by the public opinion. In the first case, the censor (immediately after the invention of the print) was seen as “an intellectual”, “scholar”, “good physician and specialist in medicine” because he cures the human mind against intellectual “toxins”. His activity (consisting in burning the books - *combustis libris*) was controlled by Justice, Order and Christian Morality (*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*).

In the second case, the communist censor is almost “inexistent” in the iconography of the censorship. In spite of this apparent “invisibility” from visual productions, the communist censor is ubiquitous in oral history. The writers and the painters, the sculptors and the musicians remember the presence of a censor responsible with “the adequate image of the society reflected in arts”⁷¹. The communist censor was perceived as “disturbing element” in art development

⁶⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Doubleday, New York, 1956, p.87

⁶⁹ Norman Manea, *On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist*, p. 30

⁷⁰ Ruxandra Cesăreanu, *De la “combustis libris” la cazul Pasolin : Scene din iconografia cenzurii cartilor interzise si a imaginilor filmice (From Combustis Libris to the Passolini Case: Scenes from the iconography of censored books and filmic images)*

⁷¹ My interview with Ion Grigorescu (Bucharest, 14 april 2007)

toward novelty and originality and at the same time his image was associated with the image of the imprisonment, with the image of the jail. If in the first case the main attribute of the censor was *to burn* in communist's case the main attribute of the censor was *to mutilate and to imprison*. In the second case any "cathartic" interpretation of the act of censoring is vanished. In many cases, when people refer to censorship system they identified it with *Securitatea* (the Secret Police).

In spite of the so-called "openness" of the 60's, the artistic movements in communist Romania remained under the state control. The censorship functioned many times (in artist's case) in the form of the self-censorship. In my view the artist imposed himself some limits in his work in order to sell or to achieve recognition. As Ion Grigorescu⁷² says:

They were to become their own secret police... art was to depict the heroes and the dreams of communism...I am remembering an episode in which a painter, one of my colleagues, painted a huge piece of meat and a knife. He wanted to sell this painting in a special shop for artworks called *consignația*, but in order to be sold every painting should receive at this time (it was in 70's) a signature from an official responsible with art. This painting did not receive any approval to be sold because it could be interpreted as a need of food, as a lack of meat in Romanians alimentation. The artist must be more careful in choosing the subject in the future.⁷³ (I. G.)

In many cases Romanian artists of the communist period preferred to be themselves very "careful" with the subject-matter of their works in order to be accepted in exhibitions, to sell artworks, to survive. The art's productions were dedicated to public recognition and to financial scopes. Only in few cases the artist created art for art's sake, or art for his or her own spiritual needs.

The communist censorship prohibited every attempt in visual arts and in literature to represent something: "obscure", "anti-human", "mystical", "ugly or depressive", "unclear and tenebrous", "the old bourgeoisie", "the illness and the sufferance", "the laziness", "good life of capitalists" and so on. In this interpretation art must reflect the optimism, conviction and must be easy recognizable.

⁷² *Ibidem*

⁷³ *Ibidem*

A special kind of contempt in the Romanian artistic censorship's case was oriented toward the photography. More exactly the mixture between photography and painting was not accepted because as Ion Grigorescu argues:

It was a general conception according to which the medium of painting is very different to the medium of photography...In painting the artist has a role, has a mission because she or he transforms the reality. The reality is not an "average" one because art has a high scope in intervening in reality. In this interpretation reality becomes "more real". In painting the artist strives to find his own territory. In photography's case the author is pulverized or in other words the photography explodes the author. In a communist lecture the photography which is mixed with painting is "ideologically dangerous" because a document (the photography) is distorted by the intervention of a hand of the artist.⁷⁴ (I.G.)



Photo 4. Ion Grigorescu, *Piatra Neamț*, 1975

This painted macro-photography was never exhibited (source: Ion Grigorescu's private collection)



Photo 5. Ion Grigorescu, *My Mother and my Elder Brothers*, 1977

This is a very big photo (2x2,5 m) and represents the artist's mother and brothers in Sunday's atmosphere on a field with flowers. The photo was covered by Grigorescu with oil (source: Ion Grigorescu's private collection)

In 1974⁷⁵ Ion Grigorescu exhibited macro-photography in *Art's House* (Bucharest). The artist explains the fact that in 1974 "it was still possible to exhibit macro- photography even if this art was regarded as something uncanny". According to Grigorescu's remarks, the moment of

⁷⁴ My interview with Ion Grigorescu, Bucharest, 14 April 2007

⁷⁵ In April 1974, Ion Grigorescu exhibited together with the sculptor Ion Condeescu in Bucharest experimental photography (macro-photography was considered at this time an experiment)

controversy in art during Ceaușescu's rule emerged in 1975 with the exhibition entitled *Art and History*.

The main critique of the exhibition was addressed by the National Committee for Art and runes like this: "Comrades, these ancestors (Romanian historical figures as Stephan the Great, Vlad Țepeș, the Old Mircea etc) are too sad and too ugly in a way....Mircea Spataru's sculpture of the Great Stephan without hands is unconceivable. Something has to be done in this sense..."⁷⁶ The ideologists of the moment were interested in a special kind of art which uplifts the ugly aesthetic detail and make it "beautiful" for the sake of "heroical past". From this moment every single work of art must fit in a *Procrust's bed*: clarity, harmony of forms, reflection of the "real" as "it really happened", beauty etc. Whether a part of a work it is not well integrated in this imaginary bed, that part must be cut it.

What could be published or filmed was subject to scrutiny. The censors in ministries of culture and bureaucracies sharpened their scissors. For every single exhibition was need of a special approval from the "responsible with the censorship".

As far as we accept Shusterman's⁷⁷ argumentation according to which "aesthetic censorship" (this expression is Shusterman's formula) could be more beneficial then harmful to art we can argue that generally a work of art is aesthetically objectionable only if it is aesthetically bad. In communist regimes the situation is different: a work of art can be objected in spite of its aesthetic qualities.

An important aspect of communist censorship, which must be elucidate is whether a work of art is suppressed by the author or by some other person or group. In my view suppression does

⁷⁶ The main critique of the exhibition *Art and History* is quoted from my interview with Ion Grigorescu.

⁷⁷ See Richard Shusterman, "Aesthetic Censorship: Censoring Art for Art's Sake" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol.43, No.2. (Winter, 1984), pp.171-180

not mean destruction (as Ruskin believed). The (preventive) suppression of art on politic grounds (not on aesthetic grounds) by the artist himself might be classified as a *postponement*.

However, the concept of censorship itself is far from clear and Shusterman's attempt to discuss his "aesthetic censorship" is also far from acceptable. From my point of view the notion of *aesthetic constraints* (Shusterman's idea) and the notion of *politic constraints* of art are to some extent equivalent. Censoring art on aesthetic grounds is not less harmful for the artist as censoring art on political grounds. Shusterman's approach distinguishes between high and low art hypertrophying the notion of form as the central concept of art. The concept of form implies order, limitation, and lack of absolute freedom but Shusterman fails to take into consideration the "in-formal" art. As we will can remark, the unofficial art of the communist regime was partly "in-formal" and partly postponed to be censored by the artists themselves.

The lack of the cultural freedom in the communist Romania can be explained by the fact that the artists of all types are stated salaried, as are the critics who review art work. In this general atmosphere of suspicion few artists created a "freer" art: for themselves and for only few friends (Ion Grigorescu); for the large public by the use of the so-called *Aesopian language*⁷⁸ as a camouflage of the message (Geta Brătescu); for himself as a survival exercise (Ștefan Bertalan⁷⁹); for friends and for authorities (Ana Lupaș). They among the others (more or less popular figures of Romanian modern art) tried to avoid, to surpass, to mislead and sometimes to ignore the censorship's requirements.

In the period between 1965 and 1980 the "relationship" between art and censorship was a very distorting one. From time to time art tried to trick the censorship using some aesthetic

⁷⁸ Aesopian language as Geta Brătescu has defined it represents a peculiar language which conceals real purposes or intentions

⁷⁹ As far as I know Ștefan Bertalan is now in Germany in a deep mental disorder.

mechanisms through which a subversive image appeared as a totally “inoffensive” one⁸⁰. At the beginning of the 80’s the censorship’s constraints becomes more and more coercive. For instance every owner of a typewriter had to present a page written by her or his typewriter in front of the Censorship’s Commission in order to prevent the emergence of anti-communist literature or other “written dangers”.

Having in mind all these considerations I will conclude this chapter saying that in Romania’s case, the censorship’s phenomenon applied to visual arts was not very clearly defined in the period 1965-1980. As the contemporary art journal *Arte plastice- Orizonturi plastice*⁸¹ notes, at the beginning of the 70’s the visual arts were in a relatively normal direction because the propagandists of the 50’s had lost (to some extent) their rhetoric enthusiasm (on the one hand), and, on the other hand, “the lots of tractors imported from Soviet Union were no longer considered the main objective of artistic creation”⁸². I agree with the idea of “relaxation” in propagandistic enthusiasm, but to consider the “lots of tractors from Soviet Union” as the single subject-matter of visual arts in the 50’s is obviously an exaggeration as well as to claim that in communist Romania no “real” art (in the sense of autonomous art) existed is also questionable. In the next chapter I will argue how art which emerges in an atmosphere of political commitment remains art surviving propaganda’s constraint.

1.3. Unofficial Actions in Romanian Modern Art

In spite of the censorship phenomenon of the period between 1965 and 1980 and besides the “court artists” specialized in “Homage to Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu”, there were also

⁸⁰ See Ion Grigorescu’s video *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu* (1978, black/white, 8mm) or Geta Bărbulescu’s *Censored Self-Portrait*, 1978

⁸¹ See http://www.ici.ro/romania/ro/cultura/p_orizonturi.html

⁸² Ibidem 29

unofficial or alternative artists who strove to create a type of art which was not politically committed. I do think that in the Romanian communism the canon of art was so harsh and so distorting that any sign of normal life, which was represented in artworks, can be seen as a sign of resistance⁸³. In what follows I will analyze the artworks created by the most important unofficial artists of Ceaușescu's regime (Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, Ana Lupaș and Ștefan Bertalan) in order to answer (partly) the research question of this paper: *how can art be politically committed yet still remain art*. I consider that art (even if autonomous art was *rara avis* in all totalitarian regimes) had an important subliminal message to transmit. As Norman Manea says: "...in the absence of the kind of direct political resistance witnessed in other Eastern bloc countries, it was primarily only the artist who was left to challenge the Romanian regime, doing so indirectly through culture"⁸⁴. In what follows I will analyze the main aesthetic mechanisms through which art tried to trick the canon imposed by socialist realism.

1.3.1. Ion Grigorescu and the Neo-documentary Realism

Ion Grigorescu was born in 1945 in Bucharest. His middle-class family influenced his career, being a family of intellectuals. In 1969 the young Grigorescu sustained the diploma's project in the IAP (the Institute of Fine Arts) from Bucharest. The artist established a set of procedures for dealing with human realities in painting and photography, which made him for more than three decades a paradigmatic image of the human condition under political oppression and at the same time one of the first Romanian experimentalists. After finishing his studies⁸⁵, he painted in oil a long series of works entitled *The young people are smashing their hair* and

⁸³ I have to note here that the "resistance" is not in my view necessarily "dissidence". Dissidents are those who totally broke with the Communist Party.

⁸⁴ Norman Manea, *On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist*, Grove Press, New York, 1992, p30

⁸⁵ Attended University of Arts, Bucharest in 1971

exhibited them shortly after the end of the graduation ceremony. His first personal exhibition took place on 16 March 1972 at *Orizont Gallery* in Bucharest. When I asked him what was the public reaction in front of his paintings, he said: “...well...the public was impressed because of the novelty which lay in the subject-matter...My technique, I have to recognize was not so great, but they enjoyed the sophistication of the message. Unfortunately, in the press of the time nothing was written...Perhaps they {party’s art critics}, did not enjoy the lack of an “educative” message or the lack of reality...who knows...”⁸⁶ (I. G.)



Photo 6. Ion Grigorescu, The Young People are Smashing their hair, 1971
(source: Ion Grigorescu’s private collection)



Photo 7. Ion Grigorescu, The Young People are Smashing their Hair, 1971
(source: Ion Grigorescu’s private collection)

Ion Grigorescu is the author of two artworks, which are considered to be the main anticommunist attempts in visual arts: *Masculine/Feminine* (1976) and *Dialogue with comrade Ceaușescu* (1978). *Masculine/Feminine* is one of the first films (in fact it is an artistic action in which the artist performs “the autistic sex”) made by Ion Grigorescu in 1976. This film documents the human body (the artist’s own body) which lies in a very small space. Every single muscle is contorted in this captive space.

Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu is an 8 mm standard movie (it is only six minutes long) inspired by a “real case”: an American journalist was refused by Ceaușescu’s personal

⁸⁶ I quote from my interview with Ion Grigorescu, made in Bucharest, on 15-th of April 2007

press bureau, because the questions prepared for the interview with the dictator were “too offensive”. Grigorescu remembered how much Ceaușescu liked his “titles” and for this reason he sub entitled (ironically) his work *President of the Socialist Republic of Romania, General Secretary of the General Committee of the Communist Party*. His dialogue with Ceaușescu is in fact an interrogation in which the artist expresses his complains⁸⁷. The title of the movie is inspired by Ceaușescu’s well known desire to have a “permanent dialogue with the people”. As Ion Grigorescu says this dialogue was only a pretext:

...he wanted a permanent dialogue with the people. The artists included. What he meant by that was an obedient application of the rules of political and hierarchic sycophancy. Real dialogue was discouraged. I also made, for my self, such a phantasmagoric “questions and answers” program⁸⁸ (I. G.)

Naturally this film was never shown in public. When this film was made (1978) the simple keeping of a film in your own apartment represented a danger in itself and at the same time a source of suspicion among your own friends. Grigorescu’s movie therefore remained hidden until 1990.

The film demanded preparing everything by me: the costumes, the disguise, the mask which is shown in the end, alone, and the black cloth backdrop necessary to successively record the actions of the two characters and to downroll the text. The shot was interrupted by a friend’s visit. He stayed in another room in order “not to know what I was doing there”⁸⁹ (I. G.)

Accessible mostly for private gatherings, Grigorescu’s movies from the 70s made him ideologically dubious to the authorities. The officials of the moment did not know about *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu* but, nobody knows how they were informed about a

⁸⁷ I quote here only a fragment of the movie in which the artist Ion Grigorescu (imaginary) asks Ceaușescu: “Why is only a slogan today the unity of the people” and continues saying that “The social classes are deeply divided, and work is repulsive. In fact it’s the working conditions; there is confusion between labor and its conditions. There is corruption in the services, so the general atmosphere is antisocial. The intellectuals who were on the verge of a renaissance in 1968-70 and who represented the privileged layer of society have now deviated. They have become people who repeat texts, like parrots, learnt by heart.....”

⁸⁸ I quote Grigorescu here from the interview taken on the 14-th of April 2007

⁸⁹ Ibidem 87

“dubious” movie with a “naked lunatic”⁹⁰ and this information was enough for them to become suspicious.

In 1970 Ion Grigorescu had found a few old families photos (very small photos representing scenes of leisure) and decided to enlarge them (2X2 m). He exhibited one of them in *Friedrich Schiller Culture House* (German Cultural Centre, Bucharest) and recognized the fact that this event had taken place only because Ms. Pfaffner (the person responsible for exhibitions in the 70's in German Cultural Centre) agreed to exhibit something which was not really connected with working class appropriate images. To exhibit Macro-Photography (a very common artistic practice in our days) was in the communist period an element of bizarre novelty, not because of the huge dimensions, but because of the fear of “supra-dimensional”.

In 1974 Ion Grigorescu made a self-portrait entitled *House Painter* in which the artist is represented as a house painter, who is painting the ceiling of a new house. The message is, in my view, clear: the artist of those times was reduced to the condition of the worker. I suppose that this painting was very pleasant for the regime (only in the case in which the officials responsible with art were not familiar with reading “between the lines”). In the official art magazine *Arta*⁹¹, is presented the way which the regime “encourages” the experimentalism in modern art emphasizing the limits of this encouragement. According to Ion Mereuta (art critic of the 70s), there are “few interdictions” for experimental arts: mystical images should be prohibited, anti-human expressions are not permitted, as well as ugly or “dubious” expressions. Abstract art is not prohibited but it is not recommendable because it says nothing about human beings.

Another “strange” performance signed I. G. is entitled *Washing my Body* (1979). The artist is washing his body with blue tempera. When I asked the artist what he intended to say

⁹⁰ In fact they were informed about *Masculine/Feminine*

⁹¹ *Arta*, no. 4 and 5, 1969

with this action he answered “It was one of my hypostases in which I was following the gesture of washing but, I could not find a good photographernobody wanted to participate in such “strange” artistic action”.



Photo 8. Ion Grigorescu, *Washing my Body*, Performance, 1979
(source: Ion Grigorescu's private collection)

In Grigorescu's studio lies a big collage dated 9 July 1971. The time is also noted (12-15 p.m.). This collage (photo-textual) is entitled *Cultural Revolution* and suggests an anti-cultural revolution. At the same time the work is a meeting place for the artist's personal mythologies. Every detail of everyday life is immortalized and explained through a short comment which is typewritten on little pieces of paper. A photograph represents the artist's mother working in her kitchen. Her face is shiny but sad (melancholic maybe). She is the same woman who appeared in the old photo together with the artist's brothers (see the previous subchapter), but in *Cultural Revolution* the artist's mother changed the beautiful field with flowers for the small kitchen. Under mother's photo is written “My mother considers that I take photos with indignities”. Another image represents a newspaper on a table and a TV set close to it. The text speaks of “television, the daily trivializer” and of “daily press which has the same sense every day...”.



Photo 9. Ion Grigorescu, *Cultural Revolution*, collage, July 1971 (This image is a photo with the artist's TV screen, representing insects. The text says: "on TV an invasion of insects. What is this? Maybe is the cultural revolution" (source: Ion Grigorescu's private collection)

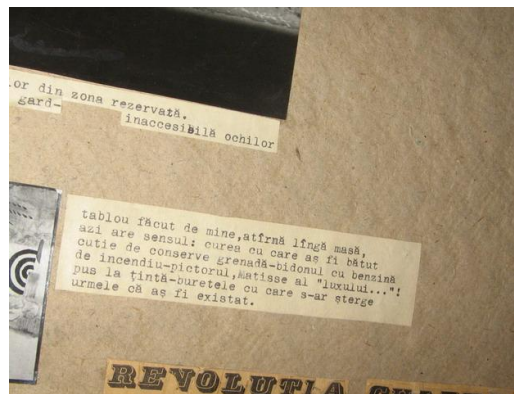


Photo 10. Ion Grigorescu, the same *Cultural Revolution*, 1971, the text says: "the painting made by me is hanging next to table... This will erase the traces of my existence" (source: Ion Grigorescu's private collection)

In Ion Grigorescu's view the so-called Cultural Revolution is symbolically represented as an invasion of parasites (or insects) which invade the personal space of somebody. One of the texts runs like this: "On the TV is presented the insect's invasion.... This is the gate for power's advertising... autistic and idiot power..." Other texts describe the atmosphere of terror and suspicion created by *Securitate* (secret police) and the misfortunes of life under dictatorship.

In my view *Cultural Revolution* represents an important document of anti-communist art and thought and the fact that this big collage was never exhibited after 1989 seems to me a lack of interest for the past of what is called "revolutionary art" and to some extent a lack of interest for historical fact. *Cultural Revolution* is in itself a chapter of cultural history and documents the quotidian details of the communist period, as well as the attempts to define cultural freedom.

At the beginning of the 70s, the art critics of the moment tried to find "original" stylistic labels⁹² in order to integrate in a theoretical framework Grigorescu's art. One of the labels was "neo-documentary realism". They did not know (the critics of the moment) Grigorescu's

⁹² See art magazine *Arta*, no. 8, 1970

courageous “documentations” and when they labeled his work “neo-documentary realism” they had taken into account only those Grigorescu’s public works in which he photographed the real life as it really was (sometimes very brutally) in factories and so on (for example one of the pseudo-official⁹³ artworks of the artist is *Fulfilling the Plan Stays in the Community’s Power*, 1972 or *Reportage from Gorj*, 1986) Ion Grigorescu himself defined his style as “Realism which does not impose to the real a style”⁹⁴.

In 1972, Grigorescu published an article in the pages of the official art magazine *Arta*⁹⁵ in order to explain his passion for the real “developed when pop-art and hyperrealism already existed”. In his view three elements of painting necessitated realism: the psychological, the historical and the social: “to be a realist means to depict people and their environment; to paint people you must be a psychologist and the obligations apply the other way round as well-from the psyche to the real-to paint the psyche means to paint reality. The historical means the desire to make a composition realistic. Art with historical qualities becomes credible”⁹⁶. I have to remember at this point that the article *On the realist artist* was written two years after the collage *Cultural Revolution*. As I have mentioned before, *Cultural Revolution* contains texts which “better explain” the images. All the images are in fact photos of daily life and speak of the artist’s surroundings, even in the case in which he photographed the *Securitatea*’s cars and wrote under this photograph “The car’s signification: cars of power, these cars are now very fashionable”.

In the article published in *Arta* (1973), Grigorescu interpreted the stormy appearance of texts in pictures. Of course, at *prima facie*, being an article published in the official art magazine

⁹³ Even if both series of works present the “worker’s life” (a kind of documentation about social topics), the style in which these works are realized is an experimental one: unclear faces, distorted identities, the mixture of materials etc (see my appendices)

⁹⁴ See Ion Grigorescu in *Arta*, nr.12, 1973

⁹⁵ Ion Grigorescu, *On the realist artist*, in *Arta*, no.12, 1973, p.22-23

⁹⁶ Ion Grigorescu, *On the realist artist*, in *Arta*, no.12, 1973, p.22

of the period, he did not say how or for what purpose he uses texts in his artworks, but if we read the article in between the lines the innuendo becomes obvious: “texts in pictures...have a fundamental role, not decorative and not just impertinent: these texts have just as much consequence and weight as a historical discourse or a danger signal, a word appropriate to the situation, a scene appropriate to the image, something like ‘a word could have changed the course of history’ or ‘everything depends on one word from him’ ”⁹⁷.

This new type of realism (*experimental realism*⁹⁸), which is modern and documental, reflects the need for concrete. Grigorescu’s series of works with his kitchen and with his own body (works of art from the 70s) document and “tell a story” about the communist times: “the historical has a plastic meaning and reflects the need for concrete”⁹⁹. The images from below represent a little part from Grigorescu’s series of “neo- documentary realism”. From left to right (black/white), we can see: the kitchen, the toilet, his studio, his first child in a crowded room, another image of his kitchen, photo with TV screen at the time of the News (1974). The next three colored photographs are realized in the same style (“neo-documentary”) with the difference that they were made in 1993, after the fall of Ceaușescu.

Ion Grigorescu explained the fact that after the Revolution of 1989, he and his family received an apartment from UAP (*The Union of Plastic Artists*) in 1992. Before the Revolution, the artist’s family lived in a nationalized building. This new home was incredibly “similar” to the old one. The main difference between the black/white photographs and the colored ones is only the color because the content and the message transmitted seems to be similar. I put together parts of both series of photos (from the 70’s and from the 90s) in order to illustrate the stylistic continuity in Grigorescu’s art (see the photo no. 11). Sometimes the artist applied a drawing

⁹⁷ Ion Grigorescu, *On the realist artist*, in *Arta*, no.12, 1973, p.23

⁹⁸ Magda Cârneci’s term

⁹⁹ Ibidem 44

procedure taken from the period when he did athletics-kinogramatics- and he painted pictures that copy his photographs. This technique was very popular among the experimental artists of the 70s but Ion Grigorescu was one of the first pioneers in Romanian unofficial art.

As Călin Dan remarks, Ion Grigorescu became the symbol of the artists' condition under political oppression combining poverty of materials, technological improvisation, subliminal cynicism, religious humbleness and free mythological associative thinking. Unfortunately, his remarkable contribution to freedom of expression in visual arts (even if his artworks were mostly underground productions, we cannot deny the "power of example" among his friends) is not enough exhibited. In my view Ion Grigorescu is half a visual artist and half a everyday life historian and his type of approach (both in terms of documentation and interpretation of the communist past) should be taken into account in order to achieve an appropriate synopsis of unofficial visual representations during the communist period.



Photo 11. Ion Grigorescu's series of photographs from 70's (black and white) and 90's (color), documenting the artist's living place (source: Ion Grigorescu's private collection)

1.3.2. Geta Brătescu and the *Aesopian Language of Art*

Geta Brătescu is one of Grigorescu's old friends. When she speaks about Ion Grigorescu she calls him "Ionica", a diminutive name which expresses affection and friendship. They both represent a generation of artists for whom the real world is the world of holiness¹⁰⁰ promised and embodied by Art.

¹⁰⁰ The term *holiness* is not used here in a necessarily religious sense

Geta Brătescu was born on 4 May 1926 in Ploiești, Romania. She was student of the School of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Bucharest and concomitantly she attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest (Professor Camil Ressu's class). Unfortunately, the young student, Geta Brătescu, was forced to leave school because of the communist censorship. She "confessed" the fact that her social origin was not really "healthy"¹⁰¹ and then resumed the courses and graduated in 1969-1971 (The Institute of Fine Arts 'Nicolae Grigorescu' Bucharest).

Her artistic debut took place in 1946 in *The official exhibition of black/white graphics* (Dalles Gallery, Bucharest) where she participated with a drawing. Between 1963 and 1983 Geta Brătescu was a member of the editing staff of the magazine *Secolul 20*¹⁰² (this magazine played a crucial role in the emergence of the Romanian experimentalism in visual arts of the 60s) and published three books: *From Venice to Venice* (1970), *Permanent Studio* (1985) and *The Moving Studio* (1994). Starting with 1959, Geta Brătescu participated with works of art in numerous collections of Romanian modern art abroad and in 1985 earned the documentation grant to Great Britain offered by the British Council.

A very short, and at the same time illustrative description of Geta Brătescu's work and personality, was made by the curator Ruxandra Balaci, the artistic director of the MNAC (National Museum of contemporary Art, Bucharest):

Singular feminine, figure in the Romanian contemporary art's survey of the last three decades...experimenting both tradition and innovation as states of mind...Her style is poetic, symbolic, neoexpressionist, neodada, mixed-media (avant la lettre), both severe and playful, contemplative and hyperestheticized, refined, modernist up to a certain point and postmodernist from a certain point (with the inherent eclecticism even if her temperamental structure inclines toward classical values), feminist sometimes protagonist of an extremely vivid creative discourse, to whom we owe a retrospective. (R.B)

¹⁰¹ Her family was considered by the regime to be a bourgeois family.

¹⁰² The 20-th Century

My analysis is focused mostly on Geta Brătescu's creation from the 60s and the 70s and is oriented mostly on the artist's memories about her work and about the regime requirements regarding her work. Geta Brătescu said that all her life she lived surrounded by objects because she loves objects and what they represent. One of her beloved objects is the object-book entitled *Voici Ton Maitre-Thonet* (the end of the 70s). As the artist said "the Thonet chair lay inert; it came back to life together with the 1909 Oliver typing machine, suggesting the presence of the two characters, Sir Thonet and Lady Olivier. Their escort was immediately formed of small objects that carry within the human spirit and the elegance of the years before the wars, the time of my parents"¹⁰³ In my view, the most interesting aspect of her work is the creation of a personal mythology within the boundaries of the house and the openness to the imaginary possibilities. Most of the photos in this object-book were taken by Mihai Brătescu at the end of the 70s. This work can be considered a part of what the artist called "my imaginary universe", besides other artworks such as *Medeea's portrait*, *Vestiges*, *I have drowned for Faust*, *AntiFaust*, *The Mute*, *Symbols of the 'Eternal feminine'*, *Aesop* and so on.

In 1975, Geta Brătescu created the installations *Self-Portrait toward White* (action in seven photographic sequences) and *Toward White* (action in nine photographic sequences). Both installations were photographed by the artist's husband Mihai Brătescu. In these two works the spectacular convention is included into a complex plastic structure, revaluating the motifs of an incessant, seemingly incoercible meditation revealing the hidden margins of things. As the art critic Anca Arghir¹⁰⁴ remarks "the '*Toward White*' photocopy edits a scenario of metamorphosis built around a funambulist-like character whose action disrupts the **black** by the creation of white screens...However, due to the exhaustive verbalization of thoughts, the triumph of the white, is

¹⁰³ Geta Brătescu in *Geta Brătescu's Catalogue*, edited by the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 109

¹⁰⁴ Anca Arghir, said these words with the occasion of Geta Brătescu's exhibition *The Studio* (MNAC, 1999)

involuntarily accompanied by the manifestation of a feminine archetype of Selenic sensitiveness”.



Photo 12. Geta Bratescu, *Self-portrait towards white*, 1975
(source: Geta Bratescu's private collection)

In *Self-Portrait toward White* the first sequence represents artist's face as it was immortalized in an average photograph. The artist's face is gradually changed in the other six sequences, little by little being covered by nylon. In the last one the suffocated face becomes white. The second *Toward White* (action in nine photographic sequences), begins with an image in which the artist is exhibited in her studio. In the studio we can observe the artist's objects which lie on the table, the AXIA tapestry created by Geta Brătescu in 1970 which covers an entire wall, the artist herself colorfully dressed. Gradually the studio becomes white, the artist covering everything (walls, objects, ceiling and ground) with white paper. The last three sequences show the artist becoming more and more... white: she is dressed in white and paints her body in white etc. These artistic actions can be interpreted, in my view, as the adventure of the artist in his personal space (the studio) toward invisibility.

In 1976 Geta Brătescu exhibited *Toward White* in Bucharest (Galateea Gallery) and in Roma (in *Accademia di Romania*). When I asked her whether the officials of the regimes enjoyed and understood her art, she answered:

Well, as I have told you my actions in art were like a 'serious game' mirroring the very essence of life. This ludic character of my art reflected the fabulous mental world in which I could develop my personal mythologies...Perhaps, using what I called 'the visual Aesopian language' I passed as a totally innocent artist...Maybe I was...I remember when I had a personal exhibition with my engravings and lithographs, one of the Party's officials told me: "I really don't

know what your work says but seems to be a beautiful art. I never presented the world as it was; I created symbols adequate to my personal mythology¹⁰⁵ (G. B.)



Photo 13. Geta Brătescu, *Toward White*, 1975, action in nine photographic sequences (source: Geta Brătescu's private collection)



Photo 14. Geta Brătescu, *Lady Olivier in Travel Suit*, installation (from the series *Sir Thonet and Lady Olivier*) (source: Geta Brătescu's private collection)

For Geta Brătescu, the ego is a point of departure and one of arrival at the same time. The *Self-Portrait* and the *Studio* are the reasons for initiating the consistent structuring of a 'personal mythology'. Part of this personal mythology seems to be the works: *The Smile* (1978), *Hands* (realized in 1977 - short films in which the artist's hands are the actors of her scenario. Ion Grigorescu shot this on an 8-mm black and white 7'30''film), *Censored Self-Portrait* created in 1978 (in which the artist composed her face as a puzzle from pieces). They are instances of how "artists broke new ground in body art in this country"¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ My interview with Geta Brătescu, Bucharest, 15 April 2007

¹⁰⁶ See Adrian Guță's article *Riders on the Storm-Performance Art in Romania between 1986 and 1996*, published in *Experiment Catalogue* edited by Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 1997, p.82

1.3.3. Ana Lupaș and the “Monument of Cloth”

In what follows I will refer to unofficial actions in applied art. One of the most provocative examples in this area is the artist Ana Lupaș, who works and lives in Cluj. Ana Lupaș was born in 1940 and graduated in the Institute of Fine Arts from Cluj in 1962. Starting in the 1964 she began to organize personal exhibitions focusing mostly on performance and installations with textile materials. Her family, a very educated one, encouraged her to create “western” art. A considerable part of her work was realized and exhibited in Cluj. She is preoccupied with three-dimensional spatial tapestry (*Flaying carpets*) series, with the object in collision with sculpture (objects created with the sculptor Mircea Spataru) and appearing in a natural manner at the Installation based on the textile element (*Humid Installation*, in 1960’s and 1990’s). Her specialization in this type of (let’s say) “alternative” or “unofficial” applied art reduced her possibilities to be promoted in the communist hierarchy, in spite of her participation at the International Biennale of Tapestry (Lausanne) in 1969.

In 1966 she realized the *Humid Installation* on Cluj’s streets (more exactly on Grigorescu Street). The installation consisted in the exhibition of humid long pieces of textiles in the way in which the clothes are hung in order to be dried. This “monument of cloth” as well as Lupaș’s attempt to exhibit on the street something “not clear”(for the eyes of the ideologists of the moment) made the critique of the time to be reserved in discussing this type of artistic actions. This type of experimentalism regarding applied arts was not very encouraged in the communist period, but was tolerated.

A very important aspect in Ana Lupaș’s art is in my view an episode which took place in 1988. Even if this period is not investigated in my paper, this event is crucial in the paroxistic

point in which the unofficial culture arrived in the late of the 80s. In 1988, Ana Lupaş thought a coat: face/back, black/camouflage. The coat passed through many studios, many artists wearing it on the convenient side and also leaving a convenient ‘sign’. During the Romanian Communist Party’s Congress (XIV), more and more political radical signs appeared on the coat.

In the same field (applied art) the regime appreciated those works in which the artists celebrate the “victory of socialism” or the communist leaders by the use of those materials which are used in applied arts. In the early 1960’s the interest was concentrated on varied weaves, the use of unusual materials such as raffia and jute, the qualities of hand knotted, fringed area rugs, and sculptured carpets. Two examples of engaged applied art are Grigore Metaxa’s homage to Ceauşescu, for which he used rice and seed and Maria Nicolae’s *Portrait of Nicolae Ceauşescu* entirely realized of very little round pieces of glass (see my appendices). I presented these two examples of engaged applied art in order to illustrate the difference between official applied art and Ana Lupaş postmodernist attempts.

1.3.4. The Ştefan Bertalan Case

Ştefan Alexandru Bertalan was born in 1930 in Hunedoara. He graduated in 1962 in the Institute of Fine Arts from Cluj but more than fifteen years lived and worked in Timişoara. He worked as teacher in Art High School (Timişoara) and was founder member of the groups *Sigma* and *Sigma 1*.

Ştefan Bertalan becomes a *case* in Romanian contemporary art when the art historians and the art critiques decided that his work is difficult to recuperate for art history. In Călin Dan’s interpretation of Bertalan was not a political dissident, but a dissident from reality. This observation seems to be pertinent if we take into consideration the fact that in this moment Bertalan lives in Öhringen, Germany in a deep mental disorder.

Beginning in 1960, Bertalan began to contest state-sponsored Socialist Realism by abandoning any representation of the figure. He investigated Western art and developed a Romanian formalism that was quickly transformed into a highly spiritual approach to abstraction. Bertalan's work can be seen and interpreted as a document of his own tragedy. Following this line of thought, Coriolan Babeti¹⁰⁷ interpreted Bertalan's tragedy in terms of creative *neurosis*¹⁰⁸.

In the 60s and 70s, Bertalan¹⁰⁹ combined visual interpretations of natural phenomena with his own life style. His paintings speak about the mechanisms of alienation. As a kind of ritual, he assists the fate of a plant from its creation to its dying. He used to document in a prolix diary (with the help of photography) all the details of daily routine. He also used to speak with the sun flower from his garden and in 1979 he performed the action entitled *I have Been Living with a Sun Flower for 130 Days* (Architecture Institute, Bucharest). The work consisted of an installation centred on a dead sun-flower, hanging from which were drawings and studies-following the plant's growth and development –and pages from the diary. The action combined the texts read aloud –including remarks about the organization of living systems-with body movements and music.

In the same year he performed artistic actions (happenings, installations and performances) in different locations, in front of a small but astonished public: *Neuer Weg, swimming through the working pocket* (1979, his own studio from Timișoara); *Eternity- the Juice*

¹⁰⁷ Coriolan Babeti is a Romanian art critic, essay writer and curator for over 150 exhibitions in Romania and over 50 exhibitions abroad. State Secretary in the Ministry of Culture (1990-1991); manager of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Venice (1991-1995) and curator of the Romanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial

¹⁰⁸ See Coriolan Babeti's article "The Bertalan Case: The Artistic Experiment as an Exercise of Neurotic Sublimation", in *Primary Documents, A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, edited by Hoptman Pospiszyl, 1999, p. 53

¹⁰⁹ Ștefan Bertalan was one of the three members of the first experimental group in Romania –*Group 111* (Ștefan Bertalan, Roman Cotosman and Constantin Flondor). The group was active between 1963 and 1966 in Timișoara. The period was called the "constructivist period". In 1970, a number of young teachers were employed by the Art High School in Timisoara. Constantin Flondor and Ștefan Bertalan gathered around them another artistic group Sigma 1 whose members were Doru Tulcan, Elisei Rusu, Ion Gaita and the mathematician Lucian Codreanu. A characteristic of this group was their avowed program based on team and interdisciplinary work (mathematics, psychology, cybernetics, bionics, plastic structures)

of Raspberry for the Last Night of the Year (Gârda de Sus, in Apuseni Mountains); *I am dispassionate and I am proud of the epoch in which I live ...so I have to rest, do not be agitated because tomorrow again we have no possibility* (Banat, Semenik Mountain) and *In his dream a war-like telegram lost its left leg* (Timisoara).

Five years before (in 1974), Ștefan Bertalan applied visual quotations marks on Ceaușescu's portrait and achieved a new portrait (in fact, a caricature of Ceaușescu's portrait). In this way the artist comments on the first image in which the communist leader is represented as a king (with the scepter). Bertalan's intervention is in my view portraiture of Ceaușescu's portrait.

In one of *Arta's* numbers Bertalan published *Fragments of a Possible Program*¹¹⁰ in the period in which he and other Sigma Group's members wanted to create an art in which the image do not be a plastic fact (still), but an operative one. He presented a set of methodological principles according to which the genesis of the forms is conceived not by *mimesis*, but by mathematical thinking. Moreover limit-solutions: *do like this, work like this* etc are liquidated. Contributions to the theme are not imposed, given from the desk; they will come from the ones directly implied"¹¹¹.

Ștefan Bertalan is in my view the pattern of the *human condition* under oppression. His main artwork is his own existence. His type of resistance is illustrated through a highly spiritual approach to abstraction. Babeti evaluates what, in his opinion, were the two primary reactions to communism: to accuse history or to evade. Bertalan appears like a „paroxistic case in point of the creative neurosis that pervaded the arts in Romania during the communism”¹¹².

¹¹⁰ Ștefan Bertalan , “Fragments of a Possible Program”, *Arta*, year XVII, no.8, 1970, page 34

¹¹¹ Ibidem, 58

¹¹² Ibidem, 56



Photo 15. Ștefan Bertalan, *The Portrait*, 1974
(source: The Catalogue “Experiment in Romanian Visual Arts since 1960”)



Photo 16. Ștefan Bertalan, *Neuer Weg, Swimming through working pockets*, 1979 (in artist's studio from Timișoara)
(source: The Catalogue “Experiment in Romanian Visual Arts since 1960”)

1.3.5. The “Laboratory” Character of Unofficial Art or How Can Art Be Politically Committed yet Still Be Art

Even if the projects of the artists presented above were atypical for the spirit characterizing Romanian visual arts in the 60s and 70s, we cannot sustain that Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, Ana Lupaș or Ștefan Bertalan were “blacklisted artists”. The artists demand for creative autonomy was not so harshly rejected (comparatively with Soviet Union’s demand for political use of the artist’s creative energy). The alternative artistic actions presented in this chapter were isolated manifestations. The “laboratory” character, the strategy, the framework of its development, the underground character, with all their nuances, defined unofficial art in communist Romania.

Some of the actions were preserved on film or photograph but other ones (especially performances) were like a “passing phase”. The ephemeral was the distinctive feature of most experiments in visual arts and they had little chance of being officially accepted “by a regime

which was rapidly degenerating into a dictatorship in need of solid value structured with traditional languages”¹¹³.

As we can observe, most of the unofficial actions between 1965 and 1980 did not voice open political protest (even if in Grigorescu and Bertalan’s cases we can perceive an obvious anticommunist message¹¹⁴, their actions were hidden in their apartments and their destination was not for “public consumption”). This type of unofficial art was produced in “laboratory conditions”, far away from public spaces. On the one hand, this “marginalization” was a requirement imposed by the social-ideological framework of the regime, but, on the other hand (as Geta Brătescu said) “...well, art is a matter of interiority... I never enjoyed big manifestations like *Cântarea României*¹¹⁵ because of the masses...I don’t know why I don’t like the masses and I don’t want to be involved in this type of events. Art is a privilege, an individual privilege, a way of understanding which differs from person to person”.

These four examples are only a part of the “second” (unofficial) culture, which simultaneously coexisted with the official one. I have presented and analyzed the main unofficial artistic actions¹¹⁶ between 1965 and 1980, in order to illustrate how Boris Groys’s theory (according to which modernism did not disappear with the adoption of socialist realism, but it simply went underground) is applicable also in Romanian visual arts. The examples of autonomous visual art analyzed before provide evidence (in a way) to the phenomenon of alternativeness, which defined the unofficial art of the communist regime. These actions performed, in my view, the task of self-preservation. The artists created these forms of art in order to preserve themselves as autonomous artists, in order to surpass the alienation of reading

¹¹³ Adrian Guță’s article “Riders on the Storm-Performance Art in Romania between 1986 and 1996”, published in *Experiment Catalogue* edited by Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 1997, p.81

¹¹⁴ For instance Grigorescu’s *Dialogue with Comrade Ceausescu* or *Cultural Revolution* and Bertalan’s *The Portrait*

¹¹⁵ *Song to Romania*

¹¹⁶ I have to note here that there were many other unofficial actions in Romanian art during the communist regime

the same newspaper all over again, watching the two hours of daily television and painting the same homage to Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu.

Their art documents the private existence of the artist who is free in his thoughts, in spite of the ubiquity of the Secret Police (the *Securitate*) which made the real dialogue among unofficial artists difficult. But at least we can assert that culture allowed a kind of underground life, restoring some trust and creativity in thought. To maintain the artistic integrity under these circumstances (censorship, secret police, and – why not – popular psychology and attitudes to which the survival of the regime owed much) was something that demanded courage. For this reason I said at the beginning of this thesis that the artist is “a hero on the margins”. If politics is about power and art about freedom, then art in a totalitarian state “comes to stand not only as a challenge – as it does for every authority – it comes to stand for nothing less than the enemy”¹¹⁷.

An important element of unofficial production of art is expressed by the so-called “the aesthetics of poverty”¹¹⁸. The issue of alienation and communication was presented under various guises in several of the actions above mentioned¹¹⁹. Pauperism (*Arte Poveri*), the simplicity of means, did not have a merely aesthetic motivation, but also pointed to the involvement of and protest against the social and economic context of the time. The “aesthetics of poverty” in Romanian unofficial art was not just mimed but dramatically genuine, due to the paucity of the materials. As Călin Dan remarks: “the problem with the productions of those ‘heroic’ years is that they can address only a limited audience, one which understands the codes and enjoys the understatements, beyond the unstructured narratives”¹²⁰. The current art critic observes the fact that the history of the moving image in Romanian art has to start with the production of Super 8

¹¹⁷ See Norman Manea, *On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist*, Grove Press, New-York, 1992, p.30

¹¹⁸ Călin Dan’s expression in “The Aesthetics of poverty”, in *Experiment in Romanian Art since 1960*, edited by Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 1997, p. 101

¹¹⁹ In the fourth chapter of this study

¹²⁰ Ibidem 68

mm and 16 mm film. The private ownership of such equipment was exceptional: “If my information is correct, there were only two cases: Constantin Flondor and Doru Tulcan from the group *Sigma* in Timișoara, and Ion Grigorescu in Bucharest”¹²¹.

1.4. Grey Zones: Semi-official Accepted Art or How Art and Politic Can Mix

In this sub-chapter I will discuss the so-called *grey-zones* (semiofficial art). This category of art is highly controversial because it is neither pure propaganda (without any artistic quality) nor art (unequivocally autonomous in the pure sense of the term)¹²². No matter how much it wanted to escape into the sanctuary of beauty and expressiveness, art of Romanian communism had to serve in the war between ideology and autonomy of aesthetics. The semi-official art of the period between 1965 and 1980 expresses the conflict between public symbolism and private realities. I have to mention the fact that in Romanian communism there were diverse types of semi-official accepted art. This semi-acceptance had many causes: the modernist technique, the atmosphere around the main character (generally, this character was Ceaușescu), the inappropriateness with the canon of official art, the lack of clarity, sometimes even the colors were considered to be inappropriate.

In what follows I will bring to light the dual nature of the artworks created by two artists¹²³: the politically committed nature in terms of subject-matter and the modernist and experimental nature in terms of execution. I decided to discuss only two artists (Ion Bitzan and Vladimir Șetran) because they were very good friends, exhibited together and they represented in my view the most relevant examples of the “semi-official” artist. Beside Bitzan and Șetran, I will analyze a few other works of art which were also semi-official but in a different understanding of

¹²¹ Ibidem 68

¹²² The terms *propaganda* and *art* cannot be coined because they are opposite terms

¹²³ Ion Bitzan (b. 1924- d. 1997) and Vladimir Șetran (n. 1935)

the term. In contrast to Bitzan and Şetran's modernist technique and quasi-subversive approach of the subject-matter, the other semi-official artworks are not very well executed and their semi-official character lies in their inappropriateness with the canon.

The main aim of this sub-chapter is to try to answer the question how *art and politics can mix*, this issue being largely neglected in the studies about Romanian communist art. Currently art critical approaches to political art are divided into two camps: the first camp believes that art and politics should not be combined¹²⁴ and the second camp finds these combinations of art and politics to be unproblematic¹²⁵. Even if there are serious reasons for questioning both positions¹²⁶, I tend to agree with the second position. This section illustrates my assertion in a little more depth.

I would like to mention the fact that *activist art* and *political art* are synonymous only to some extent. The specific difference lies in their different intentions. Autonomous works of art can be (and sometimes are) political (see "feminist art", "performance art", etc.). Contemporary art's critical approaches emphasize the distinction between *political art* and *activist art*. In this view¹²⁷, both terms are engaged with political issues, questions and concerns – but a clear distinction is mandatory. "Political art" is not a broader umbrella term. It designates instead the type of art that explores political subject matters, but this is not made in a way that involves political action.

¹²⁴ Adorno, Brustein, Kuspit

¹²⁵ Grosz, Herzfeld, Mullin

¹²⁶ This paper is not concerning with these theoretical debates but it can be useful to mention only the fact that all the art political and nonpolitical is politically liberatory to the extent that it involves the unfettered imagination

¹²⁷ See Theodore Adorno, "Commitment", in: Andrew Arto and Eike Gebhardt, *Frankfurt School Essential Reader*, New York, 1982; Donald Kuspit, "Crowding the picture: Notes on American activist and coercive philanthropy", in *Partisan Review* 62 (2), 1995; Amy Mullin, "Feminist art today", in *Art in the public interest*, ed. Arlene Raven, New York, 1993; Robert Brustein, "Cultural politics Art and Political Imagination", in *Hypatia*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall/Winter), 2003

As Amy Mullin remarks, “activist and engaged art” also explores political topics, but it is distinguished from political art in its greater concern with the politics involved in both the creation and the reception of art. In this paper, I use the term “official art”. This term means “activist art” or “art which is engaged in Party’s commitments”, an art that serves the official goals of a government, or political party – in other words, it means *propaganda*. In my view, art should oppose itself to society (in this way being autonomous), but it still remains a part of society (in this way being political). Art is indirectly committed, being sociopolitical in nature (because it appears in society, as a form of human activity). This does not mean that the “official art” of the totalitarian political regimes should be considered a “normal” sociopolitical activity. This special case of engaged art is a commitment to create and sustain a false aesthetic culture. For the sake of clarity, I would mention here that even the “unofficial” actions analyzed in the previous chapter¹²⁸ have a political dimension. The “political dimension” does not mean a propagandistic dimension nor does it mean that politically committed works are necessarily complicit with oppression. For example Grigorescu’s *Cultural Revolution*¹²⁹ with its obvious *anti-communist* and *anti-engagement* character is a political artwork, an autonomous (unofficial) artwork of the 70s which appeared simultaneously with Ceaușescu’s notorious “July Theses”. In other words Grigorescu’s *Cultural Revolution* is a politically answer to Ceaușescu’s “cultural revolution”.

There are voices which attack the combination of art and politics in the name of *artistic freedom*. I claim that in Romanian communism (between 1965 and 1980) the officialdom did not impose the themes for “official” visual productions, neither the style in which the portrait of the dictatorial couple were to be painted, or the technique. Moreover, from Ion Grigorescu and Geta

¹²⁸ See my previous chapter “Unofficial actions in Romanian Modern Art”

¹²⁹ See my previous chapter

Brătescu¹³⁰'s words, it is fair to assume that the artists of the communist period were not forced by the party to paint *homage to Ceaușescu* or portraits of the dictatorial couple. The artists decided themselves, according to their own interests and needs, whether they wanted to accept the State's commission to paint homage for different occasions¹³¹ or not. As Ion Grigorescu remembers, when a painter wanted to realize a portrait of Ceaușescu, he or she was not forced to paint a particular one, but had the possibility to choose from many photos the most "appropriate" for his or her preferred artistic technique. In this way the huge collection of "official" portraits realized in such diverse styles can be explained: from Socialist Realism, Realism, Pop Art and Impressionism to Op Art and Kinetic Art. The National Museum of Contemporary Arts preserves many of them.

Bitzan and Șetran represent that type of "official" artist (regarding the subject-matter) who is highly experimentalist and modernist (regarding the technique). It is a generally accepted that the two artists were very gifted and appreciated figures of Romanian artistic experimentalism of the 60s and 70s. Starting from 1968, they began to exhibit as a conceptual duo in the official exhibitions of the Communist Party. Their technique was quite new for the Romanian artistic field: using a formula of transposition of photographic image on the canvas, the artists followed in fact one of Rauschnberg's techniques (but using indigenous materials). All these attempts were parts of the tendency to enlarge "the concept of realism" by the means of Pop Art and Neo Dada.

Besides the official exhibitions (so-called "exhibitions with theme") in which Bitzan and Șetran presented "the victory of socialism" and big paintings with Lenin and Ceaușescu, they

¹³⁰ In the interviews which I have taken with them on 16-th, 17-th, 19-th of May 2007

¹³¹ For example: Ceaușescu's birthday, Cântarea României (the festival *Song to Romania*), Elena Ceaușescu's birthday etc

created “authentic” experimental artworks¹³² such as Bitzan’s installations *Small Sacks* (1969), *The Generator of Images* (1976), *The Towers* (1978). These artworks are marked by Rauschenberg, Hopper and Georgia O’Keeffe’s influences.

In the exhibition of Socialist Art - “*The Museum of Painting*” (Bucharest, March 2005), Ion Bitzan presented a huge undated canvas entitled *Homage to Nicolae Ceaușescu*. The peculiarity of this “homage” lies in the totally unconventional manner in which the dictator is represented. Bitzan’s Ceaușescu is alone in the middle of a blue immensity. His face expresses sadness and illness. Contrary to the typical homage of the period, Bitzan’s homage seems to suggest that the “hero”, the “Danube of Thought”, the “Genius of the Carpathians”, the “Oak tree”, the “Builder and Architect”¹³³ is in fact a simple human being not so young, not so beautiful and not so powerful. The uncanny loneliness around the dictator abolishes all the visual clichés according to which Ceaușescu appears everlastingly young, handsome, in the middle of the people, smiling and kissing children, receiving flowers, visiting factories and mines, hunting bears or drinking with Romania’s dead rulers. As much as oral history preserved, in our days only the fact that the officialdom received this painting with little reserves is known. In spite of the oddness of the message, the artwork represented the country’s leader and the manner of representing him was seen as a matter of aesthetic option.

¹³² These experimental actions were really new in Romanian art and this aspect is explainable if we take into consideration the fact that until the end of the 60-th the access to Western art and aesthetic theories was banned

¹³³ These appellatives are only a little part of the increasingly implausible descriptions attached to every mention of Ceaușescu’s name



Photo 18. Ion Bitzan, *Homage to Nicolae Ceaușescu*
(source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art)



Photo 19. Dan Hatmanu, *Drinking a glass of wine*
(source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art)

A very special case of an artist considered one of the masters of Romanian Modern Art (but at the same time he was and one of the most appreciated “court painter”) is the case of the academic painter, Dan Hatmanu. He was the Rector of the Faculty of Art “George Enescu” (Iași) almost twenty years (starting in the 60s) and in all the interviews he gave after 1989, he constantly reiterated the fact that he made indeed compromises, but only to be able to help his students¹³⁴. One of his works (very appreciated in Ceaușescu’s Era) became after the fall of the communist regime a target for journalists and art critic’s irony. The painting represents the dictatorial couple drinking a glass of wine together with Stephan the Great (one of the leaders of the Romanian province’ Moldova, who obviously was dead for more than five hundred years). Trying to bring to an end the waves of sarcasm against his painting, Dan Hatmanu explains that, in fact, he did not paint homage but portrait: “I made portraits because I am a portraitist. This painting with Stephan the Great should be ‘read’ between the lines. It was an irony...the Party

¹³⁴ For instance Hatmanu declared for *Ziarul de Iași* (*The Newspaper of Iași* from 28 December 2006) that he “honored” commissions to paint official portraits and slogans, but he never involved his students in this job. He also sustains that he tried to protect his students from what was in “agricultural practice” (during the communist period all the schools, including primary school, and all the universities were obligated to organize for students agricultural activities on the fields and in farms.

could not understand this type of irony. Another painting of mine was considered by the Party to be tendentious, even if I did not intent this: I paint a lot of doves around Ceaușescu's head and they thought that I said through this detail that Ceaușescu has birds in his mind. But I did not intended to suggest this thing”¹³⁵.

Another example of semi-accepted visual art (different from the previous ones) is Corneliu Baba's¹³⁶ sculpture entitled *The Miner*. Baba's miner was initially sculpted in white stone, his eyes being empty like in Greek statues. The *Commission of Guidance*, (a communist organization which decided whether an artwork was or was not “clear enough”) considered Baba's miner too white and too sleepy. They said that this inappropriateness with the real miner cannot be permitted and intervened in the sculpture perforating its eyes with a drill and painting the miner in black. According to one of Baba's colleagues, the painter Dan Hatmanu, the modifications were effectuated without asking Baba whether he accepted these changes in his work.

The next case of semi-official accepted art is the painting *The Black Hill* (unknown author, undated¹³⁷), representing a scene in which the dictatorial couple “analyze” by the help of a lamp the hunted bears. It is usually known fact that the dictator developed a really passion for hunting and this fervor was exploited by the artists, especially in painting (Ieronim Boca, for instance painted a series of *Nicolae Ceaușescu Hunting for Trophies*). At first sight I was tempted to think that *The Black Hill*'s author is Ieronim Boca because of the technique and because of the subject-matter, but the anonymous painting's atmosphere is very dark and rather seems to suggest sufferance and sadness than a victorious hunting. Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu are smiling, but

¹³⁵ See Emilia Chiscop's article “Artistul cu cravată”(The artist with neck tie)*Ziarul de Iași* (The Newspaper of Iasi”, from 28 December 2006

¹³⁶ Corneliu Baba lived and worked in Iași. He was considered to be the chief of the formalism movement

¹³⁷ I have found this painting into the basement of the National Museum of Contemporary Art from Bucharest. It was exhibited in 2005 for the first time.

their smile is a neurotic one. They smile in the middle of the dead bears and their presence in the night rather suggests a thievery than homage. It would be interesting to know whether this painting was homage to the dictatorial couple (eventually whether it was a painting created for an official exhibition with a theme, or it was a present for Ceașescu) or not.



Photo 20. Ieronim Boca, *La multi ani!* (Happy Birthday). This is the typical present for Ceașescu's birthday (source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art)



Photo 21. Anonymous author, *The Black Hill*, undated (source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art)

At the end of this short survey through the *grey zones* of visual arts during Romanian communism, I have to add that the minimization of the artistic dimension of politically engaged artworks in favor of the propagandistic purposes can make questionable the status of artwork itself. A question remains open: In the combination of art and politics (in the sense of political engagement) to what extent are we able to recognize why the work is artistic? The second question which is related to the first one is: To what extent in a totalitarian culture can we speak of the aesthetic merit alone?

1.5. Official Art's Public versus Unofficial Art's Public

At this point I will discuss the relationship between public and art both in terms of understanding of art (official or unofficial) and in terms of communities of people to which art is tied. The aim of this approach regarding (at least) two types of public is primarily interpretative in nature: I will survey the meaning and the role of the “public” in the case of official and unofficial art.

I would want to mention the fact that the *grey-zones*¹³⁸ existed also in what regards communist art's public, but for the sake of clarity I will focus mostly on the distinction between official arts's public and unofficial art's public even if in some situations this distinction was not so sharply delimited.

The unofficial art of Romanian communism was regarded as a practice with a powerful individual component, which concentrates on visual experimentation or “relates to some social or political commentary that eludes “official” art, and which thus situates it at the opposite pole”¹³⁹. I have to specify the fact that the majority of unofficial productions were performances, photo or video installations and only very seldom paintings. Given the spectacular¹⁴⁰ character of these actions, they were performed especially “underground” (apartments, basements, on mountains¹⁴¹), in front of a specialized public (generally artists) and under “secretive circumstances”. There were few cases¹⁴² in which the unofficial art was exhibited in art galleries

¹³⁸ For instance the public which assisted at official expositions (so-called “exhibitions with theme”) could also assist at unofficial performances

¹³⁹ See Ileana Pintilie in <http://www.inst.at/trans/9Nr/pintilie9.htm>

¹⁴⁰ In Clive Robertson's interpretation the term *Performance*, in the sense we are concerned with, means “performing a task” rather than “performing in a show” Thus, Robertson emphasizing the teleological dimension of performance rather than its spectacular side

¹⁴¹ In Bertalan's case

¹⁴² I have to note here that the only possibility in which the unofficial art could be exhibited in galleries or other public spaces was that the artworks to be experimental or nonconformist in technique but do not have a subversive message.

or in other public spaces, but if it was for a small public. These actions were not conceived to be presented in front of a numerous public (in fact this was a requirement imposed by the ideological apparatus). This marginalization was exacerbated by the lack of publicity, every artistic event being announced verbally.

The official art's public, (in the eyes of the officialdom) was the entire Romanian nation (including peasantry, working class and even children). This representation was only *de jure* because *de facto* official art's public was formed by Ceaușescu¹⁴³ couple and by communist officialdom. Every official exhibition received special attention in the press of the time and the public was in a way "guaranteed". For press, art critics, artists from UAP (*Union of Visual Artists*) and sometimes even for workers and children in primary school, the presence in galleries was mandatory and was understood as a civic obligation.

At the first sight we can say that during communist period art was split into private art and public art. Official art represented public art and unofficial art represented the private one. But, if we take into consideration Hilde Hein's¹⁴⁴ suggestion, we can admit that "public art is an oxymoron according to the standards of modernist art and aesthetic theory", because modernism, with its glorification of the autonomous individual, celebrated in the person of the artist, regarded the social as a derivative aggregate. Hein underlines also the fact that strictly speaking, no art is private. If we follow this line of thought, it can be assumed that unofficial art of communist period is also public art, even those actions realized exclusively in the most discrete spaces. How then do they qualify as public art? They can be considered "public" only in the sense that they address a little community, but still a community (in the case of the unofficial art to the

¹⁴³ Ion Grigorescu thinks that neither Ceaușescu himself had no time to look at all the paintings and artifacts dedicated to him

¹⁴⁴ Hilde Hein, "What is Public Art: Time, Space and Meaning" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 1. (Winter, 1996), pp 1-7

community of artists-friends). Art was the “most effective” mode of communication and in this sense the message of art were at least partially publicly accessible. The messages are not merely tied to a subjective and private world of the artist, but speak for the other artists from the same group.

Beside the actions conceived to be performed in front of a specialized public, there were unofficial actions¹⁴⁵ which sometimes appeared in the form of “body-actions”(for example Ion Grigorescu’s *Masculine/Feminine*) in the artist’s apartment or studio. The only spectator was the moving camera as a kind of post-happening art manifestation. Artists abandoned direct corporeal presence and revealed their image mediated by film. In these cases, the artist’s message has no public (excepting maybe his family), but documents a state of mind.

¹⁴⁵ In the late 1970s and early 1980s

Chapter 2. The Artistic Modernism and the *Romanian* Totalitarianism

2.1. Avant-garde and Totalitarianism: a Tensioned Relationship

For the sake of clarity, even from the beginning I would say that the Romanian avant-garde had some particularities which differentiate it from other avant-gardes developed in the Eastern block countries. These differences lay, in my view, not only in the strong nationalist communist influence which was imprinted also in art production, but also in a specific strategy of cultural alternativeness. This chapter surveys the relationship between the avant-garde and totalitarianism in order to explain the tension which existed between the two.

Romanian avant-garde (or better said the neo-avant-garde) of the 60s and 70s recuperated the tendencies from Western avant-gardes of the 50s or 60s: op art, neo-constructivism, land-art, hyperrealism, minimal art, conceptual art, happening. All these styles were integrated under the label of *experimentalism*. All the unofficial artists who are presented in this paper were considered to be experimentalists, even if (in my view) this label is too general and does not cover the artistic particularities of each of them.

As Magda Cârnelci remarks, Romanian artists adopted Western avant-garde ten years after their debut on the artistic scene because of the harsh commitment to Socialist Realism imposed by totalitarianism. In what follows, I will analyze the emergence and the functions of totalitarian art in order to reveal the particularities of the relationship between Romanian avant-garde and Romanian Totalitarianism with a nationalistic face and its afferent art production. Firstly, I will discuss the concept of *totalitarian art* in order to provide a general background for the specific case of Romanian totalitarianism and its type of engaged art.

Totalitarian art did not appear out of a vacuum. It was preceded by modernist trends, such as “Italian Futurism”, and “the Soviet avant-garde” (“Suprematism”, “Constructivism”, etc). Each of these movements involves political ideas of social transformation translated into the precise formulas of a “new art”. The idea of a “new art” or, in other words, the idea of “avant-garde” in connection with art, actually came into use in the 1820s in the writings of Henry de Saint Simone.

The conception of the artist as an avant-garde leader of society was particularly important in the early writings of Saint Simone. In this view, the leadership of the king or court should be replaced with that of a union of artists, scientists, and “industrialists” because they are “producers”¹⁴⁶ involved in spiritual leadership, as well as in the construction of a “new society”. Saint Simone wrote *Parabole Politique*, in order to underline the fact that the artists are the most essential “producers” of society, because they can make products of use, as well as of aesthetic value¹⁴⁷. In other words, art must be useful for life and society¹⁴⁸. The idea that art, like society, could be transformed “in the here and now” was expressed not only by Russian constructivists and their European colleagues, but also by Italian Futurists. Being too conservative by its nature to generate new ideas, totalitarianism takes all these ideas as “ready-made”, translates them into its own language and distorts their aesthetic nature.

In a totalitarian system, art performs the function of transforming the material of dry ideology into the fuel of images and myths intended for general consumption. Totalitarian art

¹⁴⁶ Especially Margaret A. Rose presents Saint Simone’s concept of art as an avant-garde in terms of the “productivist” theory of art. She analyses the theoretical links between the Constructivist avant-garde and Marx’s lost productivist aesthetic (in *Marx’s lost aesthetic. Karl Marx and Visual Arts*, Cambridge University Press, 1984)

¹⁴⁷ This utilitarian view about art represents the rejection of the idea of “art for art’s sake”

¹⁴⁸ According to the Constructivist Manifesto, “Art that is useless for life should be kept in museums of antiquities” (Timothy O. Benson and Eva Forgacs, *Between the Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2002)

used the language of realism¹⁴⁹ to engage in propaganda, to create popular myths, and to educate the masses. It followed a strict stylistic canon, in order to establish a cult. The style of Nazi art, as well as the style of Communist art, was derived from a structure that attempted to unite all its elements into a single magnificent temple built for all ages and all people. In both regimes, art must “belong to people”, but it was not intended, of course, for individual consumption (especially in Communist regimes). According to Igor Golomstock, in the ex-Soviet Union not even high-placed functionaries could not have in their private homes paintings from the official exhibitions. These “masterpieces” could be contemplated only in “temples of art” (as museums were called), in “Palaces of Labor, Culture and the Revolution, in official institutions and public spaces”¹⁵⁰. The same restriction was applied in Romanian communism as well. After the official exhibition was closed, all the paintings were deposited in a basement or in few special cases they were offered to Ceaușescu.

The concept of “pure art”, of “art for art’s sake”, is alien to totalitarian consciousness. In Hitler’s words: “There is no more dangerous idea than the slogan of French liberalism *‘l’art pour l’art’*”¹⁵¹. According to Golomstock, in Soviet texts this phrase is always framed by ironic inverted commas. In both regimes (Nazi and communism), the non-realist artistic movements were considered to be degenerations and controlled by “someone outside”. Common to the artistic programs of both ideologies (Communist and Nazi) was the conflict with autonomous art, and the pluralism of artistic principles.

¹⁴⁹ I quote here only one of the definitions of *Realism*: “The Realism is the attitude of the artist who strives to reflect some essential aspect of reality. It is the only standard which can bring art back to the people today” (Francis Klingender)

¹⁵⁰ Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art*, Collins Harvill, London, 1990, p.292

¹⁵¹ The idea of “*art for art’s sake*” is prefigured in the introduction of Theophile Gautier’ *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. This introduction is usually seen as the manifesto of the “art for art’s sake”, even though the term itself is not used. In this introduction, Gautier rejected Saint-Simone’s utilitarian view of art. Gautier’s point is that “the useless alone is truly beautiful; everything useful is ugly because it is the expression of a need. Men and women’s needs are ignoble and disgusting. The most useful place in the house is the latrine” (Gautier, quoted in Paul Wood, *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 24)

As I already mentioned, at the beginning the term *avant-garde* was connected to the idea of a leading social role for art (see Saint Simone's writings). But this term also represents "a language of revolt"¹⁵². The artists used their instruments and techniques to produce a new kind of meaning (i.e., the symbolic systems, or "languages" of their art), which could express the language of revolt (see "Dada", "Surrealism", etc). A question might appear here: Should the avant-garde intervene in society, or should it turn its back on society?

The so-called artistic *avant-garde* can be divided in two parts: the *early avant-garde* and the *late avant-garde*. A discussion about avant-gardes is, in my view, unavoidable in the context of the distinction between official art and autonomous art. I will begin with a very short description of the *early avant-garde* (the avant-garde as it had emerged in the modernity of the 19-th century, and then multiplied and factionalized in the contradictory modernities of the early 20-th century). When the conception of an artistic avant-garde was first mooted, it was understood as a program of social and political emancipation from the capitalist culture (in Saint Simone's approach). At the same time, the early avant-garde was considered a crusade, dedicated to free art from the derived academic constraints (a crusade against the Official art of the Academy). The artistic avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s first elaborated a totalitarian ideology of culture. In 1914, the Italian Futurists appealed directly to the State, demanding a code of laws to protect the sphere of individual creativity from "shams". Russian Futurism only later acquired its mass audience in the chaos of the Revolution and Civil War. It was with an eye to the masses that a search was then carried out for new forms, for a language that would have an immediate effect and could be relied on in order to inculcate a political idea into the consciousness of the people ("Constructivism"). As Golomstock said, "it was in this way that a theoretical foundation and a practical elaboration was developed by the avant-garde for the concept that was to be the

¹⁵² Ivez Hedges, *Languages of revolt*, Duke University Press, Durham DC, 1983

basis for totalitarian aesthetics, the concept of mass art”¹⁵³. “Mass art” and the construction of the “new man” (in the “Constructivist” and “Futurist” version) were later to become the mission of totalitarian culture.

The *early avant-garde* ceased to exist in URSS and in its satellites after about the 1930s, and survived in other places than in isolated pockets underground, and even in these cases, it manifested itself in a significant manner in literature, more than it did in visual arts. Beginning to the 1930s, “Socialist Realism” becomes the official style of all arts¹⁵⁴ from the Eastern block. This “style” has roots in Neo-classicism, and in the “Realist” tradition of Russian Literature of the 19-th century, which describes the life of simple people (the lower classes)¹⁵⁵. Socialist Realism was more than a style of art; it was an entire system for the production and consumption of art¹⁵⁶.

Totalitarian art persecuted and suppressed the avant-garde in the entire Communist Eastern Europe. Everywhere the artistic avant-garde demanded emancipation from all criteria of quality, tradition, taste or craftsmanship or, in other words, from any kind of control imposed by the consumer, the critic, or by the viewer. Boris Groys has a very interesting opinion regarding the differences between the Occidental and Eastern European avant-gardes¹⁵⁷. In a few words, in the Western world the avant-garde was seen as an “artistic dictatorship” of the artist over the viewer. The artist would completely transform the taste of the viewer¹⁵⁸. In Eastern Europe, the

¹⁵³ Ibidem, p. 26

¹⁵⁴ “Socialist Realism” was the official style of arts, and the only one style of art from 1932 to 1956. The end of 1960s represented a moment of openness, experimentation and borrowings from the Occidental art, which probably disoriented the older generation of art critics

¹⁵⁵ This “style” was exemplified by the aesthetic philosophy of Maxim Gorki

¹⁵⁶ In order to understand the function of “Socialist Realism”, we have to go back to Hegel’s insight (in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*). According to Hegel, particular stages of cultural development produce particular cultural forms

¹⁵⁷ Boris Groys, *IRWIN Group: More Total than Totalitarianism*, 1990

¹⁵⁸ In Groys’s view, these utopian demands of the artistic avant-garde were never realized, and for this reason they remained merely a basis for criticism of the reigning consumerist society

communists also declared their aim to be the ruler of the producer – i.e., of the working class – over the consumer, but the market and the usual system of consumption were liquidated. A politically and economically totalitarian state was supposed to become “a total work of art”, and this was exactly what constituted the avant-garde project from the very beginning.

Official canon of Communism forced out of power the avant-garde, because the avant-garde usually rejects the traditional artistic forms. “Socialist Realism” used traditional artistic forms to create a phantasmagoric, utopian world of the paradisiacal future. In fact, the traditional forms of art were utilized as tools for the most radical critique of the traditional conditions of life. Groys remarks that the source of the ecstatic and psychedelic character of Totalitarian art is more reminiscent of the contemporary phenomena of “Surrealism”, or “Magic Realism”, than the sober mimetic realism of the past.

I agree with Groys’s claim. If we look at the paintings made by the court artists of Romanian communism, such as Sabin Bălașa, Mihai Zamfir, Mircea Vremir, and others, we can observe how they used traditional artistic forms (sometimes inspired from Romanian folk tales and songs) to create a utopian image of the present or of the future. Especially the mural painter Sabin Bălașa created a type of “*cosmic romanticism*” (his own denomination regarding his style), which combines the nationalistic elements with surrealist elements and symbolist topics. He painted the walls of a huge hall “*The Lost Step’s Passage*”¹⁵⁹ with “mythological” scenes from Romanians history. In these scenes the Symbolist approach of the time and origins prevails, as well as the tendency to visually represent *illo tempore*¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵⁹ This hall is located into the University Alexandru Ioan Cuza from Iași, which is one of the oldest universities Romania

¹⁶⁰ The Latin formula *illo tempore*, or *ab originis* was predominantly used by the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade and designates “the mythic time of the world beginning”



Photo 22. Sabin Bălașa's mural paintings from "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University's hall so-called *"The Lost Step's Passage"*

In spite of the label of “novelty” which was attached to Bălașa’s works by the artist himself, the “nationalistic kitsch” which is inserted in his works excludes his art from the category of the avant-garde. This national mythology as subject of art does not promote cosmopolitan art principles, but emphasizes an obstinate anarchism (called in the officialdom’s language “traditionalist art”). These “autochthon values” (in communist ideology’s eye) conferred “originality” to the Romanian culture. Any intrusion from the Western artistic trends had to be avoided and criticized in the name of the “the traditional Romanian art’s purity”. This attitude of rejecting the modernist trends encouraged an art production inspired by the main traditions of Romanian art, with a strong folkloric component. Instead of the modernist tendencies and techniques of the Western European art, the Romanian communist imposed traditional techniques and subject-matters, such as: the Romanian leaders (named “our ancestors”), the popular costume and any folkloric element, the Romanian peasant dressed in Sunday clothes, illustrations of the founding stories about Romanian territories, Romanian recognizable landscapes and so on.

We can assert that each East European country had “the same communism but at the same time its own national communism”¹⁶¹. Following this line of argumentation, in the area of the visual arts and translating it into the language of the avant-garde, we can admit that Romanian avant-garde rearranged the invariant of the modernist aesthetic paradigm according to local artistic aspects. This “rearrangement” represents the Romanian avant-gardism with its specific strategy of cultural alternativeness.

2.2. The Relative Autonomy of Aesthetics during the Period of Pretended “Cultural Liberalization”

The period between 1965 and 1980 remained in the Romanian’s mind as being the most “liberal” stage of the communism. In the sphere of the visual arts this political liberalization meant a relative aesthetic pluralism: modernist trends coexisted with the engaged art. In fact the cultural liberalization was only a “cultural amelioration” (in Magda Cârneci’s terms). Official art still remained under the control of the ideological censorship in what regards the *content*, but the *form* was chosen by the artist.

An important element of the cultural amelioration in visual art field was the so-called “enlargement of the official realism”. The artist could introduce visual innovations in his artworks. The photograph began to be used as a basis for painting, like in Pop Art but, as Magda Cârneci¹⁶² remarks, an old technique of visual manipulation is still present, (in spite of the new appearances) and consists in falsifying the photographs. In spite of these aspects, the official realism is doubled by an unofficial one – the “experimental realism” or “the new-realism”. These types of realism are obviously opposed to the didactic-illustrative realism of the 50s.

¹⁶¹ See Michael Shafir, *Romania, Politics, Economy and Society*, London, Pinter, 1985, “Introduction”

¹⁶² Maga Cârneci, *Artele plastice in România 1945-1989* (Visual Arts in Romania: 1945-1989), Meridiane , Bucharest, 2000, p.102

An important “amelioration” was at the level of the autonomy of the aesthetic language. A new type of artistic discourse (which was the mainstream in Western art publications) began to be accepted also in Romanian art-magazines as well as in exhibitions. We can assert that the main content of the visual arts was a mixture of stylistic autonomy and thematic constraint¹⁶³.

Starting with this period of pseudo-autonomy of the aesthetic, the artists can be grouped into three different categories: conformists, false non-conformists and non-conformists¹⁶⁴ or according to a different classification¹⁶⁵, they can be grouped as merchants, mercenaries and monks. In the next chapter I will investigate the artist’s condition under oppression in order to give a sense to the role of interior freedom in artistic creation.

¹⁶³ Ibidem 17

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem p.107

¹⁶⁵ See Sorin Alexandrescu, *Une Culture de l’interstice*, “Les Temps Modernes”, January, 1990

Chapter 3. The Condition of the Artist or the Art of Survival

3.1. The Intellectual Survival under Dictatorship: General Considerations Regarding the Romanian “Intelligentsia”

In the former communist countries there is a tendency to talk about the intellectual survival in terms of “keeping integrity”. I agree with this interpretation only partially because keeping an immaculate integrity does not necessarily mean intellectual survival. Sometimes the totalitarian system must be circumvented in order to obtain a real work of art or a real book of literature. This “technique of tricking” places this type of discussion in the sphere of moral particularism.

A considerable part of Romanian intellectuals, being strongly influenced by philosopher Constantin Noica, regarded intellectual life under dictatorship as possible, paradoxically, because it was potentially impossible¹⁶⁶. For instance for philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu culture is not “the natural rhythm of spiritual breathing” but “stolen oxygen”, “clandestinely deposited”, “a variant of survival”¹⁶⁷. For Horia-Roman Patapievici survival was guaranteed by his “friend of ideas” (a special type of friend with whom the philosopher read books¹⁶⁸, commented movies and so on)¹⁶⁹. In Andrei Pleșu’s view “humor is a technique of survival” under dictatorship. He develops

¹⁶⁶ I am referring to Constantin Noica, Andrei Pleșu, Gabriel Liiceanu, Sorin Dumitrescu, Horia-Roman Patapievici and others

¹⁶⁷ Gabriel Liiceanu, *Jurnal de la Păltiniș*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1991

¹⁶⁸ I quote here a suggestive remark made by Patapievici: “I should add that the manner in which we debated the books which we read was much more serious and committed than the manner in which people at the many scientific symposia I have attended would discuss the papers delivered in the various sections. Passionate,

¹⁶⁹ Horia-Roman Patapievici, *Flying against the Arrow*, the English edition published in 2003 by Central European University Press, Budapest

a theological argument about the presence of an imperfect evil in the middle of a carceral universe, such as that created by communism¹⁷⁰, and this imperfection ensured survival.

In my view culture is only a variant of survival among other (such as faith, friendship, love, beauty, insanity etc). Constantin Noica's cynical remarks according to which "for intellectual life bad conditions are good and good conditions are bad" or "a good book was written with a cheap pen"¹⁷¹ are obviously exaggerations in the Platonic-patristic spirit (I mean, that philosophical insight according to which there is another superior world-the "idea's world"). We can accept their efficiency in an atmosphere of cruel scarcity (many of his disciples really believed in these apothegms) but they still remain "philosophical exaggerations".

The cultural life possible in a totalitarian regime is different from that available in a democratic polity, but it is still a type of intellectual life. As Mihai Botez (who in 1988 became a political refugee in the United States, and later on became Romania's ambassador to the United States) remarks "it is sometimes said that an intellectual living under a communist regime must always choose between being a courtier or a dissident. This is an excessive simplification"¹⁷². Following this line of thought we can assert that indeed, the "art of survival" meant not only combining calculated submission, self-limited criticism and "tactical keeping of a low profile", but also an intelligent usage of opportunities sometimes by means of trickery. Mihai Botez concluded saying that "of course, for many Western intellectuals, such strategies seem strange if not disgusting. In principle I am ready to agree with them, adding my sad wish that they will never be compelled to learn such an art"¹⁷³.

¹⁷⁰ Andrei Pleșu, "Intellectual life under Dictatorship", in *Representation*, no. 49, Special Issue: Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe Before and After 1989. (Winter, 1995), pp. 61-71

¹⁷¹ Noica quoted in Andrei Pleșu and in H. R. Patapievici

¹⁷² Mihai Botez quoted in Andrei Pleșu's article "Intellectual life under Dictatorship", in *Representation*, no. 49, Special Issue: Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe Before and After 1989. (Winter, 1995), p.64

¹⁷³ Ibidem 6

3.2. The mechanisms of survival during the communist period: the artist as a “hero on the margins”

The aim of this sub-chapter is to envisage a portrait of the artist under oppression, focusing mostly on a special type of survival: namely, the survival through internal freedom by means of art. This survival was possible because in one way or another, artists had adapted themselves to the conditions of dictatorship. Here I will only be able to briefly draft an answer, which can open this debate but not resolve it.

When we talk of survival under dictatorship, we must avoid considering the entire issue only in terms of cultural survival. At the same time, in my view, the art which was possible in a communist regime is not totally different from art in a democratic one, or, as Andrei Pleșu said, “the captive mind is still a mind and not necessarily a stupid one”¹⁷⁴. Perhaps the main difference lies in the fact that whereas in a normal country art comes naturally and with bureaucratic diligence, in a totalitarian regime, art even if passionately created remains ineffectual.

A preliminary remark is required at this point, namely, that the artist living under a communist regime must not always choose between being a courtier or a dissident. This dichotomy between a courtier and a dissident artist (which appears as a common interpretation) is an excessive simplification of an insufficiently analyzed aspect of the communist past. The artist strove to be “normal” in “abnormal” circumstances.

A special kind of survival through artistic “(self) therapy” is Bertalan’s authentic amazement when he was faced with a common thing, such as: a human destiny, a slice of sky, a plant or a landscape. This survival of inadaptability was catalogued as insanity. Even if his art is next to the limit of mental illness, it still is much uncontaminated by socialist clichés and it still

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem 5, p.63

inspires respect. Bertalan kept his moral integrity at the cost of his mental integrity. His artworks are chronicle about himself. A drawing-diary which was made in 1977 is entitled *Self-Therapy*. He used to combine the drawings with confessions in artworks, which were half diary and half drawing. In one of them he wrote: “Every morning I have to finish a drawing in order to cure myself. They want to transform our spirit into slaves. They watch me all day long”¹⁷⁵.

There is no evidence according to which the artist was really spied by *Securitate*, but in his mind and work this danger was ubiquitous. The threat was real, as real as the possibility to be watched. Many times the artist said “look at these holes” (showing the wood fence that separated his yard from the unknown and hostile neighbors), “they spy on me through these holes”¹⁷⁶. He thought that “they” (*Securitatea*) were under cover as tractor drivers and forest workers and they stopped him from drawing even in the mountains, at Rașinari. Another obsession was that an airplane followed him all the time in the Apuseni Mountains during his training period. As a response to these fears the artist recorded in abstract drawings the everyday routes the patients of the wards moved along on the hospital¹⁷⁷ aisles.

Bertalan’s art illustrates the mechanisms of alienation, drama, and isolation. As Babeți convincingly argued, “Bertalan did not search for the limitations of art and forms and he never seemed to me to pay attention to how much novelty he brought about. There was as much originality in his work as the amount of drama he had to communicate”¹⁷⁸. The communication mediated by his peculiar type of art, illustrates the condition of the truthful artist under Ceaușescu’s dictatorship.

¹⁷⁵ Ștefan Bertalan, *Prolix Diary*, 22nd of May 1977

¹⁷⁶ Coriolan Babeți, “The Bertalan Case: The Artistic Experiment as an Exercise of Neurotic Sublimation”, in *Primary Documents, A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, edited by Hoptman Pospiszyl, M.I.T Press, 1999, p. 53

¹⁷⁷ Coriolan Babeți identified the place as being the mental institution from Gataia. All the information about Bertalan during the treatment in this institution was transmitted to the art critic Coriolan Babeți by the Bertalan himself

¹⁷⁸ Ibidem 11

Ștefan Bertalan was neither a “court artist” (the single portrait made by him representing the dictator, was in fact a caricature or in other words an anti- portrait) nor a political dissident. He was perhaps a “dissident from reality”¹⁷⁹, but still very strong connected to it. His artistically neurotic description of the everyday life personifies life under oppression. I do not agree with Erwin Kessler’s interpretation according to which the irrational was central in Bertalan’s artworks¹⁸⁰. On the contrary, the heart of his artistic creation was hyper lucid or as Coriolan Babeți observes, “Bertalan makes his work the trace left by this flabbergasted perplexity when faced with history. He is just the sensor of his fellow men and of history dramatically experienced in the first person”¹⁸¹.

Bertalan lived in Timișoara in an old house on *Chopin Street*. His studio “took over the house and displaced it”¹⁸². He wanted to extend art everywhere. As a member of the artistic group *Sigma I*¹⁸³ (besides the artists Constantin Flondor, Doru Tulcan, Elisei Rusu, Ion Gaiță, and mathematician Lucian Codreanu), Bertalan intended to educate young people in a multi-disciplinary system and to blur the difference between student and teacher. In the *Arta* magazine, he wrote, “We rejected the duplicitous attitude of the artist who has a different position in his own laboratory than he has as educator”¹⁸⁴. This project was welcomed among the students. A former undergraduate of the Art High School in Timișoara wrote: “We had periodical opportunities of gathering information from foreign art magazines...and from art movies, which were brought to us in school. They reinforced our conviction that we were on the right path, and

¹⁷⁹ Călin Dan’s expression

¹⁸⁰ Erwin Kessler, “Dublu Portret Robot” (Double Robot Portrait), *Revista 22*, 8-th of April 2005, no.787

¹⁸¹ Ibidem 11

¹⁸² Ibidem 11

¹⁸³ Founded in 1970 by a group of young teachers of the Art High School in Timișoara

¹⁸⁴ Ștefan Bertalan, “Fragments of a Possible Program”, *Arta*, year XVII, no.8, 1970, p.34

gave us a feeling of cultural exaltation. And above this exuberant Kastalia, which was the art school...the Sigma group shone like an intangible heavenly body”¹⁸⁵.

Bertalan was faithful to his vocation. He also founded (together with two friends) the *Sigma* and *Sigma 1*, and they conceived an alternative educational program; he described the life in Communist Romania in terms of dramatic alienation of the human condition; he observed the destiny of a plant from its birth until its death; he described artistically the life in a mental institution in which he was patient; he continued to be active in the artistic field after Ceaușescu’s fall.

In the 80s Bertalan finally succeeded to immigrate to Germany. He regarded the possibility of leaving Romania as the final solution for his survival. In contrast to philosopher Constantin Noica’s “pedagogy”, artist Bertalan decided not “to assume the limit”¹⁸⁶. He rather forced that limit transforming it in a zone of internal freedom.

Noica gathered the young gifted intellectual at Păltiniș (a small mountain resort), in order to “train the spirit for cultural performance”. He offered lessons in ancient Greek, in Aristotle, Plato, Hegel, Kant etc. The scope of this training was to reinforce the interest in philosophy of the undiscouraged young men of the Communist society. One of his favorite expressions was “Don’t pay attention to the immediate circumstances...the best books are usually written at the candle light”. In my view Noica survived “in his armchair” through philosophy.

Artist Ștefan Bertalan could not ignore the severe conditions imposed under dictatorship and the “immediate circumstances” were criticized in his art. He could not be detached from the

¹⁸⁵ Quoted from Ileana Pintilie’s article “The Cardinal Points of the Artistic Movement in Timișoara”, in *Experiment in Romanian Art since 1960*, Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 1997, p.33

¹⁸⁶ Andrei Pleșu underlines the effectiveness of Noica’s philosophy for his generation of intellectuals. Noica believed that “history needs circus horses” and asked his disciples “to be racehorses”. When he was asked why he never thought to emigrate, he constructed a long discourse on *the jubilation of the assumed limit*, on inefficiency which enriches you as opposed to impoverishing plenitude (see Andrei Pleșu, “Intellectual life under Dictatorship”, in *Representation*, no. 49, Special Issue: Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe Before and After 1989. (Winter, 1995), p.71)

pressure of the present. His survival was a painful one and the social was the last “battle field” for his artistic experiments. Besides “unofficial” artistic actions [such as *Neuer Weg, swimming through the working pocket* (1979, his own studio from Timișoara); *Eternity- the Juice of Raspberry for the Last Night of the Year* (Gârda de Sus, in Apuseni Mountains); *I am dissapionate and I am proud of the epoch in which I live ...so I have to rest, do not be agitated because tomorrow again we have no possibility* (in Semenici Mountains), *The Portrait* and many other], Bertalan was the expression of the tyrannically felt reality. His pedagogy was based on the idea that the mind is never completely captive.

In my opinion, Bertalan is a “normal” artist who struggled for the art’s right to normality in an “abnormal” political regime. His technique of survival under dictatorship was not a technique of making the best of precarious means as in Noica’s case. The artist survival was an exercise of marginality but, on these margins he was courageous enough to criticize political power through art. Perhaps the price of this survival was his mental health, but at least his mind was not a captive one.

3.3. Remembrances in dialog: private remembrances versus public remembrances

In this chapter I will focus mostly on the private remembrances of the artists discussed in this paper. The artist’s confessions will be “confronted” with what the current art press published on them. When the artists are asked what remembrances they have regarding their life under dictatorship, the (almost) unanimous answer is “we remember the confusion and the misery of existence”. Their small apartments were at the same time their studio. The entire space, the kitchen included, was transformed in a studio. “Functions” take the place of the space. The Block

of Flats or the “Dwelling Machine”¹⁸⁷ takes the place of the living space of the house which becomes typified, a utensil of behavioral sameness and absolute control. Ion Grigorescu has unpleasant remembrances about the small apartment in which he lived together with his family. In the same space Grigorescu’s family was supposed to sleep, dry clothes, and have dinner, but Grigorescu declares modestly that he did not feel more affliction than the others in the same situation. Starting in the early 80s, Grigorescu’s films¹⁸⁸ (which intended to provide a personal ideology) led to his suppression as an undesirable figure, banned from the local scene:

I was many times criticized by the Union (UAP- Union of Visual Artists). After the 80s I hardly succeeded in exhibiting...It was almost impossible to me. The Party’s officials asked me to put all my works in a room in order to be rigorously analyzed. My presence in that room was not allowed. They told me that the moment “was not proper” for exhibiting “bizarre” creations. Many times I received unfriendly “messages” from the Union.¹⁸⁹(I. G.)

The UAP (Union of Visual Artists) represented for its members a source of publicity and at the same time it was the only possibility through which the artists could borrow money. These “benefices” had a price: the artist was more or less forced to spy on his colleagues. Grigorescu refused then to visit the Union. His condition became more and more fragile. He was a drawing teacher in many primary schools and earned little money from this profession. Because of the “inaccessibility” of Grigorescu’s artworks to the audience, the artist could not sell his works (neither paintings nor photographs). He accepted the poverty without reservations. His beloved *model of integrity* is a peasant’s tenacious refusal to become “collectivized” (member of CAP-Productive Agricultural Cooperation)

I know a case, the case of a peasant who was such a skinny and shy man. He usually helped the priest of the village to clean the courtyard of the church, to arrange the garden and to maintain the cemetery unsoiled. But, in spite of his quietness and timidity he was the single man in his rural community who refused any compromise with the Party. The others thought that “it was better to

¹⁸⁷ The expression of the Romanian architect Dragoş Gheorghiu

¹⁸⁸ Especially *Masculine/Feminine*

¹⁸⁹ My interview with Ion Grigorescu, Bucharest, 14 April 2007

accept” the new rules than to suffer after. This brave uneducated man paid a big price for his independence. He had to plow the land alone (or with his wife) without oxen (domestic animals were “confiscated” by the Party). He and his wife were teamed in the yoke like bovines. This was the real integrity.¹⁹⁰ (I. G.)

Grigorescu considers that the social component of his art expresses the ruinous situation of Romanians during communism. He confessed the fact that in the night when he created the collage *Cultural Revolution* (1971) he glued a few “posters” on the walls in Bucharest’s center. The message was written on them using an overturned technique: *We don’t want a Cultural Revolution*. The artist had chosen the middle of the night to paste these posters because at that hour everybody was sleeping. In a communist country there is no “night life”. He knew that the next day, since early in the morning the officialdom would command to cleaning women to wash any trace of his action, but he was very content because the *Securitatea*’s members watched them even for a few seconds.

In the Romanian current press, Ion Grigorescu’s creation is extremely seldom the subject matter of an article. From time to time a newspaper or a periodical (especially art magazines) publish very small articles (which are in fact “news bulletin”) announcing his next exhibition. For example, Robert Bălan signed an article in the daily newspaper *Gândul* (from 15 May 2007), entitled *The Show with the Puppet Ceaușescu*. The article publicizes in fact a painting exhibition which will take place in Sibiu (*The European Capital of Culture* in 2007) this summer. The article refers to Ion Grigorescu’s “show with puppet Ceaușescu” only in four sentences. Usually, his works from the communist period are neglected. Romanian current press seems disinterested in this subject matter.

¹⁹⁰ Ibidem 186

I have found an article written by Erwin Kessler in the pages of the weekly *Revista 22*¹⁹¹ (a pretended independent newspaper of political analysis and cultural actuality), which describes the life of Grigorescu's family without any remark on Ion Grigorescu's artistic actions during the communist period. The article presents "Grigorescu's family wealth". Of course, the title is a metaphor. The entire article describes "Grigorescu's family museum": carpets, books, paintings, hand-made traditional chemise called *ie*, photographs, icons and so on. The author emphasizes especially the fact that Ion Grigorescu developed his personality in a family of artists (his brother Octav Grigorescu is an appreciated painter, one of his sisters is a musicologist, his wife is an ethnographer, his sister-in-law, Georgeta Naparus, is a painter too). Erwin Kessler is right when appreciates as valuable the "symbolic wealth" of Grigorescu's family.

If in Ion Grigorescu's case there are a few articles published in current press (even if none of them analyzes Grigorescu's "oppositional" artworks), Ștefan Bertalan is almost totally absent. The single information about Bertalan's life is contained in Coriolan Babeți's essay, *The Bertalan Case: the Artistic Experiment as an Exercise of Neurotic Sublimation*¹⁹².

From this essay we know how the artist lived in Timișoara, in an old house together with his wife, Karin, and his children, Bastel and Buber. After a while Bertalan remained alone in this house-studio. He was depressed and poor. Every day he was thinking how to leave communist Romania. His house-studio was like an island to him. Here Bertalan began to "contest" the social and political realities. After Ceaușescu's fall, he was invited to international exhibitions (for instance Venice Biennale) as well as in Romania (to the *Ann Festival*, Sfântul Gheorge). To me it is unexplainable the fact that the current press (and the art press included) does not pay attention

¹⁹¹ *Revista 22*, year XV, no.830, February, 2006

¹⁹² See, Coriolan Babeți, "The Bertalan Case: The Artistic Experiment as an Exercise of Neurotic Sublimation", in *Primary Documents, A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, edited by Hoptman Pospiszyl, M.I.T Press, 1999, p. 53

to this subject. Ștefan Bertalan is (almost totally) unknown for the Romanian public (except maybe to a small group of artists). He is not exhibited and the very few articles about him focus mostly on his temporary mental disorder, neglecting the message transmitted through his art.

Geta Brătescu and Ana Lupaș, feminine figures of the Romanian avant-garde, are present in the art press from time to time. The National Museum of Contemporary Art exhibited Geta Brătescu's installations, collages, and drawings. She was the artistic director of the magazine *Secolul XX* (Twentieth Century). During the communist period (starting in the 60s) the magazine *Secolul XX*, introduced in the Romanian culture all the "novelties" from Art History, Philosophy, Literary Theory, Musicology which were at that time the "mainstream" of the Western culture. The emergence of experimentalism in Romanian visual art coincided with the appearance of the magazine *Secolul XX*. Geta Brătescu is remembering how her life was in that period:

I was very busy. All day long I had something to do. I was never a drawing teacher. Instead of this I worked for *Secolul XX*. I could not sell my drawings and sketches because of too abstract subject matter. I sold tapestry, large tapestries. I never painted homage to Ceaușescu or this kind of portraits. My main interest was the self portrait and the object. My art had not a polemic character. I am not interested in controversies. I rather, wanted to sublimate the difficulties of life into my mythological stories. My life was complicated but I believed in the pure space of the circle. My *alter ego* was Medeea or Aesop. In a way, I have circumvented the communist officialdom to allow me to exhibit works "in my foreign language". In my view, the fairy-tale cannot be censored. It will survive in any captive system. My art is about stories.¹⁹³ (G. B.)

¹⁹³ My interview with Geta Brătescu, Bucharest, 15 April 2007

Chapter 4. “Pictorial Hymnology” Re-exhibited after 1989: the First Exhibition of Communist Painting in the National Museum of Contemporary Art from Bucharest

4. 1. Exhibiting Together the “Official Art” of the Regime with its “Unofficial” Counterpart of the Same Period: Artists, Meaning, and Place

In this chapter I will refer to two exhibitions organized in Bucharest: first one is *The Museum of Painting-Socialist Realism* (2005) and the second is *Romanian Artists (and Not Only) Love Ceaușescu’s Palace* (2004). I have decided to choose these two exhibitions because they re-exhibit the communist art of the past in a totally unconventional manner, by the means of contemporary art. This alternative approach of the communist art productions was the subject matter of many controversies in the Romanian press. Except for these exhibitions, there was no other attempt to display the official art of the communist regime. I would like to point out only an aspect of the complicated relationship between art and politics under Ceaușescu’s dictatorship, that of the portraiture of the dictator.

Painters before 1989 were not forced to paint Ceaușescu, but many of them decided to portray him in a variety of “artistic styles”. Their decision was a political one. The contemporary artists decided to reiterate the communist art, using subversive techniques and ironic quotation marks. Their decision is again a politic one.

In March 2005, the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC, Bucharest¹⁹⁴), organized the exhibition of socialist art, suggestively entitled *The Museum of Painting- Socialist Realism*. This exhibition (and the entire project around it) was meant to be an attempt to re-open

[§] Located in Ceausescu’s *House of the People*

the discussion about art in socialist Romania. Unfortunately, this prologue to the future “theoretical and critical analysis”¹⁹⁵ regarding the communist art of Romania remained only a prologue. The curator of the exhibition was Florin Tudor and it was visited by a huge public. This public might be formed of three different types of visitors: those who went there because of their artistic interest, those who have nostalgic sentiments for that age and those who wanted to be informed about this past of Romanian communism.

The exhibition contained 150 official “works of art” produced in the last fifty years (mostly in the Socialist Realist style), signed by: Silaghi Adalbert, Manole Adoc, Corneliu and Ramona Andronescu, Ana Emilia Apostolescu, Corneliu Baba, Sabin Bălașa, Marcel Bejgu, Calin Beloescu, Mihaela Bighiu, Ion Bitzan, Traian Brădean, Corneliu Brudașcu, Doina Catargiu, Ruxandra Papa Cebuc, Spiru Chintilă, Octavian Ciocsan, Cici Constantinescu, Theodoru Doagă, Elisabeta Dorobăț, Adrian Dumitrache, Zamfir Dumitrescu¹⁹⁶, Traian Filip, Horia Flămând, Aurel Cîrjoaba, Elena Greculesi, Ion Sulea Gorj, Dan Hatmanu, Georgeta Ilie, Corneliu Ionescu, Ion Irimescu, Ion Jalea, Andrei Koss, Iacob Lazăr, Augustin Lucaci, Viorel Mărgineanu, Pavel Mercea, Vintilă Mihăiescu, Eftimie Modîlca, Ioan Moszelka, Emilia Niculescu, Constantin Nițescu, Ioana Olteș, Eugen Palade, Vasile Pop Negreșteanu, Nicolae Eugen Petrescu, Toma Roata, Doru Rotaru, Mihai Rusu, Albin Stănescu, Ion Stendl, Lia Szasz, Liviu Suhar, Vladimir Șetran, Valentin Tănase, Ion Țarălungă, Vasile Tolan, Andrasy Zoltan, Aristotel A. Vasiliu, Pavel Vereș, Nicolae Vânătoru, Artur Andrei Vetro, Ioan Vișan, Mircea Vermir, Grigore Metaxa, Onisim Colta, and Ieronim Boca.

Beside these paintings, as part of the same concept of the exhibition, a “reading room” was set up, in which the visitors could consult the collection of the art magazine *Arta* (from 1960

¹⁹⁵ See <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-ro-0503/msg00071.html>

¹⁹⁶ Zamfir Dumitrescu was at the time of the exhibition, the President of the UAP (The Union of Visual Artists) and member of Romanian Parliament

to 1980), a few communist journals and current articles about the Romanian communist period. The public was invited by the organizers to talk about what they thought regarding the exhibition.

The National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC), which hosted the exhibition of socialist art, is situated into the E4 wing of Ceaușescu's *House of the People*. The memory of this building was a subject of controversy¹⁹⁷ from the very beginning (the museum was created under governmental decree in 2002) Few journalists (I quote here only Ioan Grosan) consider that the exhibition *The Museum of Painting-Socialist Realism* should be placed in the Museum of Romanian History and not in the National Museum of Contemporary Art¹⁹⁸ because the art of the communist period should be exhibited in a different museum. Conversely, Florin Tudor (the exhibition's curator) argued that the ex-*House of the People's* space which now hosts MNAC is the proper space for such an exhibition: "The one meter distance¹⁹⁹ from the socialist concrete of the building to the new wall of the museum of contemporary art represents to me the historical space of the last fifteen years".

In the same space, the National Museum of Contemporary Art organized not only the exhibition of socialist art (*The Museum of painting –Socialist Realism*) but also the exhibition entitled *Romanian Artists (and Not Only) Love Ceaușescu's Palace?!²⁰⁰* (in 2004). This exhibition proposed three themes, as "a corollary to the Palace iconography"²⁰¹ but for the purpose of this study only the first one is important: this theme was conceived as a collection of

¹⁹⁷ The Parliament Palace and its current co-function as a museum, was (and still is) the point of departure for long discussions about the relationship between post-communist politics, imagination and representation. MNAC's sustainers consider that this museum is one of the various attempts to use contemporary art for transforming a former 'totalitarian' symbol into a democratic one. The central questions around this issue are: Can artistic engagement and creative imagination take possession of a 'totalitarian' building? Can art ever 'take over the central point of power, being a symbol of openness and democracy'? How does Romania's first national contemporary art institution employ the symbolic to express a constructed national identity, by using (totalitarian) foundation?

¹⁹⁸ Ioan Grosan, "Atelier, singurul lucru de care nu trebuie să te detasezi niciodată" (The Studio is the only thing from which you never should be detached) in the journal *Ziua (The Day)*, 15-th of April 2005

¹⁹⁹ The *National Museum of Contemporary Art's* space was "re-architected" over the initial architecture of the *House of the People* by the architect Adrian Spireșcu.

²⁰⁰ The curator was Ruxandra Balaci (the artistic director of the museum)

²⁰¹ In Balaci's view

portrayals of Nicolae Ceaușescu. But the collection put together official paintings (bombastic propaganda tools such as Dan Hatmanu and Vasile Pop Negresteanu's paintings), unofficial works (like Ion Grigorescu's *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu*) and very recent works (such as Cristian Pogăcean's *The Actors of Subliminal History*²⁰²). This "gathering" of portrayals of Ceaușescu was not welcomed (mostly because the public's perception of the visual, of contemporary art productions, was distorted by the "common sense" in terms of visual perception). This collection of Ceaușescu's images in the same exhibition illustrates the ambiguity of the dictator myth. As Ruxandra Cesereanu suggests, Ceaușescu benefits from "a double perspective at the level of the political myth, in both senses: as anti-myth and as retrieved myth"²⁰³. In Romanians perception the dictator has many faces (Ceaușescu who promised reforms in 1965; the one who opposed for one day the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968; there is also a Ceaușescu of the 80s, a "frenetic nationalist with a scepter in his hand like a king, which elicited Dali's simulated enthusiasm in the 70s"²⁰⁴) but constantly appeared as the infallible leader or (after 1989), as a victim who fell under the soldier's bullets "right on Christmas Eve...brutally executed, and whose burial place is still the meeting place of nostalgic admirers who maintain that the former dictator was beneficial for Romania"²⁰⁵.

²⁰² Cristian Pogăcean's short video (2'50'') *The Actors of Subliminal History* presents a megalomaniac gathering (like the gatherings for the political festival *Song to Romania*). During one of the dictator's celebrations, the platforms handled by the masses obliged to get together on the stadium, depicting glorious images of the president, show for a prophetic second, the image of his corpse, immediately after the execution. Costin Costinaș wrote the text for this video "Who makes the history? Who is the main character at those moments when history seems to be felt, seen, even controlled, through the intensity which it asserts its presence in what stops to be everyday life and becomes destiny? And if the answer to this question is, as we got used to, here in the East, the masses, what exactly determines them to clarify their intentions, to agree upon them and to act together, in order to achieve them? Is there, besides the actual means of communication, a collective irrational which sends, at a given moment, a common message towards the conscience of each of the members of that mass, in order to act? Finally, what is the role of individual in history?"

²⁰³ Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Imaginarul violent al romanilor* (The Violent Imaginary of the Romanians), Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004, p.192

²⁰⁴ Ibidem 10

²⁰⁵ Ibidem 11

In Erwin Kessler's interpretation the exhibition *Romanian Artists (and Not Only) Love Ceaușescu's Palace* is "high-tech and low level"²⁰⁶. In his opinion the museum is not properly named neither "national" (National Museum of Contemporary Art) nor "museum" because of the "elitist" content of the contemporary artworks. He suggests the more appropriate denomination of "Center of Contemporary Art". The cruel critique does not include Ion Grigorescu's *Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu*. In Kessler's view this video is "low-teach but high-level". The fact that the exhibition presented at the same time official paintings, unofficial artworks (dissident artworks from the same period) and current art productions regarding the same topic-Ceaușescu- was seen by Kessler as a lack of respect.

4. 2. Romanian Contemporary Art Critics versus "Unspecialized" Visitors Interpreting the Exhibition of Communist Painting

The exhibition of socialist painting *The Museum of painting - Socialist Realism* (March 2005) was not a totally new cultural event. It continued the post 2000 wave of "Communist imagery revisited" of the entire Eastern block. This "museum" was a temporary exhibition (from the 16th of March 2005 to the 22nd of May 2005) which could hardly make up the lack of a real museum where the Romanian art between 1960 and 1990 might be exhibited. Between The National Museum of Art (which features pre-1960 Romanian art production) and The National Museum of Contemporary Art (which usually features alternative art created after the 1990s) almost forty years of Romanian modern art is missing: there is no museum for the Romanian art between 1960 and 1990. In other words, between "prolekultism" and "alternative arts" in Romanian museums is there nothing to be exhibited? A possible museum for the period discussed above should include not only the modern art of the period but also the official hymnology of the

²⁰⁶ Erwin Kessler, "MNAC: Political and Historical Kitsch", in *Revista 22*, supplement no. 780, 2005

communist regime. In my view both sides of art during the communist regime (official and unofficial) document and adequately reflect the history of the period.

The concept of *The Museum of Painting* was explained by the curators and the critics in terms of “cultural re-memorization”. Romanian art critic and curator Ștefan Tiron tried to answer the question of “Where did the paintings of the leader disappear?” His attempt to reconstruct the odyssey of survival of the official painting is not as clear as he intended. His intention is declared at the beginning of his article “This is a text which will try to explain a mystery. Where do the paintings of the country leaders disappear, where do they reappear and in what way, where were they taken from and where were they hung again, and why does their memory lurk around every corner. What happens to the paintings, the presents and the titles of the dictators? Representations of communist dictators’ portraits, dead or alive, still generate speculations among analysts and the press”²⁰⁷. His analysis is focused on the dictator’s images in general, but a clear answer could not be found. He tried to explain what happened with the “floral imagery” (which is ubiquitous in official hymnology dedicated to Ceaușescu) but fails to take into consideration what happened with “historical subject-matters” (such as Ceaușescu hypostases as king with a scepter). Even the attempt to interpret what happened with “official floral imagery” seems to me very improper and more or less forced. He said that “Many portraits painted for the Ceausescu dictatorship display in fact representations of a floral art: bouquets offered by children to leaders of various unions and embassies, cut flowers in vases, the flower held in hand or pinned to the buttonhole, the blossomy branch, the carnation in a glass of water, the couple walking in the cherry orchard...”²⁰⁸. This observation is quite pertinent, but the following claim seems exaggerated:

²⁰⁷ Ștefan Tiron is one of the authors who wrote the texts for the exhibition *The Museum of Painting- Socialist Realism*. His article is entitled “Where did the paintings of the leader disappear?” and it can be consulted at http://www.Conset.org/home_xx2.php?pub=56

²⁰⁸ Ibidem 14

“the flower bunches bouquets, garlands, crowns, coronets and arrangements are, according to size and composition, associated to the notions of grace and finery. The multiple functions of floral arrangements cover meeting room, symposia, wedding, funeral and military ball decorations. Today, one can order online the newest models of flower bouquets, the “a sign of friendship” type, with names such as “Intense emotion”, “Passion”, etc.”²⁰⁹ This interpretation seems to me a deliberate shifting of the borders, a totally fake argumentation which rehabilitates in a way the pseudo-official art of Ceaușescu’s regime.

Another attempt at interpreting the exhibition of socialist art is Andrei Siclodi’s article *Painting a TV Screen in the “Golden Age”* (A comment on the media / content relationship in the ideological art production of Romania, in the times of Ceaușescu)²¹⁰. This text emphasizes “the fact that the regime’s notion of ideological art did not explicitly encourage a visual production that represents and documents the socialist reality by corresponding technical means – film, photography, or by the use of an avant-garde language. On the contrary, the film and the photography are used as objective media, therefore, ideologically, they seem to be employed mainly by the press (TV screen and printed), and not by the arts”²¹¹.

Besides these “qualified” opinions, I will also present also the view of the “unspecialized” public. For instance a woman who declared that she was a drawing teacher²¹² during Ceaușescu’s rule considers that the official artworks of the communist regime were never exhibited till 2005 because their authors were still in politically important positions. She declared that her presence at that exhibition of socialist art was “like a re-fresher mark” and at the same time, she wanted to see “how a current politician (Zamfir Dumitrescu) portrayed the Ceaușescu couple”. In her view

²⁰⁹ Ibidem 15

²¹⁰ Andrei Siclodi is curator and art critic

²¹¹ This is a quotation from Siclodi’s text which was written for the exhibition *The Museum of Painting –Socialist Realism* (MNAC, Bucharest, March 2005)

²¹² I have introduced here my interview with a former drawing teacher from Bucharest, who was part of the public’s exhibition. The interview is dated 19 April 2007

the “leader’s paintings” really disappeared after the Revolution of 1989, as a precaution measure in order to hide the questionable moral integrity of some of the official artists.

A relatively similar opinion was provided to me by a man²¹³ who declared that he was one of the numerous “anonymous” persons who worked for the building of the *House of the People* in the 80s. He said

I visited the exhibition two years before, because of two reasons: firstly because I was curious how a museum constructed in a house of socialist terror looked like, and secondly because I wanted to remember what everybody could see on every wall before 1989. I was satisfied when I saw that the “court artists” were publicly presents in this exhibition, if only as names on the paintings.²¹⁴ (C. P.)

The same interlocutor thinks that the “paintings of the dictator” did not disappear from public scene, but they were modified in the form of the electoral placards. In his view “the artist will paint the politic leader as far as he or she will be starved enough, like in the example with Gigi Becali’s²¹⁵ portraits”.

²¹³ He did not want to declare his identity

²¹⁴ My interview with C. P. , Bucharest, 19 April 2007

²¹⁵ Perhaps my interviewee referred to the fact that according to some rumors in the Romanian Press few unknown artists portrayed Gigi Becali (a controversial candidate to the presidency of Romania which is notorious for his exacerbated nationalism and egocentrism) dressed like a king

Conclusions

This thesis explores some of the most important “existential programs” of the artists who lived in communist Romania. My main attempt in this study was to correct the canon of visual arts of the communist period by including some neglected “unofficial” artists in. I hope that the great majority of artists who have been at history’s margins will be acknowledged and rehabilitated and will create a different panorama of “new history”.

The four case studies epitomize four different types of “unofficial” artist, during the age of the Romanian communist regime. I have chosen four artists from different cultural centers (Ion Grigorescu and Geta Brătescu from Bucharest, Ana Lupaş from Cluj and Ştefan Bertalan from Timişoara) in order to emphasize the fact that these alternative artistic actions did not have a regional character. Similar actions (to some extent) took place also in Iaşi, Sibiu, Braşov, Baia Mare and in other cities. Their existence has a great importance, documenting not only the recent past but also the artist’s tradition and his state of mind during the decades of oppression. The term “unofficial” does not mean necessarily “dissident”, even if in a few cases (Ion Grigorescu, Ştefan Bertalan and others who were not discussed here) the oppositional, anti-communist character of their art production is obvious. In this thesis I have tried to map the emergence of the artistic alternativeness against the prevailing “official” art. I have also offered a portrait of the artist who struggled for survival during the communist regime, focusing mostly on the mechanisms of doggedness used by unofficial artists.

The artistic work of Ana Lupaş and Geta Brătescu is an alternative one, having a strong experimentalist component. Ana Lupaş opened the door for a new genre “ambient art” and for

installation²¹⁶. Geta Brătescu broke new grounds in body art and subjective mythology. Even if their alternative art did not articulate an open political protest, these types of artistic actions still create an oppositional culture which runs parallel to the official one. The artistic representations interpreted in this paper were not analyzed from the point of view of genuinely artistic formal qualities, but from their content and their “ethical message” and were handled as historical document.

My intention was to survey one special aspect of the mechanisms of cultural politics of Romanian communism under Ceaușescu choosing the sphere of “underground” art as a field of research. I think that the studies of communism which are oriented only toward its “official” (political, economic, and social aspects) do not adequately highlight the period. Especially when the research’s subject-matter is a decisive, well documented seemingly straightforward official cultural event, the historian has to be attentive to the “other side”, to silences, absences, and peripheral happenings, in order to reveal its complex but hidden meaning.

A special case of “silence” is Bertalan’s tragedy. Even if parts of his art have such a strong anti-totalitarian character the very few articles on him²¹⁷ (leaving aside the fact that the artist is almost totally neglected in the contemporary press and in specialized literature in general) stresses first and foremost the artist’s mental instability. Instead of analyzing the content of his messages and the type of painful survival experienced by Bertalan, the attention is focused on his shakiness. Such interpretation uses the type of sophistic argument called *argumentum ad*

²¹⁶ Coriolan Babeți defined *installation* as an arrestment of the artistic genres, a crisis of technique-painting, sculpture, video-art, etc: “They all turn to the others for support, for justification, for a reason to exist...The installation also shows its author’s state of health at a time when the isolated genres of art do not seem to be feeling very well” (Coriolan Babeți, “The Museum of Romanian Peasant-An Installation by Horia Bernea with “Ready – made” Objects by Romanian Peasants” in *Experiment in Romanian Art since 1960*, edited by Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 1997, p.120)

²¹⁷ As far as I know there is only Coriolan Babeți’s article: “The Bertalan Case: The Artistic Experiment as an Exercise of Neurotic Sublimation”. Few other article are too short and too lacunas, generally emphasizing his activity in the *Sigma* group

personam to support their biases. Undoubtedly, Bertalan's artistic alternativeness (which was oppositional to the communist regime) can be seen as a form of dissidence. Approaching Bertalan's case, I realized that future studies regarding disability as dissidence, as well as those regarding the "medicalization of dissidence"²¹⁸ should enlarge the dissidence literature. Disability means not only physical handicap but also mental disorder. It can be interesting to distinguish between the persons who were really mad during communism and those persons who pretended to be crazy in order to escape the diverse persecutions dictated against them by the regime. Another category along these lines would be represented by those persons (especially writers) declared by the officialdom insane, confined to their home, and placed under the supervision of a physician. In this case, a fake medical or psychiatric diagnosis is imposed on normal people. The psychiatry was used as a mean of social and political control. But, we can analyze and the other side of the same matter, namely the situation in which mental hospitals were used as a safeguard from worse destiny at the hands of the regime.

An important aspect associated to the official art of the communist regime, remains in this study unaddressed: namely the way in which the control of folklore and folk art was a consciously manipulated practice by the officialdom. The "specific autochthon" required by the ideologists of the party was in fact a trick to emphasize the ethnocentrism. According to their understanding of the ethnocentrism the Western contemporary styles were considered negative by comparison with the "autochthon style". In my further researches I will approach the mechanisms through which "official" art policy assimilated folklore into the official discourse (folklore being considered for a long time a site of cultural refuge and resistance).

Regarding the artist's condition under oppression, my paper puts emphasis on the mechanisms through which the four unofficial artists survived propaganda's constraint. I

²¹⁸ Mark Field's term

analyzed mostly the living conditions of “unofficial” artist as opposed to the living conditions of the “official” one. Nevertheless, in spite of my original aims I couldn’t map the living style of the state-artists because these artists (or at least those of them solicited to give interviews) were not disposed to share any information, or memories of that age. The single remark made by a “popular court artist” (who did not want to be mentioned in this paper) was that “the artist was pale of hunger as the majority of the population. Should I accept this? I’m a portraitist. What is the difference between a portrait and’ homage’ when you are starved? Let’s face it: in communist period the single genre of art that was totally autonomous was religious art. I mean the icon. Is it a crime to paint in order to survive?

Currently in the Romanian press (both popular and professional) references to Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, Ana Lupaş and Ştefan Bertalan are very few (in Grigorescu and Brătescu’s cases) or almost inexistent (in Bertalan and Lupaş’s cases). All of them are evoked in the catalogue *Experiment in Romanian Art since 1960* which is accessible for the community of contemporary artists and critics. Excepting this specialized group of people, the Romanian public knows almost nothing about the visual artists of the communist regime. The general public is practically ignorant about the fact that in the communist period there was a type of art which was not “engaged”. The majority of the people (even the more or less educated people) believe that the only type of art created in communism was the official art of the regime and the tasteless “apolitical” landscapes from *Consignația*²¹⁹.

²¹⁹ *Consignația* was the Romanian idiom for a special type of shop in which the artists (and not only) could present their products in order to be sold.

Appendices

Dialogue with Comrade Ceaușescu (1978)

by Ion Grigorescu

(President of the Socialist Republic of Romania, General Secretary of the General Committee of the Communist Party)

Script:

(Imaginary questions and answers)

Motto: If the people cannot rule, they should at least be allowed to criticize!

I: In the last days you have been speaking about the contentment of the people...

Ceaușescu: Yes, there is content created by stimulated consumption, and sometimes by deprivation as well. We are creating needs in the area where people are most easily scared – that which concerns food. However, the country is hierarchically structured. Those who live in the villages should be the most starved, but they are accustomed to endurance. Their civilization – such as it still exists – is not based on food, nor on other needs related to the services of today's world. It is simply a handicap with which we are fighting. We will not make progress simply by equalizing the countryside and the towns. This is a matter of objective economic laws.

I: These 'objective laws' result from a too simple speculation. Those who are exploited in the new power relations- the proletariat – were destined to defeat exploitation and to become the leaders of the future, but now the reality is changing. The proletariat is tied up with bourgeoisie to come up with something new or different than the same exploitation

Ceaușescu: but we suppressed property rights over the means of production.

I: You did nothing that was not prompted by your own bourgeois-materialist instincts. The exploitation just became more complex. On 2nd of March 1978, at 8 am I saw two women pushing a wheelbarrow filled with mud, and over this image, I juxtaposed the images of the two or three visits to the presidential palace in the same day. Here militia men pulled the ears of the children who were begging outside. Delinquency among women is very high; we can speak about pauperization. Of course there is no legal property excepting the *Carpați Trust* with all its buildings, workshops and technical equipment, and there are hundreds of decrees which force all enterprises to cater to the needs of this trust. Many people are employed by it under conditions of slavery. I'm not referring to the low wages, but to the fact that they are bought and sold for life. What I mean by ownership over their lives is the Communist Party's own "jurisdiction" outside the law, trials without public or defenders, and the fact that their debts accumulated in this way amount to a hidden capital punishment. Too many people have passed through prison

Ceaușescu: Not everybody resists transformation. Only few men resist transformation!

I: Your only statements about the people are: “One cannot perform miracles overnight” (Braşov, 1978) and “In comparison with 1930...”. But poets sing only miracles achieved overnight. Dialogue, our dialogue is necessary because there still is a truth and a science with which one analyses social reality.

Ceauşescu: Romania is caught in the web of international economic relations, and dependent on the pressure of highly developed countries, on their credits and crises.

I: If a revolution took place here, would we follow the path of these other countries? That is “progress”, “goods”, “accumulation”, “investment”...

Ceauşescu: We are gaining original experience in original conditions, where anarchy itself cooperates with planning. “Progress” does not mean capitalist progress! Perhaps the revolution does not happen because the towns were crushed by our heavy agrarian campaign. Your proposals of anti-capitalist (no to accumulation, no to progress) will not only lead to misery and general decay but also to economic isolation. You ignore what socialism really is about: a guarantee of stability-this could be your dream about the lack of progress- on the path to collective ownership and responsibility for enterprise and its results.

I: At least people that might believe that what you wish is a kind of capitalism for all. You encourage the property of apartments, cars, furniture, household appliances; you’re lining the towns with shops. What stupefies those who followed you and strive to understand why you maintain the superiority of the system is your behaving as a great capitalist. You are always speaking about economy, inspecting factories, demanding discipline. You are a big employer, hungry for speculation on a stock exchange market where you are the only investor. You see only unhappy people and yet you keep throwing them into the circuit of labor- buying, proletarian-consumers.

Ceauşescu: I do not understand why you do not notice the qualitative differences between our society today and the society in the highly developed countries, when they were in the situation you are speaking of. The poor peasantry and industrial proletariat on the outskirts, the broad masses of people ruined by exploitation, war and economic crisis-they have been promoted here at least two steps. They live in apartment blocks in reasonable cleanliness and minimal comfort. To attain this we had to give them some work, in other words to offer them a source of honest and continuous income, affecting a climb up the social ladder. What is the aim of this social cleansing and moral economy? We really are a society based on economy. Our values are first and foremost material ones.

I: You are representing a minority – the suburban mentality-and you will remain in the minority because you have overlooked people’s yearnings. People are disinterested in economic efforts. We are a rich people in spite of your vision. We have a wealth you are not aware of. Even worse, you are destroying it unconsciously. There used to be material wealth here and today food tastes like rubbish. There used to be a social wealth. Today the unity of the people is only a slogan. The social classes are deeply divided, and work is repulsive. In fact it’s the working conditions: there is confusion between labor and its conditions.

There is corruption in the services, so the general atmosphere is antisocial. The intellectuals who were on the verge of a renaissance in 1968-70 and who represented social wealth have now deviated. They have become people who repeat texts learnt by heart. Our lives become incomprehensible to us. The intellectuals have no connection to the workers, they do not defend them. There is no solidarity even among intellectuals themselves. Romania has no intellectuals yet. The strange premonition of the Party! "The new man will come", the Party said. This is why so much is being demolished around us.

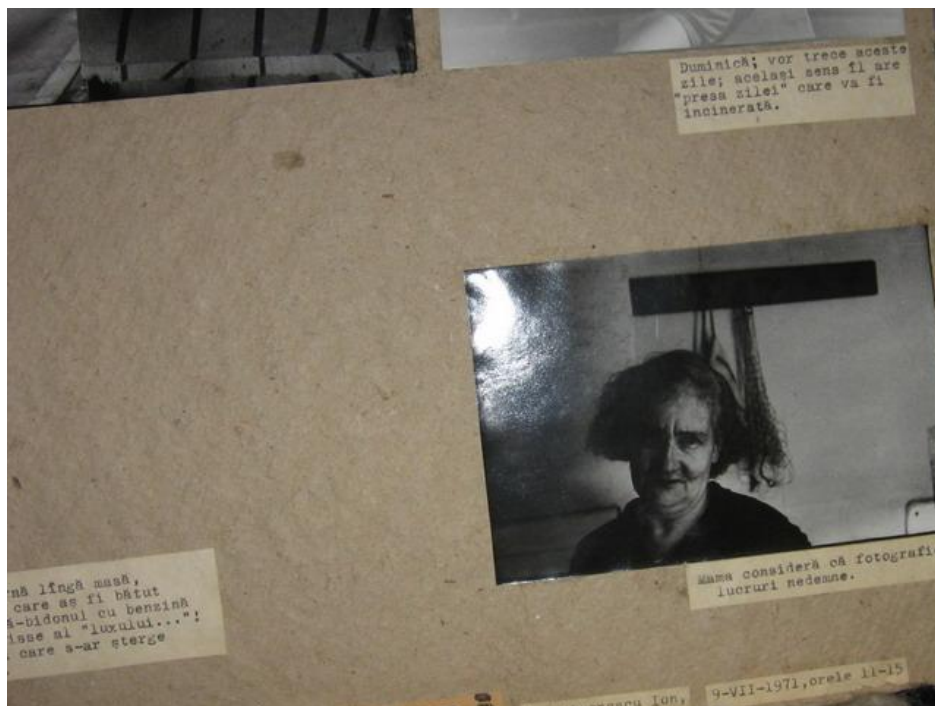
***Cultural Revolution*, by Ion Grigorescu (9 July 1971, between 11 and 15 a.m)**

The source of these photos is Ion Grigorescu's private collection



This is a fragment from Ion Grigorescu's collage *Cultural Revolution*. The reproduction was made with author's permission.





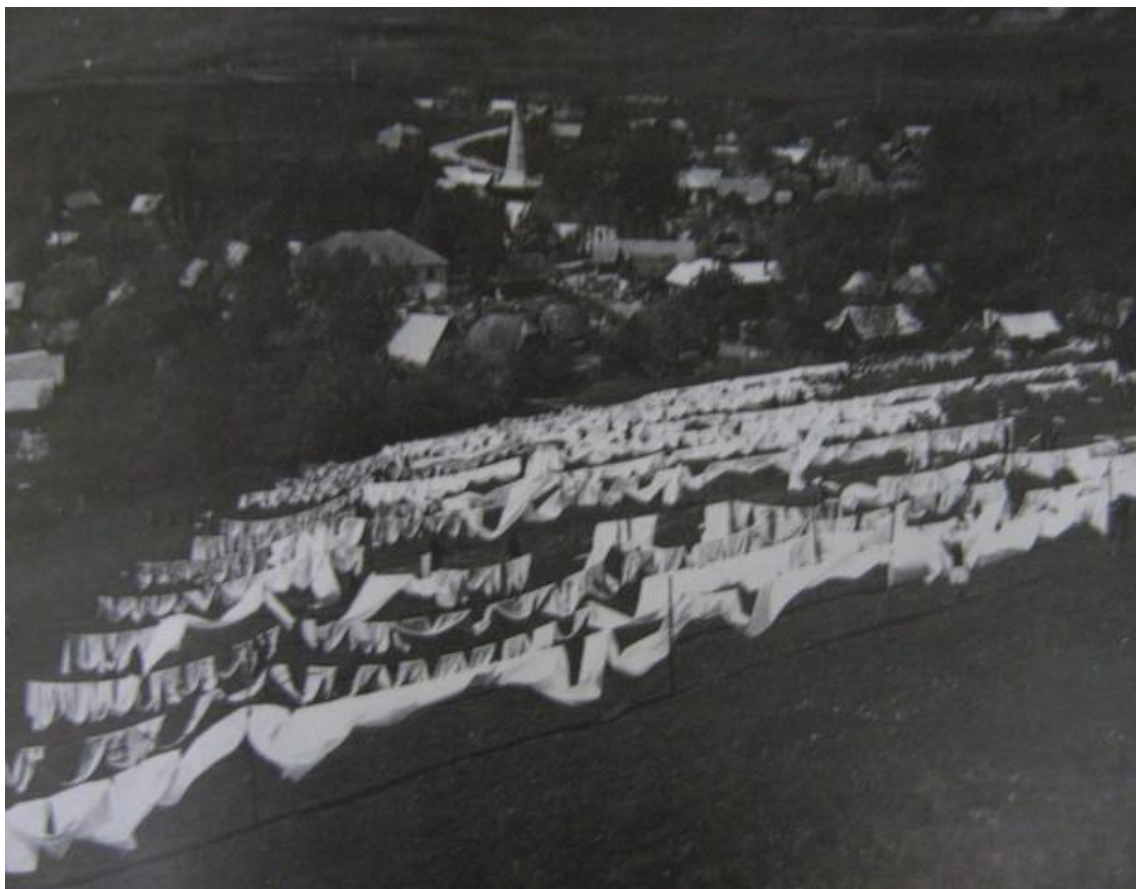
***Masculine/Feminine* (1976), by Ion Grigorescu**

Source: the catalogue *Experiment in Romanian Visual arts since 1960*



Humid Installation, by Ana Lupas

Source: the catalogue *Experiment in Romanian Visual Arts since 1960*



The House Painter (1974), by Ion Grigorescu

Source: Ion Grigorescu's private collection

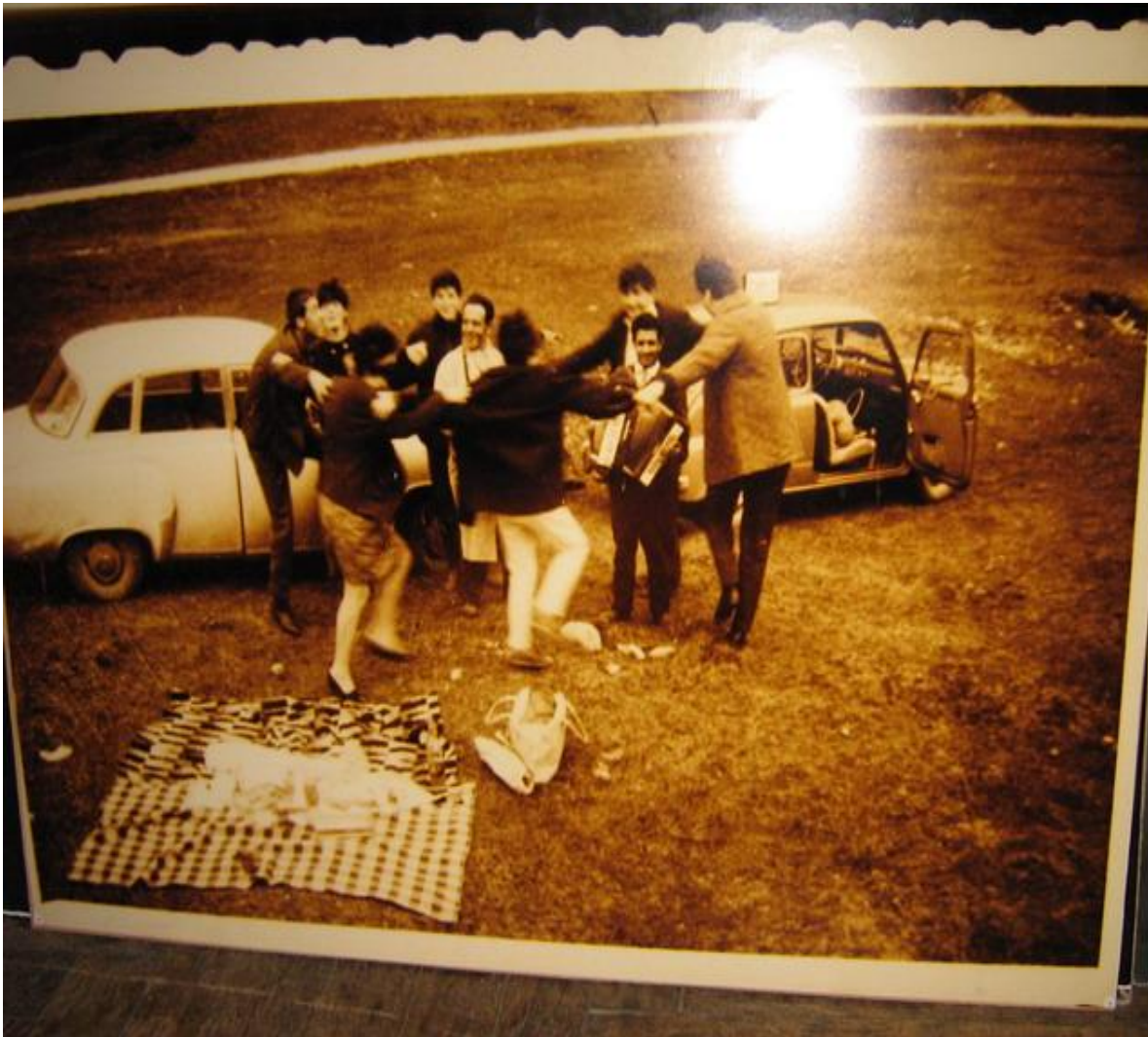


Photographs founded and enlarged by Ion Grigorescu in the 70s

The dimension of these photographs is 2x2m.

The communist regime did not enjoy macro-photography and 'leisure scenes' in the subject matter.

Source: Ion Grigorescu's private collection



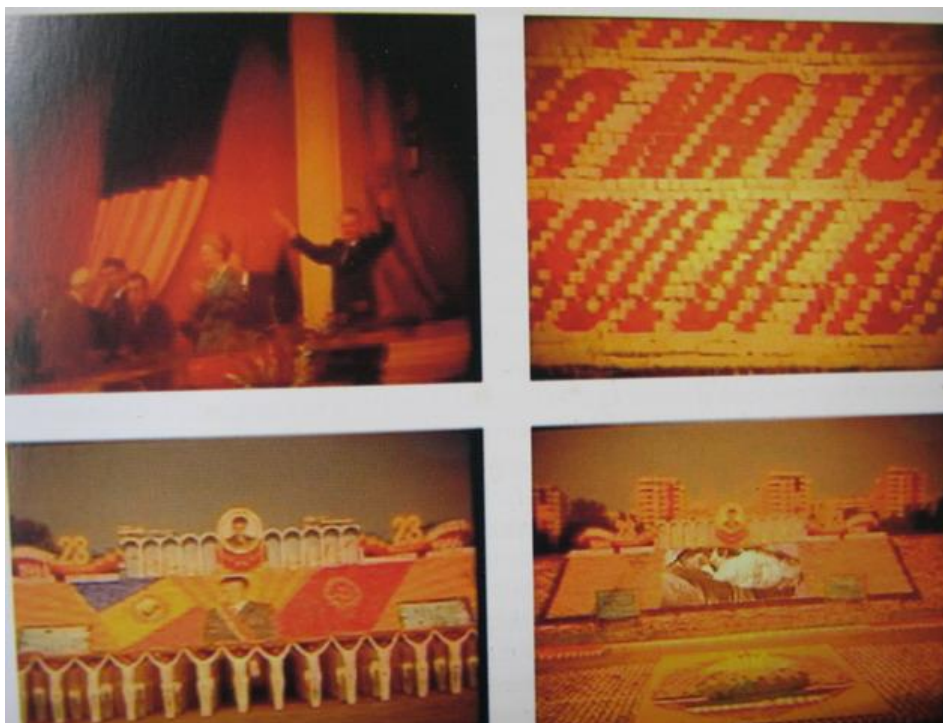


Macro-photography from the series
“Photographs founded”, made by Ion Groigorescu

The Actors of Subliminal History,
by Cristian Pogăgean (text by Cosmin Costinaș)

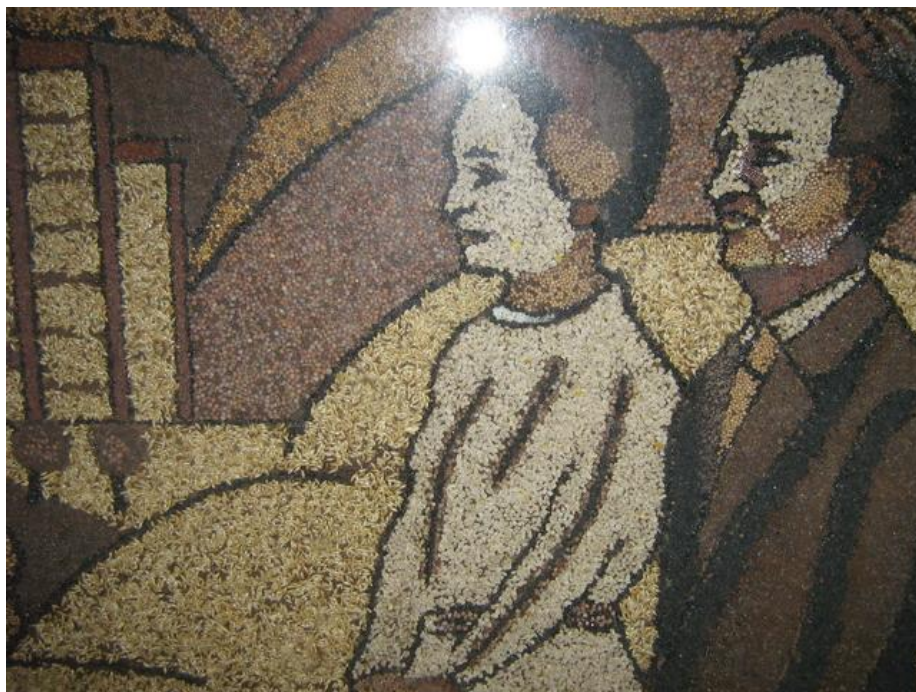
This is the short video- 2, 5 min- *The Actors of Subliminal History* presents a megalomaniac gathering (like the gatherings for the political festival *Song to Romania*). During one of the dictator's celebrations, the platforms handled by the masses obliged to get together on the stadium, depicting glorious images of the president, show for a prophetic second, the image of his corpse, immediately after the execution.

Source: the catalogue *Experiment in Romanian Visual Arts since 1960*



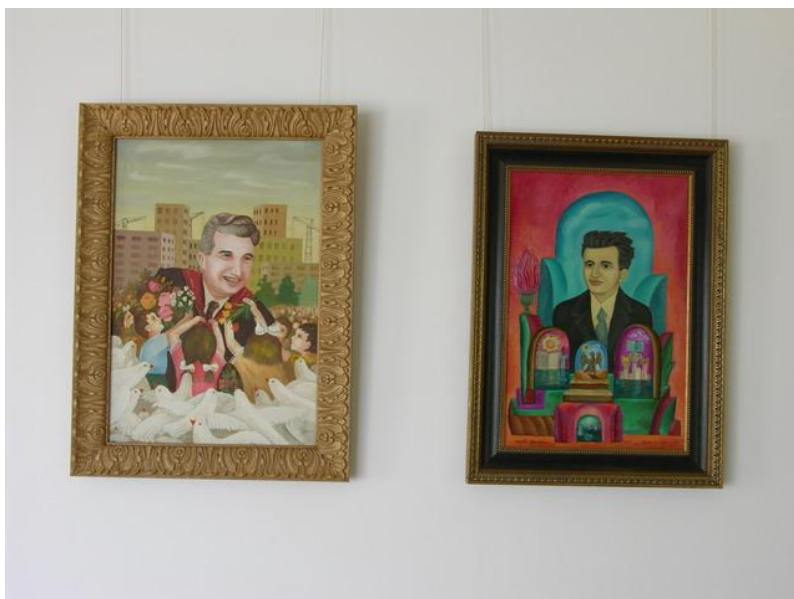
Homage to Nicolae Ceaușescu, by Grigore Metaxa

Source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest



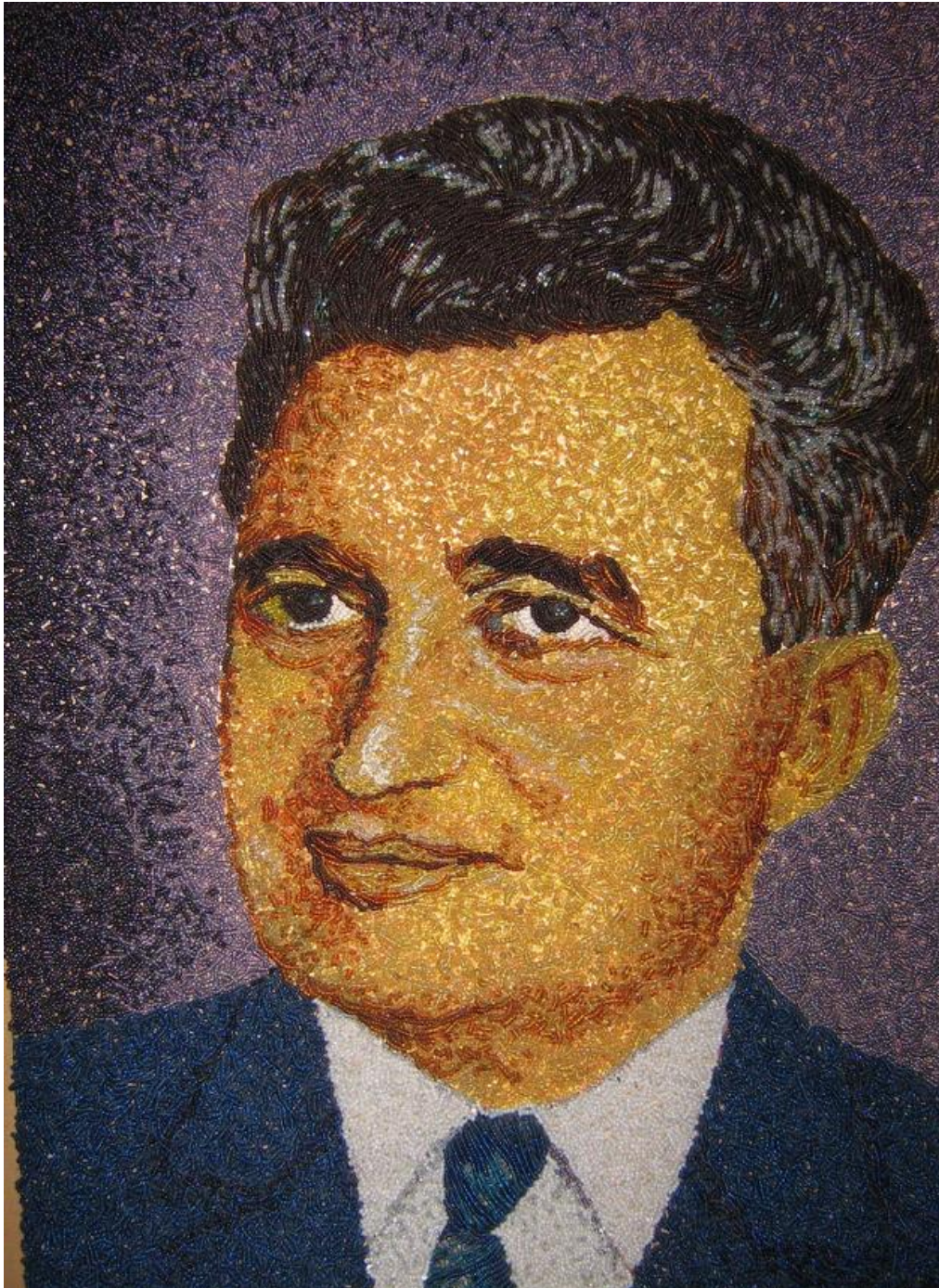
Homage, by Unknown authors

Source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest



Homage to Nicolae Ceaușescu, by Nicolae Maria

Source: The National Museum of Contemporary Art (Bucharest)



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