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The Many Facets of the Romanian Conceptual Art

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Abstract

Conceptual art was and still is a subject of great interest for art criticism and contemporary artists. The attention paid to this art has emerged both from the internationalization of the practices associated with conceptual art that continues up to the present day, but also because of the challenge and even rejection of this art as visual art. In Romania, since the early years of the establishment of the communist regime, art has become strictly subordinate to political interests, artists being forced to rally socialist realism and to abandon the styles practiced in the interwar period. This has reduced the aesthetic autonomy, art has to illustrate mainly the new social order, the rise of the proletariat and the unique political model: socialism. This paper is part of an analytical approach that aims to understand the conceptual art according to the specificity of Romania during those years and the political and social context in which it appeared. In the historical period that is the subject of this research, between the mid-1960s and the 1970s, the ruptures of the art of the beginning of the century and the politically imposed art were best observed.

Keywords: conceptual art, Romania, politics.

1. Introduction

Conceptual art in Romania did not appear as a reaction to the oversaturation of consumerism, abstract expressionism, as was the case in the United States, but as a form of protest or alternative art. Moreover, we observed that it is difficult to label an artist as being conceptual when there

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were periods of time when a series of Eastern European artists have dabbled in conceptual art. Given the way Western conceptualism is perceived, the forms taken by conceptual art in Romania reflect the distinct features of the environment and political context in which it was born, the main artistic preoccupations being questioning the present, the notion of art, or the objects which can become art.

2. Theoretical Background

Tony Godfrey argues that "conceptual art is not about forms or material, but about ideas and meanings"[1]. Paul Wood believes that conceptual art "raised questions about the products of artistic activity and about the purpose of art in relation to a more general history of modernity"[2]. According to Alexandra Titu, conceptualism is "that awareness of the artistic act as a linguistic act. We are no longer in the process of purifying language, but proposing as a theme of discourse, the way itself of the relation between the concept (terms, definition) and object, between concept and concrete", giving as an example for this definition the experiments of Joseph Kosuth [3].

What these attempts have in common is that they try to explain conceptual art starting from the same key word: *question,* either in the form of interrogation by the conceptual art of the environment in which it had developed (in terms of the political and institutional dimension) or the interrogation by the public of what is actually art.

3. Argument of the paper

Compared to the rest of Western Europe and the United States of America, we have observed that conceptual art in Eastern Europe has placed more emphasis on irony, subversiveness, individualism and humor, closely related to the political situation in this part of Europe. It can not be stated that conceptual art in Eastern Europe was an explicit political protest. Conceptual art was considered to be suspicious by the authorities of the totalitarian states because it refused to follow the doctrinal lines of socialist realism and because it was considered to be affiliated with Western models. If in Latin America the artists refused those styles of art that seemed to be representative of American art associated with imperialism, artists in the Soviet Union preferred "individualism" to Western art.

5. Conceptual Art in Eastern Europe

Taking into account that conceptual art in Eastern Europe has had a number of peculiarities, even uniqueness to the international trend, we believe that Tony Godfrey's definition of what is conceptual art can be extended to the acceptance in this part of the world of those "underground" actions that included both forms of land art and body art under this concept. Conceptual art in this area did not emerge as a reaction to the over-saturation of consumerism, as in the case of the United States, but as a form of protest or artistic alternative work. Moreover, it is difficult to classify an artist as a conceptual one, as there are shorter or longer periods of time when a number of Romanian artists have been interested with conceptual art, after which they either return to painting, sculpture, or had a total separation from the artistic projects of this period. Interactivity with the audience was scarce, yet there were interconnections between the main area of humanistic research, on the lines mentioned in a study published by Ana Cristina Leşe [4].

5.1. Romanian Conceptual Artists

Ion Grigorescu is a particular case in the Romanian art of the `70s through the experiments and actions in which the main subject and object was his body combined with works or actions with an obvious opposing character regarding the communist politics. Throughout his work there is an illusion of politics, followed by a continuous ironic opposition, doubled by an ideological self-preservation.

The means of expression of this complex artist were not limited to photography and painting, but included installations, drawing, collage, mural painting, film and even readymade objects. Speaking of his style as a realism that does not impose a style on the real [5], Ion Grigorescu's works and actions of the 1970s rejected the officially imposed "realism", choosing his own realism, that of the social and political daily reality under the brutal and undistorted austerity. And because his style had to had an official label, he was included in the category of "neo-documentary realism" on the basis of works displayed in exhibitions, consisting of photos that captured everyday life of ordinary people, factory workers, family members etc.

A fresco of the society in which the artist "sank" was caught during a journey through Bucharest with the 26th tram in the movie "Beloved Bucharest", 1977 [6]. The tram line guided the artist through the working-class, impoverished neighbourhoods, in which one could read inscriptions containing communist propaganda messages such as "Long live

communism, the future of man!" Or "We made the ultimate sacrifice for the next generations!", through the areas in which workers constructed the underground line, surprising the machines used in this process and the inscription "M". Moving towards the central areas the artist captured another social class, elegant and refined, but also the fascination of some people with the monuments of the past.

Other photos of the communist reality transmit the same state, the duality "reality" – "utopia, propaganda": "The Meat queue", 1975, "Waiting for the gas tanks", 1982 Craiova, deconstruct the myth of the prosperous socialist society, showing it as it was seen by all of its participants. The people surprised by the artist do not express dissatisfaction but the fact that they have adapted to the state of affairs, and there is a place for a "deeper adaptation to decay" [7] which makes a discordant note and emphasizes the individual and original character of this approach.

The period of relative freedom of creation and movement outside the country at various exhibitions and artistic events from the mid-1960s was a real opportunity for Paul Neagu. "Neagu's boxes" developed, appealing to their visual and tactile sense, being opposed to official art: "displaying their simple tridimensionality and proposing constructions and deconstructions of form, often made from peculiar materials"[8], but which involved actively the public since they had to manipulate the materials and experience a sensation. These "Tactile Objects" started in Bucharest, after which they were exhibited at the Edinburgh festival in 1969. The aesthetic quality or visual aspect of the works was an unimportant aspect, focusing on how the shape and the texture worked together in creating an effect.

In London, Paul Neagu tied a friendship with the owner of the Sigi Krauss Gallery and his wife who even baked his waffles for the performance that took place in that space, "The Blind Bite" in 1971 [9]. After he had already used the audience with the tactile challenge, the artist proposed a new approach to artwork, a perishable sculpture of waffles. After arranging the "Cake Man", an "anthropocosmic" human figure filled with cakes placed on overlapping layers and with various messages attached to it explaining the event, the participants were offered the performance program with a map of the parts of sculpture that could be bought.

The public could buy a portion of the silhouette, eat it or take it home to store it. The "Blind Bite" was a performance with social aspect with multiple levels of perception, the first is the connection between the different waffles arranged in the form of a complex system consisting of a multitude of cells communicating with each other and a secondly the communication between the work and the public that had been served from these cells and had become part of the system. About this performance, the

artist said he did not bring anything new to the unconventional art scene, recognizing that there were artists who experimented with different foods to achieve a reaction, in order not to be confused with a naive artist from Eastern Europe [9].

Andrei Cădere was a nomadic artist. In his youth, the artist came into contact with the great artists of the times (Corneliu Baba for example). At the same time, the interest in drawing can be observed, the artist showing a nonconformist talent, yet preferring isolation, the marginality that will become a distinct sign of his artistic existence. In his works it can be seen the same interest that Western conceptual artists have manifested towards institutional criticism as well as to serialism, through "endless painting" as in the case of Roman Opalka or Niele Toroni.

The coloured bars were not subject to hierarchy or history. With regard to how the artist entitled these objects, "peinture sans fin", the thought sends us to another Romanian artist, Constantin Brâncuşi, and the legend about his journey on foot to Paris but also to the "Endless Column". Probably because of this inevitable association, one of the most controversial appearances of the Cădere, at *Documenta 5* Kassel, 1972, is ironically linked to the Brâncuşi legend.

Today, the portrait of Andrei Cădere is much easier to sketch and understand by referring to postmodern contemporaneity. His playful attitude, without the weight of a biography of history and myths, the exclusively urban character of his actions, the political activism in the form of the criticism of the institutions and the intrusions of the subversive (without limiting his criticism to a system), the freedom of manifestation, all to a certain extent, are supported and even contrasted by its emblematic creation, the coloured bar. The disinterested attitude opposes an artistic object, for which the artist has proposed a series of strict rules precisely with the aim of overturning the existing cultural, social and political norms.

Thus, one can speak of self-identification with the artistic object of the artist, he himself became a new "norm" (or rather a distinct "mark") who chooses to use logic, the rational giving the impression of randomness. In support of this statement are the artists' drawings, the invitations sent to the connoisseurs to observe it and the purpose of the intervention.

5.2. Romanian feminism. Geta Brătescu

The Romanian art of the 70s was not deprived of the presence of artists who did not conform to the plastic rigors, which redefined the notion of feminism through and from the perspective of conceptual art. Geta Bratescu expressed herself artistically through installations, performances,

with a powerful conceptual language focused on serialism, repetition of the same patterns. The concern and research of female identity through self-analysis came from the historical reality of a long period of time, partly continued after the Revolution, in which there was a major imbalance between genders, and thus a series of limitations stemmed from stereotypes, where the female artist, either a painter or a sculptor was tolerated, but too little encouraged, with little chance of affirmation.

The body was used in the intimate space of the studio, not in order to protest (as in Ewa Partum's case who marched nude on the streets) but self-discovery through fragmentation, or more specifically the dematerialization of its own representation by what will become a trademark of the artist, the mask. It is not a substitution in itself, but a reduction of the "ego" as can be seen in the "Towards White" [10], 1975 action (9 photographed sequences) that captures the gradual transformation of the studio space by sticking to the walls, the ceiling , the floor white sheets of paper.

After finishing the wallpapering, the artist glued white sheets, her face and hands painted in the same colour. In this way, the artist became one and the same with the environment, she conjoined "white", where the interpretation of the action can be made in terms of the chromatic association: white (purity, innocence, truth), but this level is too simplistic and does not include the feminist dimension of action. By reference to the environment and self and especially through serialism, took birth the new identification through the white mask.

6. Conclusions

As for Romania, conceptual art took a form that was not always and explicitly a critique of socialist realism from the unrealistic view of reality, but rather an attempt to redefine and revive "individuality". Many conceptual artists even used Soviet propaganda material to hijack it, and their works do not portray nostalgia of the West, but they are heading with the same force towards both political systems and what they represent.

These artist displayed a personal way of understanding art, either subversive or on the contrary, which could not be visibly perceived as "politicized" to reach the "inner self", to that part that could not be exhibited due to political rigor, for that by liberating from "politics" (even if only in the form of group exhibitions seeking uniformity of style according to canons) they were able to find their individuality. From a historical point of view, Romanian conceptual art has meant an official break-up, the

creation of a new, introspective way to be followed by the practices that followed.

In the course of this paper it was noticed that the conceptual art continued the cultural revolt of the 1960s, opposed to formal authority of any kind, and created new ways in which the artist and art to hold a new authority even by redefining the social function of art. Thus, it can be said that conceptual art is a product of the years in which it took shape. During this period, in capitalist states, a number of artists believed that their artistic practice was limited by the art exhibited by institutions such as museums, official galleries, thus wishing to escape, to overcome the limits imposed by these institutions.

About a number of artistic works analyzed in this paper it can be said that they had an international impact, which shows that although broken geographically, politically, socially true art world, independent, experimental as in the West was also present in Romania that entered without doubt in the series of international conceptual practices of that period, stemming from the questioning of the limits of art, of what it represents and to what extent an object can be considered an object of art.

We can clearly state that the Romanian conceptual art relies not only on similar practices in the communist states, but also in the West, introducing new techniques, directions, materials and, last but not least, concepts.

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