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List of Contents

Issue 20 (April 2008)

Gisela Weimann Shared and/or Divided Times: Questions and Answers and Europe in Exile	4
Brigitte Hammer Shared Times II / Pictures and Sculptures	12
Moira Roth Widening the Spiral: Musings and Readings in a Berkeley cafe, California, March - April 2007	15
Katy Deepwell More than Seven Urgent Questions about Feminism	24
Sanne Kofod Olsen Feminist art in Denmark a short introductory history and an interview with Kirsten Justesen , (artist, born 1943)	30
Eli Bartra Displaced or Nomadic Subjects	36
Ramona Novicov Three Female Hypotheses of the Romanian Avant-Garde	43
Ursula Neinhaus Preserving, Describing, Conserving Cultural History and Making it Accessible FFBIZ, The Women's Research, Education and Information Center, Berlin	51
Mercedes Replinger A False Interview with Real Answers	54
Amaya Martínez de la Escalera Castells THE DYNAMICS OF A LEGACY Living where you don't belong	64
Concha Jerez Installed Ideas	70
Gabriele Kamper Equality - a call to and from all politicians	73

Three Female Hypotheses of the Romanian Avant-Garde

Ramona Novicov

Translation: Ioan Danubiu and Liana Cozea

I was born on 10 July 1960 in a small city founded by the Soviet Union in 1952, near the Western border of Romania. I studied at the art colleges in Brasov and Oradea, and then at the Art Institute in Bucharest in the department of history and art theory/museology, from which I graduated in 1983. In 2001 I received my doctors degree at the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, with a thesis entitled 'Avant-garde Art in Romania between the 1970s and the 1990s'. I work as an art critic and curator, as a lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture of the University in Oradea and as a producer of the programme Art Style for Transylvanian television. I have published two books on experimental Romanian art.

My interest in contemporary art and especially in its avant-garde aspect was triggered by several exhibitions of contemporary Romanian in the arts section of the Muzeul Tarii Crisurilor in Oradea, a very important museum that dared to offer an extensive opening towards the west with its international exhibition programme even in the toughest years of the communist régime. Among all these exhibitions, there was one that had a decisive impact on my artistic direction: that of Geta Bratescu, a woman artist who was a real spearhead of the Romanian avant-garde art. It was a true event, which I had the possibility to organise and conceive in spite of the fact that we were in 1988, when the oppression of the communist ideology was extremely strong (the Romanian anticommunist revolution took place only one year later). Another moment of great importance for my professional orientation towards the avant-garde was my entrance into the national circle of young artists, called Studio 35. This circle, which had a clearly defined experimental and avant-garde orientation, was founded in Cluj by Ana Lupas, an exceptional artistic

personality. It was she, who ensured that the concept of the Biennale de la Jeunesse in Paris was successfully introduced to the Romanian artistic environment of the 1980s. Due to this cultural corridor with international openings, the powerful Romanian generation of the 1980s was born, a generation connected to the values of post modernism, which leads the artistic movements of today.

Due to the fact that I experienced the Romanian artistic reality of the 1980s directly, and also through my doctoral studies the reality of the 1960s and the 1970s, I chose as representative artistic examples, three iconic names from the top of Romanian avant-garde. Here, at this level of the elites, information on international art scenes was circulated subversively, which prevented communist censorship from strangling it. The Library of the Artist's Union in Bucharest had valuable collections of contemporary art books and international magazines which I studied incessantly during my student years. Important international reviews could also be read, and Romanian artists whose creation was remarkable could participate in international events with the help of two art critics of European importance: Ion Frunzetti and Dan Haulica. I would like to underline the fact that Romanian art was not separated from the international contemporary art scene. But I also cannot deny the existence of severe censorship, which coexisted with a craven obedience to the orders of the communist rulers, with drastic restrictions of travelling abroad and of cultural exchanges especially with the Western world. But these were characteristics of the communist régime that were experienced by the whole population of Romania.

Of course, like many other Romanian citizens, many valuable artists left the country, for reasons which are completely understandable. But those who stayed succeeded in giving an identity and a consistent value to contemporary Romanian art, and managed to keep the avant-garde spirit alive. There were both male and female artists who, from the sparsely populated heights of the artistic elite, with both hidden and revealed sacrifices have nurtured Romanian spirituality with force, with courage, with responsibility, and above all with high artistic landmarks which are today more apparent than ever. Their example of social commitment with actions that could be considered events, also made me determined to preoccupy myself with the problems of social influence, of detention, of alienation and of resistance in an oppressive environment. This year, for example, I have initiated an art course in a prison environment, at the Penitentiary of Oradea, entitled Luminescences.

In order to talk about the Romanian avant-garde art practiced by fine artists, I have chosen three artists from three generations who have, in an exemplary manner, lived through not only inner revolutions, but also revolutions or crises of contemporary history, and have remained important landmarks of the Romanian and international avant-garde. With a rare elegance of artistic attitude, always aspiring towards an elevated purism of plastic language, of a heraldic type, their work expresses, on three chronological layers of contemporary art, an essentially counter-culture attitude, an implicit political and social rebellion, uncomfortable

for any kind of establishment, subtly altered in recurrent artistic cycles.

Out of the sheer volume and complexity of the works I have chosen a certain theme: the female face in the interval between disclosure and camouflage. The self-portraits of the three fine artists, explicit or implicit, always suggest a tough, uncompromising search for their own existence on the narrow knife-edge between the physical and the meta-physical, between beauty and truth.

Geta Bratescu

Geta Bratescu was born in 1926 in Ploiesti, in a family of intellectuals refined both by culture and aristocratic heritage. Between 1945 and 1949 she studied at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Bucharest. Then, after the long and oppressive years of the establishment when the communist regime began to fade, she studied art at the Institute of Fine Arts of Bucharest between 1969 and 1971. Thanks to her vast literary and visual background, she worked as graphic designer and collaborator of the most prestigious art magazine in *Romania*, *Secolul XX (The 20th Century)* for 20 years (1963-1983).

She has written five books in her own unique descriptive literary style. She lives and creates with the same exceptional energy in Bucharest where, in 1999, the Romanian National Museum of Art organized a vast retrospective of her work. She is an artist of a creative nature, essentially experimental. From the beginning, she was attracted by the expressive languages of intermedia and performance and conceptualized and quantified them using the sequential methods of the photo and video techniques. The interval when she attended university courses coincided with a short happy period of communist regime and with the years in which there was a cultural and political opening of Romania towards Western countries. 1968 was the year when the chief of state Nicolae Ceausescu distanced himself from the policies of Moscow by refusing to participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia with Warsaw Pact troops. In the interval 1968-1974, thanks to Western, especially American, support, Romanian artists were able to participate in the most important international biennial exhibitions and events of the avant-garde: Venice, Sao Paolo, the Youth Biennial Exhibition in Paris, Milan, Edinburgh, The Hague, London, etc.

On the other hand, works of American avant-garde artists were displayed on the walls of the museums of Cluj and Bucharest, connecting Romanian artistic world directly with the latest trends of the contemporary international art elite. In this interval of political and cultural freedom, along with other artists of the 1960s generation, Geta Bratescu tackled directly the problem of the object, of installation and performance, to which she would remain faithful all her life. Her work is absolutely exceptional in its complexity of language and conceptual elements. It has a preference for serialism, for the recurrence of the patterns and clichés, which lends her plastic expression an interior unity.

Analysing her work, I understood why the artists at the forefront of the Romanian avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s made subtle use of the "cold" and conceptual mechanisms of plastic objectivity: fragmentation, serialization, sequentialisation in the form of the pattern and of the module: because in practising with a programmatic lucidity those mechanisms of objectivation, they could reach a zero degree of subjectivity, and hence avoid becoming stranded in a over-obvious pathos concerning the political engagements of a totalitarian leader. That zero degree of the serial language, with a high coefficient of objectivation, could suspend and neutralize the pressure of the communist ideology and propaganda manifested through the language of Socialist Realism, permitting "escape from everyday life", and eventually, an escape from the system. Because preformed patterns, modules or photo clichés are plastic spaces devoid of substance, or of their own individual message, they are essentially open spaces and their great quality is that they can transit or "deviate" other plastic realities towards meanings that cannot be intercepted or possessed by the forces of other systems (in this case, that of the socio-political sphere). In other words, those modular spaces possess an "incorruptible" plasticity, virtually infinite, which cannot be capitalized or exploited by a particular ideology. That fact is cleverly underlined by Geta Bratescu in the course of her entire oeuvre, but there is a specific type which I think is able to focus on the tension of this problem in an exemplary manner: the self-portrait.

Beginning with *Self-portrait. Towards White* (1975, action in seven photographic sequences) and passing on to the specular game of *The Pillars* (1985, three pieces, mixed media), of the *Self-portrait in a Mirror* (1985, object, mixed media) of the *Censored Self-portrait* (1978, photo collage on textile support), unfolding the folds of *Adventure* (1991, object-book), or the *Book with Eyes* (1991, cardboard, paper, tempera, photo), through the strange series *Make-up* and the exuberantly phantasmagorical series *Caprices* and reaching the "disguise" in *Mrs. Oliver in riding costume* and of *Mrs. Oliver and Chevalier Thonet*, installations from 1991, so passing through all these sequential or metaphorical reflexions of one and the same face, what remains is the perplexity in front of a Protean face, whose versatility suggests a creative intelligence of fascinating plastic expression.

Ana Lupas

Ana Lupas was born in Cluj, in 1940. Her father, the outstanding historian Ioan Lupas, had been severely persecuted by the communist regime. In 1962, Ana Lupas graduated from The Fine Arts Institute of Cluj. It is Ana Lupas who, since 1973, has brought to Romania the spirit of the International Young Artists Biennial from Paris. From the 1970s to the 1990s, she founded and guided with her exemplary way the national gathering of young fine artists entitled *Atelier 35* to which she has given an undeniably avant-garde influence.

Her sculptural or textile objects evolve within the environment like a piece of

architecture, subjected to similar rigours of construction and generating a similarly special poetry. Ana Lupas holds a privileged position given her radical approach and the ceaseless experimental attitude. She is among the Romanian artists who enjoy widest exposure within the exceptional international elite of the avant-garde. She has always placed herself in the most risky fine art language area: at the intersection of tapestry, sculpture and architecture. Artistic gesture takes on the magnificence of a remarkable event; experimentation with shape paves the way to the lost paradise. Before ambient art or the description of a process came along her work already had the nature of an event. Indeed, Ana Lupas attribute a solemn rhythm to the spatial play with shapes. However, she simultaneously makes a tactile invitation which invites intimacy and even a certain delight derived from touching. *Hemp thread*, *Playing Prometheus* (1973, textile thread, wood, fur), *Red-painted egg in nest* (1973), *the Bridge* (1973) are each open-ended works, protean, with flexible spatial dynamics, reversible and combinable. They suggest organic evolution, like some nest sculpted from the bodies of gigantic creatures, silently entangling or disentangling but untameable. And yet her works have also a subjacent function, as a vehicle for initiation spanning different levels of the visual.

Their textile material also emphasizes the sacred meaning of the works: the thread, the binding, the knot, the net - everything merges in an erotic discourse about pattern and "zone" which condition our existence. Despite the fact that they are fashioned according to traditional techniques and from similar rough materials, the works display a certain elegance; their demanding minimalism is flexible because their three-dimensional geometry emerges from the mobility of surfaces exclusively woven from organic and warm materials: natural fibers, leather, fur, wood, wheat stems. Some recurring cycles are illustrative in this respect: **Flying carpet** (a piece which was later named *Humid* installation, 1970), *Margau*, and *Solemn process*, a series of installations made between 1964 and 1974.

These are ambient installations with an ecological undercurrent: spaces "re-inhabited" with modular mobile shapes, so as to turn them into a place for celebration. Still in the traditional rural environment, sumptuous vegetal architectures spread like "ecological paradise-like elements", to quote Anca Arghir. Coined up from wheat, straw, hemp, cotton, stitchings, insulating materials, wood and metal, an intermedia environment comes into being, which is reloaded with the force of the primordial gesture as it is repeated with minor changes. The idea of remaking, rebuilding and repeating a massive spatial action normally has de-personalizing connotations; however, here the serial gesture alludes more to the ritual aspect which basically remains the same, because it relates to the same essential principle that it was once generated from, time immemorial. Between 1964 and 1970, Ana Lupas alternated two types of ambient installations derived from action. In 1964: *Solemn process*, *Saliste*; in 1966: *Humid* installation, Grigorescu district in Cluj; in 1967: *Teud*, installation; in 1970: *Humid* installation, Margau; in 1972: exhibition hosted by Apollo Galleries in Bucharest.

The *Humid* installation theme was resumed in 1991 as well, in the University Square, in association with the idea of the rented garment. Eventually, they would result in Monument of rags. Also, in the remarkable exhibition entitled Europe, Europe: a century of the avant-garde in Central and Eastern Europe, opened in Bonn in 1994, Ana Lupas reconstructed the *Humid* installation, but on this occasion she gave it tragic and not humorous overtones (an installation made of textiles, acrylic and twenty containers of different materials). Another series developed between 1977 and 1991, entitled *Preparations for a round grave* also has an unsettling significance, with the haunting gravity of its message.

The obsession with Thanatos in the 1980s and 1990s came to replace the humorous and the erotic one that had thrived in the seventies. The celebration robe, characteristic of flight and of an agrarian ceremony, is being reduced to a piece of casual clothing, an item for social camouflage, transitive and ridiculous, to be abandoned or passed on: Ana Lupas' *Robe* (1989), *Rented clothes* (1989 - Cluj, Sibiu, Oradea), culminating in its most decrepit and threatening incarnation: *Monument of Rags* (University Square, Bucharest, 1991, bitumen-impregnated cloth, eight wooden supports, metal scaffolding, 1,000 sq m.). The *Flying Carpet* of the 1970s has turned into a kind of feathered plumage of death, anchored and made visible for a second in the heart of the capital: a fixed black shadow, heavy and motionless.

This progress from Eros to Thanatos inevitably led to an action as desperate as it was ironic, and yet perfectly logical: conservation (canning). The conserves are tin boxes welded together, which contain, like some kind of funeral recipients, the remains of the once great and ambitious flying works, that formerly used to roam excitedly in the open space.

Indeed, the work of Ana Lupas became entirely hermetic (in the strictest sense), a result of the existential hermeticism of the artist, a consequence of her reclusion in the box normally known as workshop. The gesture of creating has been condensed, by means of a spectacular conceptual effort, thus becoming the compacted, ascetic gesture of conserving creation. The work of art has imploded and is encapsulated within itself - in fact, in its own urn: like a post-modern Taj Mahal.

To put it briefly, we might say that Ana Lupas' self-portraits are implicit, as they are portraying inner states of mind, situated at the crosspoint of camouflage and excoriation. It comes as no surprise that the artist has resumed the theme of her *Humid* installation but has produced three major variants: one in 1970, in a village near Cluj, when the artistic liquid was water, evaporating in an action staged with great subtlety. The second *Humid* installation was on public display in 1991, in University Square in Bucharest, a space symbolically destined for protest, with respect to the Romanian revolution. In this case, the viscous suffocating bitumen, mourning-like black material used has replaced the elemental clarity and purity of water. The third *Humid* installation, like sort of a third age, a third inner epoch, was displayed in Bonn, in 1994, at the already mentioned emblematic exhibition for the

international avant-garde: Europe, Europe - a century of avant-garde in Central and Eastern Europe. This time, the liquid was a blood-red acrylic substance, whose near motionless flow took on a significance beyond personal or national tragedy. The image, cold and cruel, had the power of a grief memorial. Ana Lupas created on that occasion one of the most disturbing representations of the sacrifice, in the form of a metaphoric self-portrait: a wounded face, camouflaged in cultural attire.

Adriana Blendea

Adriana Blendea was born in 1961, in Bucharest, into a family of well-known fine artists. She graduated in 1984 from the Institute of Fine Arts in Bucharest, painting department, and in 2006 she received her diploma from University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne. She has lived in Paris since 1988, but has maintained close ties with the Romanian artistic world. Her painting debut took place under the uncomfortable sign of neo-expressionism, whose violently articulated language was a key feature of the 1980s avant-garde. However, her artistic maturity in painting showed that her personal forms of expression were not influenced by the spirit of her generation alone.

‘For me the self portrait is a plastic pretext which sums up a series of symbolic elements whose exploration takes me on the most direct path to finding the essence of being human, by probing the self. These self portraits are made up of thousands of past faces and worlds which hide behind a single face that appears as an ultimate emblematic symbol of the successive layers of consciousness. All these "self portraits" are in fact the images of some imaginary portraits that I appropriated, as if they were shamanistic masks. They were born during the course of the creation process and only assume this final form after many "facets" have disappeared, as if they decide themselves how to appear, and I am only a vehicle. I call them self portraits, meaning that my ego tends to fuse with them and my face, as I see it from within, can become anonymous, androgynous, atemporal.’ (Adriana Blendea)

Fascinated by the deconstruction, by the breach, of a painful, abrupt inner archeology, she constantly places her images near the limit, where the figurative switches completely to its opposite in a form of self abandonment. Because the theme of all Adriana's portraits is the sacrifice: the sacrifice of her own talent due to its dissolving into uncertainty and the risks taken in seeking its own limits; this is evident through an image of her face which has become an heuristic instrument of her own beauty, seduction, grace and subtle sensuality but it is frequently replaced with the hypnotic aridity of the "relics", of the face (prosopon) transfigured in an ideogram of celestial fragrance. The image barely consists of the face, although it is deeply carved into the image, utterly mute, just as a scratched hieratical image on a clay pot. For Adriana, the act of painting is like making deep cuts in the seductive glow of the layer of color, casting out the demons of superficial seduction, the repression of Melusine's song bursting through the unctuous brush strokes. The

image itself becomes sparser, rougher and more reduced, even virtual transparent. The face is caught in the change, one minute hesitant, frontal, and the next hardened like a solid shield which has survived some plague against all odds, and has blossomed from the source of its own exhaustion.

This paper was presented at the Symposium *Geteilte Zeit: Kunstgeschichte als Internationaler Dialog / Shared Times: Art History as International Dialogue*, at the European Academy in Berlin, 25 - 28 March 2008. This text is available in Gisela Weimann (ed) *Geteilte Zeit: Fragen und Antworten* (Edition Eselsweg, 2008) in German.

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