

The Problematic of National Identity and Social Engagement in the Contemporary Art Practice in the Balkans

[...]

România versus Non-Identitaire ?

In the second half of the sixties and later in the first couple of years of the seventies the restrictive grip of the state apparatus on the artistic production entered into a relatively relaxed atmosphere in comparison with the former two decades, which allowed a certain extent of re-‘synchronisation’ between the art productions in Romania and Western world. New art practices of a neo-avant-garde nature emerged in various central cities of the country, but due to economic difficulties and the lack of access to new visual technology this new experimentality remained rather within the frame of practices as happenings, performances and land-art. Yet, following the ideological hardening in the course of the seventies, these practices had to be realised in private spaces or on unpopulated sites, which stripped them from their constitutive part, the public. In order to distinguish these practices from the notions of happening and performance, Ileana Pintilie (2002) names them as practices of ‘actionism’. The concept does signify the absence of communicability of these practices, but it also confer them a political tone. However politicality, the twin dynamic of conceptualisation in the recent art practice, was not enunciated in a manifest manner –it could not be. As Bojana Pejić (1999b) puts it, “in a fully politicised socialist society ruled by a Communist Party, any political art was seen as an ‘anti-Communist’ act”. The references to the social life were formulated through either universalised terms of humanism or spiritual terms of semi-religious sources. The topics were generally chosen from generic notions as birth, death, fertilisation, suffering and violence; the works were spatially situated mostly in open sites, and remained unspecified through social contexts; the signifiers of protestation were carried through carefully encoded symbolical acts, such as strategic passivity, destruction of the artwork, fire and to a certain degree, self-destructive gestures. “Any creation which [was] non-conformist charge[d] itself with political meaning, implicit or declared”, says Alexandra Titu (1997). Yet, as the Ceaușescu regime drifted to an increasingly irrational regime of paranoia and control, ‘declared’ references to the political life, iconography and representations of it, such as the cult figure of the leader or the flags of the nation or the party, remained scarce -of course, with some exceptions, as in some of the works of Ion Grigorescu, Paul Neagu and Teodor Graur, albeit “in a rather veiled and allusive form”. (Pintilie, 2002)

The 1989 revolution brought an immense opening in all senses; it also brought the “discovery of the social as a source for commentary” (Titu, 1997). It would be a difficult task to map out all the artists and works related to social and political thematisation and to place them in their specific contexts. The scenario I will offer here is surely a partial, personal and to a certain extent biased reading. But here it goes.

From 1991 onwards, Dan Perjovschi set out to produce drawings with political comments in alternative, oppositional publications such as *Contrapunct* and *22*. The manifestly public

character of his profession in these magazines slowly passed into his performances on the contemporary art field. In 1992, in a performance titled *The Appropriation (of Land) Committee*, Perjovschi sold fifty pieces of 6 x 8 cm portions of soil, symbolising land of Romania. The act was the indicator of a willingness to contribute to the transition phase from the remnants of the Ceaușescu regime to a democratic society. The fever for intensifying this process was illustrated by the symbolical re-privatisation of the land -which was collectivised by the previous regime, leading to terrible social and agricultural consequences. The performance did not suggest a wholesale privatisation towards the monopolist capitalism of an-ethical property speculation but rather a symbolically homogenised, humble re-distribution of possession and dignity. On the other hand, it also responded to its political context in which the newly defined nationalist paranoia conceived the process of land privatisation as a danger of intrusion of foreign elements (including the minorities within the country) and a threat to national integrity. The ‘sell-out’ in Perjovschi’s performance worked symbolically in favour of ‘the people’ but against the interests of ‘the nation’.

One year later, in a performance practiced in the frame of the festival *Europe Zone East* Perjovschi had his arm tattooed with the word ‘România’. Tattoo has been used as a tool of identification with certain cultural values. The inscribed skin becomes the site of inclusion and exclusion, a border between the social and the individual or the community s/he belongs to. It is widely used to signify identifications within minoritarian groups since the dominant majority does not need any additional marking to be exhibited on the social space. Minoritarian identities and subcultures use tattoo as an instrument for differentiation from the homogenous bulk of the masses and for facilitating the recognition phase between the members of these differentiated and marked communities. Perjovschi’s tattoo, on the other hand, rested on a tension. In order to irritate and displace the sterile and conformist quality of the contemporary art scene at that time, aesthetically and culturally (and tattoos were not that popular in Romania in this period), Perjovschi applied this technique of differentiation practiced by the groups as prisoners, gypsies or marine soldiers. Yet, the inscribed word on his arm was the signifier of the majoritarian belonging to a national identity. Can such a mode of identification be re-formulated as a minoritarian position? And if yes, against which higher identity? Here we face the second step of Perjovschi’s critique.

In contrast to the canons of happenings and performances that have reinstated “the traditional male role of the active subject” (Piotrowski, 2002), Perjovschi in that performance, is being exposed to an external act. He is sitting on a chair and extending his left arm and someone else is inscribing pigment onto his skin; the word Romania and the consequent representational branding are imposed onto an individual body by someone else. Is it the ‘master symbol’ of national identity imposed on him by the nationalist discourse of the Ceaușescu era? Or more accurately, by the more recent, re-invented “national history which [was] now being re-told without censorship” (Pejić, 1999b)? The ‘someone else’ referred here in this performance is perhaps Europe. In the political context at that time, Perjovschi let himself being “stamped as a cow” to indicate the objectivisation of any person living in Romania. This ironic passivity targets the power asymmetry between the West and the organic complexity, which it reduced into the single word of ‘România’. Yet, there is a hat on the first ‘a’ letter; a sign of indigenoussness. In that case, can it be also a non-ironical identification with the country’s name –at least in front of the new Big Brother called Europe? But, what would we think of an artist from Belgrade, for example, who tattooed himself with the word ‘Serbia’ in the nineties, ironically or not?

Two years later, Perjovschi produced four montaged photographs, in which he, with his tattoo clearly visible on his arm, posed in front of some urban settings in Bucharest. The composition with a shabby hut used as a toilette in the open field was titled *The Most Beautiful Country in the World*. Another with a church squeezed between two high buildings was called *Always Between Two Empires*. The one that depicts the infamous People's House had the title *A Tiny People with Such A Big House*. The fourth composition that depicted a dozing old drunk sleeping in the public space was titled as *Freedom Thirsty*. We find here a bitter irony that displaces the boastful terminology of nationalism, but at the same time that retains an empathic link to and embeddedness in the geo-culture called Romania.

The extent of irony was more intensive in the projects of the art project SubREAL from the early nineties. The group was combining various stereotypes on being a Romanian in utterly subversive sarcasm, or in their words, in a "cynicism [operating as] an international trend in a nationalistic context". They had two targets to displace: the rising nationalism and the negative exoticism of the European gaze in regard to Romania. *Draculaland*, for example, superimposed two historical images in a funny single composition. In the image we basically see the reproduction of the Mona Lisa of Leonardo; but the face of the figure is replaced by the hideous head of Vlad the Impaler. The displacing effect on looking something (or rather two things) familiar but in a completely uncanny fusion leads to mockery of both of what these images represent. A historical figure whose was recently re-honoured by the official authorities as one of the forerunners of national independence was put into a drag costume. On the other hand, one of the icons of aesthetic excellence of Western civilisation was transformed into a nightmarish appearance of Prince Dracula. The Western imagination that locates its fantasised monsters onto other (neighbouring) geographies, in that instance Bram Stoker's novel, is being sabotaged by installing the nightmare back into the parts of that imagination that are considered to remain forever in harmony, beauty and order.

Another work of SubREAL, *The Castle*, is rich in its interconnected layers. The group was invited to an exhibition to be held in Ujazdowski Castle in Poland. And for that show the group decided to refer to the Jules Verne's novel *Le Château des Carpathes*, which told the story of a noble living alone in his castle up on a hill and spying, through a complex set of strange auditory and optical devices, upon his subjects living down the hill. By constructing a miniature version of the People's House, SubREAL made use of the connotation inherent in Verne's novel that is easily extendable to 'the Genius of the Carpathians' who built a similarly paranoid system of "Securitate". A chair having long stakes instead of legs (another reference to Vlad the Impaler) was dangling on the miniature castle. Yet, more interestingly, the material they used for building up this replica was boxes of *Carpați*, the Romanian cigarettes that had become widely popular in the black markets in Poland during the eighties. Nationalist myths, myths on Romania fabricated by the colonialist conventions of the European literature, basic goods, versatile relations between the ex-socialist countries, antilegal commerce came together in a single rhizomatic composition.

The features employed in the SubREAL projects are mostly of representational character; and the humorous settings offered by the group between these elements point at the impossibility of getting beyond this representational level. There is no truth about a Romanian essence to discover. And there is no way to see the personal affiliations of the members of the group to the idea of Romania -except their personal pursuits of art production. Both of the members of the project, Călin Dan and Josif Kiraly have recently concentrated on contemporary the urban texture of Bucharest. Their photograph-based investigations on the city reveal willingness and

an empathic attachment to record the current transitions in architecture, problems in urban planning, sociological dimensions of dwelling and so on. Josif Kiraly's photograph series *Re-constructions*, compositions of multiple pictures shot in different times and slight varying perspectives allude also to the quest of attaining an integral meaning from the dizzying, fragmented experiences lived through the phase called 'transition'.

It was impossible not to respond to the events of 1989. Yet what happened later? What was the art produced on, during the process of normalisation? In the frame of an exhibition they curated in France, Laurence Bosse and Hans Ulrich Obrist defined what they saw in Romania as "une scene postnationale et heterogene, emergente et nonidentitaire".ⁱ Post-national... "The shift from the local obsessions regarding national salvation to a desire for the fastest and most encompassing connection possible" (Balaci, 2003). It is perfectly understandable; but should the annexation to the global mean also a shift towards the post-political *-deconnexion* from the social?

The generation of my age, namely the people born in the first half of the seventies and lived the nineties in their twenties in a normalising Romania seem to have retreated from any interest in the social, if not from any critical art practice. Should we read it as a positive sign of being normalised, or more than that, of living in an attained normalcy? Is it about the gains of the previous generation that struggled to formulate the transition phase in a proper analysis? Is it about an optimist view about the contemporary Romania that says, it has already connected to the hyper-speed of global circulation of signifiers: cable television, MTV, internet, chic and sexy magazines from England? A 'suspended adolescence'? The illusive cushion effect that was once produced by Soros foundation, a sense of safety and hope; and accession to EU on its way? Or just the opposite -pessimism about the future of the country, tiredness in waiting for the never coming normalcy in economic terms? To divert to other geographies or having already left the country. Starting some business or giving up any art production in the face of the seducing offers coming from the advertisement industry, broadcast companies, (graphic) design studios? Leaving the pitch empty?

Cosmin Gradinaru is an interesting name for understanding this generation in transition. In a series of photographs he visualised a traumatic event he experienced in his past. When he was only ten, he came across to an aborted foetus thrown out into the woods. More than facing a human being disallowed of life and falling into the midst of existential questions about life and death in an early age, Gradinaru was traumatised by the reaction of his mother who chastised him for reporting the found foetus to the local police. She knew that the authorities would trace the mother of the baby in order to persecute her bitterly. The force used to stick to the ideological regime on demographic targets of the nation had produced an unspoken but daily terror on the people. Gradinaru was perplexed about this discrepancy between what he was taught on behaving as a proper citizen and the teachings of his own mother. Thirteen years later when he came across to yet another disposed foetus he could not resist taking pictures of it. The haunting image of the previous one, a death inflicted by a so-called communism, re-surfaced –but this time in front of a setting prepared by another ideological regime. Normalisation accomplished, but not the normalcy.

In the description of another series of photographs depicting the steel recycling gypsies, Gradinaru wrote "First of all this series of photos is not about an exotic and backward Romania, it is about a nomad community that has kept its tradition alive over the years, despite all the social and political pressures during the communist period."ⁱⁱⁱ His resistance to a reception of his work that would reduce it into a national allegory is quite telling. For sure, it

is primarily a shield used against the exoticising gaze of the European, but it also illustrates the ways in which one can deal with the social without falling into the traps of thinking in the terms of the nation. The content of Gradinaru's works is very atypical for his generation, but his ongoing distantiating from art production in favour of an entrepreneurship of subcultural fashion design seems to be symptomatic.

Young people in their early twenties are about to take the stage. They have already inherited the thematics of the previous generation: psychologism, the use of everyday life occurrences, depiction of the 'misery of student life', quotidian objects, subcultural iconography (hip-hop, graffiti, stencils). Yet, there is a recent vague but perceivable twist in approaching local or political issues, conceiving Romania as a whole and defining a common enunciative field, perhaps as a generation; the last one that will have the Ceaușescu disaster in its memory.ⁱⁱⁱ

In a recent exhibition held in his private apartment flat Vlad Nanca brought together works that relate to the figures or figurations representative for the Romanian national life, such as the national product Dacia, the national poet Eminescu, the national artist Brancuși and so on. The title of the exhibition is itself a clear declaration of situatedness: *Vlad Nanca, Lives and Works in Bucharest* (2003). On the humorous flier image we see a man on ground trying to repair a broken Dacia. One of works in the exhibition *Original Adidas* deals with daily suffering in the eighties in which finding and buying meat was quite difficult and the complementary parts of the animals that are bought instead were named by the general population ironically after luxurious goods to be found in the West. Thus, the flimsy claws of chicken were called 'cutlery', the pork head 'computer' and the meatless feet of the pork 'adidas'. The latter anonymous metaphor is literalised here by Nanca through the three stripes of the famous brand placed onto a pork feet.

Another work in the exhibition illustrates the confusion between the continuities and ruptures of Romanian near past and future. The dizzying shift between the two, once warring ideological continents, the state-communism of Eastern Europe and liberal social democracy of Western Europe is being represented in that piece by two flags. One of them bares the sickle and hammer combination used by the USSR and the other bares the circular twelve stars of the EU. Will the latter truly replace the former? Is the EU really the only viable alternative for Romania still trying to heal the traumas of its nightmarish past? Nanca's sardonic swap between the colours of the two flags (blue & yellow USSR flag and red & yellow) points at that confusion among the Romanian minds -the split of the national tricolour into two trans-national entities.

The national tricolour of the Romanian flag has another signification in the city of Cluj. The fetishisation of it by the ultra-nationalist mayor of the city, furnishing the whole of the city centre with small flags, spreading it onto every kind of urban furniture (litter bins, benches, street posts, electricity posts, flowers in the parks) create a grotesque festivity of colour but also a frightening paranoid space defined against the Hungarian population in the city and in Transylvania in general. Mircea Cantor and Ciprian Mureșan's series of photographs titled *New Species* is a deconstructive mockery on this weird situation. We see both of the artists watering meticulously the coloured street posts. It is on one hand a parodic gesture for doubling the absurdity of the cityscape and on the other a ridicule of the nationalist attribution of 'organic' quality to inanimate things and representations.

The recent emergence of direct interest in the issues around social, national or local problems has been criticised of being conformist responses to the expectations of the Western art system that favours art practices of that kind. Not only in Romania, but in all peripheral

cultures, the artists presenting ethnographic works on their local experience are being frequently accused of self-exotisation. Through that perspective, results of that sort of art practice exhibit a fake occupation on politicality and resume the ideological patronage of an external gaze.

Mircea Cantor's piece *Double Headed Matches* has been examined in that context.^{iv} At the outset of the project, Cantor planned to distribute boxes of specially designed double headed matches to the passers-by on the streets of Brussels. The concept of the project was cleverly linked to the Duchampian problematisation of authorship, pop-art conventions of commodity use, arte-povera's appeal to cheap material and presentational techniques of relational aesthetics. For the production of the matches Cantor applied to a factory based near Cluj. The factory directors told him that their machinery was technically not capable to produce the second head of the matches, but the workers in the factory could instead do the job with their own hands for the agreed payment. This interesting procedure was filmed by Cantor and later displayed along the initially planned performance. Later, though, during the last Venice Biennale the project was re-presented only by the video material. The truly interesting local context of the matches' production somehow overshadowed the initial idea of Cantor, which was not based on this social specificity but on a series of art-historical references. Can social engagement, willingly or not, fall prey to other ideological agendas? Are we again over-contextualising things? Can we insist on a radical positioning in terms of politicality without being manipulated by a 'foreign invention'? Who is the audience of that sort of work; and to whom do we tell 'our stories'? Do these practices truly 'work' at home?

Instead of a Conclusion

At the end of this paper, which set out to speculate about the problematic ground between national identity and social engagement, between interest in and distance to the social problems, and about the different critical registers to the process of identification, I want to go back to the tattoo performance of Dan Perjovschi. In the frame of *In den Schluchten des Balkan* exhibition, the artist have received ten sessions of laser treatment for erasing the tattoo on his left arm. If we remember the original intentions invested in the first tattoo performance, we can perceive a symmetrical twist in methodology. It was aimed to be a symbolical repetition of the European branding of the people of a country with a single word. It had irony –it said something and it meant the opposite. In the second instance, however, the irony disappears: the branding is this time straightforwardly denied –in an exhibition that could not completely escape the representational categorisation of a geography.

Another interesting aspect about the laser treatment is the fact that it actually doesn't get the pigment out of the skin. It rather dissolves and spreads it onto the texture of it. So, the word ROMÂNIA is not to be read as a whole anymore, but it stays somewhere in the body; it is stripped out of its political power on the body of its bearer but kept somewhere inside and aside. A perfect example of disidentification...

ⁱ I take the quotation from Ruxandra Balaci's text (2003). The exhibition mentioned here is *Traversées*, Musée d'Art de la Ville de Paris, 2001-02.

ⁱⁱ Text for the catalogue of *In den Schluchten des Balkan*.

ⁱⁱⁱ It might be useful here to juxtapose the works of some students of Josif Kiraly. The "Gara du Nord" (2000) co-produced by Stefan Cosma and Daniel Gontz portrays both of the artist waiting in one of the platforms of the main train station. In the middle of the picture there is a visual complication, a mirror reflection to be recognised after paying more attention. Although the title situates the site, and the background cityscape and the sight within the reflection opens up the spatial dimensions of the composition, the focus in the picture is on the two figures. One of them is actually the one who shoots the picture. They are looking at their own reflection and taking the picture of it. The inherent narcissism is enhanced by the self-confidence on their gestures and the implied homoeroticism. The photograph is called Gara du Nord, but there is no link between the figures and their environment. The site seems to be accidental. Another student of Kiraly, Ioana Nemeş also takes self-portraits, in which she holds the camera with an extended arm and shoots herself from a distance at some touristic sites. Yet, she is alone on her journey; thus, she has to take the pictures of herself; she has to objectify herself; and this produce a split between the figure in the picture and the person who touches the shutter. Sometimes we see her face, sometimes the back of her head as a stalker. A liminal experience of subjectivity in a fragile balance of integrity –quite opposite to Cosma & Gontz's photograph. The inherent psychological dimension dominates also her photograph titled *Looking for Stability*. A clear blue winter sky, snowy fields, a tarmac road that is empty and a deflated basketball. The elaboration on the personal psyche also stays open to be linked to a larger context. Vlad Nanca, mentioned in the next paragraph of the main text was also a student of Kiraly.

^{iv} I am indebted the whole analysis on Cantor's piece here to the Cluj based young critic Cosmin Costinaş.