

Vladimir Bulat

No Radicalism

First published in "Contrafort" nr.4-5 (42-43), April - May 1998, pg. 26 - 27

[3.817 words]

Moldova



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



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.

Vladimir Bulat

No Radicalism

One

The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989—the symbolic border between the Eastern and the Western worlds—marked the beginning of profound changes in the viscera of Europe. The strong difference, reinforced by the existence of that weir, seemed to fade away after that historic moment. The countries subject until that point to the ill-fated ideological and political influences of the USSR, started along the path of redefining and rediscovering their national identities. The trauma could be felt especially at the mental and cultural levels, since these were the aspects to be subject to discussion first. To be sure, the scale of the trauma varied in each case, it was different for each nation. Therefore, they have to be analyzed and made clear, with utmost rigor and separately for each case, keeping in mind the peculiarity and differences of every cultural model.

Two

On the following pages I am going to outline the physiognomy of the artistic organism, especially of the plastic arts of the former Moldovan SSR, and the way in which the physiognomy has changed so far. The point is, therefore, of an exclusively retrospective look at the last artistic decade, as it appears in the light of the most recent and *unexpected* transformations,

with the main emphasis on the artistic developments which had foreseen and generated the said changes.

The beginning of the “thaw” in the visual arts during the ‘80s was triggered basically by a concrete fact: *a misunderstanding*. What do I mean?

Perhaps under the influence of the still vague “perestroikist” breeze, or some other abstruse (and mystical) artistic instinct, two artists from Chişinău, the architect Nicolai Ischimji and the sculptor Valeriu Moşcov, decided to build a kind of “spatial graphics” (the phrase was coined by them) in the courtyard of the sculpture studios at Bariera Sculeni (a place at the edge of Chişinău—*t.n.*), whose main material was metal waste found uptown. Their first piece dated from 1985. It depicted a giant “typewriter” and was entitled “The Dragon”, the title changing later to “The Bureaucratic Apparatus of the CC of the CPSU”. That was the child of intuition rather than of a purposeful aim to expose a thing obvious to everyone: “the warranty” of the System had expired, sending the latter into a steep downward process of putrefaction. The two artists just wanted to experiment, to play around freely with form, volume, and to shape space in fanciful ways. However, “The Dragon” generated animosity, although not between the authors and authorities but between the authors and their fellow artists. For the latter it was inconceivable to make sculptures from found objects without interfering with their surface; they suggested painting those objects. Given this dispute (quite insistent and pressurizing), Ischimji and Moşcov decided to “politicize” the meaning of each of the pieces in order to salvage the initial project in its original form. This is how the concept of the worn-out bureaucratic apparatus appeared, which made its way into the (literary) undercurrent of the metallic structures they were working on. The concept of “glasnost”, which became a “mascot” of the Soviet times after 1987, allowed some consideration (not too scathing though) to be given to the past and to Stalin’s mysterious and bloody character. The visored cap, associated by the two authors with the omnipresent symbol of the horrid character, became the key element of many of the spatial sculptures of the whole set. Thus, by a compromise that allowed them to go on with their search, the authors managed to salvage their original intention, that is to build ephemeral constructions by organizing and shaping space, in order that, finally, “just like wear swallowed the Soviet system, so ... rust would suck in the whole set and only autonomous mounds of rust would be left in the end, untouched.”

One can easily conclude that that was, and still is, an aesthetic belief and agenda that has been under development for over a decade now at the

periphery of the city, Bariera Sculeni¹. That atmosphere of creative scintillation attracted many young sculptors, who added to the set created by Ischimji and designed their own spatial constructions, although widely using paint. A kind of Bariera Sculeni “style” developed, characterized by free use of the welding machine, a mixture of various materials, and paint, often active and applied to the rusty surfaces. An extremely inventive character, shaped to a considerable degree by that artistic environment, was Iurie Horovschi, who in 1989 opened a solo exhibition, at the National Economy Achievements Exhibition where there was a culture-and-arts pavilion, which later became the notorious “Pavilion No.7”. That event laid the basis for a number of modernist exhibitions, which aimed at recovering all the recent attempts made by local artists to overcome the handicap of isolation, their intention to re-live the experience of almost all “isms” of the present century.

Three

The year 1987 showed that the time of change in plastic arts was close. The Youth Exhibition at the Arts Museum had a sufficient number of signs to justify such a statement. That was the first convention of the creative youth under the auspices of the most important forum of the plastic arts; that was a legitimization of the younger generation. And an official recognition as well. If one didn't take part in that exhibition at the moment, one could not gain recognition. However, there were several characters who brought in the sprouts of novelty and who could not be described as especially conformist. I am first of all thinking of the far-fetched expressionist paintings by Mihail Gorban, Vasile Moșanu, Era Freudson, Valeriu Caftea; of the “abysmal” graphics by Iuri Liberman; of the experiments in sculpture by Iurie Horovschi; etc. One couldn't say that the exhibition contained some extremely “tough” and violently radical pieces—the old system was being discarded slowly, with no leadership, no agendas, by a simple rejuvenation of the people in the trade. The exhibitions of the younger artists showed that, when there was no tradition of “unofficial” art, the younger generation “adjusted” itself to the issues of the times, that is a dialogue was being born, a quite dull one though, with features specific to “Moldovan art.” The young people who were coming back from universities in big centers of the USSR (Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk, Kiev, the Baltic

¹ Regarding issues related to the set at Bariera Sculeni see the following: Grigory Pototski, “Dantelăria metalică *****” (The Metallic Lacework on the Wasteground of the 20th Century) in *Moldoiaj' Moldavii*, October 10, 1989, pp. 1,4; as well as a more recent article: Leo Gherasim, “Mic tratat asupra uzurii” (“Short Treaty on Wear”) in *Art-Hoc*, no.6, January 1998, pp. 6-7. Also an interview with Nicolai Ischimji in *ibid.*, p.7.

States) had practically no artistic ideas. They had to shape them “on the spot.” The “grafting” was most of the time not quite vigorous and qualitative; it had no vivacity. The need for a firm segregation—by searching for new subjects—was felt. For the first time one could feel that an exhibition—the one in the summer of 1989, dedicated to Eminescu (classical Romanian poet—*t.n.*)—turned into a watershed that separated two “streams”. In a very heavy-handed manner, the exhibition was divided in two: “traditionalists” and “abstractionists”. That was not a schism just between styles, but rather a tension between generations. The elderly artists were trying to adjust their subjects to the agenda of the day (“national rebirth”, the glorious past of the nation, the wonderful age of the inter-war Basarabia [the present Moldova plus some territories in the south and in the north—*t.n.*], Stephen the Great, Eminescu, etc.), to the representational formulae of the stale “socialist realism”, while legions of creative young people were straining themselves to cancel the consequences of the latter. Only for the sake of change, unfortunately. One could still not see the development of new, characteristic subjects that would match the ideational changes of the time. An exhibition, with a somewhat inquisitive title, ‘Search-’98’, was organized in that quite confusing environment. It was at that event that the greatest variety of modern art was exhibited: abstract painting, “objectual” art, various so-called “conceptual” formulae of expression, installations, etc. An art historian reported on this convention the following: “The era of official reviews is leaving. The era of work is coming in. The ‘Search-’98’ exhibition has made the first step in this direction. One wishes that between this step, unsure and varying in width, and the next the distance be as short as possible.”²

The same autumn there was an open-air biennial sculpture exhibition on the square near the Arts Museum, which featured mainly young artists. Almost all the sculptors from Bariera Sculeni were present there (Moşcov, Horovschi, Rabinco, Şevenco, Gonenco and others), but there were also several established artists. One could read into this event an opening of the arts to a different kind of relationship between the art piece and the environment³, when the latter was seen not just as a receiving space but as a component part of the art piece and as a supplier of materials necessary for its creation. Horovschi’s piece, which contained an insinuating environmentalist irony in its title “We Are Cutting Down Forests”, is suggestive in this respect. It depicted a large bundle of branches painted a

² For a report on this exhibition see Natalia Ponomariova, “Razdumia” (Meditations) in *Sovetskaia Moldavia*, September 7, 1989, also published in Romanian (and English) in *Art-Hoc*, no.6, p.11.

³ Tatiana Cistova, “Vystavka na trave” (Exhibition on Grass) in *Molodij’ Moldavii*, October 17, 1989, pp.1,4.

gaudy green—a “bouquet” stuck into a mass-produced chair. The ambiguity with which that “object” could be interpreted also suggested that there was a crisis in the way in which the relationship “significance”/“signifier” was perceived. The artistic approach considerably outran the capability of the critical approach. It so happened that many of the nonconformist-art exhibitions were not subject to a degree of analysis one had expected, and the little that was reported in the press did nothing but to report very generally some names and marginal thoughts on some of the pieces authored by those names. The art events between ‘89-’93 didn’t flow into wide theoretical discussions about the role of and the numerous interpretations on the artist and art. But they were much wanted. Society and art were undergoing profound—if not radical—changes, while the prospective, critical thinking seemed helpless, incapable of making out its meanings and problems. Perhaps it was due to this fact, by no means beneficial and positive in essence, that the 1993 Bucharest exhibition of plastic arts from Moldova showed a moment of stagnation rather than opening inside the plastic arts. The organizers didn’t try to select an organic and coherent set of pieces, which would be able to describe the present situation of the plastic arts in Chişinău; they chose the least-resistance path and showed a “panoramic view” of the entire creative process of the previous thirty years by using pieces from the Arts Museum storeroom. This concept was rather a disservice; it would have been more useful to present a reason for initiating debates on the process of detachment from the rudiments of the “social realism” tradition. The material exhibited didn’t allow for such an analysis or a serious discussion, which was delayed until some later times.⁴

Four

The beginning of the ‘90s witnessed the emergence, in the plastic arts landscape of Chişinău, of two groups of artists, Fantom and Zece (Ten), whose periods of activity were ephemeral but no less interesting for that, and even symptomatic of an understanding of the transformations occurring inside the artistic and aesthetic world. Since each of the two is,

⁴ This exhibition generated a lot of interest and triggered a number of articles and studies, from which we chose just the most interesting ones from the viewpoint of their theoretical formulation: Liudmila Toma, “Arta plastică a Republicii Moldova la Bucureşti” (The Plastic Arts of Moldova in Bucharest) in *Arta '94*, pp.123-127; Vladimir Bulat, “‘Chipul’ trist al plasticii se învioreaza” (The Sad Face of the Arts Starts Livening Up) in *Literatura și Arta*, April 15, 1993, p.6; Pavel Şuşara, “Artă plastică din Republica Moldova” (Plastic Arts from Moldova) in *Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei*, vol.40, 1993, pp.106-107.

beyond doubt, a “case”, a separate investigation is required in order to analyze their activity.

It is not a secret to anyone that the artistic environment in Chişinău is extremely cosmopolitan and variegated from an ethnic viewpoint—this is one of the core elements of this cultural organism's heterogeneity and peculiarity. It was perhaps due to the political context during the Soviet era that this feature remained hidden, that is the multicultural character of the population in this region didn't come to the fore. However, once this state of affairs changed, the distinctive “color” of some artistic entities became visible. The appearance of the Fantom group can be explained in this context too, besides the context of their more or less coherent agenda they set for themselves when they stepped on the stage. Essentially their painting contains a Slav kind of yeast and hidden undercurrent, a Russian kind of offhandedness, molded to a large extent on aesthetic clichés well-homed in the two capitals of the former empire. In other words, the pattern followed by the Fantom artists was of eastern origin; they thus “discovered” the artistic achievements of the east by looking at the patterns in Moscow. The point is of an attempt to “synchronize”, but which was patently mediated, non-combatant and non-radical. The pith of this kind of painting was the wish to engage into a dialogue with any kind of issues of the moment, which were adapted to the sensibility of the place; these artists “had in common the regional artistic traditions, the trend towards nonfigurative art in which the main issue on a canvas was ‘pure form’, the eloquence of gesture, the technology of the material, the power of persuasion peculiar to color”⁵. When regarded as a whole, the activity of the group was characterized by numerous convulsions, much ambiguity, moments of tension, and changes in membership. The permanent crisis was fertile ground for a continuous permeability to the newly joining members, which went, in a way, against the grain of the successive departures of older members. The group dissolved in 1993, and each of the members chose a different path, only to slip up on auctioning out too zealously his or her own work. One may also say that it was only within the group that each of the artists reached his or her most complex degree of creativity.

Things had a totally different turn in the case of the team which adopted the name of Ten. The group was founded by several established personalities (it is enough to mention Andrei Sârbu and Dumitru Peicev in order to make myself clear), who invited an ambitious generation of young artists to join, in order to “encourage and set off an instantaneous process of grouping

⁵ Natalia Ponomariova, “The Fantom Group” in *Art-Hoc*, no.6, January 1998, p.19.

and regrouping, of association and dissociation of artists, ideas, trends, with the ultimate goal of reaching the freedom of creative expression and not reestablishing a trade subservient to an ideological doctrine, according to the old pattern. The group would, at the same time, contribute to refreshing, reinvigorating, changing root-and-branch the local artistic thought itself, which had been seriously affected by a long period of stagnation”⁶. But I have to say from the very start that this agenda was accomplished by the Fantom group rather than by Ten. The two exhibitions of the latter group, one in Chişinău and the other in Bucharest, represented reunions of disparate entities, some kind of solo mini-exhibitions displayed in one place. They had two elements in common: 1) the group was not ethnically homogeneous—there were Basarabian Romanians and Bulgarians; 2) all of them adhered to the local artistic “canon” that had been established in the ‘60s by artists like Mihai Greuc, Valentina Rusu-Ciobanu, Igor Vieru, Eleonora Romanescu, etc. Consequently, to their “state of stagnation”, that the artists wanted to overcome, they added their attitude of maladjustment of the old clichés to the new realities. The efforts of the Ten group were finally limited to representing almost nothing else but the residue of a dissembled psittacism. The members of the group showed, in various degrees of intensity, fondness for the pictorial values of the local tradition, which they re-represented as digests. However paradoxical it may seem, the activity of the Ten group didn’t accomplish a qualitative leap but rather a relapse, a look backward, a descending linearity. Structurally, the ten artists were at the opposite end from the Fantom group, as if trying to save from being torn down the edifice which had already been rejected by the latter, who maybe never tried to bring it together. The Fantom group was following, as I already said, a different model.

Speaking of groups, one ought also to mention another one, which was active at the turn of the decade, called *Studioul lui Tumanian* (Tumanian’s Studio)—it brought together several young artists (G.Şevcenco, Iu.Boris, Iu.Roşieru and others) who painted under a “filonian” influence—a kind of painting totally dependent on the “organicism” of the great Russian painter from the beginning of the century. The only appearance of the group in an open venue was during the nonobjectual (nonfigurative) art exhibition in 1990⁷. It is also possible that a good part of this group’s “search” and

⁶ Andrei Sârbu, “Zece” in *Sud-Est*, no.1, 1993, p.***, republished in *Art-Hoc* (see above). In connection with the Chişinău exhibition of the group see critical notes by Igor Isar, “Avangardism basarabean?” (Basarabian Avangardism?) in *Tineretul Moldovei*, February 7-8, 1993, republished in *ibid*.

⁷ Polina Gridneva, “Levyi marsh” (The March of the Left) in *Sovetskaia Moldavia*, July 22, 1990, p.4. Not much is known about the activity of this group, but what is known is that they displayed their works at the Chişinău Polytechnic Institute. The architect Nicolai Ischimji—an emblematic figure of the Chişinău underground, one of the authors of the Bariera Sculeni sculptures project—used to teach at that institute for a long period of time, which makes me hypothesize that *Studioul lui*

“investigation” was not meant for display and had just a “chamber” character—a kind of “apt-art”.

Five

In 1994 there was a number of events which oblige me to mention the permanent and consistent outlining of a new aesthetics, developed by a pleiad of young artists who exhibited an artistic behavior allergic to any kind of reference to tradition or naturalized, officialized models immediately served to the wider public. Those events were permeable to any kind of experimentation, from open-air sculptures to attempts at performance (one ought to mention here the events in the city as well as outside the city, organized by the group that featured Ștefan Sadovnicov, Valentina Bobcova, Igor Șcerbina and others; as well as those by Marc Verlan in 1995: “Barbie’s Funeral”, “Holy Land”, “Paperman”, which had an incredible impact on the public and artists) to various land-art and video-art projects.

Six

The real turning point in the development of modern plastic arts in Moldova came with the opening in the spring of 1996 in Chișinău of SCCA (Soros Center for Contemporary Art), which started off with an intervention (performance, landart) project in Sadova (Călărași district). The event was conceived of as a summer camp attended by artists who were ready to take on the most wide range of artistic expressions, and especially those forms which had been banned by an ill-fated regime, hostile to any kind of freedom to externalize one’s individuality and creative autonomy—the communist-totalitarian regime.

I am not at all setting out to write an apology for SCCA’s activity. I am only going to analyze and formulate several considerations on the impact produced on the larger public and artists in general by a number of events organized by the Center. It is especially clear that its projects set an irreconcilable cleavage in the arts system of Moldova. Most importantly, two stylistic entities shape out clearly, but we can also speak about two mental entities. Just to banter a little on this situation, one could say, just like Lenin

Tumanian was not foreign to a certain aspect of the “disguised experimentalism” taking place in Chișinău.

said, that there are “two cultures in one”⁸ inside any culture and at any time, which describes a schism between two camps—a progressive and a reactionary one. So that I be liked by the establishment, I will use “progressive” for the art it is used to (fashionable art, exhibitions celebrating personalities, solo exhibitions of septa- and octogenarians, etc., that is “law & order”), and, on the other hand, I will use, of course, “reactionary” for the art promoted by SCCA.

I actually didn't do anything else but to state a fact: the opacity of the mass media and of an important part of the public opinion. The press is silent about nearly all the events organized by SCCA. Even the annual exhibition *Mesaje de la TZARA* (Messages from TZARA), where a lot of artists from abroad participated, was not followed by analyses and commentaries (1997); a special issue of *Art-Hoc*—published also by SCCA—was the only record of that large-scale event. A critical reaction is still lacking; only a well-built critical mechanism could clear up this state of affairs, which is blatantly preposterous. As a consequence, the artistic act has considerably overrun the critical one. Due to this situation one can already feel the flip side of the problem—the artist moves towards aloofness, and there is but one step from there to “mannerism”. By “mannerism” I mean absence of progress.

For the time being, the Union of Plastic Artists keeps organizing exhibitions that reek of staleness, love of the fashionable, academism, perpetuating to a good extend the tradition of the “social realism” method (has anyone ever declared the death of the latter?). In the meantime, an increasingly numerous team of “bad boys” and “bad girls” are playing around with the INTERNET, are building virtual realities (“global village”), designing “imaginary maps” (Marc Verlan), bringing to life the bicycle (Veaceslav Druță), proclaiming the secondary existence of birds (Vasile Rață), and are making things whistle staccato (Iurie Ciubotaru)...

As for the rest, “Art belongs to the people!”

It was only by following the profound meaning of this ideological slogan—actually a mystifying one—coined by Lenin, that one could avoid the destructive, volcanic force of the modernist radicalism. That is, one could have avoided it, until recently. But now a new era has set in.

⁸ Cf. V.I.Lenin, “Kriticheskie zametki po natsional'nomu voprosu” (Critical Remarks on the Issue of Nationalities) in *V.I.Lenin ob iskusstve i literature* (V.I.Lenin on Art and Literature), Moscow, 1957, p.95.