NOVEMBER 1948: A WRITTEN TEST ON SOCIALIST REALISM

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Abstract:
Drawing heavily on archival research, the paper analyses the formation of the discourse of socialist realism in Romanian post-war art. A questionnaire on socialist realism to which a number of artists responded in 1948 provides an intermediate phase that brought together more types of language and conceptions of art and reveals how the Soviet model was grafted onto local interwar theories.

Keywords:
Post-war art, Romania, socialist realism, Soviet art theory, wooden language

In November 1948, the artists of the Syndicate of Fine Arts were given an eight-point questionnaire on socialist realism in art. Although the archives have preserved only forty-two completed questionnaires, it was aimed at virtually all artists, who were at the time, almost without exception, members of the syndicate, which was the only officially recognised form of association for artists. The number of completed questionnaires is low, even in comparison with the number of artists then living in Bucharest. Clues as to the loss of the other (perhaps numerous) completed questionnaires do not exist at present, although we may make the general observation that the Syndicate's archives are scanty for the year 1948, the crucial year when the communist regime was installed in Romania and radical changes took place in every field. [1]

[1] One hypothesis worth taking into account is the alteration (of parts) of the archives through erasure. Throughout its existence, the regime reworked its policies several times, including its arts policies, denying or passing over in silence rules, actions and decisions taken previously and as such archival documents that might have revealed contradictory approaches would have been inconvenient. Along with other thinkers, Jacques Derrida saw a close dependence between control of the archives/memory and political power. Likewise,

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In the arts, such major changes took place mainly in the ways in which exhibitions were organised and in the system of acquisitions. The *Flacăra* (The Flame) exhibition in the spring of that year coincided with the annual State Exhibition, an event under even stricter control, which was thenceforth to replace the traditional Salon. Together, the two exhibitions played the role of configuring a type of relation between artists and the state, in which the latter became the sole patron and purchaser, while at the same time monopolising art exhibitions and artists' sociability. [2] In this context, the questionnaire is all the more interesting, given that it came on the eve of the annual Exhibition, as a kind of theoretical test prior to the practical examination.

Although we have no definite quantitative picture of the questionnaire, and therefore cannot use it in standard quantitative research, [3] the answers include variations wide enough to give us an idea of the artists' knowledge and their modes of expression. In addition, through corroboration with other research, also partly archival, they fill out the picture of the changes that were taking place in the arts system after the installation of the communist regime. Their exceptionality does not necessarily derive from the rarity of archival documents from the turbulent and epochal year 1948, but, above all, from the discursive form of the answers given, which shows us one phase in the process whereby the language of totalitarianism took control, not only as a vehicle of ideology, but also as a means of producing reality. The newspeak, *la langue de bois*, "repairs the 'weak links' of the real world

the archives might be irremediably governed by a "death drive" associated with destruction and aggression: "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression", in *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 10-13.

[2] For changes to the exhibition system in 1948 see Irina Cărăbaş, "Ultimul Salon sau prima expoziție invizibilă a realismului socialist", in: *De suo' maniera et de su' aria. Studii în onoarea Ancăi Oroveanu*, R. Demetrescu, I. Măgureanu, I. Cărăbaş (eds.), Bucharest, Unarte, 2012, pp. 130-143.

[3] Forty-three questionnaires are kept in the Syndicate of Fine Arts (S.F.A.) collection of the National Central Historical Archives Service (SANIC: Serviciul Arhivelor Istorice Centrale), file 57. If we give credence to a document from August 1948 (SANIC, Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party collection, Agitation and Propaganda Section, f. 219), "processing" of artists could bring together as many as 100 people. Likewise, we know the number of the Artists' Union members in 1950 (181 full members, 130 interim members) and if we suppose that the number was equal or less (up until 1948 the majority of artists had jointed the F.A.S. given financial and residential constraints), then around 20% must have answered the questionnaire. But such a calculation remains just a simple hypothesis.

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and inserts its wooden categories therein; in parallel, it allows the darning of the tears brought about by the reality of the ideological net, which must always be intact, lest it unravel completely. Wooden language ensures the constant re-adjustment and re-updating without which the ideology would lose its virulence and impact on the world. "[4] From this point of view, the answers of the forty-three artists differ from the standardisation of the official texts and also the rhetoric of the 1950s, the codified, ossified language of which it is difficult to make any sense beyond the set phrases of propaganda. Even when the artists spoke (gave speeches, wrote articles), the authorial voice was absent, and their discourse merely repeated the clichés about the need for art's ideological engagement, about knowledge of the contemporary reality, about the artist's fundamental task, about the struggle against formalism, and so on. If we compare the completed questionnaires from 1948 with the template for identifying wooden language put forward by Françoise Thom, [5] the result is rather ambiguous. Even if we encounter certain specific syntactic and lexical structures, the general impression is that these are drawn from the "bibliography, " from what the artists have learned or been taught, and that there are a number of fissures between the discourse and its emitter. Unlike in the 1950s, the questionnaire reveals a language in the course of development, which has not yet become wooden language, a discourse based on notions yet to be assimilated, which are often articulated artificially, illogically and, in many cases – perhaps unwittingly – discontinuously connected to the individual's intellectual culture. Undoubtedly, the artists knew what was expected of them and complied, but the control of the discourse proves to have been more lax than we might be tempted to believe today. Even if the texts written by the artists have many similarities, betraying the same sources, they remain fundamentally different, allowing individual voices to be heard. "Deviation" from the wooden language which contradicts the expectations we retrospectively place on the discourse about socialist realism does not mean that the answers were not accurate or that the general theory of socialist realism had not been assimilated in a minimal or more thorough way, depending on the case. In the majority of cases we can detect caution or aloofness, but this also combines with a de-localisation of the realities

[4] Françoise Thom, *Limba de lemn*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 83. For the Romanian space, see *Limba de lemn în presă*, Ilie Rad (ed.), Bucharest, Tritonic, 2009.
[5] Françoise Thom, *op. cit*., pp. 41-80.

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denoted (for example, “the people, ” “the working class, ” “socialist changes”, more often than not, do not seem to be rooted in any time or space and are certainly not realities in whose service the artist places himself). Nevertheless, it may be said that the “school for cadres” had been effective in “raising the ideological level, ” to use a phrase from the period.

Even if what was most at stake was the artistic practice within whose sphere the most important negotiations were to be carried out, with a view to defining socialist realism in local terms, the discourse and the assimilation of the verbal language of socialist realism and the structures of the wooden language were also to become increasingly important for artists. Dimitrios Demu, the author of the Stalin monument in Bucharest, recounts in his memoirs the ready-made speeches handed to artists at various conferences, in which they were required to take part and which ultimately had a pedagogic effect, that is, they transformed artists into perfect orators, capable of producing similar speeches themselves. [6] The socialist realist artist had to combine artistic and discursive practices, both of which were signs of his engagement, particularly within the delimited and ritualised framework of art institutions.

On the other hand, the connexion between verbal (or rather literary) and visual language had depended on the definition and function of socialist realism ever since it was invented in the U. S. S. R. Its norms and discourse were configured firstly within literature with a literary aim, and only thereafter were they translated and partly adapted to the visual language. The birth of socialist realism was regarded as having taken place at the Congress of the Unions of Soviet Writers in 1934, at which Maxim Gorky and Andrei Zhdanov, then the general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, both gave speeches containing solely references to literature. Although they did not define socialist realism with any clarity or provide any instructions for its application, excerpts from their speeches were quoted countless times (including in our questionnaire) until all sense of context and author was lost. Zhdanov spoke of socialist realism as a method of literature and literary criticism, whose task was the ideological transformation and education of the working class, [7] a

[6]Dimitrios Demou, *Le sourire de Staline*, Paris, Editions Universitaires, Jean-Paul Delarge, 1977, pp. 183-184.

[7]“From Andrei Zhdanov’s Speech”, in: *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, John E. Bowlt (ed.), New York, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 293.

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memorable, albeit elusive expression that was to give way to debates about style. As a result of these founding debates, socialist realism was defined through a sum of concepts and, more often than not, through negation, through concepts of what it was not, thereby creating a closed system in which each term referred to its opposite. The absence of any generally accepted stylistic characteristics (within the limits of a figurative art mainly based on classical drawing skills, along with other classical methods) allowed it to be altered in time and space. As such, the artistic production of the socialist countries adapted to a local form the Soviet model, which itself underwent a continuous process of metamorphosis. Analysing the complicated relationship between verbal and visual language, it is possible to distinguish at least two incompatible situations. Although the same discourses and the same demands seem to govern literature and art in equal measure, the languages remain distinct and artistic practice is defined separately through its own means; genres, artistic subjects and stylistic formulas are established not only through verbal discourse, but also through a series of evaluations of the art object at the institutional or exhibition level. Having undergone multiple assessments by guidance committees or exhibition juries, model works were promoted by means of prizes, repeated citation, and reproductions in the press and other publications, and their impact must have been at least as persuasive as verbal arguments. In any event, precisely due to the uncertainty of the concepts and stylistic formulas, the visual language required the verbal language in order to create a context for the representation, in order to argue that the representation was of a quality sufficient to allow it to be declared an example of socialist realism. The simultaneous functioning of the two languages explains, for example, why works by interwar masters, who had altered their stylistic register only to a very small degree, were accepted in exhibitions held in Romania in the 1950s. Viewed from such an angle, the 1948 questionnaire on socialist realism records a transitional phase in the convoluted relations between verbal and visual language that were established after the advent of socialist realism, a phase that allows us to observe the ways in which it was constructed and the mechanisms whereby it functioned.

The respondents to the questionnaire that is the starting point of this article were artists of every generation and category: artists trained at the turn of the century, who accumulated experience and renown in the interwar period; artists famous at the time, but who have been overlooked by

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subsequent historiography (many of them having left all too few traces); artists trained in the inter-bellum period; and, to a lesser extent, younger artists. It should be noted, however, that the artists who held high-ranking positions in the Ministry of the Arts (Lucian Grigorescu, Maximilian Schulman) or in S. F. A., where it seems the artists completed the questionnaire (president M. H. Maxy and other leading artists, such as Boris Caragea, Zoe Băicoianu, Iosif Cova, and Alexandru Ciucurencu), are not to be found among the respondents, nor are the younger artists whose meteoric rise began in that period, such as Ștefan Szönyi and Titina Călugăru (both of whom went on to win prizes at the annual State Exhibition, first held in December 1948). The only members of the S. F. A. leadership that completed the questionnaire were the sculptors Mac Constantinescu and Ion Jiga. Other well-known artists, some of whom had problematic or nebulous situations, give some of the most interesting answers: Adam Bălţatu, Oscar Han (purged from the S. F. A. in 1945), Samuel Mützner, Ion Jalea (ex-president of the Corps of Plastic Artists, an organisation set up by the Ministry of Culture during the war to take the place of the Syndicate), Dumitru Ghiaţă, and Eugen Ciucă. They were joined by young artists who went on to become famous, such as Brăduţ Covaliu, Eugen Popa and Tia Peltz, and the all-but-unknown Veturia Sonea, Elena Anton and Ion Pană.

The questions were as follows:

1. What do you understand by socialist realism in art?
2. What would be the most effective means of eliminating formalism?
3. What role does romanticism play in socialist realism and how would you define that romanticism?
4. According to you, what are the subjects of socialist realism?
5. What technique would be most suited to achieving socialist realism?
6. What difference do you find between socialist realism and bourgeois realism?

For each question I have selected the most various answers, which capture the plurality of the artists' voices and attitudes. Another interest guiding the selection was connected with my wider research interests in how modernist formats and interwar artists adapted to the arts system imposed by the communist regime. This explains the recurrence of names such as Mac Constantinescu, Oscar Han and Adam Bălţatu in the commentary on the

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questionnaires, but the overall aim was to present the most diverse discourses possible.

On the first question, which asked for a definition of socialist realism, most of the artists state only that the notion of reality ought to guide art, a notion they connect with sincerity, truth, and sometimes a knowledge and observation of nature. Such characteristics of art were familiar to the artists from a different context and with different visual results and were not necessarily connected with realism in the strict sense. Sincerity towards nature or observation thereof was part of the debate about modernity, relating to the painting of Paul Cézanne, one of the most important models for interwar Romanian art. Answers such as those of Ghiaţă, Mützner and Han define socialist realism drawing on previous conceptions of art:

DUMITRU GHIAŢĂ: Every work of art should be conceived according to an idea, this idea should contain a progressive social truth that reflects the revolutionary transformations we are experiencing.

SAMUEL MÜTZNER: Socialist realism is the reality of life, the expression of truth, it is understanding and love of nature in all its grandeur, it is human psychology with all that is most characteristic, human, noble or base about it.

OSCAR HAN: A realist is situated in nature and in social life as an observer of reality, pursuing with objective sincerity the truth in its scientific concreteness.

Of the same generation as the above three artists, sculptor Ion Dimitriu Bîrlad seems to superpose the old idea of national art, according to which there is a correspondence between the history, geography and customs of a nation and its art, upon the contemporary imperative to create art that reflected the present reality.

Since socialism aims at a new order in the life of a nation or a union of nations, the new aspects of this life should also necessarily be reflected in the art in question, because the art of a nation should be nothing other than the most perfect image of its life, viewed from every angle and presented in every aspect. Once the antiquated aristocratic and bourgeois mentalities vanish from a country forever, it is natural also that the presence of such mentalities should vanish from the art of that country. In this way, any socialist reform should necessarily have a direct correspondent in the

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respective artistic creation, for only thus can a correspondence of positive and fruitful situations be established.

Other artists propose a definition of socialist realism by pointing to its militant, democratic and educative function, a method also found in the official texts that clearly delineated the mission of art and the artist. In some cases (Ana Vogel, Despina Ghinokastra), it is identified with representational subjects related to the working-class, which shows not only the assimilation of models, but also a pragmatic attitude.

During the course of 1948, the main concern of the arts system, which was undergoing centralisation, was to reorient the subjects of art, as can easily be observed if we read the catalogues of the official group exhibitions, while postponing debates about style, the appropriate representational means, and thematic diversity. The importance ascribed to theme provides a conclusion to the strange answer given by Eugen Ciucă, in which we find an artistic manifesto in the proper sense, which employs the rhetoric of the avant-garde manifesto and lends the text a graphic look that contributes to its meaning. Through this manifesto, which never entered into official circulation, the artist constructs a kind of total answer to the questionnaire, finding a textual equivalent for the militant nature of socialist realism:

Thus, S. R. in Art is achieved *through the presence of MAN in his everyday manifestations*, in other words it is the ESSENCE OF THE IDEA / socialism /, of the STRUGGLE and of the SUCCESS OF SOCIALIST-COMMUNIST REVOLUTIONISM, presented simply, meaningfully, just as it is found in nature.

Socialist realism in art:

DOES NOT ELIMINTATE the plastic value gained / colour, technique, etc.

DOES NOT REQUIRE any particular mode of expression

DOES NOT DEMAND a special kind of technical treatment,

BUT DOES DEMAND:

Images in which the *preisence* of the SOCIALIST ASPECT of the theme should be resolved with as many plastic qualities as possible.

The militant spirit and the image of the artist as fighter also inspires the answer of the unknown Veturia Sonea, whose text juxtaposes all the concepts employed by the official discourse, from art's mission to "convey

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reality" to the need for "ideological content" and the act of "transforming the world." Besides the author's intention to criticise some artists' lack of responsiveness to socialist realism, the beginning of her answer betrays an atmosphere full of confusion, on the one hand, and resistant to change, on the other:

Countless times, in the plenaries of the plastic artists, the notion of SOCIALIST REALISM has been defined and its role has been demonstrated, but just as many times, in debates, there have been people who either have not wanted or have not been ideologically prepared adequately to understand where and how to apply it. This explains why even today the subject is not on the agenda, because ultimately every artist has to come to serve the cause of the present day through plastic means.

The second question follows on from the first, since socialist realism and formalism define each other, the one being the negation of the other. In the discourse of the period in which they actively functioned in the arts system and in particular at the level of artistic practice, neither of the notions had fixed boundaries, but their duality would never be abolished. In any event, formalism belonged equally to the (bourgeois) past and to the present. It demanded that the artist constantly struggle with himself, purge himself of the residues of the past, of bourgeois art, of oppression, and so on. Formalism remained art's "enemy from within", as was reiterated in many of the articles and speeches of the time, which artists could read in the press or exhibition catalogues. [8] On the other hand, the general attitude towards formalism remained equivocal, because the regime had long since begun a campaign to attract prestigious artists and therefore only partly criticised their artistic (modernist) forms. Artists also proved to be opaque to the key notion of socialist realism for other reasons. The discourse of the period labelled as formalists mainly the artists or movements that were not necessarily admired or imitated by the interwar generations, such as Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali and the whole of the abstract art movement. The position of the local avant-garde had been marginal in comparison with the new classicism or impressionism. The critique of the avant-garde, to be found in texts about socialist realism, reactivated and continued previous

[8] See, for example, Marcel Breslaşu, "Cuvînt înainte", in: *Grupul plastic Flacăra* [exhibition catalogue], Bucharest, 1948, p. 4.

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disagreements and even in cases where impressionism or post-impressionism was included in the category of formalist art, the majority of artists would have found it impossible to recognise themselves in features such as antirealism, irrationality, anti-humanism, individualism, etc. [9] For example, Adam Bălţatu, an impressionist painter whose declared model was Nicolae Grigorescu, labels as formalist the movements that do not cover his own art or that of most of his colleagues:

Studying all these [nature and states of mind] and seeking to express them through lines, colours and forms, the artist will no longer be tempted to juggle with lines and forms arising from the desire to bait using representations that have no relation to great art, but are mere mental inventions, plastic algebra or geometry, things that are in essence stale. Picasso, Braque etc. and a part of the work of Cézanne. In brief, things without content. In the representation of nature I do not agree to seek for naturalism that denotes laziness of the eye and of the reason in relation to nature.

The placing of the avant-gardes and naturalism within the same species as formalism repeats the contemporary official discourse, but also the discourse of the local inter-bellum. On the one hand, the faults which Bălţatu ascribes to the avant-gardes do not stick to the formula provided by socialist realism, a few of whose elements I have listed above, but rather to conceptions that crystallised in a completely different political and social context. [10] On the other hand, the interwar artists who set themselves apart from the strategies of the avant-gardes equally set themselves apart from naturalism, regarding the two as opposite extremes. It is no wonder that naturalism recurs in the answer of another artist who makes use of it in the question regarding socialist realism. Whereas Bălţatu's way of putting it is closest to what Şirato wrote – naturalism is a "passive attitude towards nature"[11] – in the case of Mac Constantinescu the references seem to have shifted, since naturalism is here associated with excessive detail, along the lines of Gorky's parable of roasting the hen, which he even quotes:

[9] Such features are mentioned in publications such as A. I. Sobolev, *Teoria leninistă a reflectării şi arta*, Bucharest, Editura Partidului Muncitoresc Romîn, 1948, pp. 33-36 and V. Kemenov, *Decadenţa artei burgheze*, Bucharest, Editura Ziarului *Scînteia*, 1948, *passim*.

[10] For an extended critique of the avant-garde featuring the idea that the avant-garde was devoid of substance and excessively intellectualised, see, for example, O.W. Cisek, "Expoziţia internaţională a revistei *Contimporanul*", in: *Gândirea*, 15 January 1925, pp. 218-220 and Cezar Petrescu, "Copacul din asfalt", in: *Gândirea*, 15 May 1925, pp. 1-7.

[11] Francisc Şirato, *Încercări critice*, Bucharest, Meridiane, 1967, p. 63.

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Socialist realism in art must be active, dynamic, concentrated, dedicated to the working class into which it is integrated and from which it proceeds. In no case should socialist realism in art be confused with "naturalism, " which leads to photographic dilutions, to non-essential details, therefore to the inexpressive. Gorky writes: "We cannot roast the chicken feathers and all…we have to learn to pluck the inessential feathers of the fact, we have to know how to extract the meaning from a real fact. "

Thus, the majority of local artists did not feel that the critique of formalism was aimed at them, and their answers reveal that, more often than not, they equated it with superficiality. For this reason, many of the texts propose that formalism be combated through study (Eugen Popa), in particular study of drawing (an academic desideratum), sincerity, closeness to the model (Brăduţ Covaliu), and even through the imagination (Marius Copan). The more theoretical Mac Constantinescu alone proposes "critical combativeness, " thereby lending formalism a meaning related not only to form but also to content.

The question about the role romanticism is called upon to play within the framework of socialist realism had a single prescribed answer, which is the one that most of the artists also give. "Revolutionary romanticism" and the aim of inspiring art with the ability to make visible the future had their origin in the aforementioned speech by Andrei Zhdanov and constituted one of the famous dicta of socialist realism, which was to be repeated *ad nauseam* in every kind of context, with or without mention of its source. The artists were introduced to it indirectly and it is possible that they knew of the expression "revolutionary romanticism" without knowing its author.

The dose of romantic ideas regarded as necessary to the theory of socialist realism raises the question of its temporality, a multidimensional temporality in which past, present and future co-exist: socialist realism borrows processuality from the general language, since it is called upon to convey the transformations of the present with an eye to the future, to the goal of those transformations, but it does so using means that belong to the past. At the height of the Cold War, socialist realism appropriated the classic European heritage (for example, the art of the Renaissance and Rembrandt), which Western Europe was supposed to have rejected in favour of anti-classical, dehumanised art.

References are rare in all the questionnaires (the theory of socialist realism oscillates between impersonally expressed universality and prestige accorded to leaders), and Zhdanov is mentioned just once, by the little-known painter Elena Anton. Many historians have equated post-war Stalinist culture with the decisions Zhdanov took in order to consolidate the centralisation of the arts system. He was considered a cultural Stalin,

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synonymous with the tightening of cultural norms in the U. S. S. R. and with imposing socialist realism on the Eastern Bloc states through brutal, obtuse and all but absurd means of control. [12] Although a school for cadres named after him was founded in Bucharest in 1948, possibly after his death (31 August of that year), he was rarely to be mentioned in the discourse about art, and the questionnaire was no exception. In fact, the works of the much-feared A. A. Zhdanov were little translated in Romanian and only a few of them made reference to philosophy or literature, such as the famous criticism that led to the complete marginalisation of Ana Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko, while the rest dealt with international politics. [13] His extremely harsh criticism of the works of the two writers was taken as a warning to the whole literary sphere and by extension to the arts in general, thus setting the standard for methods of Stalinist censorship in culture. Besides a few clues as to socialist realism proper, whose name is barely mentioned, it contains themes from the famous speech of 1934. Despite the importance of the verbal discourse within the framework of socialist realism and the convention of quoting communist leaders as a means of argument, the absence of publications by figures such as Zhdanov, who held an extraordinary amount of power, is not necessarily inexplicable, but rather points to the existence of a higher power, that of the arts institutions (such as the artists' unions, annual exhibitions, institutes of the fine arts), whose bureaucratisation and centralisation was the main strategy of Soviet and Eastern Bloc cultural policy.

Without doubt, for the Romanian artists in 1948, "revolutionary realism" was more than just a memorable catchphrase, which explains the very similar answers to the questionnaire, which, besides their militant character, perhaps adjusted the demands of realism. Here, it is worth mentioning Mac Constantinescu once again, who, without repeating the cliché, lends romanticism a more general meaning:

[12] See, for example, Antoine Baudin, *Le réalisme socialiste soviétique de la période jdanovienne: les arts plastiques et leurs institutions (1947-1953)*, Berne, Peter Lang, 1997 and Cristian Vasile, *Literatura şi artele în România comunistă. 1948-19*53, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2010.

[13] A. A. Jdanov, *Raport asupra revistelor Zvezda şi Leningrad* [1946], Bucharest, Editura Partidului Muncitoresc Romîn, 1948. Apart from this speech, in the Romanian Academy Library can be found three other smaller texts, also transcripts of speeches. Unlike Maxim Gorky, many of whose speeches were translated into Romanian and subsequently published in book form, Andrei Zhdanov seems to have been forgotten, and his famous speech of 1934 was never translated into Romanian; all that remained of it was the phrase "revolutionary romanticism."

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Our romanticism is the "flame" eternally awake in the consciousness of the working class on its road to progress.

Nevertheless, in some cases, ignorance of the "revolutionary realism" topos apparently leads to an attempt to adapt general knowledge of the history of art to the question. Based on the traditional opposition between realism and romanticism, a number of artists deduce that the two cannot cohabit:

ION JALEA: Romanticism diminishes the realism in the art of socialist realism. It predisposes to a utopian art and an unreal art and one devoid of any expression of the life that ought to be lived engaged in struggle.

ELENA PESCARU: Romanticism has no role in socialist-realist art, inasmuch as romanticism is opposed to reality.

The same question also gives rise to the old connexion between romanticism and the cultivation of national character, a concept utterly opposed to the internationalist discourse of the time. It is Ion Dimitriu Bîrlad who makes this connexion, and he puts forward a similar interpretative key in his answers to other questions:

Giving impetus to the existence of sentiment, custom, tradition and national art and frontally tackling the native character of various populations, romanticism might seem to be an artistic element connected with the most perfect possible presentation of their characteristics in art.

Inasmuch as many of the respondents regarded themes linked to labour as best defining socialist realism, the way in which the artists tackled the fourth question is quite uniform and succinct. The subjects of socialist realism are "the new reality" (Eugen Popa) or quite simply the life and activity of the working class. The uniformity of the answers shows that the artists had understood what was expected of their artistic practice, and namely, in the first phase, re-orientation towards themes in keeping with the official discourse, and the simplest way of achieving this was by depicting labour. Some answers borrow the official rhetoric, such as the answer given by Benedictina Papadopol, which stands out as the only one that brings the state into the equation of socialist realism. Art must select:

Subjects connected with social transformations in every branch of activity in the new social order that the Romanian Workers' Part and the entire working world seek to establish in the New Romanian People's Republic.

While after 1950, that is, after the establishment of the Artists' Union, official lists of themes were put forward for artists, particularly with a view to the preparation of annual group exhibitions, at the time of the questionnaire subjects were probably passed on orally or via wall newspapers, which were important channels of information and which we

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know to have existed at the S. F. A. Adam Bălţatu provided the following list of themes in his answer to the fourth question:

The list might be endless. Road building, the electrification of the villages, dyke building. Workers' outings. Mechanised agriculture. Factory subjects. The family life of the workers. Scenes from the life of the artists. Scenes from the historic struggle of the working class. I think that grand landscapes are to be scorned, either, which could give a wider vision of our country.

The next question, on the technique appropriate to socialist realism, represented just as stringent a problem as subject matter when it came to artistic practice, but the answers are far from being unanimous, which shows that in fact the topic had been neglected and somehow left up in the air. Nor was it a topic that was tackled directly later, but the privileging (through prizes, fees, commissions) of certain genres, techniques and sizes established a kind of general formula of socialist realism. Thus, the most widespread idea among the artists was that every technique could serve socialist realism and that it was up to the individual artist. A similar discourse can be found in the press, voiced by authoritative figures such as Maxy, who published in *Flacăra* (a magazine closely supervised by the Union of Artists', Writers' and Journalists' Syndicates, of which the S. F. A. was a member), an article on artistic practice, which, he says, it is up to the artist to choose: "Each artist will discover for himself the technical means required in order to realise his art, an art sure of its value and social content – means that will elucidate most straightforwardly the expression of the given content. "[14]

In the questionnaire, we find a number of succinct answers, such as that given by Zambaccian, the only non-artist among the respondents. Contrary to expectations, this does not set his questionnaire apart in any way. He writes that:

The problem of realism is first of all a problem of content. Ciucă likewise gives a succinct answer, but in the same avant-garde register as the rest of his questionnaire:

It is NOT on technique that the SUCCESS of a subject is conditional, just as the value of a POEM is not determined by grammar.

Some artists once again propose "good craftsmanship, without exaggerations" (P. Troteanu) or "good, healthy drawing" (Tania Baillyare), which have nothing to do with technique. Others intuit that socialist realism redirects the means of representation towards academic values. One

[14] M.H. Maxy, "Cum să pictăm", in: *Flacăra*, 10, 1948, p. 5.

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unidentified artist gives the example of nineteenth-century Russian painting, the only one to do so, although the example of Russian and Soviet art was prevalent in the discourse and in reproductions. It is interesting that the models he proposes do not come from contemporary art, from Soviet socialist realism, but from its invented lineage: it must have been a matter or personal choice or guidance to have preferred a gradual introduction of models:

The conscious artist will seek to achieve socialist realist art, will seek to employ the most perfect means to achieve his idea without being afraid of being accused of "classicism" or "academism", inasmuch as he knows that it is precisely those who call themselves "innovators" or "revolutionaries" at any price that are expressions of bourgeois decadence. Let us remember the works of painters such as Repin, Vasnetsov and Surikov as our example and watchword.

Oscar Han also refers partly to formal means, but in the spirit of modern classicism, which was specific to his sculpture and to an entire movement in interwar Romanian art. He chooses a middle way based on an interest in the concrete, in objectivity and truth, which also draws on theories such as those of O. W. Cisek, to which Han and the whole Group of Four were inextricably linked. In his answer, Han seems to speak entirely for himself:

If by technique we understand craftsmanship, that is, the means of expression, that is, the means of realisation through volume, form, line, colour, then the most appropriate technique is that whereby such means pursue plastic concreteness, with respectful objectivity towards the scientific truth, without succumbing to the exaggerations on which the romantic sentiment relies in the transfiguration of form or in the classical spirit that renders form abstract or the spirit of impressionism that pulverises form.

Graphic artist Beca Rind gives an unusual answer in this context in which artists sooner duck the issue of technique; she subordinates technique (sooner understood as an artistic field) to socialist realism's mission to educate the masses and for this reason defines it as public art (monuments, decorative panels) or reproducible art (illustrations). Indeed, all these were to play a major role in propaganda strategies, perhaps even more so than artistic products intended for exhibitions or museums:

Socialist realism is by its essence art for the masses; for this reason, the technique whereby plastic works are to be made should be the one most suited to their penetration of the wider masses. The most suitable would be frescoes, decorative panels, large-scale paintings, book and magazine illustration, and monumental sculpture.

Painter Raul Lebel devotes more attention to this question than to any other in the questionnaire, taking literally socialist realism's claim to truth, as a

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claim to scientific truth. He proposes no more and no less than laboratory experiments to assist in the development of genuinely scientific techniques:

In a few words: any technique might be good on the condition that it be a scientific technique, in the current sense of the word. If we had the courage to carry out honest self-criticism, we would recognise that painting is not based on any scientific technique, but only on a substratum of empirical technique…This is why it is necessary to set up a physical-logical optics laboratory in order for painters to be able to understand what light is, what its relationship to colour and value is, and how all these are perceived by the brain, since only from such an understanding will the sensation of harmony and beauty result for all.

The differences between socialist realism and bourgeois realism, asked for in the final question, entail exactly the same conceptual area as that of the first two questions, related to the socialist realism/formalism dichotomy. In general, the answers gravitate around subject matter, and the opposition between the two consists in representation of the working class or the absence thereof, in the case of bourgeois realism. The terms of the opposition are almost never harsh or combative, and sometimes they are completely non-ideological, such as static/dynamic (Adam Bălţatu, Ion Dem. Demetrescu) or constructive/destructive (Despina Ghinokastra). More problematic is the very notion of realism and which artists from the past might be included within the category. Oscar Han excludes realism from art, which as a corollary raises doubts about the existence of socialist realism itself:

In plastic art, some artists have sporadically created works of a realist nature. I think that the problem has a far wider field to be researched in literature, where bourgeois-realist works were created.

On the other hand, Samuel Mützner selects "bourgeois" artists with differing artistic styles, from seventeenth-century "realism" to twentieth-century impressionism, which he nonetheless does not discard, but includes among the potential models for the present day.

To him, the opposition is sooner transformed into continuity, an ambiguity that the official discourse also maintained: socialist realism was presented as a new concept of art, one radical and different, but which nonetheless sought its legitimacy in a past lineage (such as the nineteenth-century Russian realists):

Realist artists such as Frans Hals, Vermeer, Chardin, and Courbet, or Renoir and Monet (for the reality of light) and others have handed down to us a painting of the highest order, but devoid of the drive that urges mankind onwards to the lofty ideal of justice, humaneness and truth, to which all proletarian humanity aspires. It is therefore our purpose to carry the banner of the beautiful onward on the luminous path to Socialist Realism.

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Mac Constantinescu's answer to this final question is noteworthy from at least two points of view. His answer consists in a simple transcription of a quotation from the soviet scholar A. I. Sobolev, whose writings have been probably used as textbooks, i. e. he replaces individual expression with an official text, with an authoritative quotation:

In "Leninist Theory of Representation and Art, " A. I. Sobolev writes: "… the artists of the past were not capable of providing a positive programme, of showing by artistic means the real path that would lead to the creation of the new socialist society. Only socialist realism is capable of doing this, which has as its theoretical base the sole scientific conception of the world, Marxist-Leninist philosophy. "

The quotation from the work by Sobolev, translated into Romanian that year, [15] indicated the recommended sources, which were available to artists. The questionnaire could have been filled in based entirely on a reading of this short book. Where ideas can be recognised, the author is not cited (with the exception of Mac Constantinescu's questionnaire) and we may presume that they were drawn not from direct reading but from an intermediate, probably oral, channel of information. Apart from Sobolev, another work translated for the benefit of the artists' education, *The Decadence of Bourgeois Art* by Vladimir Kemenov, [16] seems to have had even a lesser impact, since its combativeness does not transpire in the answers to the questionnaire, as is proven by the attitude towards the final question in particular. The entire book was an answer to the question. The fact that the answers are based not so much on reading as much as on speeches relates to the conception of "guidance" and "ideological elevation", which were eminently collective and anchored in multiple types of institutional practice.

The questionnaire itself should be understood from the perspective of institutional practice and functions. The S. F. A., in whose archives the questionnaire dossier is to be found, had a monopoly on the social life of artists in 1948 (other groups and associations had been outlawed), as well as on artistic recognition. Membership of the Union exempted artists from the large taxes levied on freelancers after 1945, and this forced them into membership and gave them, at least in some cases, access to living quarters, studios and canteens, which were vital benefits immediately after the war. The Syndicate mediated some commissions and, above all, relations with the Ministry of Arts. It became responsible for implementing rules, which, in the first phase, related not so much to art as to artists. Not only did art have to be addressed to the collective, but also its production had to gain collective authority. Attendance of meetings, reading groups, and

[15] See note 10.
[16] Idem

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conferences became an integral part of the arts activities centralised by the Syndicate and its successor, the Artists' Union. In collaboration with the Union of Artists', Writers' and Journalists' Syndicates, the ministry, and the Agitation and Propaganda Section, the offensive to collectivise the arts was augmented in 1948 with new strategies of which ideological education of artists was a major part. Whereas until then the relationship between the regime and artists had been more circumspect, once the communists gained complete power, things changed. In this context, the questionnaire represents the close of an initial phase, in which art was reoriented towards socialist realism. At the beginning of that year, the education system had only just been overhauled and the task seemed difficult, as Nicolae Moraru himself said in a meeting of the Agitation and Propaganda Section:

But the level in regard to assimilation of Marxism-Leninism in art is quite low. … This is why, with the greatest keenness, the question arises as to creating a Party seminar for people in art. Not a school for cadres in the proper sense. Something wider, more mobile. Great care needs to be taken in the labour of educating artists. In order to ensure greater ideological vigilance and at the same time in order to change the spirit of people of art. [17]

If that was how things stood at the beginning of the year, by August Nicolae Moraru was able to declare satisfactory results, [18] which cannot be read without a trace of doubt, however. The task of putting into practice the school for cadres fell to the Union of Writers', Artists' and Journalists' Syndicates and then the S. F. A. The archives of the S. F. A. preserve proposals for plenaries and lectures on arts topics, to be given by art historians Radu Bogdan, Ion Frunzetti and Ionel Jianu, [19] and other topics straight from the school for cadres, such as "the history of the Bolshevik Party" and "dialectical materialism. "[20] As in the case of the questionnaire, which was also imported from the education system for cadres, we do not know how large attendance was at such meetings, how the artists reacted to them, and whether or not they were required to attend. Taking an overall look at the questionnaire, which also elicited many superficial or completely inappropriate answers, we tend to believe that the artists were required to have minimal knowledge and/or there were means of avoiding the ideological discourse. In any event, the same as meetings and conferences,

[17]S.A.N.I.C., Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party collection, Propaganda and Agitation Section, file 6/1948, p. 24.
[18]Ibidem, file 9/1948, p. 219.
[19]S.A.N.I.C., S.F.A. collection, file 23, p. 58: Radu Bogdan "will talk about the social elements of life, " Ion Frunzetti about the Modes of Realism; Ion Jianu about Realism in the Evolution of Art.
[20]S.A.N.I.C., S.F.A. collection, file 37, p. 11 verso. It may be supposed that the topics were presented by various artists and then debated in the discussion groups.

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the questionnaire was a collective exercise, a pedagogical strategy in itself, quite apart from a test of knowledge. The guidance meetings, the conferences and plenaries, were to become constant events in artists' lives, whereas the questionnaire, as far as the archives are able to tell us, seems to have been unique. Although none of the artists completed the questionnaire with any subversive intent, the answers contained expressions and opinions that had nothing to do with the official discourse. The questionnaire is therefore valuable from a number of points of view: firstly, it reveals the process whereby the wooden language came into being, but at an intermediate phase that brought together a number of types of language; and secondly, it brings together a number of conceptions of art and points to how socialist realism was grafted onto local theories from the previous modernist period. Likewise, the questionnaire, understood as an institutional practice, reveals the importance of the art institutions to the socialist realism that they implemented and maintained. From the artists' answers we cannot draw any clear definition of socialist realism, which is not solely due to their disinterest or confusion in the face of political pressure, but also to the fact that it was not so much a style or theory and more a means whereby the arts functioned under the communist regime.

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