

Magda Carneci

The 80s

[5.772 words]

Romania



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



Institute for
Contemporary
Art Zagreb

This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Magda Carneci

The 80s

General/International Climate In the early 80s, a certain change in the "air" became perceptible at the level of the whole diffuse cultural/artistic mentality. After the ebullient effervescence of post-war neo-avant-gardes, a certain "weariness", a certain relativization of the notion of avant-garde was gradually advancing, bringing a multiform uncertainty and profound doubt as to the meaning and effectiveness of modernist "progressive" ideology, which had been prevailing undeniably and undenied.

The intellectualist ethos, typical of the art of the 60s-70s, was undergoing a rapid erosion. The importance attached to rational operations, the strictly logical reductionism, so peculiar to the whole experimental trend - from minimalism to op-art, cynetic art, and conceptualism - began to be widely questioned and rejected. Refusal and doubt concerning the very reasons for avant-garde - typical of the previous visual research - based on the conviction that a universal method could be established to master art's essence/nature and to control/manipulate its relationship to non-artistic reality (natural environment and the social, economic, political and informational ones, a.s.o.).

In other words, beginning with the 80s, artists and critics lose, to a certain extent, their illusions regarding the utopian avant-garde almightiness, and gradually give up evolutionist, and progressive aesthetic fanaticism, "awaking" from the linear, positive teleology of "absolute modernism". And the new intellectual climate forces them to accept in their minds and souls the ideas of conceptual relativism, of contradictory and complementary stylistic pluralism, to turn into "complexity" what looked like a "contradiction" before - and to take on a more realistic and modest role in the general social metabolism.¹

¹For the general climate of the period, see, in Romanian, Matei Calinescu, *Cinci fete ale modernitatii (Five Facets of Modernity)* Bucharest, Univers, 1995; Dan Grigorescu, *Intre cucuta si coca-cola (Between Hemlock and Coca-Cola)* Bucharest, Minerva, 1994. see in other languages: Benoit Duteurtre, *Requiem pour une avant-garde* Paris, Laffont, 1995.

Local/Romanian climate The decline of meta-narratives (conceptual, aesthetic, political) in the international mentality in the 80s is related - in the West as much as in the East - to the same "theoretical and practical failure of certain major postulates of modernity" (Lyotard). Perhaps it is not an accident that it coincides with the last, decadent phase, of state communism. In the 80s, the economic and social disaster of totalitarian regimes became explosively evident even to the heads of these regimes, not only to the subject populations, and thus any revolutionary theory based upon utopia and authoritarianism was discredited.

Moreover, in Romania, the 80s coincide with the resumption of a rigorous Stalinist type police state, in which an absurd "head of state cult" and a primitive "clan socialism" (the Ceausescu clan) are disastrously combined with virulent communist nationalism" (protochronism, etc.). Unlike other totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe in their terminal phase, the Romanian cultural environment doesn't come under the mollifying influences of the Hungarian "goulash socialism", of the Polish "Solidarity", the Soviet "perestroika", the Czecho-Slovak "post-totalitarianism", not even of the Bulgarian "human-faced socialism". It experiences isolation and poverty, social marginalization and political powerlessness. Being subjected to a revived "ideological restoration" with a neo-Stalinist flavour, the artists and critics withdraw in their milieus and studios, cultivating the values of closeness, inwardness and individualism.²

Beginning of the decade: 1980-1985 The change of cultural mentality and aesthetic paradigm occurs, of course, gradually. The early eighties still bear the mark of the 70s' neo-avant-garde. But this is a tame experimental art, which becomes gradually disillusioned. The artists who asserted themselves in the late 60s and early 70s - Constantin Flondor, Ana Lupas, Ion Grigorescu, Wanda Mihuleac, Horia Bernea, Geta Bratescu, Stefan Sevastre, Florin Maxa, Alexandru Chira - continue for a while the kind of visual research which was based on a "progressive radicalism" as far as the materials, media and aims, were concerned in the artistic act. However, their ranks grow thinner during these years, as some return to traditional artistic ways, and particularly, as others leave the country - Paul Neagu, Ilie Pavel, Roman Cotosman, Serban Gabrea, Ingo Glass, Stefan Bertalan, Diet Saylor, Peter Iacobi, Ritzi Iacobi, Serban Epure, Iulian Mereuta, Doru Covrig, Mircea Florian.

Their aesthetic ethos, moulded by optimism in the search for knowledge and a certain pragmatic, in some cases even positivist enthusiasm, bears specific features: the rejection of traditional means of expression, such as

²For the atmosphere of that period in Romania, see Radu Teposu, *The Tragic and Grotesque History of the Dark Literary 90s*, Bucharest, Eminescu, 1993; Magda Carneci, *The Art of the 80s. texts on Post-Modernism*, Bucharest, Litera, 1996.

painting, and a certain unicornism; the exploration of natural or artificial materials in art making; the experimentation of certain new artistic methods, some originating in scientific techniques or industrial technologies; the interdisciplinary attitude, the "utilitarian" ideology, the wish to shape the natural or social ambient by a symbolic configuration of real life materials (or even by merging with industrial design); the temptation and attempt to create art in everyday life, in "reality" and not only in art: the demand to be community-oriented.

Developing in a period of certain "confidence" and "relaxation", characterized by a relative political and cultural opening, in which the relationships between art and power/art and society seemed positive, stable and clear, the experimentalists of the generation which would reach maturity by the 80s, were able to work in that manner through the 70s, and to impose the prestige of an inquiring and interdisciplinary mentality within the local artistic environment even after 1974-1975, after Ceausescu's election as president, when the political situation was growing worse.³ Their effective and, at the time, quite influential artistic "activism" was possible as it also coincided with certain "ideological" aspects, with the slogan of the "technical and scientific revolution" by which the regime was trying to give the illusion of forced synchronization with Western civilization. The cultural opening promoted for a while gave the artists and critics the illusory hope that the communist regime might be moulded from within by "imbuing politics with culture" - a hope also shared by other personalities in Romanian culture. This ineffective "experimental" similarity with the views of the "political experimenter" vertiginously decreased with the crisis of the regime in the 80s, leading, among other things, to a loss of effectiveness and attraction of the experimental trend in the 80s. In fact, experimentalism - as a last avatar of modernist avant-garde - cannot fit in a rigid, authoritarian and conformist political system, which has an innate hatred for innovation and change.

Avant-garde/experimentalism: However, due to its multiple connotations, the term "avant-garde" has a special destiny in any communist regime. Taken over by politics (as the Party is "the working-class avant-garde" and so on), it becomes a suspect within the artistic field, where, restricted by censorship, is sometimes replaced with related, and not identical, terms like "innovation", "experiment".

³For the constructivist ethos, in particular, and for the neo-avant-garde one, in general, in Romanian art, see Andrei Pintilie, "Tendances constructiviste dans l'art roumain contemporain", *Revue roumaine d'Histoire de l'Art Serie BeauxArts*, Tome XX, P. 21-48, Bucharest, 1983; *Secolul XX (20th Century)*, special issue, no. 4 (171), 1975; *Creation and European Synchronicity. The Artistic Movement in Timisoara in the 60-70s*, catalogue, Timisoara, 1991.

However, the avant-garde attitude has a peculiar meaning in a totalitarian ideological context, in which it is compelled to lose a part of its virulence and negativity, of its radicalism and will for change, to take on a "softened", tamed, half-integrated or extra-aesthetically motivated meaning, a utilitarian one. In other words, under the pressure of censorship and totalitarian ideology, the avant-garde inevitably becomes a certain type of experimentalism. But it also true that even in the democratic European cultures, under the pressure of art trade and the cultural industry, the avant-garde impulse turns into experimentalism. Thus, one might say, in Gugliemi's words, that "experimentalism is the style of present-day culture".⁴

History: In the meantime, in the early 80s, great collective exhibitions on interdisciplinary subjects remain fashionable, based either on "very topical problems" or on the self-analysis of the artistic process itself. The "Writing" exhibition of 1980, organized by the visual artist Wanda Mihuleac and the art critic Mihai Driscu, indicates the climax of the searching spirit of the 70s. Bringing together under the common denominator of expressive written form the representatives of various artistic and scientific contemporary idioms - visual, musical, literary, architectural, mathematical, etc - "Writing" is a typical experimental event. Motivated by a diffuse conceptualism, which dealt more with culture than with pure visuality, the exhibition was not only the "collective work" conceived and elaborated by personalities from the fields of culture and sciences, it was also the collective metaphor of an active and energetic generation of artists, which had been able, in the previous decade, to come close to a real synchronization with international artistic movements, and which proposed original initiatives, traveled and made itself known abroad (the Biennials of Venice, Paris, Sao Paulo, a.s.o.).

Of the art events integrating the visual research of a multidisciplinary ethos, mention should be made of the large exhibition "Man, City, Nature" in 1981, at the New Gallery in Bucharest, one of a series of exhibitions organized in the last decade by art critics like: Dan Haulica and Mihai Driscu, Anatol Mandrescu and Anca Arghir; a series which ended with the symposium-exhibition "Man and the City", organized by Mihai Driscu and Dan Haulica in Iasi in 1985. On the other hand, in 1982, other exhibitions took place such as "Object-Space" (organized by Wanda Mihuleac and Mihai Driscu) and "The Human Body Expression" (organized by Wanda Mihuleac and Dragos Gheorghiu) in Bucharest and the exhibition "Geometry and Sensibility" organized by the painter Stefan Sevastre in Sibiu. In 1982, another large exhibition opens in Timisoara: "Study 2 - Man and Nature, Place and

⁴See Marin Mincu *Avangarda literara romaneasca (The Romanian Literary Avant-Garde)* Bucharest, Minerva, 1983, p.6 and *Avangarda si experimentalism (Avant-Garde and Experimentalism)* in *Essay on the Poetic Text II*, Bucharest, Cartea Romaneasca, 1986.

Things", organized by the art critic Coriolan Babeti and the artists from Timisoara, an exhibition focusing, like those mentioned earlier, on visual and conceptual analysis of the aesthetic act and object, and their relationships with the natural or cultural environment of the artist. Moreover, in these early years of the eighties, a number of sessions, symposia and debates, many of them reproduced in ARTA magazine, conveyed ideas and notions significant for the same spirit open to visual and conceptual research intersecting the analytic and scientific discourse: "place", "space", "structure", or "process", "module", "processness", "study", or "model", "prospection", "construction" are words which appear quite often in approaches made by critics and artists, but also by the scholars, designers, engineers and architects invited to collaborate.⁵

In 1983, the art critics Ion Frunzetti and Anca Vasiliu organize the exhibition "The Place - Fact and Metaphor" at the Village Museum in Bucharest, an opportunity to experiment the consensual articulation of rural objects and rural contexts with art objects and "installations" designed by contemporary artists belonging to different generations. The series of the collective art events generated by a more or less experimental spirit (as it was understood in the 70s) ends with the exhibition "The Mirror-Space" of 1986, organized by Wanda Mihuleac in Bucharest, an exhibition which by its subject-title and some of the works shown makes the transition towards another type of artistic sensitivity and research, open to stratified cultural metaphor and to an eclectic spiritual symbolism.

In spite of political constraints and economic decline, which became obvious in 1980, the experimental/neo-avant-garde trend maintains a certain pace, a certain effervescence up to the mid-80s: there is a gap between political decisions and their consequences in the cultural field, by virtue of a certain creative "inertia" which is slower in modifying its mental and behavioural patterns. The members of the Sigma group from Timisoara - Flondor, Bertalan, Tulcan - continue their individual studies in nature and their films in a spirit which is more and more "organicist".⁶ The artists from Cluj - Ana Lupas, Mircea Spataru, Cornel Ailincai, Florin Maxa, Stefan Kancsura, etc. - turn, like those from Timisoara to artistic education, effectively converting their research impulse into educational programmes which will greatly stimulate the decorative arts field in particular (ceramics, glass- and, tapestry-making). The artists from Bucharest - Wanda Mihuleac, Horia Bernea, Ion Grigorescu, Decebal Scriba, Sorin

⁵See ARTA magazine issues dedicated to themes such as : art and technology, art/performance/musical meaning (no.9-10/1980); man, city, nature (1/1981); kinetics and cybernetics (9/ 1982); artistic process (10-11/1982); structure, process, processness (10/1983); science and art (6/1985), etc.

⁶See Gheorghe Vida, "Ambient Art in Romania. Hypotheses and Interpretations" in *Art History Studies and Researches* Fine Arts Series, t.25, p.175-199, Bucharest, 1978.

Dumitrescu, Andrei Oisteanu, etc - get involved in various artistic and cultural actions, solo or collective ones, which maintain the guild's dynamism and become models for the debutant artists (see the art criticism debates held at Kalinderu Hall, or at the Art Collections Museum, the action of the "Messaggio Terra" group in 1983, the participation of Wanda Mihuleac, Sorin Dumitrescu, Ana Lupas in the young artists' circle "Studio 35", etc).

However, statistically speaking, the number of public events involving artists who might be included in the experimental trend - not only those already mentioned, but also more discreet figures like Liviu Stoiciu, Viorel Toma, Ciprian Radovan, Mihai Horea - drastically decrease in comparison with the previous decade. Artists who used to be involved in public art events withdraw to their studios or channel their creative energy into theoretical research and education - Dragos Gheorghiu, Ana Lupas, Daniela Grusevschi, etc.

Moreover, the solo exhibitions of the most active artists who asserted themselves earlier within this militant "aesthetic front" gradually show a significant change of attitude. A kind of "interiorization" of the purely experimental approach occurs, the interest moves from the research object or the exterior artistic process to the researching subject and his/her inner world. The artistic act no longer consists of aesthetically and symbolically shaping reality, but tries to configure visually certain models of cultural archetypes or spiritual instances of the self. Thus, with certain artists, there is a sort of slow "sublimation" of the initially experimental impulse, a kind of spiritualization of the creative experience, which seems to clear itself of the former avant-garde and cosmopolitan motivations to rediscover and project itself back into the field of the local spiritual traditions (archaic or orthodox Christian ones). The exhibitions made in these years by Horia Bernea, Constantin Flondor, Marin Gherasim, Sorin Dumitrescu and Cristian Paraschiv obviously show the emphasis moving from a more or less "prospective" vision towards a rather "retrospective" or "introspective" one.

The Years 1985 - 1990: The generation of artists making its debut in the early 80s shares less and less the experimental ethos of artists 10-15 years older. Although they begin their career in a slightly timorous admiration and respect for the industrious and energetic older generation, which they also imitate in the beginning, the younger visual artists seem to feel less motivated by the prospective-type visual research, which takes over, industriously and optimistically, ever larger slices of reality.

They enter the cultural stage at a time of drastic political closing (of which, in the beginning, many of them are not aware). Being gradually marginalized - both socially and professionally - more violently than the

previous generations - their acceptance in the Fine Arts Union is politically restricted, at first, and then refused - just like their fellows, in the field of literature, music, theatre - they organize themselves and react in a specific manner against a social and cultural reality which is more and more ossified.

A reality which rejects them and doesn't know how to make use of their abilities, one in which they cannot participate directly, but which they cannot elude, one they cannot change or criticize freely. Compared to their predecessors, these artists don't have the privilege of illusion (as in the 60s), nor do they have the advantage of hope (as in the 70s); optimism in both its idealistic and apparently realistic forms looks outdated, utopia and revolt are forbidden. In a stagnant social situation, without a credible mental prospect "forward" (which is now impossible), or "backward" (not allowed), in a kind of "stasis" of the collective psyche, the young generation of artists and critics - inevitably - turns towards the inner, individual world, towards other values and functions of the creative act. An important part of this generation doesn't attempt pure experimentalism, but experiments with a new realism.

The New Expressionism Its first sign was Aniela Firon's painting exhibition in 1981, but only towards the mid-80s and later, did a new series of solo and group exhibitions, show the existence of a certain neo-expressionism in the ideology and practice of a fair number of young artists (also echoed in the work of reconized artists like Neculai Paduraru, Silvia Radu, Teodor Moraru).

Also called "The New Sensibility", it expressed itself by choosing a rough, aggressively figurative style, cultivating primitively existential or radically eclectic themes populated by plain "personal mythologies", quite often reduced to commonplace everyday or purely biological life, combining an iconography of the body with mass-media or art history cliches; a new "figurative style" attracted by the expressionist attitude, by violent, visceral chromatics, by sudden, distorted gestures, tempted by oversizing and spectacular pathos, but also by irony, derision and the grotesque.⁷

Undoubtedly, painting was the favourite medium of this "new wave" of artists, who, without having a unitary aesthetic programme, shared affinities and attitudes, and sometimes refused the same things, outlining quickly and impetuously a prevailing trend in the art of the period. Perhaps we should mention here the rough feminine and feminist mythology of Marilena Preda-Sanc or Vioara Bara; the unusual cut-outs from commonplace everyday life signed by Andrei Chintila, Gheorghe Ilea or Sorin Novac; the

⁷For Romanian neo-expressionism, see Calin Dan, "The New Wave Painters" in *Amfiteatru*, December 1985; Magda Carneci, "The New Figurative/ New Expressionism - Provisional Landmarks" in *Arta* 1988, no.9; Gheorghe Vida, "Neo-Avant-Garde and Postmodernism" in *Arta*, 1988, no.9, etc.

imagery imbued with kitsch and mass-media clichés used by Ioana Batranu and Mircea Tohatan; the dada-like assemblies made of sub- and infra-reality created by Gheorghe Raszovsky; the informal chromatics explorations of Petru Lucaci or Catalin Guguianu; the subliminal psyche mapping of Marcel Bunea and Costel Butoi; the ironical, almost grotesque dialogue with the classical visual culture clichés in Mircea Stanescu's and Titu Toncian's painting; the fabulous and grotesque personal mythologies signed by Ion Aurel Muresan, Erdei Zoltan or Komives Andor; the paradoxical formulations of the classical genres of still-life, (self)portrait, landscape signed by Dorin Cretu, Victor Gegiu, Gregorian Rusu, Vlad Iacob, Mihai Chiuaru, Marcel Lupse, Cristian Neagoe, Ion Augustin Pop, Mariana and Adrian Serban-Chira, Ion Val. Scarlatescu and others - so many strong individual variants, spread all over the country, of the new expressionist representation.

Although the 80s was the "decade of painting", conspicuous traces of the same new expressionism can be found in graphics as well with artists like: Olimpiu Bandalac, Roxana Trestioreanu, Vasile Tolan, Gheorghe Urdea, Lie Stela, Petru Rusu, Carmen Lucaci, Onisim Colta, Ana Golici, Marius Atanase, Voichita Gramada, Doru Pacurar, Gina Hora, Sorin Vreme, Rares Pantea, Nora Raboca, and they represent only a part of a more comprehensive "artistic front".

Echoes of the same expressionist poetics are also to be found in the very personalized sculptural approaches made by artists like: Mircea Roman, Vlad Aurel, Romelo Pervolovici, Alexandru Pasat or Marian Zidaru.

It is difficult to specify how much of this visual poetics was due to individual existential experience and how much, to the artists mediated cultural experience. Although some make their debut under the influence of the previous experimentalism and almost all of them hardly have access to foreign art magazines, it is certain that, at the level of expression, Romanian neo-expressionists take over, through the international channel, the late echoes of object mythologies from pop art and hyperrealism, deformed by the more recent experience of "bad painting", as they had been processed within the Italian "transvanguard", in the American graffiti, in the French "nouvelle figuration", and in particular in the 70s "Neue Wilde" German trend.

It cannot be denied that, in spite of cultural isolation and scarcity of information, these vague echoes were able to act as a stirring ferment, one which was necessary to provoke a diffuse mutation of sensibilities which, however, in the Romanian artistic environment was caused by specific frustrations and underground tendencies. The eruption of the "new expressionism" felt like an inevitable reaction against a falsely normal

situation inherited from the past. And this could be, in our opinion, a threefold rejection.

First, the neo-expressionist attitude can be read as a definite refusal of official art, which has aggressively returned with the "personality cult" and the "Ceausescu family iconography", an official art completely ignored by the "new expressionists" - unlike their predecessors - if not maliciously mimicked.⁸ Then, it could be understood as an examination of the "commonplaces" of a "classical modernist" visual paradigm - already "academized", generalized on a large scale within the arts guild at the moment of the cultural liberalization in the mid 60s, accepted /integrated even by political power: a modernist "collective style" which was passively casually using visual syntagms which involved a low, foreseeable innovation and risk coefficient.

Third, even compared to the experimental trend in the 70s, to the intellectualism of some, and "engineerism" of others, the "new representation" also shows a spirit of revolt and rejection by returning to classical artistic genres (painting, sculpture), by refusing methodological purism and deliberately choosing a thematic and stylistic syncretism. Thus, an artistic and existential attitude is asserted, which opposes experimental rationalism and "technicism", its illusion of progress, elements which seemed naive or easy to manipulate within a rigid and all-restrictive political determinism.

After 1985, the "new expressionism" stands out as the most productive and conspicuous innovative trend in several active artistic centres in Romania: Bucharest, Oradea, Tirgu-Mures, Cluj, Timisoara, Brasov, Craiova, Bacau and Sibiu. It will be confirmed as such by a number of group and collective exhibitions which have implicitly displayed or declared a common aesthetic programme of the new generation: "Contemporary Images" (Craiova, 1984), "Drawing-Poetry" (Bucharest, 1985), "Alternatives" (Bucharest, 1987), "The Young Artists and the Present Time" (Timisoara, 1987), "The Motive - Photography" (Oradea, 1984, 1986), The Young Artists' National Exhibition (Baia-Mare, 1988). Among them, the "Alternatives" exhibition stands out, in whose written programme signed by the three organizers - Calin Dan, Magda Carneci, Dan Mihaltianu - the pre-eminence of neo-expressionism, together with other tendencies of the young art (neo-constructivism, neo-Byzantine art and intermedia) is categorically asserted.

It is quite obvious that the new expressionism has used a circumscribed and limited meaning of experimentalism. The young "savages" did not propose to innovate within the visual language, did not invent new techniques or styles, but processed and distorted previously existing visual

⁸Even some of the most ambitious experimentalists had produced at least one "commissioned work".

means to express a new attitude. Their gesture was backward-looking, rather than forward-looking; they were keen to explore their inner experiences (biological, psychical, spiritual) rather than investigating new ways of acting with/by art in the real/social area. So, their art manifested a certain autarky, a moment of withdrawal into intense, private "personal worlds". Experiencing rather than experimenting, the new expressionism seemed to the older experimentalists a regressive aesthetic trend, a new form of the old motto "art for art's sake" from the beginning of modernism. Some even called it aesthetic nihilism.

Now it is easier to understand that "the new expressionism" represented an unusual type of subversion. The young artists of the "new wave" opposed both the cultural and social status quo of the time in many tacit or obvious ways, by unexpected, specific strategies. Their individualistic, interiorized ethos suited a blocked social situation: there was a convergence between the young artists' need to organize in small groups, to work in restricted circles, to exhibit in small, "reserved", marginal spaces (see the basement exhibitions in Bucharest and Sibiu in the period 1986-1989, the "pocket shows" in Oradea, 1988) or private ones (studios, flats), to turn to exhibitions organized on artistic genres and techniques (landscape, still-life, drawing, lithograph, engraving, etc.), to prefer quite often the small, low-cost and easily transported genres (mail art, small sculpture, small engraving, textile miniature, book-work) to opt for "decentralization" and exhibit their works in the provinces (farther from the censoring authorities) on one hand - and this degrading frozen social situation, on the other.⁹ But even at the level of purely artistic intentions, the "new expressionism" indicates a significant and subtle form of subversion. Resorting to subjective, irrational contents which cannot be controlled by an outside authority, or distorting in an ironic or grotesque key the well-known cultural and mass-media clichés, ridiculing the worn-out modernist stylistic elements or the ambitious neo-avant-garde syntagms, the "new representationalism" uses existent visual structures, but pours into them a new content, reinterprets the previous styles parodically, without trying to

⁹It is worth mentioning here the part played by the young artists' circles "Studio 35" of the Fine Arts Union. Initially designed to organize and prepare Art Institutes graduates to be rapidly admitted in the Fine Arts Union, they played an important, almost vital part in the late 80s, when the "top level" blocked the young artists access to the official structures of the guild. The "Studios 35" in Bucharest and the country functioned like small satellites of the F.A.U.'s branches, where the younger generation was kept in a sort of a semi-official professional "reservation", which granted some half-rights, but did not grant many others. This situation contributed, on one hand, to artificially prolong the "youthfulness" of the new generation, and on the other hand, it contributed to the disappearance or weakening of the "Fine Arts Union ethos" among young artists, and assumption of individual strategies, "on their own". Regarding the salutary outlet quality of these Studios 35, we should mention here the part played by Ana Lupas, who was in charge of these Studios 35 on behalf of the F.A.U.; her own example and personal involvement greatly contributed to their real vitality. And this is sincerely and gratefully acknowledged by the coordinator of the Studio 35 in Bucharest between 1984 and 1989.)

"outrun" them with new experiments and innovations, deconstructing them from within, causing an "implosion" (not an explosion) simply through a special subjective emphasis. The grotesque quoting, the eclectic combination of phrases and references are not, in this case, forms of creative impotence, but subtle forms of refusing imposed or pre-established scales of values; they deny the official authorities (political and cultural) the privilege of setting unique scales of values or taste; and in fact, ignore these authorities, by evading their rules, not by open revolt, but by irony, withdrawal, a passive refusal to participate in a stasis or collective fraud.

It is quite relevant that neo-expressionism was the favourite trend not only of the Romanian young artists, but of the whole artistic young generation of the 80s in Eastern Europe, a sign that its distorted and cathartic realism was everywhere felt to possess a subterranean subversive dimension against the visual discourse of official art and of the general social situation. It is no accident that the most important (and last) collective neo-expressionist event could not take place in Bucharest, but in the north of Romania, in Baia-Mare, far from the capital's political and ideological centre. It is also noteworthy that after the social and political upheavals of 1989, this trend ceases to be prevalent among the artists who reach maturity at this date.

The Intermedial Trend However, neo-expressionism was not the only trend which structured - obviously and coherently - the forcefield of the 80s generation. There was also an alternative one, that of "intermedial art". Significantly, the 80s start among other things with an "intermedial" type exhibition - "Medium" in Sf. Gheorghe, organized by Imre Baas - and continue with a series of exhibitions of the same kind: "Artist-Made Photos" (Bucharest, 1981), "Mail-Art" (1985-1989, in Bucharest and in the country), "The Motive - Photography" (Oradea, 1984, 1986, 1988). Both the "Alternatives" exhibition in 1987, and The Young Artists National Exhibition in 1988 have given an important scope to intermedial art shows, a fact which demonstrates that this trend was felt to be as important and representative as the more spectacular neo-expressionism.

Using unconventional materials, different from the classic ones, combining several artistic media (painting, object, photography, collage, installation, film) this trend in fact continues the experimental one in the 70s, from which it originates: the first exhibitions and participations of artists like Dan Mihaltianu, Olimpiu Bandalac, Theodor Graur, Ion Isaila, Cristian Paraschiv or Marilena Preda-Sanc express the same interest in structures, and for a break with real space and time, as the work of their older colleagues who remained in the country (due to the lack of information, those who left the country are more often than not ignored). This initial interest will

materialize in different ways, some artists expressing it in neo-expressionist or neo-Byzantine experiments, others remaining faithful to the experimental trend proper, with whose representatives they would closely cooperate.¹⁰ Compared to this, the "intermedialism" of the 80s is quite different, as it is less oriented towards the expression and conceptual potentialities of the creative act in its relationship with nature, technology or society, and cultivating more intensely the metaphorical values and symbolical echoes, either personal or widely spiritual, of the artistic act and its traces in space and in consciences. The more precarious material conditions and the constraints imposed on society, make the artists prefer modest materials and techniques (photography processed in various ways, photo-collage) or unpretentious actions/events with power of communication and circulation, able to "sublimate frontiers" and participate (without their authors) in international events (mail-art or visual poetry).

Represented by fewer artists than neo-expressionism, but however by some of the most active and innovative ones, the intermedial trend developed in several important artistic centres: Oradea, Bucharest, Arad, Cluj, Timisoara. In Bucharest, Dan Mihaltianu, Theodor Graur, Dan Stanciu, Gheorghe Raszovsky, Olimpiu Bandalac, Radu Igaszag, Mircea Popescu and Calin Dan were some of the most consistent explorers of installation and processed photography (less so as far as performance is concerned). In Oradea, a very interesting and lively group phenomenon developed within the "Studio 35" circle. Rudolf Bone, Dorel Gaina and Aniko Gerendi, Dan Perjovschi and Lia Perjovschi, Laszlo Ujvarrosy and Nicolae Onucsan were able to impose - by periodical group exhibitions ("Motive-Photography", "Panoramatica", etc), by means of installations and especially organized performances (see the series "Peace Time", 1989) - a model of "group experimental activism" to the other circles in the country. In other western Romanian cities, too, due to the proximity with the western border of the country and to easier acces to international cultural information, the number of artists attracted by intermedial experiment was greater than in the rest of the country. In Timisoara we should mention the names Iosif Kiraly, Calin Beloescu, Camelia Crisan-Matei, Carmen Paiu and Valeriu Mladin. In Arad, Bartha Josef and Bartha Sandor, as well as the experimental film group gathered around Gheorghe Sabau and later called "Kinema-Ikon" (Calin Man, Emanuel Tet, Ioan Ples, Al. Pecican, Ioan Gale,

¹⁰For instance, Theodor Graur makes his debut as a painter influenced by neo-geometrism and neo-expressionism, but he will become greatly "addicted" to installations (see the permanent photo-installation in his office at UCECOM, in period 1985-1990). Symbolically, the "alliance" between the "experimentalists" of the 70s and those of the 80s materializes in 1987 and 1988 in a film, in two editions, of a group "performance" called "house pARTty": Wanda Mihuleac, Decebal Scriba and Andrei Oisteanu meet Dan Stanciu, Calin Dan, Nadina Scriba and subsequently Theodor Graur. See the special issue "For and Against Avant-Garde" in *Arta*, 1990, no.6-7-8.

V. Simulov). In Cluj-Napoca, the names of Alexanru Antik, Titu Toncian, Laurentiu Ruta and others.

As a matter of fact, not just once, sculptors and graphic artists who actively practised neo-expressionist poetics, were also very active in using intermedial techniques (Marilena Preda-Sanc, Mircea Stanescu, Petru Lucaci, Roxana Trestioreanu, Marian and Victoria Zidaru, Marcel Bunea). But even artists who cannot be included in a particular trend, have tried this type of artistic expression: Dragos Gheorghiu (with "ephemeral architectures" in 1985 and subsequent projects), Andrei Oisteanu (promoter of visual poetry in Romania).

The climax, both in intensity and in the social presence, of intermedial research was undoubtedly the young visual art and art criticism colloquium organized in 1986 by the critic Liviana Dan in Sibiu. The installations and performances created then by Dan Mihaltianu, Theodor Graur, Laurentiu Ruta, Alexandru Antik, Constantin Petraschievici, Merisor Dominde and Stelian Onica - daring, powerful, but provocative for the political and social environment of time - did not lead to a détente of the official authorities towards that kind of artistic action, quite the opposite. In the last years of the eighties, installations and, particularly, performances had a more or less private character and took place mostly in the provinces (Oradea, Baia-Mare, Cluj), and a new wave of artists left the country.

Generally speaking, the previous generation's experimentalism had shown only a relative interest in a purely conceptualist approach, almost non-existent in the Romanian environment where it had an obvious cultural aura and was often tempted towards archaistic symbolics - "ruralist", "spiritualist" - with a "specific" character for the spirit of the place. Therefore, we can also speak relatively about post-conceptualism at the level of this younger generation's inter-media experiments, a post-conceptualism which would develop in a more spectacular manner only after 1989.¹¹

Neo-Orthodox Art The "spiritualization" of the experimental impulse at the beginning of this decade with painters like Paul Gherasim, Constantin Flondor, Marin Gherasim, Horia Bernea or Sorin Dumitrescu, becomes, in

¹¹It is interesting to observe the limited reverberation of the notion of conceptualism and conceptual art in Romanian art and art criticism. Unlike other countries in the region (Hungary, Poland, Czechia and also Bulgaria) conceptualism was not in vogue in Romania before 1989. This could be ascribed to censorship (which did not like some aesthetical notions without a clear political motivation, or those which seemed culturally ambiguous), to the isolation or lack of first-hand information. But, I think this should be ascribed to the pressures of the Romanian cultural environment, to a specific feature of the local artistic mentality, which is cautious about importing any type of radicalisms, always trying to project the cultural novelty on its traditional patterns which still have metaphysical bent, being thus constantly and irreducibly tempted by the possibly spiritual form of any aesthetical innovation. From this point of view, it is interesting to note the "ruralist" or "spiritualist" tinge acquired in Romania in the 70s and afterwards, by the approaches which had been initially of the type land-art, ecological and sociological art, installation, with artists like Ilie Pavel, Ana Lupas, Constantin Flondor, Horia Bernea, Cristian Paraschiv, to mention a few names belonging to different research types.

time, a real aesthetic trend, called in that period "neo-Orthodox" or "neo-Byzantine" painting. The artists affiliated to this trend give up, to a certain extent, "the formal libertine outlook" of a neo-avant-garde type and return to a visual rigour based on the religious vein of Byzantine tradition. At the moment of its appearance, this attitude could be interpreted as daring in two respects. First, in the context of international art, the option of the neo-Byzantine artists could seem like a "retardation", a return to an obsolete representationalism also marked by an outmoded religious symbolism; but it could also be seen as an act of revolt, of artistic courage against the inflation of visual variety in the international art market. Second, their spiritual position, first discreetly and then more and more openly confessing the regaining of Orthodox faith and active participation within Church life, could be felt, in relation to communist propaganda and ideological constraints, like an act of moral courage and spiritual independence.

So, it is significant that the neo-Orthodox artists - we should also mention here Horia Pastina, Vladimir Zamfirescu, Vasile Varga, artists without experimental antecedents - functioned within their craft as artistic landmarks, which offered an aesthetic alternative to modernist aporias, but also an existential alternative to totalitarian constraints. In this context, the neo-Byzantine group's "Prologue" exhibitions were interpreted at that time as a type of "cultural resistance", even if it was neo-traditionalist, oriented towards the past. It is noteworthy that their art could appear to the younger generation, in contrast with the existing social and cultural background, somehow "avant-garde" or "revolutionary". And there were young artists, with or without neo-avant-garde antecedents, who took over this spiritual relay, changing more or less radically their former approaches in order to tackle more openly the metaphysical dimension of the visual image or visual object: Marian Zidaru, Cristian Paraschiv, Mihai Sirbulescu, Dan Mohanu, Claudiu Filimon, Stefan Rimniceanu, Vlad Ciobanu, Gruia Florut, Constantin Pacea, Mihai Lujanschi etc.¹²

Postmodernism The most powerful and influential cultural concept of the 80s was undoubtedly postmodernism. All the trends reviewed so far can be juxtaposed and interrelated under its umbrella.

As we all know, postmodernism was related to a more comprehensive state of mind (briefly recalled at the beginning of this text), materialized in a wider international debate around the ideas of modernity in society and modernism in artistic idioms. Discussing the positive and negative aspects of the modern world in the last 50 years, postmodernism has manifested itself in the artistic environment as a tendency to leave aside and elude, in

¹²For neo-Byzantine art, see: Magda Carneci "Glosses on Neo-Byzantine Art" in *The Art of the 80s. Texts on Postmodernism*, Bucharest, Litera, 1996.

various ways, the absolutist avant-garde principles of "break", "continuous innovation" and "progress". In exchange, it extended various approaches centred on the concepts of "tradition", and "historicity", approaches which regain and use in various ways the history of art styles from the past or various geographical areas. Thus, within the framework of postmodernist aesthetic pluralism and eclecticism two great complementary directions could be delineated: a "realistic" one (parodical, neo-dada, kitsch, consumerist, etc.) and a "formalist" one (abstract, spiritualist, etc.), which can be included in all their variants in a vast international emerging "trans-aesthetics".¹³

It is a significant fact for the Romanian artistic milieu as well, that postmodernism was the most intense cultural debate in the mid to late eighties. In spite of increasingly tyrannical political restrictions and subsequent drastic cultural isolation, the relative synchronicity (by and large) of the Romanian artistic environment with the international spirit at that time can be explained not only by the presumed "external influence" (which was real, normal, inevitable) but also by internal circumstances, of which we should not neglect to mention the degrading and implosive socio-political situation. But it was especially due to an internal evolution of artistic discourses towards postmodernist presuppositions. The art critics and theoreticians who were active during the past decade - Mihai Driscu, Mihai Ispir, Alexandra Titu, Radu Procopovici, Calin Dan, Liviana Dan, Adrian Guta, Magda Carneci - were not slow to notice the presence of both trends mentioned above, and the postmodernist tinge of some apparently mutually exclusive tendencies.¹⁴

Finally, neo-expressionism, neo-Byzantine art and intermedial art brought to light a state of crisis, or stasis, of postmodernist artistic discourse, oriented towards the end of the century, bent over itself, looking for its own initial motivations and checking its path, having to give up a self-image developing linearly, in favour of an alternation of dominants, maturing through oppositions which do not completely exclude each other, but which envisage together and alternately a possible artistic future.

¹³There seems to be a specific feature of Romanian spirituality, the aspiration towards the sacred, towards timelessness, a metaphysically bent mentality, the preconceived idea of the sacred behind phenomena, of truth which transcends evidence, a.s.o)

¹⁴See among others, Magda Carneci, "Postmodernism Within the Space of Image", in *Caete critice (Art Reviews)* 1986, no.102; Calin Dan "The Island Feeling. Notes on Postmodernist Crisis" in ARTA 1986, no. 12, and 1987, no.2; special issue "Postmodernism" in ARTA, 1989, no.2

