

Art and Politics: considering some of Ion Grigorescu's films and photographs  
by Magda Radu

My contribution to the symposium will address some questions raised by the exhibition *Geta Brătescu and Ion Grigorescu. Resources*, opened at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest in January 2007. Although this exhibition does not offer an exhaustive presentation of the two artists' oeuvres, it nevertheless functions as a general outline of the major directions and of the fundamental attitudes which have shaped their careers. Using this exhibition as a starting point, I will propose a number of aspects for consideration, aspects which, it seems to me, have been insufficiently highlighted in previous commentaries and analyses. My intention is to investigate such notions as "alternative art" or "underground art" by looking closely at some of Ion Grigorescu's films and photographs which were produced during the last two decades of the communist regime.

The rather complex reflection and practice undertaken by such artists as Ion Grigorescu might prove extremely valuable, eliciting a number of unavoidable questions: how are these instances/sites of resistance to be accounted for? How did this resistance actually take place? Is it relevant and appropriate to speak of a neo-avant-garde art practice in Romania? How are the past and present dichotomies between East and West to be addressed? I believe that these are important issues and that their exploration might illuminate some of the circumstances which gave rise to the artistic forms of resistance to the regime. Ion Grigorescu's lucid investigations of the socio-political realm in some of his private photos, films and texts resonate surprisingly well with Lucian Boia's insightful analyses of the mental patterns which structured the collective imaginary during communism, exposing the Marxist Leninist dogmas and the devastating effects of their application<sup>1</sup>. Yet such lucidity on the part of the artists was not matched by an open criticism of the regime. Instead it was relegated to the gray area of compromise.

An important aspect of my interrogation concerns this ethical stance inherent to the artistic practice. In Romania, many artists were faced with the difficulty of coping with power and surviving within a repressive system, choosing to escape the institutional limitations or censorship and evading in a space of aesthetic autonomy, often producing a hermetic, politically innocuous art, or simply giving up art in order to explore other paths of intellectual and/or spiritual fulfillment. Or, to put it differently: choosing marginality, isolation and ultimately self-exclusion from the social/artistic system, tacitly admitting one's incapacity to deal with the country's miserable reality, while nevertheless refusing to leave it. This state of suspension, this dispossession of rights, reveals a condition very close to what Giorgio

Agamben suggests when using the concept of *homo sacer*<sup>2</sup>. This concept comes to mind when one examines the series of photographs documenting Ion Grigorescu performing various actions by the river Trăisteni. They reveal the state of extreme alienation, the feeling of loss, the failed attempt to escape an overwhelming pressure, the quest for freedom and the incapacity to attain it. Nature seems to provide a safe refuge and yet the artist seems to lose/dissolve himself in the vastness of the landscape, almost reaching a state of self-annihilation, while in other takes he appears like a Sisyphus, pointlessly carrying a symbolic burden (fig.1-4). For almost ten years the artist would disappear from the artistic circuit, embracing another occupation as restorer of church paintings, to become, later on, a fully-fledged painter of church murals.



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



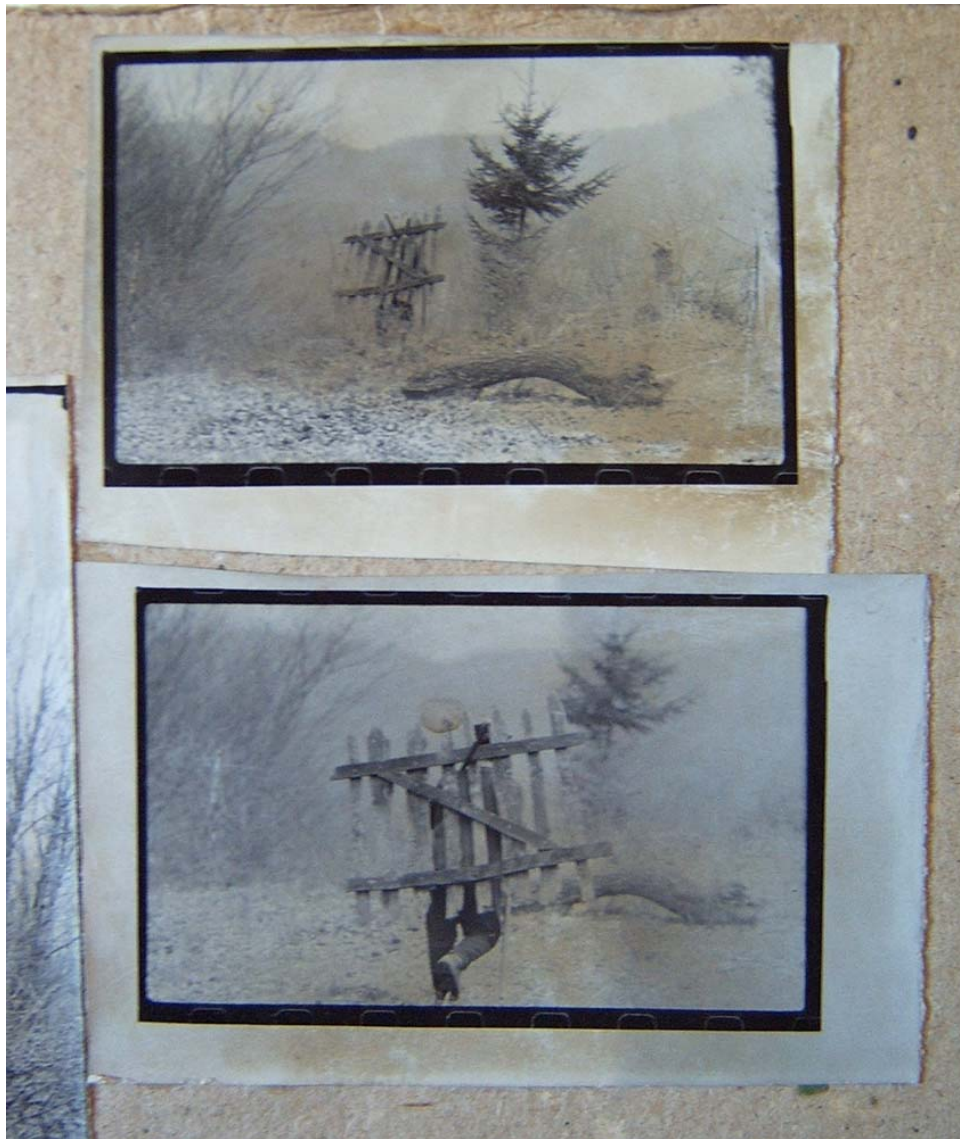


Fig 4

An issue which needs to be further clarified is that of the relation between the artists and the institutions which controlled and regulated the art system; to what extent were artists granted the freedom to do what they wanted, and which were the limitations? As a member of the Artists' Union and encouraged (as so many other artists) by the ideological relaxation of the '60s, Ion Grigorescu was in a situation in which he could undertake more daring and even radical artistic experiments (which were enacted in private locations and presented to a small circle of friends), but at the same time he submitted his more conventional work (painting, engraving) to the approval of committees, thus hoping to exhibit at the art galleries which were under the administration of the Artists' Union. At the time, photography was not considered a medium of artistic expression, and had a marginal status as to its being admitted within the network of official galleries; however, Ion Grigorescu decided to set up a series of exhibitions

at the Schiller Culture House, a place which functioned temporarily as an alternative art space, somewhat protected from the vigilance of the censors and which offered the artist the opportunity of showcasing works of fellow artists and some of his own photographs and films. I was surprised to find out that one of the artist's most radical pieces, *Ame*, a film which contains a scene of circumcision, had been shown in one of these exhibitions - a risky exposure which would soon attract unwelcome attention and would eventually put an end to these independent/alternative initiatives.

What I would further like to propose is a discussion about the way the artist chose to address the political power and the social context, focusing on a series of examples which might help us to better grasp the nature of this “critical consciousness” of historical conditions in Romania during the 70s and the 80s. Since the beginning of his career, as early as 1973, Ion Grigorescu expressed his intention to engage with what he called “the reality and the social”, a concern that would not cease to provoke him to this day; a rather problematic endeavor, given the political circumstances and the all-pervasive ideological restraints. In *Dialogue with Ceausescu*, his anthological 8mm film (1978), the artist assumes the roles of both the dictator and of himself in what might be called “an impossible dialogue”. The image is split in two and the lines of the text are scrolling down, a method which compensates for the scarce technical possibilities (the lack of sound) but which enhances the significance of this piece: it subtly reveals the split between the textual and the verbal, as the neat body of the text, which shows no signs of pauses or interruptions, is in stark opposition with the tense atmosphere that exists between the “two” protagonists (fig.5-8). Reading the dialogue, one realizes that the two discourses run parallel and that there is no interaction whatsoever between the representative of the “people” and the one who embodies the power.





Fig 5-8

In 1980, asked to do a portrait of Ceausescu, Grigorescu was obliged to respond to this request and submitted an intriguing work, which was turned down by the cultural bureaucrats who objected that the portrait did not comply with the strict requirements entailed by Ceausescu's personality cult. As one may notice (fig.9), the dictator is depicted in three different attitudes within the same painting, in a manner which disrupts the conventional iconography that usually places Ceausescu (or the presidential couple) in the centre of the composition. Moreover, Ceausescu is seen giving instructions, as he is typically shown in the so called "working visits", but here his attitudes evince a certain hesitation as if he were pondering over a decision, or seeking advice. The artist's intention, as he himself admitted, was to make manifest Ceausescu's human side. Following this rejection, the artist had to repaint Ceausescu's portrait (fig.10); this time the critical comments pointed at the naturalistic details of the anatomy: the dictator's hands were disproportionately large, his swollen veins were too obvious; briefly put, the artist painted an unflattering portrait of the ruler of the state. It is interesting to mention as a footnote that scenes with Ceausescu's public appearances at various occasions were generally painted after photographs, which were often subject to manipulation. For example, the group portraits which featured Ceausescu amongst members of the nomenklatura had to respect a certain hierarchy and, quite absurdly, no other member of the group was allowed to surpass Ceausescu in height. Thus, the stratagems of distortion could move from one medium to another, amplifying the rhetoric of the images and adding up to this conflation of lies which made up the ubiquitous picture of the dominating power.





Fig 9, 10

These patterns of addressing the political power should be discussed in relation to their potential for subversion (the attempts made at destabilizing the established order or, in any case, at resisting this order). Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse have put forward the concept of “subversive affirmation”<sup>3</sup>, referring to artistic tactics developed in various Eastern European socialist countries since the 1960s, which allowed “artists/activist to take part in certain social, political and economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them”. One might conclude that the works discussed above fit in this framework by re-enacting what was a widespread trope in the propaganda discourses, namely the “dialogue with the people”, or by presenting a slightly altered (but nevertheless sanctioned) version of the working visit. One important aspect of the subversive affirmation was that it was expected to induce in the viewer an attitude of criticism towards the totalitarian practices; therefore it was assumed that these actions were validated and recognized as such by a public which yielded consistency to these “zones of unofficial art”. In Romania these works had a rather limited effect and were known only in restricted circles, no doubt due in part to the extremely difficult conditions which shaped the life of the population and the excessive pressure and control exerted by the mechanism of power. Only later, after 1989, these works of alternative art resurfaced and were rediscovered by a new generation of artists. However, what must be stressed is that the term “criticism” is not apt enough to pinpoint the problems raised by Grigorescu’s works; of course, the dialogue with Ceausescu exposed some of the failings of the system in building a new society and the new man, but its main thrust is precisely the fact that it goes beyond this criticism and aims at understanding the power (as embodied by the personality of the dictator). An important question asked by Ion Grigorescu is: how was it possible that the system failed at creating the utopian society, a utopia in which I once believed? And why were my expectations thwarted? Power here seems to be perceived not as alien and external to the subjectivity of the artist; rather, it seems to contaminate each of us through everyone’s involvement (and guilt) in reproducing its mechanism. Rather than an example of “critical art”, what Grigorescu’s practice brings to the fore is what Jacques Rancière has termed “a work of dissensus”, that is, a work which has the capacity to produce “a reversal of perspective” and “to always reexamine the boundaries between what is supposed to be normal and what is supposed to be subversive”<sup>4</sup>. In Rancière’s view “there is no subversive form of art in and of itself; there is a sort of permanent guerilla war being waged to define the potentialities of forms of art and the political potentialities of anyone at all.”<sup>5</sup>



I propose to take a look at series of photographs from 1975, Electoral Meeting, which were taken on the occasion of a public demonstration organized by the Communist Party. The photos were covertly taken, and what they reveal is the fact that Ceausescu's personality cult was built and maintained by all segments of society: the Party leaders, the members of the Securitate who were keeping under surveillance all the other groups, and finally the crowd (fig.11). In one of the photos we see a horde of unenthusiastic demonstrators lifting identical effigies of the president – a common image which unveils the workings of the propaganda aiming to place all individuals under the sign of power, were it not for the unsettling detail of the church intruding into the field of vision (fig.12). In another photo, an undercover member of the Securitate with a very vigilant and tense expression on his face, holding his walkie-talkie ready to report, is ironically captured by the unobserved photographer (fig.13). We are confronted with a situation in which the watcher is being watched, an unexpected *détournement* which reveals once again that photography is a “tool of power”.



Fig11- 12

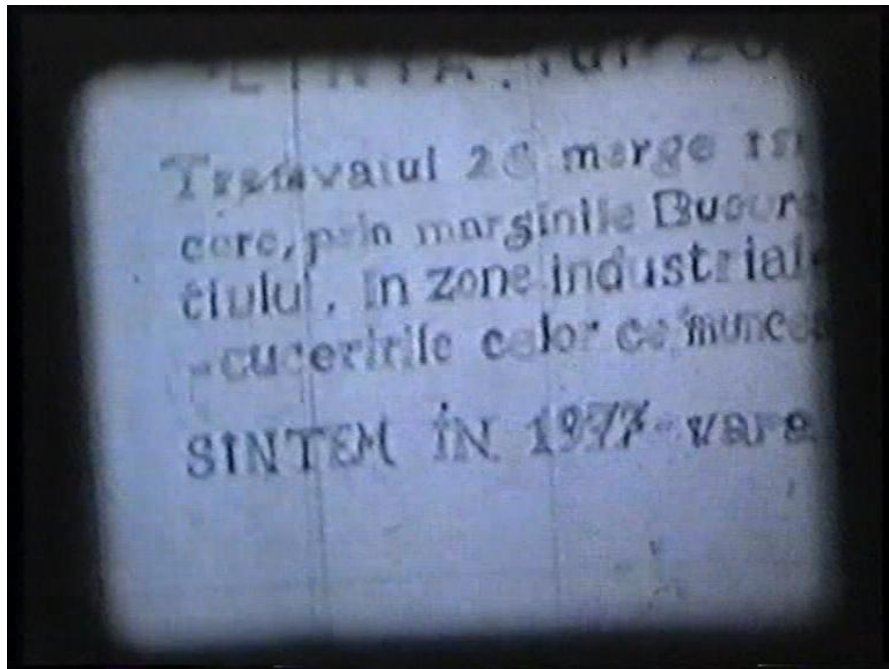


Fig 13

In line with his penchant for the “experience of the real”, the artist admitted that one of the sources of inspiration which prompted him to start making film was the detached, impersonal cinematic aesthetic of Antonioni’s films, their clinical recordings of the external reality. In *Beloved Bucharest* (1977) the camera investigates the city’s peripheries, testifying to the failure of socialism: the poverty, the dreary living conditions, the new construction projects which gave rise to alienating and low-quality living environments; it is a deteriorated piece of footage punctuated by short lines of text which are pointing at the gap between the much heralded socialist ideals and their disappointing outcome, sometimes inserted between fragments of footage and sometimes discovered accidentally on the walls of some run-down construction, as if the city were articulating its own misery: “Let us embellish the city like in fairy-tales” (fig.14-18).

More recently, the observation and recording of the tensions within the public sphere can no longer satisfy the artist’s impulse of analyzing the local context and its complex articulations. His acute awareness has shifted towards a retrospective impulse, and currently one of his main concerns is that of locating a historical perspective from which the past and the present could be better understood. He often meditates on Romania’s new situation on its difficult path of transition in which, as Zizek put it, the ex-socialist countries “never had the chance to choose [...] they were presented with a new set of given choices (pure liberalism,

nationalist conservatism)”<sup>6</sup>. It seems that, for Ion Grigorescu, recording the real may no longer be a suitable strategy for grasping its underpinnings: “I refrain from taking pictures of people in distress. Such reporting campaigns are always supreme artistic failures. Man cannot be treated at the speed of the pictures taken”.<sup>7</sup>







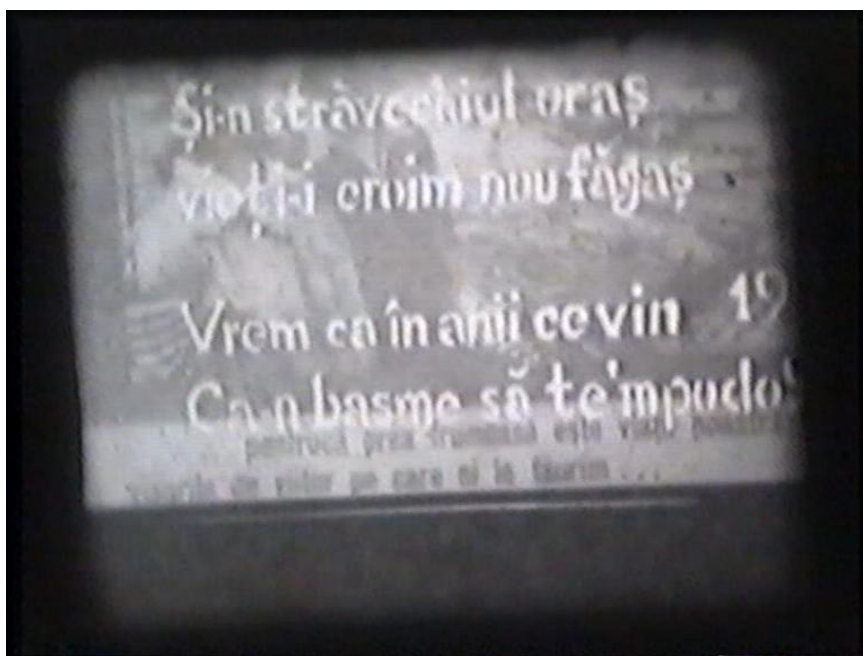


Fig 14 – 18

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<sup>1</sup> Lucian Boia, *Mitologia Științifică a Comunismului*, Humanitas, București, (1999), 2005

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Puterea suverană și viața nudă*, Idea Design & Print, 2006, translated by Alexandru Cistelean

<sup>3</sup> Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance", *East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, Afterall and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London, 2006, p. 445

<sup>4</sup> Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, "Art of the Possible: An Interview with Jacques Rancière", *Artforum*, March 2007, pp. 266-267

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 267

<sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Can Lenin Tell Us about Freedom Today?", *East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, Afterall and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London, 2006, p. 493

<sup>7</sup> Ion Grigorescu, "A Child of Socialism", *Plural*, no. 2, 1999, p. 78