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1989: A Turning Point in Romanian Art and Society

PhD Thesis Statement

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The aims of research

With regard to Romanian society and art, the year of 1989 signifies a *turning point* in the ample transformation process that had already started at the beginning of the '80s. Its signs are discernible in the realm of the spirit and culture, respectively in the first manifestations of postmodernism in Romania. The aim of the research is to outline the changes that took place in the art field, to bring into relief the significance of some individual oeuvres, to contextualise them within the larger framework of social-political and economic transformation.

The dissertation aims to build up a structure, which without claiming cause-effect relationships, relates artistic phenomena to their background by following several paths of the transformation process in order to show up their overlapping and nodal points. Though after 1989 studies on Romanian contemporary art have continuously appeared, to my knowledge no comprehensive study on the Romanian art of the '90s, viewed from the *postcommunist transition* perspective and in relation to the earlier decade, has been published.

Research methods

I've framed the *transition* period from communism to postcommunist between 1981/1983 (the first manifestations of postmodernism in Romanian art) and 2004 (the opening of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest). This interval roughly coincides with the starting of the process of questioning communism, its active rejection, processing of its traumas until communism ceases to represent a reference point. The working up of communism's heritage is a longer process, I've considered the point from which the past no longer dominates upon the judgement of the present.

In my research I draw on studies of the transition period, that appeared in the field of politics, sociology, anthropology, economy and cultural history, in order to put in perspective and contextualise the transformations that took place in Romania in the field of art. I've given importance to the contextual approach of Romanian artistic phenomena since in the '80s and in the '90s the relation between art and power, and later on, between art and society had a decisive influence on the attitude and positioning of artists, on their artistic practice.

I analyse the change of the position held by culture in Romanian society in the '80-'90s, the formation of the Romanian art scene. I follow up the shaping of artistic trends that appeared in the '80s as well as the appearance of a new generation of artists and a new system of values at the end of the '90s. The research lays stress on the discussions that characterised the reception of postmodernism in Romania, maps out the dynamics of postmodern artistic phenomena with regard especially to the '80s, when postmodern sensitiveness played the role of a cultural ferment against the communist system. While concerning the socially engaged art of the beginning of the '90s I resorted to thematic and artistic-practice related classifications, starting with the second half of the '90s I layed stress on individual artistic activity.

I analyse three important debates that marked the Romanian cultural life and art scene in the '80 and in the '90, namely the postmodern debate, which took place in the mid eighties, the so called media-debate, that aroused in the first half of the nineties and the debate around institutions of art, which was triggered by the setting up of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest. Albeit these debates had their own specificity, all were connected with ways of taking stand on communism, respectively with the handling of its heritage.

In order to highlight the particularities of the Romanian art of the '80s I've found appropriate to compare it to the artistic developments of the same period in some Central-East European countries (Hungary, the former Czechoslovakia, Poland). Taking into account the globalisation process and the developments of the Romanian art context in the '90s (the appearance of exhibitions and publications concerned with historical and thematic aspects of contemporary Romanian art), in order to situate the Romanian art of the period within an international framework, instead of the comparative method, I resort to the study of the mechanisms of representation.

Summary and main results of the research

While the political transition, which started in 1989 can be considered accomplished in 2000/2001 due to the fulfilment of the formal conditions of democracy and market economy, the transformation of mentalities had been a much longer process. The beginnings of this process are discernible already in the early '80s together with the appearance of a postmodern sensitiveness in the field of literature and visual arts. I marked the end of the transition period with the opening of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in 2004 in Bucharest. Between these two cultural reference points, I situated the year of 1989 as a *turning point* in the transformation process, which started with the mental rejection and deconstruction of communism, and has continued with its practical dismantling and the establishing of the new structures.

Putting the transition period into political, sociological, economical and cultural perspective the research has succeeded in formulating some general aspects of the transformation process. While the Romanian art of the '80s was characterised by its opposition to the communist power – opposition which mostly meant an “aesthetic alternative” – , the art of the early and mid '90s was marked by its opening towards society, by the alternative propositions made by artists with regard to the problems of Romanian society and culture. In the first half of the nineties the deconstruction of old structures and the building up of new ones, recuperation, context-production, the constructive solving of binary oppositions were topical issues for art as well as for the whole Romanian society. By the turning of the millennium, together with the coming up of a new generation of artists and the shaping of a new art institution system, one can talk about the apparition of new values and of a global reference system.

Sharing the opinions of some Romanian historians of art and literature (Magda Carneci, Ion Bogdan Lefter) I consider the appearance of postmodern sensitiveness in Romania at the beginning of the '80s a positive phenomenon, which anticipated the ulterior changes. Studying the modern-postmodern relationship with regard

to the Romanian context, I developed a hypothetical model with the help of which I considered artistic phenomena as postmodern-type of reactions to the de-legitimated and unfulfilled character of the Romanian modern. By emphasising the hypothetical character of the model, I related the new-orthodox and new-expressionist movements to the de-legitimated aspect of the modern, and the experimental tendencies to its unfulfilled aspect. In parallel with this, I pursue the relationship of artistic phenomena to their context and tradition, and I'm showing artistic examples for all the three phenomena. New-orthodox art, that appeared already in the mid '70s and matured in the '80s (Marin Gherasim, Sorin Dumitrescu, Alexandru Chira, Florin Mitroi, Horia Bernea, Constantin Flondor), represented a form of "resistance through culture", it presented a spiritual-artistic alternative to the general fragmentation of life and emptying of values. The new-expressionist trend, which appeared in the early '80s among young artists (Marilena Preda Sanc, Stela Lie, Gheorghe Rasovszky, Sándor Bartha, Ion Aurel Muresan, Mircea Tohatan, Ioana Batrinu, Andrei Chintila, Teodor Graur, Tractor group, József Bartha, Darie Dup, Mircea Roman, Aurel Vlad, László Újvárossy, Dan Perjovschi), considered the work of art as the territory of artistic freedom, focused on individuality, on the particular, and the values of everyday life. It represented as well an alternative to the constraining circumstances of the Romanian context. I'm following Romanian art-historical writing by using the term "experimental" for artistic phenomena that beyond the experimental attitude, have a conceptual, sometimes political and performative character (Iosif Király, Imre Baász, Gusztáv Ütő, László Újvárossy, Rudolf Bone, Lia Perjovschi, Nicolae Onucsán, Sándor Antik, Dan Mihaltianu, Teodor Graur).

The comparison of the art of the '80s from Romania to that of some Central-East European countries (Hungary, the former Czechoslovakia, Poland) from the same period has brought into relief the particularities of Romanian new painting. The latter characterises both the middle and the young generation of Romanian artists, new-orthodoxy is a local specificity, new-expressionism is characterised by the spectacular comeback of the repressed individuality. Though political and critical contents are discernible in the Romanian art of the '80s, these were very isolated manifestations. Due to the constraining circumstances, the playful-humorous, loose attitude are not representative for Romanian art.

From the point of view of contextual approach I considered important to discuss the reception of postmodernism as well as the retroactive evaluation of the art of the '80 in Romania. The postmodern debate of the '80s was about aesthetic concepts, however, taking into account the place held by culture within communist society, one may consider it as an alternative discourse to the dominant discourse of power. In the '90s, political stands and ideological considerations often influenced the retroactive interpretation of postmodernism and artistic tendencies of the '80s. The media-debate from the first half of the '90s was more than a struggle between the old and the new held on an aesthetic ground. The same as in the communist period, the struggle over the means of language represented a fight for power. That time the adversaries were not the Party and the intellectuals, but two artistic camps, the devotees of the new-orthodox trend, and those of the use of new media, both presenting themselves as alternatives for the future of Romanian culture. While the media debate was rather indirectly connected to the heritage of communism, the connections of the institution-debate roused around the establishment of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest were explicit.

The Romanian art of the '90s is characterised by a recuperative tendency (attempts at bringing closer art and public, redefinition of the social role of the artist), the thematisation of the relationship between individual and collective history, the deconstruction of communist symbols and identity clichés. The exhibition practice of the time was characterised by the tendency to supply the various lacks accumulated during communism (the processing of the art of the communist period, the catching up with information in the field, the re-establishment of international contacts). I'm discussing the art of the first half of the '90s according to themes and artistic positions, then I focus on individual paths. I'm analysing separately the activity of Ion Grigorescu, subREAL, Dan Perjovschi and Lia Perjovschi, whose works, projects I consider symptomatic for the transition period. All four artists were not only concerned with the issues of the time, but – even in an indirect manner – tried to influence them.

I'm presenting the young generation of Romanian artists, which came up in the late nineties. Compared to their elders, they have different life-styles, ways of getting information, attitude towards art, and locate themselves differently. They have a post-utopian world-view, master self-management, they are interested in small communities, move loosely between artistic genres and fields of activity (Cutter group, Ioan Godeanu, Cosmin Gradinaru, Anca Ignatescu, Ioana Nemes, Stefan Cosma, Vlad Nanca, Rostopasca group, Mircea Cantor, Gabriela Vanga, Ciprian Muresan, Duo Van der Mixt, Cristian Pogacean). Most of young artists spent their childhood in communism, their coming of age was influenced by the transition period. Therefore they develop both an implied and distanced way of dealing with themes of the recent past (Mona Vatamanu & Florin Tudor). At the turn of the millennium, besides Bucharest, important artistic initiatives developed in Cluj, around the art and philosophical-political magazine *Idea.art+society* and in Iasi, around the Periferic Biennial.

Apart from some aspects (the official image of Romanian art presented by the Arta review, the debate around postmodernism, the 1988 mega-exhibition from Baia Mare) one can hardly talk about the representation of Romanian art during the '80s. After 1989 the situation changed, the most important task was the supplying of lacks caused by the political oppression and isolation during the communist period. In this respect, the exhibition *Experiment in Romanian art from 1960* represented a memorable attempt. Analysing the international visibility of Romanian art in the '90s I'm discussing the ideological character of some of the period's popular concepts, such as "East European", "Central East European" and "Balkan" art. The participation of Romanian artists in international exhibitions structured around these concepts was not always a passive one. Some of them (subREAL, Dan Perjovschi) consciously played upon the use of identity-clichés or developed counter-strategies such as Lia Perjovschi, who set up her own version of art history. In the '90s the self-image of Romanian contemporary art oscillated among self-colonising, conflictual, pessimistic and constructive views. The young Romanian artists are no longer interested in defining themselves nationally or regionally, they define themselves in global terms.

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