

Conceptual Art on the Edge - Some Romanian Perspectives between the '60's and the 80's

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The political and social situation in Romania at the end of the 60's until 1989 was somewhat different from the other countries in the „communist block”. The Romanian communism adopted organizational frames, as well as institutional and mental structures similar to the Soviet ones during the Stalinist period, frames it was never able to get rid of, not even during the „opening” facilitated by Gorbachev. This was obviously the result not only of the system itself, but of Nicolae Ceaușescu's personal dictatorship.

In a first stage, between 1965 and 1971, a certain political relaxation occurred, perceived at the level of the entire society after the release of the political prisoners with a life sentence and also manifested in a certain degree of social reconciliation. This conspicuous change could be accounted for by the replacement of the political leaders, a renewal of the top communist power. After Gheorghiu-Dej's death, the rule was taken over by N. Ceaușescu, a younger politician who wanted to become visible at an international level. He seized this occasion in 1968, when Tchechoslovakia was invaded by the troops of the Warsaw Treaty (a military agreement among all the Eastern European communist countries coordinated by the USSR), a military action Romania refused to join. The new political leader in Bucharest condemned this aggression, separating himself from the rest of the „communist block”, his gesture of rejecting Moscow being positively received by the western powers.

If 1968 was the moment of maximum democratic opening and freedom of speech, the year 1971 initiated a closure that would reach its climax in the 80's. After a memorable visit to China and North Korea, impressed by the Asian communism, in which the population's obedience and austerity reached a level impossible to imagine on the European continent, Ceaușescu launched his „Mangalia Theses”, brutally abolishing the forms that were related to democracy and freedom of speech, while introducing a stricter political surveillance and an increased ideological manipulation, with the help of the media or the process of restructuring the population, subject to regular ideological sessions of „education”.

The end of the 70's witnessed an even stricter political situation, mercilessly imposed on the society, owing especially to the two Ceaușescus thirst for more personal power, to the institutional paralysis resulting from a „closed system” that rejected any form of renewal, promoting, in all top positions, only obedient and unassuming individuals, supporters of Ceaușescu's personal cult and ideology. This closure was doubled by the economical crisis, generated by the grandiose projects of the dictatorial couple. These projects, completed by 1989, led to the demolition of an important part of historical Bucharest, to the dislocation of a great number of inhabitants and to the erection of the notorious People's House and the Socialist Victory Avenue, with its imposing post-stalinist blocks of flats. This huge building site was much too costly, both financially and in terms of the human sacrifice it implied, being achieved with patriotic work and in conditions probably comparable to those of slavery.

In this context, the artistic world was divided in two clear-cut directions: on the one hand, there was the official art, a prompt and humble response of a group of artists who were, in a way, „specialized” in the themes imposed by the propagandistic

system; on the other hand, there was the personal creation, including experiment and research, of a rather small group. This type of creation was often restricted to the artist's own studio, or, in fortunate circumstances, was included in a modest system of public promotion, with the public's access usually quite restricted, where the public itself was a specialized one, made up of other artists, critics and art lovers. In that period, many of the important events took place outside the capital, in other cities, especially in Transylvania and Banat, regions with a tradition of openness towards the West.

The forms of expression of the „underground” art are varied, conceptualism being associated with a certain type of questioning, the artist directing it towards his own practices, in his studio. It can be identified in an entire artistic „system”, conceived by Paul Neagu and his theory about „tactile objects”, in Andrei Cădere's „painting without limits”, practiced on a „pilgrim's walking stick”. It can also be spotted in the blending of modular structures made of wooden beams, practiced by Mihai Olos to define his concept of the „universal city”, or the „wet installations”, genuine works-in-progress by Ana Lupaş, in the happening „I lived 130 days with a sunflower plant” by Ştefan Bertalan, who worked out a diary about this „co-habitation”, or Constantin Flondor's „solar diagrams”, with the artist putting down „scientifically” all the changes in the natural elements – the water, the air, the light. A symptomatic example of a whole series of conceptual issues is Ion Grigorescu, with his various happenings questioning the body, the society, or the artistic practices. This image can be completed by evoking Dan Perjovschi's idea of redesigning, in the 80's, his own apartment, or a body action, performed by Lia Perjovschi, who wrote a text on her own body.

Paul Neagu was moulded as an artist in the social-political matrix of communism. From his debut on he was a moving spirit of local artistic life and, later, of international artist life. His desire to break away from the academic tradition, as well as his inquisitive spirit, led him to the creation of a series of neo-Dadaist works entitled *Neagu's Boxes*. Small objects of variable form, created with an inexhaustible imaginative verve, these “boxes” became fetish objects. They addressed the tactile sense which had to be recovered after it had been neglected for such a long time by an insipid art. In contrast with the official art of that time, these objects exhibiting their simple three-dimensionality, suggesting compositions and de-compositions of form, were often made of ephemeral materials such as match-boxes, or were improvisations from left-overs from other objects. The art they represented defied the official art. Such objects began circulating, taking on a life of their own, with a secret content whose meaning was known only to the “initiated”. When these objects appeared they brought with them a cultural aspect related to their form and intention and a communication aspect evincing their sociological valencies. *Neagu's Boxes* became ironical and self-ironical commentaries addressed to the social context which had given birth to them. They introduced the ludic into contemporary Romanian art, a free and easy manner, an artistic attitude of disinhibition in a tense cultural environment. In 1969, in the second exhibition at the Demarco Gallery during the Edinburgh Festival, Neagu presented his “tactile objects” in complete darkness, the walls of the gallery being painted black. This obliged visitors to look for the objects, suspended along the gallery walls, and to learn about their form by touching them. In the same period of time Neagu launched the *Manifesto of Tactile Art*, also published in Romania, in the *Arta Plastică* (Fine Arts) review.

As a continuation of this development (1966-1967), a year later there appeared the series entitled *Colector de merite* (The Collector of Merits), consisting of

drawings and objects, in the same neo-Dada manner. Intrigued by the way in which merit could be “measured” in the bestowal of titles, honours and “merit”-medals in communist Romania, Neagu imagined some ironic machinery which would be able to collect and apply the merit selection criteria as well as conferring the honours on randomly selected people passing by. This series culminated in the first street action presented in Romania. In 1968, on a busy main road in Bucharest, the artist placed his “merit-collectors” right in the middle of the streams of buses and cars, incessantly moving them in the traffic flow.

It was then that he began work on another long series of objects, paintings and drawings – a performance entitled *Anthropocosmos* – this too based on the principle of composition-decomposition but this time focused on the human figure. The body was de-constructed into its component elements in the form of “honeycombs”, being viewed from the angle of energy pathways, as well as in terms of the component cells. For Neagu, *Anthropocosmos* evoked a hierarchical human system made up of steps ascending from the one to the many, from the individual to the collective, in which the first stage is symbolically represented by “the bed” or the “coffin” recalling the complete human form. This was followed by a room or house, symbol of the family, and then the village or the town and, finally, the country or the state, representing larger communities. It was from this vision, which likens the cosmos to the microcosmos (the human universe), that *The Blind Bite* and *Horizontal Rain* - the series of ritual-performances created by the artist after his having settled in England - later sprang.

The *Cake man* performance-rituals, for example the 16-storeyed, first presented in 1970 at the home of an artist and friend of him before an invited audience, were related to *Anthropocosmos*. Another performance, intitled *Blind Bite*, was presented at the Sigi Kraus Gallery in London (1971) where a „cake man” made of 80 waffle helpings was eaten. It was a perishable construction, evincing two aspects. On the one hand there was the formal connection between these component elements made of pieces of dough, baked in forms which remind us of “cells” and networks of elements resembling human figures. On the other hand there was the aspect of communication with the public evinced by eating, communally, the component parts of the “cake man” - a communication accompanied by messages in the form of written notes specially dedicated to the spectators. This social element, emphasised through the act of communication, would later become one of the characteristic features to be found in Paul Neagu’s actions.

To use a terminology suggested by the artist himself, his actions are closer to being *rituals* acted out before a public, thus training them to establish diverse communication relationships. These rituals developed on three hierarchical levels. The first and the lowest was *Blind Bite*, in which the artist signified a number of characteristics on the individual plane such as intuition, spontaneity, emotion and feeling. On a more general collective plane it signified an unknown superstitious power, the undifferentiated world, primordial freedom and the collective unconscious. The act of eating is a typically “physical, visceral, tactile and primordial” one. To underline its perfect instinctiveness (the quality of an act which is not visual, but tactile and visceral) the artist used to blindfold the participants during the *Blind Bite* action.

The second hierarchical level is represented in Paul Neagu’s symbolism by *Horizontal Rain*, suggestive of, among other things, the structure of human society, and speculative and scientific freedom. For such a performance the artist made himself a costume with many small transparent pockets in which he habitually put

messages for the public. These messages suggested “the level of human communication” and their development within society. During a performance staged at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol in 1976, Paul Neagu was assisted by four students in a ritual of the *Horizontal Rain* type.

Each of the four participants seemed to evoke four distinct personalities imagined by the artist as forming part of the Generative Art Group. Seated at working tables each performed an intellectual activity (drawing, writing) while the artist, clothed in the costume previously described and with roller-skates on, representing the organising force of the universe, gradually moved the four tables nearer to each other, and the four young people began cooperating .

Finally, striving to attain the “new, total cosmic freedom”, the last level was entitled *Gradually Going Tornado*, a cyclical ritual in which, through a state of ecstasy, the artist aspired to become one with the infinite self by atomization ... Wearing a special costume from which all kinds of objects were hanging, evoking “cultural baggage” and recallings shamanistic accessories, Neagu transposed himself into a kind of dervish in an ecstatic state through an actual ritual of spiral gyration .

Most of Paul Neagu’s concepts and ritual actions were conceived in Romania and were then continued in Great Britain, his adoptive country. Strongly linked with the artist’s personality, with the intimate evolution of his inner structures, these actions which reflected him also reflected the Romanian society in which he had been formed. These artistic events must be considered as belonging equally to Romanian and to British culture as it was Neagu’s own wish to identify himself with both of them.

In the 1960s, **Pavel Ilie**’s debut on the artistic stage and his evolution followed a circuitous route which was, to a certain extent, also experienced by other artists. Trained as a painter, he traversed the path from realistic painting towards abstractness and the essentialness of forms, achieving an abstract painting style inspired by reality. After a short time the artist went beyond the traditional bi-dimensional framework of painting in favour of three dimensional painting. This transition was marked by a few wood collages on canvas, painted in oil (*Three-four White Sheep by Moonlight, The Caloian*).

The artist was interested in the relationship between the works and the space in which they were placed in order for them to stand out. This facilitated and hastened the transition from the collage to the object and to ambient art. Attracted by unconventional materials, vaguely evoking a vigorous archaic world, Pavel Ilie used wickerwork on which he sometimes stuck a layer of adobe. At other times he used branches or other vegetal elements collected directly from nature in his compositions. In an exemplary way, the artist managed to integrate his own works into some objects pertaining to the “contemplative ritual” and to a primordial complicity with the object”. Initially, his objects were replicas or projects for later achievements, the best being transposed into ambient art. His inclination for the unpretentious but expressive, as well as his relationship with the space in which he was to exhibit his work, are all inborn givens of the artist who originated in a village.

Invited by Richard Demarco to participate in the Edinburgh Festival in 1970 and 1971, and again in 1973, with a one-man exhibition, Pavel Ilie arranged for some of his previously created objects and replicas to be turned into greatly expanded projects. One such project was completed at the Town House in Allison’s Park, near Edinburgh, where he organized a kind of “sheltering nest” on some tree-branches.

Through the questions posed by his work, and through the whole artistic enterprise developed in harmony with nature, by his originality in approaching art and

by his choice of materials, Pavel Ilie created a direction in the Romanian art of the 1970s.

Andrei Cădere was in 60s a young artist a self-taught painter who used to frequent the studios of some recognised artists and, now and then, sat as a model. His early drawings showed him as genuinely talented, non-conformist, with a fresh conception, by-passing the traditional education system. In fact his style of artistic manifestation and his lack of ambition concerning potential integration into the system which could have promoted him, both display his option for marginalization. In 1967, he settled in Paris where he developed and exploited this marginal condition in a quite remarkable way. He worked there for eight years, between 1970 and 1978, a stretch of time which sufficed to make him known all over the world as a conceptualist painter. He renounced traditional art and its whole system of professional spaces, creating a “strolling” art, taking up a “pilgrim’s staff”. Although he created objects, Cădere considered them to be paintings on a cylindrical surface, giving them the name *peinture sans fin* (unlimited painting). In fact, these objects have the form of wooden cylinders of various dimensions, made of segments of a length equal to their diameter. These segments are assembled according to a mathematical system of permutations which also include an error. The colour of the segments is important because this establishes what makes each cylinder different from the others. The artist’s intention is not to operate with chromatic harmonies, as in traditional art, but to make use of the objective aspect of the colour chosen from the spectrum.

Thus an object of a conceptual nature can be exhibited anywhere, whether in galleries or in museums (but where it does not have to hang from picture rails), in non-professional places, or even in the street. The round bar was employed by Andrei Cădere as a polemical critique of other artists, some of them famous. The artist used to make his appearance, on the opening days of important exhibitions, with such an object on his shoulder or in his hand and put it somewhere in the gallery, as a way of exhibiting and confronting the others non-aggressively. Sometimes, he would announce his participation by an “invitation” sent beforehand. His way of becoming part of an exhibition was considered provocative in its imposition of discourse upon other artists. This is why the artist was very often thrown out of galleries, or even found guards waiting for him at the gallery entrance.

Cădere was a provocative and subjective artist who brought the liberty of art into the arena of public debate. Through his attempts at challenging the system established by those who decided upon the destiny of the world of art, Cădere opted out, preferring to maintain his freedom in choosing where to exhibit. He also focused discussion on the artistic event itself. Perhaps under the influence of the protest movements of the 1970s, the artist exploited his condition as an outsider, a marginalized individual. Viewed from this perspective his artistic interventions may be understood as actions aimed at demolishing a too-rigid order. Scarcely known in his native country where, after emigration, he kept in touch only with a few close friends, A. Cădere influenced the Romanian artistic milieu to only a small extent. However he may be viewed as a result of it, coming from a background which was fertile in contradictions and frustrations which were continually offered to the artistic world for scrutiny.

As I mentioned before, Romanian artists responded differently to the new ideological pressures after 1971. One can speak about a real cultural “schizophrenia”: on the one hand there existed the official thematic art, as a direct response to the “political command”; on the other hand there was an individualistic art, expressing

the searching of individuals, the experiments of certain artists who were trying to evade these ideological pressure. Meanwhile more and more secret manifestations were organized, performed in front of small audiences – or with none at all, except for the photographic or the film camera.

Ion Grigorescu belonged to this last category of artists and is an artist who has remained unique in Romanian art, because of his experiments relating to the human body. Keeping in touch with the international art scene, Grigorescu learnt from art catalogues and reviews about the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, according in which the artist's body became a new resource for the work and an open construction. Using photography as a means with many possibilities, Grigorescu developed, in an original way, the concept of *realism* and *reality*. He combined painting and easel photography into a kind of photomontage and “bandes dessinées” that seemed to be an ironic, unexpected response to the ideological “directives”. He also used photography and film as a kind of objective “witness” to his physical experiences about the reality of the body.

A category of actions in the early 1970s was dedicated to the value of banal actions of everyday life which influenced art through their unequivocal **reality**. In his opinion, life and its banality is not just made up of unique moments. It is a kind of “one's own theatre” in the sense that the artist is the “actor” of his own life, in which he has an awareness of the show, which however he tries to diminish. In *The Kitchen or Art in a Single Room*, 1976, Grigorescu presented himself living within the narrow bounds of a kitchen in a block of flats, while ironing his shirt or sitting at a table. The idea that came from this action seemed to equate banal life with a work of art and give value to the “heroism” of small everyday activities. At the same time, through its almost brutal presentation of unfalsified daily reality, the action preserved a social commentary as its subtext.

But most of Grigorescu's performances in front of the camera were devoted to the exploration of the “forbidden body” unanimously considered a taboo subject in Romanian society. On the one hand, he was interested in the exact recording of his body at a given moment as an expression of absolute nudity and intimacy often in relation with the intimate space (the room), which was given anthropomorphic features. On the other hand, he experimented with the recording “visual mechanism” by placing the camera in the most unexpected angles and positions, sometimes giving the impression of aggressiveness against the image.

In “Self-portrait with Mirrors”, a performance dating from 1973, repeated in several variants, Grigorescu used two moving mirrors obtaining the multiplication of the character, an amplification and dynamization of the movement. Very keen on experiments connected to the body in search for individual identity, the artist considers himself a maniac *voyeur* in search for the illusion produced by the virtual, this search leading him to a genuine psychic excitation, a restlessness that engenders other optical settings. In the photo action “Overlappings”. Grigorescu used chaotic multiplications of his own body with the help of the mirror but also with the help of superprints on the same frame of colored film. The effect was one of confusion, doubling multiplication, false reflection, which the artist regarded as the desired result.

In the action materialized in the photographic series, and also in the film *Mimicry*, 1975 Ion Grigorescu examines the expressions of the face which follow on one after another, empty, as on a screen. The exercises had no significance but tried to identify a “standard” expression, an exploration of the anatomy of the face, sometimes associated with absurd objects.

In parallel, the artist also completed other actions - *Man, the Centre of Universe* - in which the focus was on the relationship between the interior world and the exterior world. Photographed by a friend, the artist is at the centre of the image, concentrated with a wide-angle lens, an image bringing together the sky and the earth in a relation of unification that suggests an island. The simple gestures of spanning this universe with outstretched arms and offering oneself to it and the gestures indicative of a Leonardo pentagram make references to cultural acts in a dialogue over time and also to a profound interpretation.

The artist played an extremely important role as an influence upon the younger generation of Romanian artists, especially after 1990. Even if these visual experiments were only partially known in that period – they are being recovered at the present time but not yet in their entirety – the importance of this artist who brought a new vision, a new mode of thinking in the visual arts is universally recognized.

In the Romanian context, the conceptual art must often be associated with the peculiarities dictated by the isolation of the artistic milieu from the regular public networks – galleries, museums. Consequently, a group of artists developed in the 80s „mail art” networks, one of the few unofficial artistic forms that joined the international movement successfully and built its own small working „system”.

This art, often obscure before 1989, has been quite recently brought to light and is well received by the public, who has, obviously, been unaware, so far, of many details pertaining to the existence of an unofficial art.