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Can Aesthetics Overcome Politics? The Romanian Avant-Garde and Its Political Subtext

The first use of the term *artistic avant-garde* seems to have condemned it to an inescapable relationship with the political sphere. At the beginning of the 19th century the utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon put forward the idea of a new society based on universal harmony as a response to the void caused by the collapse of absolutism. Within this new society the artists would function as the avant-garde and would work along with scientists and industrialists-artisans in order to move mankind towards progress. The artists take the responsibility for providing the conception of a new social order which will be developed further and carried out by the other members of the elite.¹

*“What a most beautiful destiny for the arts, writes Saint-Simon, that of exercising over society a positive power, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all intellectual faculties, in the epoch of their great development! This is the duty of artists, this is their mission...”*²

Another way for artists to assume their newly acquired autonomy is through creating an art for art's sake. Thus the artist is the sole agent of his work and therefore the art s/he produces doesn't require any explanation that would take it outside itself. A contemporary of Henri de Saint-Simon, the future president of the 3rd French Republic, Adolph Thiers, expresses the need that “art must be free and freed of any boundary”.³ The 19th century served as a testing ground for the status of the modern artist that was being shaped. The dilemma set up in the process was: Will s/he seek “pure art” or will s/he struggle to change the world by the means of art? This dilemma will be however carried on by the avant-gardes of the 20th century which, in one way or another, will declare their engagement with life and hold the new art form as signifiers of a new spirit.⁴

¹ Donald D. Egbert, “The Idea of “Avant-garde” in Art and Politics”, in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 73, No. 2. (Dec., 1967), p. 342.

² Henri de Saint-Simon *apud* D.D. Egbert, *op. cit.*, p.343.

³ Eric Michaud, “Note despre «deontologia» artistului în epoca modernă”, in *Artă, comunitate și spațiu public. Strategii politice și estetice ale modernității*, D.E. Rațiu, C.Mihali (coord.), Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p.16.

⁴ Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia. Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy 1917-1946*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1997, pp. 2-3.

Autonomy implies fragility and it can lead to isolation and to a disruptive relation with the public. The modern artist is faced with two options if s/he is to counterbalance his/her fragility: either s/he enters into an alliance with the political power, or s/he becomes a militant for her/his own ideas.⁵ Although the two solutions seem contradictory, the artist as an ally and the artist as a rival of the political power don't exclude one another.

The avant-garde artist displays, almost always, a militant nature and, accordingly, s/he appropriates the principal instrument of propaganda: the manifesto. This vehicle of political statement is turned into a vehicle of artistic statement. The 1909 *Futurist Manifesto*, nihilistic and violent, and postulating a definitive divorce from the past, stands as a model for the numerous manifestoes to come. Its author, the Italian poet F.T. Marinetti asserts that there is an art of writing manifestoes which requires "violence and precision".⁶ I quote a few lines from the futurist program:

1. *We want to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness.*
2. *The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity and revolt.[...]*
9. *We want to glorify war - the only cure for the world - militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman.*⁷

The avant-garde manifesto makes use on the one hand of the persuasive means specific to political militancy and on the other of its vocabulary and even concepts. This fact elicited most of the interpretations that related the avant-garde to politics, and moreover to totalitarian ideologies. The modern artist could be seen as a dictator because s/he wants to shape reality to suit her/his own subjectivity and does violence to the norms of art in the name of originality.⁸

The official birth of the Romanian avant-garde is held to be 1924 when a big international exhibition was organized in Bucharest. This event was a manifesto in its own right for it was an launching of a new art. It gathered for the first time the members of the Romanian avant-garde and it sought to make it part of an international network. From the start, the main orientation of the Romanian avant-garde was constructivism which had been promoted by Marcel Iancu, former dada artist at Cabaret Voltaire and self-proclaimed prophet of the new art after his return to Romania.

⁵ Eric Michaud, *op.cit.*, p.26.

⁶ Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment. Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre and the Language of Rupture*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2003, pp. 81-82.

⁷ F.T. Marinetti, "The Futurist Manifesto", in *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Ch. Harrison, P. Wood (eds.), Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA, 1992, p.213.

⁸ Eric Michaud, "Œuvre d'art totale et totalitarisme", in *L'Œuvre d'art totale*, Gallimard, Paris, 2003, pp.22-23.

It is worth noting that one year earlier the first avant-garde publication *Contimporanul* (Present Time) included besides translations of selected avant-garde manifestoes and reviews on contemporary developments, political commentaries. From 1924 onwards, this type of articles began to slowly disappear. This fact can be accounted for either by assuming a deliberate estrangement from the political sphere, (although the title of the manifesto of *Contimporanul* was *Activist Manifesto to the Young*, politics was dismissed as “a business for grave diggers and brokers”), or by postulating an absorption into the artistic/aesthetic.

In 1925 a new avant-garde publication, *Integral*, takes over the leading role of *Contimporanul* and tries to impose a more coherent program. I will now call into discussion the theoretical texts of *integralism* that mix together the aspiration of a new poetry and a new art, freed from the ballast of the past and the aspiration toward a new society. There are no more arts, but one single Art, born from their synthesis and capable to mould the new man. *Integralism* aims to be a total art which rejects the traditional taxonomy of the arts and seeks to bring together architecture, painting, sculpture, design and the other arts into one unit:

*“Today is the time of the accomplished deed. Poetry, music, architecture, painting, dance, all step forward integrally linked towards a definitive and lofty scale.”*⁹

Unlike other avant-gardes that share the same idea of unity, *integralism* intends to graft it onto a critical consciousness of history. Thus a new synthesis of all modern movements is born, a synthesis of dada, futurism, expressionism, cubism, constructivism and surrealism.

*“...we only know this: the old Art and the new Art. The old Art: Futurism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, etc. The new Art: Integralism.”*¹⁰

Integralism tries to define its own position by reviewing the recent history of art as a history of spirit. The aforementioned avant-garde doctrines contributed to the development of modern spirit, but were incomplete nevertheless. *Integralism* appropriates them all and considers itself a sort of final point, for it is able to recognize their common beliefs and carry them forward into “the synthetic order, the essential order, constructive, classic, integral”. The synthetic order must characterize art and, to the same extent, life, so the artists become the foremost leaders of society responsible for establishing the norms of the entire existence.

“WE: Synthesize the will life has always had, everywhere, and the efforts of

⁹ Ilarie Voronca, “Surrealism and Integralism” [originally published as “Suprrealism și Integralism,” *Integral* no. 1 (March 1925)], in *Between Worlds. A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910-1930*, T.O. Benson, E. Forgács (eds.), MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London England, 2002, p.556.

¹⁰ Mihail Cosma, “From Futurism to Integralism” [originally published as “De la Futurism la Integralism,” *Integral* vol. 1, no. 6-7 (1925)], in *Between Worlds...*, p.557.

*all modern experiments. Immersed in collectivity, we create its style according to the instincts it only surmises.”*¹¹

Consequently the human being is the true work of art of the future, however not on its own, but within a collectivity.

The vocabulary used in these manifesto-like texts (“new man”, “collectivity”, “the transformation of society”) as well as the prophetic overtones of their usage can be encountered in the discourse of totalitarian ideologies. All in all, one cannot treat these artistic statements as purely political ones and cannot infer a transparent political option on the part of their authors. It should be mentioned that, although the majority of the Romanian avant-garde artists have never assumed a direct political engagement, their leftist views are well-known. Even if the avant-garde manifestoes didn’t provide scholars with political documents, one could question the relation between avant-garde and politics on the condition of keeping in mind that the manifesto is not an ideology but a literary genre.

The integralist synthesis of modern movements gathers at least two with strong and diverging political connotations – futurism, linked to fascism and constructivism, related to communism.

In 1937 the Nazi government of Germany opened *The Exhibition of Degenerate Art* that relegated modern art to the pathological and to the supposed racial impurity. The event seemed to make official an essential incompatibility between modernity and Nazism.¹² Yet the fascist dictatorship in Italy tolerated the futurist avant-garde. Marinetti wanted to transform futurism into a political power in the service of the renewal of Italy. In the ‘20s negotiations with politics were pretty ambiguous, but Marinetti was still struggling to gain at any risk an official status for futurism. *Integralism* doesn’t endorse the political activism which Marinetti has sought to imprint on futurism. Together with dada, futurism stands only as a model of radical aesthetics, “the most terrifying of professors, the most ardent guide”.

The Soviet system is usually considered the other major 20th century totalitarian ideology. For the Russian avant-garde artists the October Revolution seemed to accomplish their aspiration toward a new world order. In the early years of the Soviet Union, before the rise of socialist realism, the avant-garde artists embraced the Revolution, but finally they were reduced to being mere illustrators of a political system which didn’t include them. The Romanian avant-garde was more acquainted with the constructivists’ activity in the 1920s Germany. They held as

¹¹ Editors of *Integral*, “MAN” [originally published as “Omul,” *Integral* no. 1 (March 1, 1925)], in *Between Worlds...*, p.555.

¹² See the catalogue of the exhibition “*Degenerate Art*”. *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991.

common belief the idea of an art whose power should transcend the aesthetic boundaries and make the characteristics of a utopian society visible.¹³ Here is to be found one of the main sources of the Romanian *integralism* for whose synthesis constructivism was the essential ingredient. *Integralism* is at its turn

*“Constructive spirit with innumerable applications in all domains. Integral effort toward the synthetic perfection of existence. We have gained our technique after years of struggle. We surprised the substrata of the soul with the spontaneity of the great boulevards. It's the life of the eternal future”.*¹⁴

Can aesthetics overcome politics? Obviously *integralism* didn't intend to mediate the discontinuities between the two totalitarian ideologies and transform the artist into a kind of dictator. Any avant-garde is more likely to oppose the takeover bid for control made by totalitarianism. Within such a system there is no room for the nihilistic, individualistic or elitist nature of the avant-garde artist. Moreover the avant-garde aims one way or another to unveil the deeper structures that govern the world and therefore it is engaged in the first place into an ethical quest.¹⁵

¹³ Victor Margolin, *op.cit.*, p.5.

¹⁴ Mihail Cosma, *op.cit.*, p.559.

¹⁵ Philippe Sers, *Totalitarisme et avant-garde. Falsification et vérité en art*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2003, p.75.