THE IMAGE OF ALTERITY IN ROMANIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

Lucian-Nicu RĂDĂŞAN, PhD Candidate, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş

Abstract: Alterity represents a philosophical concept framed by Emmanuel Lévinas, which mirrors the representation of the other; that is why the concept it also known under the name of 'the otherness'. Although alterity was established as a concept in the field of philosophy, it is also deployed in other domains and disciplines such as: anthropology (Michael Taussing, Pauline Turner Strong), arts (John Michael Cooper), religion and pre-eminently in literature (Mallarmé) and cultural studies. In terms of antropology, alterity refers to the representation and projections of the other. In this sense, Michael Taussing opines that alterity implies both 'Mimesis' (the internalized image of the other) and 'Alterity' (the symbolic interspace between Self and Other). In other words, the author defines through alterity the opposition between Self and Other (the contrast between two ontologic entities).

Keywords: alterity, art, image, representation, Self.

The notion of alterity, which we seem to come across more and more often, represents a certain ammount of originality, a sense, a concept.

The term can be used in a large number of contexts: it can stand for anything from the personal identity to the national one - an identity which has been greatly debated lately. Until now, the aspect of identity has been protected, and considered as something which cannot be changed or influenced in any way. However, a large number of question marks have arisen lately. Socially speaking, the attempt to create uniformity leads to political and cultural reactions. The idea of a united Europe also creates an impact from the point of view of the member states resulting in that the attempt to establish new rules of conduct fails.

In order to support the notion of identity and to strenghten it, a new reality, namely alterity has arisen. This reality has been insistently debated and analized, especially in a dual manner: identity vs alterity.

The identity crisis should be seen as a means of understanding the concept, but it must also be regarded from the point of view from which one perceives the world. Identity is not a gift, it is a construction whose timeline is as long as life itsels and it also is an issue which each individual when describing himself uses, in his story, something which makes identity dependant on the dialogue with another, on gaining recognition or receiving rejection by the other, by using the first and third person.

Culture, in a wider sense, is a lifestyle common to a group of individuals, including practices and knowledge, competencies and values which are relevant to the group.

Alterity is a philosophical notion put forward by Emmanuel Levinas and focused on the image of the other. The notion has enjoyed great success in a large number of cultural areas in the 20-th century. The concept is borrowed by researchers such as: Nicholas Dirks, Johannes Fabian, Michael Taussig and Pauline Turner Strong in the field of anthropology and refers to the cultural construction, creation of the other. In *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussing writes about assimilating the culture of the other (mimesis) and distancing oneself from it (alterity); in other words the author defines the oposition between Self and Other.

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Each individual is unique and asserts himself as different from the others but at the same time places himself in a group where he identifies with *Us*. Depending on the nationality, language, profession, sex etc, everyone can belong to a number of groups. The identity has many facets which are polished by the feeling of belonging - something which each person experiences.

The expansion of the artisitic manifestations in postmodern Romania has lead to a number of different styles and concepts as well as to a hunt for originality. The artistic has become more and more commercial, up to the point of being dissolved and if the artistic act of creation is more and more absent, the commercial takes its place.

The literature of the last years has yielded more and more towards the rise of commercial trends thus leading to an ever smaller number of writings based on interior spiritual experiences. Commercial literature, where authors do not put forward their emotions too often, is the new trend.

A look at the bigger picture of the contemporary Romanian artistic discourse brings to light a series of thematic and structural mutations where the image of identity and alterity plays an important role from a double perspective: firstly, we are dealing with the discovery of the image of the other, of the foreigner who must first be understood and then conquered and secondly, a direction set on the edge of alterity during the decades when history suffered tragic changes and humanity is subject to an irreversible process of losing its ontological status, by mixing in the homogenous mass of the many.

From an aesthetical point of view, we can notice a pluralization effect of the artistic act which has its roots in postmodern ideology. The street art scene in Eastern Europe is almost unknown in the US allthough the fall of the Iron Curtain has opened a space which was quickly occupied by emergent creative minds. Some of the new artists have unleashed their artisitc personas across the walls of developing cities, finding the most amazing means of expression and populating twisted universes. The Romanian Cultural Institute from New York has invited in 2008 three young Romanian street artists: Nuclear Fairy, IRLO and Omar to work at the Romanian Gallery and to offer an exposition from their experience in New York. The gallery organized on June the 18th 2008 has included a Q&A with the artists, hosted by Sara and Marc Schiller, founders of the Wooster Collective.

Street art experiments in Romania are connected to the new media ones because of the do-it-yourself approach. The showing was accompanied by a presentation of the best contributions of the last years to the Video Art and New Media Festival. Street art comes from the east as urban gentrification in New York and the cleasing policies have erased those legendary grafittis which have inspired artists around the world. Street art has flourished in eastern european cities. It is in the large cities of Romania where the three artists have started to bring their means of expression to the streets. Their art combines low-brow aesthetics with figurative grafitti and with an unusual approach from the textual point of view, from font to content, thus giving life to various areas of expression. The three have collaborated often with Romania as well as other European countries, creating a common means of expression. As they were for the first time in New York and after having explored it a few days, they tried to transpose their American experience onto the walls of the Romanian Gallery. The exposition has allowed everyone to see how the exhibits evolved and the people went in to see them being constructed. The manner for which they opted, namely that of exposition under

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construction has managed to draw attention little by little. The pink pony installed in the Romanian state-owned gallery in New York, the same building where the Romanian Cultural Institute has its office, proved to be a challenge for critics, journalists and politicians. Here, where normally typical Romanian parties took place, where 80's vIPs were invited to talk about intelelctual matters such as Eminescu and other clasic Romanian emblems, the pink pony has defied not through its debatable artistic value – a pink pony branded with a swastica on the hip and a bone wedged as a tail – but by means of it's surrondings: exaggerated articles, antisemit accusations, police complains. The crossing from the Romanian cultural identity was sudden and shocking: Grigorescu's *Car cu boi* was replaced by abstract paintings which seemed meant to revolt this stereotypical identity. Art is seen as an adaptation regardless of the side we're looking from, either art producers or consumers. Through art, the inner self adapts to the level of the cultural entity, and the artwork becomes my story but said with a stranger's mouth. The artisitic expression of the three young artists brings to light a known identity crisis, a sign that it is time for a new interpretation but also a warning regarding one's outlook – the phenomena of an alterity which cannot be defined in terms of differences anymore.

The identity crisis is set into motion by the modern and is a crisis which manifests itself on a large scale leading to a crisis of the language, something seen in contemporary literature as well. The modern man's need for an identity and for freedom results from the society which isn't keeping up with the human needs.

The need to rediscover oneself and to express oneself is also found in the field of architecture as a person's, an architect's means of expression as he is an artistic creator as well. Romanian architecture has gone through a transformation as well, much like all of society and this conscious transformation represents a modernization. Any transition is actually the search for a new modernity. To anticipate the future on an artistic level – namely to set oneself in the avantgarde – is the most modern of attitudes; avant-garde is one of the faces of modernity and also its most radical form. One doesn't need to be an avant-gardist in order to be modern but the tendency of the avant-garde is the acute form of modernity's manifestation. In a grey, concrete-dominated world, identity is instantly lost and the architect's identity is lost first as he is bound between space and imagination. The constructions of recent years have allowed the artist to express himself, through his unique and at times extreme creations. One example is the Architect's Union Headquarters in Romania – Bucharest, Architects – Dan Marin and Zeno Bogdanescu, 1992 – 2003. The building is an example of modern artifice. The gestures are apparently contextual: the new building integrates the facade of a house which burned during the 1989 revolution, a witness of long past events so as to keep history alive. The glass prisms of the new building follow the allignment of the existing fronts and from the old building only an illusion, a facade, an empty canvas was preserved with the role of covering that which is new. The old, the past is seen as a protector of the present. It hangs artistically from the glass prisms – a building abstract in nature, as the authors themselves would describe it; old and need maintain their mutual independance and reciprocity, stay detached without touching. In this case we may speak of a spatial identity, an identity of the creators but also about alterity as means for expressing oneself. A historical identity is set at the base of an artistic expression where the authors can be felt in their new creation.

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In the present cultural and scientific context, which is set in a conceptual crisis, identity is going through an expression crisis and the person, trapped within the mundane world, saves himself through duality and manages to rediscover himself in a parallel world which ensures his survival as an individual.

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