GENERAL ASPECTS OF ROMANIAN PAINTING IN 1960-1980

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Abstract: The artistic creation as a form of human spirit's manifestation is in the most organic and profound way linked to the freedom, the creating act being the ultimate expression of the absolute human liberation. The free development of the creating process depends on the circumstances, intrinsic and extrinsic conditions of the artist's existence. The evolution of the Romanian painting in the European context during 1960-1980 is analyzed in this work in terms of society's restrictions / opening to the freedom.

Key words: Romanian painting, communist ideology, European cultural values, cultural emancipation, free plastic expression.

The 1960s and 1970s remain in history as a milestone both artistically and socially, certifying a visible rehabilitation of relationships between the communist government and citizens, a recreation of an atmosphere marked by the communist ideology of the 1950s-1960s. This is due to the death of Stalin in 1953 and the coming to power of Khrushchev (known as "Khrushchev thaw") characterized by a wave of political change in the Soviet empire, with a more relaxed governing style. It is felt thereby a gradual diversification in all artistic plans, a revival of the idea of belonging to the values of the European culture.

Due to political normalization, as well as to new political concepts as "socialism with a human face" (Dubcek), "paternalistic socialism" (Kadar), "real socialism" (Brezhnev), the art experiences everywhere a period of emancipation and remarkable diversity in all communist countries.

In the Soviet Union, since the 1960s, art publishing houses and museums start presenting samples of French, African and baroque art and even old Russian icons, the reference to the French modern art is made only to Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Fauvism (cited in Besançon 1963).

The cultural space is still penetrated by Western art albums that bring uncensored information about modern and contemporary art, but also about exiled Russian artists as Lanskoy, Poliakoff and Nicolas de Stael. In this period, the modern art was represented only by creations of Mir Iskusstva current and Tatlin (avant-garde art). Leading art historians as Lazarev or Alpatov, upgrade the Byzantine art and the names of Rublev and Theophanes the Greek and draw important aspects of art history. If in the Soviet Union, the socialist realism remains the strongest dogma up to end, in the satellite countries the art evolves freely closely with national cultural traditions and values.

In Poland, numerous exhibitions of modern art influenced by the informal current and other Western Neovanguardism currents are organized. Many groups of artists in Warsaw, Krakow, Gdansk appear, that following the path of avant-garde, get Abstractionism strengthen in all forms in the late 1960s.

In Hungary, due to the paternalistic regime of Kadar, the art quickly exceeded the Sovietized form and there has already been a realism of Hungarian type influenced by Mexican art and local traditions, continuing then opening to the Western Neovanguardism. Although the Abstractionism was a Hungarian traditional orientation of the 1920s, the official art would not recognize it any more, accepting instead the existence of Expressionism. The new generation of artists is directly influenced by the School of Paris, discovering the pop art and new techniques of work (collage, frottage, scratching, etc.).

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In Czechoslovakia, the lyrical abstract art dominates and the first art exhibitions of the optical, kinetic and constructivist art take place. Due to the new achievements of modern technology and applied sciences, it would reach the emergence of computer art in the 1930s.

In Romania, the winds of change are in some way felt; the communist government is trying to revitalize the intellectuals to rediscover the national identity and independence, embedded in a "national communism" but in close correlation with the "proletarian internationalism."

Intellectuals would not delay to revive the traditions of the interwar culture, to shyly change the imposed official Marxist-Leninist culture, to tacitly develop the local culture through an "alternative culture". After ten years of the Stalinist terror, both intellectuals and the rest of the population feel an improvement in their private lives, a normalization of relationships with power. For now, the intellectual class enjoys special privileges: foreign travels paid by the state, leaves in "houses of creation", spacious housing, awards and high honors, much more consistent than those of peers in neighboring countries.

All this visible opulence is in a dissonance with attitudes in the first communist decade characterized by police pressures and imposition of a certain cultural production and censorship. According to some critics, this is a period in which the entire population seems convinced of the irreversibility of the communist regime and trying to adapt to the "prisoner mentality" (Călinescu 165).

According to other authors, the intellectual class takes over the place of bourgeoisie previously removed from power and accesses to leadership again (Karnooh 36). Due to state policy to promote national values and independence, the party changes its ideological position, encouraging philosophers and artists in their work. However, some of them would choose the way of exile, that of freedom; among them we can mention the sculptor Ion Vlad, the writer Petru Dumitriu and others.

The 1960s in Romania mark the transition to the second phase, to that of "socialist socialization", a period of "transition" from a decade of forced industrialization to the period of "controlled relaxation". The Soviet communism is now entering a period of "détente" which is an absolute imperative of survival because "unreality land" in relation to reality requires a "policy of valves" designed to bridge the gap from "ideological reality" to everyday life (Besançon, 1986: 199-202).

National traditions in politics and culture have never been removed; they begin to progressively return to the agenda being a power able to overcome any forced ideological obstacle and to impose further development in all communist countries.

The issue of freedom and aesthetic issue appear first among the ancient philosophers and continuing with thinkers of the nineteenth century, reach some common conclusions. Deterministic solution was imposed mainly when the man was considered a product of nature and solutions of free will when he was considered as a depositary of a supernatural principle. Deterministic philosophies are also in their majority naturalistic philosophies.

In the philosophical thought of Schopenhauer, our freedom is limited; the man ruled by an individualized universal will be barred and, whatever he does, he is a slave of the individual mode of his will to live. However, the strict determinism of human nature can be conquered and overcome by reason, by motivation of human intelligence, which, according to Schopenhauer, is also an instrument of the will to live. But there is a unique moment when the man becomes free, when he no longer acts as a natural being, but becomes a subject of knowledge, contemplates the world, contrary to his will to live, this moment is offered by the art. If by that moment the man has known only relations between things and him now he is no longer a mere link in the chain of nature, he suppresses natural causality. Situated in front of art and beauty, the naturalist and materialist anthropology should

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recognize the paradox that the man inexplicably subordinated to nature becomes a free being due to the art in its many facets giving so many aspects of freedom.

In H. Taine's art philosophy there is invoked natural and social causality that determines the shape and diversity of artistic products, omitting the issue of art reception without which the aesthetic system is never complete, to this issue refers E. Hennequin in his *La critique scientifique* (1880).

Formed in the mid-eighteenth-century, aesthetics, detached from the body of the concerns of philosophy, was not always able to overcome the kind of speculative comment on the themes of beauty and art that did not necessarily require a specific knowledge of the realities to which they refer. Compared to other sciences, aesthetics is permanently subject to errors because the phenomena it studies are legitimized both objectively and subjectively, but different shades of human subjectivity cannot be fully controlled.

Another issue of the system of aesthetics is that of the artwork structure and style, the question to which Gottfried Semper, a German arhitect, tries to answer. In his view, all art styles through which the mankind passed were not a result of free will of the artists of the time, but a product caused by the material used, tools and state of technical means. Older aestheticians foresaw a *philosophical realism*, that is for all art species, there was a prototype the structure of which had to be surely followed by the artist.

In his famous philosophy of art, H. Taine argues that the most remarkable works of humanity are those having a greater documentary value, i.e. "those in which the futureness can recognize with a more relief and in a more vivid light the way to be and feel of peoples in different stages of development." (*cited* Vianu 453) So here is that the art of all times does not appear as a product of the artist's freedom, but as one of natural and social reality in which the artist lives. Determinism in art will certainly have some negative effects.

It is difficult to give a concrete definition of aesthetic value. Many thinkers have been limited to affirming the value and not to explaining it, others have defined beauty as an association of ideas, Kant has deduced the aesthetic value from the concordance of intuitions and concepts, of background and shape, removing some existing unilateral interpretations. The evolution of the concept of aesthetic value has come quite heterogeneous in terms of an underlying theories. Thus, R. Muller-Frienfels considers life to be a basis of aesthetic theory; the biological is regarded as the most general principle of value: "Wherever the value is deiscussed there is a correlation to a living being; something is considered a value only when it contributes to the preservation or advancement of life". In the *psychological theory* of Broder Christiansen, the aesthetic value is what pleases fundamental human instinct; an activity that takes us into an imaginary world, giving us the illusion of reality, therefore psychological theory must show how to produce an aesthetic value, an aesthetic object, which is a psychic creation. Another theory of aesthetic value is a *metaphysical* one for which the beauty is something absolute, objective, independent of our subjectivity, that wants to explain the aesthetic phenomenon in relation to metaphysical conception of the essence of world. Henri Bergson clearly explains the relationship between aesthetic and metaphysical intuition: „The art is a philosophy of analysis, criticism, and science: the aesthetic intuition is a nascent metaphysical intuition, bounded on the dream, which does not go to a positive verification proof. Mutually, the philosophy is an art that succeeds science and takes it into account, an art that takes analysis of results as material and is subject to the requirements of rigorous critics: the metaphysical *intuition* is an aesthetic intuition that is checked, systematized".

I. Kant believes that the aesthetic judgment is not based on logic, it is primarily contemplative: „The aesthetic judgment is not a judgment of knowledge (neither theoretical nor practical) and therefore it is not based on concepts and does not tend towards them." (Kant 49) The aesthetic judgment may arise purely subjective to us, with no claim to be true

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for others as well, as it is said in the popular expression that *tastes differ*, which means that the judgment may also be objective. The public taste as an expression of interest has a rich human experience and has been constituted through a continuous confrontation of subjective preferences, which gives it a certain authority.

W. Windelband shows in his *Einleitung in Philosophie* (254-255) that to evaluate the scale of morality or the aesthetic taste of different peoples, we must delimit from the logical consciousness, from the vicious circle of relativism, after which the value exists only through consciousness. That is why we must identify a reference point; however, it is not a fixed one, but a socio-historical practice in which values and non-values coexist. The finality of this coexistence and the social meaning in relation to the context in which it falls, develop an objective value judgment, without excluding individual taste variations. It is excluded any peremptory, contemplative attitude in the cultivation of taste that would be very harmful for the aesthetic and inappropriate to reveal art and life valences. In the attempt to penetrate into the privacy of art object the feelings of sympathy and antipathy, living and personal vibration occur. Confronting these conflicting views (sympathy, antipathy) leads to the *aesthetic antinomy*, which consists of a thesis and an antithesis, formulated by Kant in the following way: *Thesis*: the aesthetic judgment is not based on concepts; *antithesis*: the aesthetic judgment is based on concepts. Solving this problem is possible by removing of the sensitive and searching „of the point of union of all our aprioric faculties in the supersensible, because there no other way to make reason with oneself" (Kant 210).

In Romanian painting, under the titles still "committed" as "Happy Life", "Peace", "The Wealth of the Earth", "Youth", there is actually hidden figurative compositions representing still natures, nudes and scenes from daily life that make themes of socialist realism completely forgotten. There also appear several magazines and specialized publications such as *Arta plastică („Fine Arts")*, that for the first time since 1948 inserted in its pages reproductions of the Western art, even if the texts were critical and obtuse.

Criticism of the time fight almost formally against trends of fake art emerged in recent years, of the "sterility of abstractionism" or "styling specific of medieval painting," holding superiority of realistic, figurative art. The main that-time artist's motto was the quote of André Fougeron: "The happiness to paint is a communist artist's happiness to freely create social artwork meant for ordinary people, for workers".

With the growth of information in the field of arts, there appear the first Romanian presences, for example, in 1964, at the Biennale of Sao Paolo and at the Biennale in Paris, where their participation is discussed laudatory.

The first manifestations of abstract art in Romania are undoubtedly related to the name of Ion Ţuculescu, after 1947, but in the decade of the 1960's his name is mentioned again. The criticism attempted to include him among the representatives of Expressionism, due to his orientation towards dramatic, fantastic and totemic themes. After other opinions, Ţuculescu's painting would would represent Abstractionism, the initiator of which Kandinsky said that "the richest form is neither geometric nor beautiful, but a hidden one, springing from instinctive and cosmic laws." But the most striking resemblance is to Van Gogh in terms of brilliant colors, lively, almost unreal, but the folk element is missing, stylized, with strong decorative character: *Trăsura neagră* („*Black Carriage*"), *Iarna în pădure* („*Winter in the Woods*"), *Noapte la Ştefăneşti* („*Night at Ştefăneşti*"), *Apusul soarelui*. („*Sunset*").

In the totemic period (1957-1962), Ţuculescu radically changes his plastic language, totally rejecting the realistic figuratism of folk period "in favor of a unique visual organization, founded on other principles of formal synthesis". (Cârneci, 1984: 70) Thus new creations offer a unique abstract space, devoid of any prospect, dominated only by a chromatic explosion of signs, a vague, ambiguous, open to any comment universe.

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Obsessively vehiculating three building elements (eye, Trinity and totem), alternating with other secondary elements, "side noise" (Kandinsky), such as triangle, spirals, circle etc., the artist suggests a unitary and synthetic image of the artist's inner universe.

In terms of composition, the works exceed all existing templates, require a connection of real elements to the Universe, the color manifests itself as an image energizing value, nuances of red and yellow, blue and violet, orange, the basic elements of the solar spectrum act with a double effect in the "horizon of sensitive values and that of magical action" (Baconsky 7). Symbolic images of the works do not have a basis of folk or cult origin, but focus a *dynamic direction* by adopted rhythms chosen subjectively from a universe of reality "but a plastic language invented to make it possible to guess a myth, a vision of existence that do not leave to be expressed in another way than in this one, for the artist" (Cârneci, 1984: 76).

It should be noted that Ion Ţuculescu is included into the pleiad of artists- promoters of the current of Abstractionist that started in the 1960s in all communist Eastern Europe, getting voluntarily apart from the directives and duties imposed by that time, rejecting all ideologies.

The new generation of painters represented by Cupşa Victor, Vasile Grigore, Aurel Codiţă, Octav Grigorescu, George Apostu, Victor Roman receive laudatory acclaim from critics, who do not forget from time to time to support the role of the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the requirement of "socialist humanism", those of "the ideal in art".

The former disciple of Nicholas Tonitza, Corneliu Baba, seeking his vocation as a realist painter after old masters' fashion, promotes modern art full of a warm humanism in the message. A dramatic series of paintings starting from *Cina* („*The Supper*") (1942) and ending with *Maternitate* („*The Maternity*") (1962) and *Pământul* („*The Earth*") (1976), continued with a series of portraits, such as *Sadoveanu*, *Sturza-Bulandra Lucia, The Artist's Wife*, *Arghezi*. Baba's self-portraits are a true gallery of a diversity unmatched by any contemporary painter, began to scrutinize the latest drama to old age and loneliness, becoming more severe, with nervous line, cooler colors and facial expression turning into mask.

In 1965 Ceausescu takes over the power and continues for a while to encourage cultural diversity framed in the spirit of socialist culture, respecting the principle that "the Marxism cannot accept the so-called independence or autonomy of art to society." After the myth of "retrieval" and "national communism", there appears a new myth, that of "scientific and technical revolution" that aims to demonstrate the superiority of socialism in the international context, there occurs the official abandonment of socialist realism and a promoting of "the humanist realism", an aesthetic doctrine vague and inadequate.

The artists of that time work on basis of expressive values of a figurative lyrical nuanced and overcoming the academic figurative to non-figurative and other new artistic ways; Spiru Vergulescu George Stefanescu, Basil Varga, Ligia Macovei Pili Constantin Vasile Brătulescu are just some relevant examples.

Convinced that the figuratism has no possibilities of expression, C. Piliuţă lyrically addresses a number of themes with explosive colors, vibrant of an apart freshness. The artist deals with preference with still nature, flowers, as well as with brightly realistic landscapes and compositions involving different themes associating suave to grotesque, tavern scenes, revolted peasants, railway workers and historical scenes.

The period of the 1970s is marked by the experimentalist artistic phenomenon of *new media* and *intermedia / multimedia* appeared in the West in the late 1950s, suggesting an exit from classic modernism by combining multiple plastic languages and media (painting, film , photography, theater, dance, sculptural object, poetry). The names of the artists Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, Wanda Mihuleac Mihai Florin Olos Maxa belong to this

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phenomenon. The Important characteristics of Experimentalism are elimination of traditional forms of expression, the use of artificial techniques such as photography, video image and even methods related to the field of scientific, industrial and information technologies, all these having the purpose of transposing the art into the social environment.

The totalitarian regime in Bucharest supports emancipation of the cultural sphere, rejecting for a while to censure acts of creation, limiting itself only to control behavior in general, so artists are freer in addressing of ordered "employed themes" – the content of the themed work is strictly controlled, but the shape is given by the artist.

Theoretician of their own experiments, Ion Grigorescu, being at the same time both a painter and a photographer, paints in oil on photos on the relevant themes: *Înfăptuirea planului stă în puterea colectivului* („*Achievement of the Plan is in the Power of the Collective*"), *Ziua* („*The Day*"), *Reportaj din Gorj* („A Report from the Gorj"), in a realistic journalistic relevant style transforming the truth into an artwork.

In the late 1970s the situation of Romania is strongly marked by the decline due to the megalomaniac plans of industrialization and returning to the neostalinism policy. N. Ceauşescu becomes an absolute dictator of a people subjected to retrograde political changes, isolation from the outside world and total control of the population. The artistic life also feels significant recoil, the censorship is more forceful than ever, international cultural exchanges are reduced, and the television program is reduced to two hours per day and is mostly dedicated to political indoctrination and cult of personality of "the most beloved leader". The official art is now based on some main areas: historical figures, cult of Nicolae Ceauşescu, socialist achievements and folklore. There appear young artists' followers of Ceauşescu: Traian Hrişcă, Constantin Dipşe, Ion Grigore, Viorel Mărginean, Ion Grigore Vrăneanţu etc., who use elements of folklore and elements of modernism in naive compositions limited to kitsch. The painters Eugen Popa, Ion Bitzan Vladimir Şetran Dimitrie Grigoraş Doru Bucur immortalize the achievements of socialist construction in the works: *Şantierul naval Oltenița* („*Oltenița Shipyard*") *Canalul Dunărea – Marea Neagră* („*The Danube - Black Sea Canal*"), *Omagiul constructorilor metroului bucureştean* („*Tributes to Bucharest Undergroung Builders*") etc. In parallel with these painters there also work some nonconformists who, going on the "doubling" of the official visual culture, perform works thematically in the same universe, but with more advanced artistic means, such as kinetic and op-art art; they are: Octav Grigorescu, Ion Nicodim and Virgil Almăşan.

The late 1970s are characterized by a new artistic orientation called "neobizantinism", which meant a return to a figuratism marked by religious symbolism, so "the artists belonging to this direction reject to a major extent the neoavant-gardes formal libertinism and return to visual rigor grounded in religious vein of the Byzantine tradition" (Cârneci, 2000: 156). This orientation can be considered as an affront to the communist system proclaimed as atheist or a response to inflation of international artistic trends. In both cases it is a great artistic courage which authorities have tolerated due to its purely Romanian "protochronism" cand antieuropenism.

Among neobizantine painters of the time we mention Dan Mohanu, Ştefan Rîmniceanu, Mihai Sîrbulescu, Constantin Pacea, Cristian Paraschiv etc. Sorin Dumitrescu remains the best known painter and theorist of this group, working in the cycles *Arhanghelii* („Archangels") and *Mâini* („The Hands") at the confluence of the East and Christian influences. The exhibitions of the byzantine group "Prologue I" and "Prologue II" were successful, being perceived as a form of "cultural resistance" to the communist regime.

So the short period of detention of 1965-1971, that of "an apparent and partial withdrawal of the party from certain sectors of social life, has shown that many things could be achieved without its direct intervention" (Nițescu 348).

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After 1971, the cult of personality of N. Ceauşescu takes an unprecedented scale by collective exhibitions of art, collective art albums, totally reducing the possibilities of free plastic expression, there is triggered again that outright fight between power and intellectuals that would take just over two decades.

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