

Days



Erwin Kessler

Days

Florin Mitroi

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 HUMANITAS
BUCUREȘTI

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The most decent and inconspicuous Romanian artist, Florin Mitroi, has left the most indecent and violent legacy. What should we do with it? Should we hide it, ignore it, downplay it as pathological? Should we burn it, perhaps, as Ruskin claimed to have done with the famous notebooks with erotic drawings that came to light after Turner's death, so as not to compromise the grandeur of his progressive work?

This could be the prologue to a scandal rather than that to a revelation.

Yet, here is the most electrifying breakthrough of Romanian art. The most intriguing and secret creation produced in Romania from the '70s until the tumultuous beginning of the 2000s. A toxic thesaurus of aesthetic consciousness and sensibility: more than 8000 graphic works, drawings, engravings, paintings, objects carved in metal by scissors or pierced by the chisel. A work "for the drawer", scribed by the unwavering hand of a restless man, who seems equipped with a razorblade, not with a paint brush. It is the only creation concealed for decades, which only now sees daylight and most probably – almost 30 years after the fall of Communism – the only major creation made "for the drawer" of the last half of century.

The surprise comes from the fact that we're not discussing about the typical drawer. But about the drawer below the belt.

The limits of our expectations (severely amended by the bewildering magnitude of compromise of the Romanian artists with the Communist regime, an area still insufficiently studied) made us have one sole concern when public curiosity is pulling such a drawer of an artist: we want to see the shred of torn canvas, the broken marble, the time-stained page or the

wrought clay in which the bruised specter of Communism would make its apparition, the face of dictatorship reduced to the ridicule which only an artist could reveal, and which could retrospectively avenge all our cowardice and yielding. We want to see the innuendos, the jazzy derision, the transparent parable and allegory through which the regime is smashed by the almighty consciousness of an intransigent artist: our fellow-creature, yet different from us, the one that ventured where we only dreamed of, but who – like all of us – lacked the courage to put in the open the fruit of his labor. And this is yet reassuring. We want to see someone whose darkness suits us, whose hide-out is our better (common) disclosure, replacing our own damaged disclosure. Someone who could express, in a both resounding and reconciliatory manner, our failed courage, who could mediate the convergence between us and ourselves, not someone who would tear us apart or who would alienate us. We are expecting to (re)visit sophisticated versions of political brutality well tempered in heroic cultural allegories, resembling the *Mad Kings* of Corneliu Baba¹, those tragic (invisible) blows given (through so long a detour that it fades in the fog of ages) by an artist (emeritus, from 1958) who belonged to the system he (apparently) hated but which he used to the full. We are expecting such a subtly heartbreaking attack to the Communist regime that it could turn into a bow taken before the curtain of our common history closes.

As a matter of fact, we are dreaming of inner reconciliation, by using the aesthetic abuse for moral use.

We want a kind of political inefficiency which would be visually efficient, a cultural act that would soothe our ideological migraines. The time is ripe: the Romanian visual culture of the last hundred years has had an upbringing in the spirit of culture, in the spirit of forms pregnant with bibliographic substance, with references, common sense, conformism, aestheticism, which are otherwise of value, but for which the authenticity of experience has always lurked in the shadow of crafty expression.

Separated from the founding/devastating excesses of the '20s, with the so-called hooliganism of personalities such as Tzara, Ionescu (Ionesco)² or

1. Corneliu Baba (1906–1997), painter and professor at the School of Fine Arts from Iași (from 1939) and at the “Nicolae Grigorescu” Institute of Fine Arts from Bucharest (from 1958); he determined an artistic direction (“babism”) addressing museum values, both in expression and technique.

2. Eugen Ionescu (Eugène Ionesco) (1909–1994), Romanian writer and playwright established in France. He contributed to the development of the theatre of the absurd through plays such as *The Bald Soprano* (1950), *The Chairs* (1952), *Rhinoceros* (1955);

Bogza³, the Romanian culture, instrumental, professional and amoral as it has been, has sung since the '30s the songs of power, whether it was democratic or totalitarian. Pillars of the '20s avant-garde, M.H. Maxy⁴ and Marcel Iancu (Janco) participate in 1933 at the futurist as well as Fascist exhibition from Rome. In the same '30s, Maxy is awarded a prize by Franco's Spain. In a text from late '20s, Maxy admits that he "calibrates according to Mussolini's political compass". From 1944 onwards, the same Maxy becomes the pillar of socialist-realist art and an important element within the gear of Communist cultural politics. Before 1960, he was the first to tune in for a new propagandistic frequency, of Communist-nationalist color, by painting peasants in traditional folkloric clothing joined in *hora* dances, so that later, in 1963, to rediscover the neo-avant-garde, pop-art, serialist vocabulary, employed once again in the interest of the regime, for the cause of the revolutionary "progress".

It mattered less what totalitarian propaganda was imposed by the various regimes – what really mattered was the profession turned into an engineering of the souls, a repertoire of themes and procedures used in a scientific manner by artists who turned over night into technocrats, the sole ideology of whom was the apparently neutral ideology of "fine arts" and "visual grammars". The major effect of this technocracy in art was the fact that the avant-garde became an instrument, official art *par excellence*, and experiment became another name for propaganda, not only for the patriarch Maxy, but also for the young wolves of the '60s.

The artist without a lab. Among the technocrats

Professionals of a given idiom, the artists have become in the '50s – the school years of Florin Mitroi – genuine tools in the hands of the system, which tackled

in 1949, he was imprisoned for the publication, in the *Viața românească* magazine, of a pamphlet about the institutions of the Romanian state.

3. Geo Bogza (1908–1993), poet, writer and journalist, he was tried (after the publication of the volume *Jurnal de sex / Sex Diary*, 1929) and imprisoned (as a reaction to the volume *Poemul invectivă / Poem Invective*, 1933) for the scandalous character of his poems, which were considered pornographic.

4. Max Hermann Maxy (1895–1971), painter, founder of the avant-garde magazine *Integral* (1925) and the founding director of the National Museum of Art of Romania / MNAR (1959–1971).

through them all sorts of disorders regarding control, legitimacy or even repression. The artists pretended they were juggling with subtle compositional constructions, with colour ratios, with geometric structures. The Communist system was using this apparently sovereign and autonomous “visual research” in its own interest. This looks like a dialogue of the deaf, which nonetheless resulted in an enduring pact, mutually benefic in *statu-quo* and stagnation.

The most serious effects came nevertheless from a central, insidious element – the conviction that the artistic creation has an actual social impact, only if it respects the regime’s prescriptions. And the regime’s prescriptions weren’t only formal: official art was actually an iconographic system, not an aesthetic paradigm. As hermeneutics turned into propaedeutics, official art was a repertoire of themes and schemes, an inventory of eligible representations: historical themes (artistic vaudevilles of triumphant protochronism through the praising of great ancient or medieval personalities who have contributed to the birth of our nation and to its fight for emancipation and freedom), social themes (peasants, laborers, intellectuals – all healthy and optimistic, fighting the cause of a bright future), political themes (much stricter – peace, disarmament and the cult of the Leader’s personality), humanistic themes (maternity, nudity as perfection, sports) or patriotic themes (the landscapes glorifying the beauties of the country) as well as philosophical and ideological themes (the praise of science, of progress, of industry).

The combinative art of many local artists made it that, by giving up one theme for another, when one artist stressed what the other neglected, the narrow field of accepted themes gave the illusion of a local artistic universe full of diversity, dynamic, even conflicting sometimes, if we are to consider it from the perspective of the skillfully directed “dispute” between the two painting schools which dominated from the ’60s until the ’90s, *babism* and *ciucurencism*⁵.

Florin Mitroi started like any artist educated (mutilated) by this system, by completely accepting both the method and the theme. On the occasion of his debut, he painted (agrarian) geometrized landscapes, still lives and decorative sceneries, in the wake of the generic *ciucurencism* seeded at the periphery of propagandistic vocabulary, expertly driving the graphic vehicle of classical modernity, in which the French conception is prevalent, but delighting in the

5. *Babism* and *ciucurencism*, informal rival schools of painting, emerging in the 60s around Corneliu Baba and Alexandru Ciucurencu: the first one is defined by formalism, frequent cultural references and chiaroscuro, the brush stroke and paste – as artistic means, while the second one is defined by a seeming modernism through the importance given to (bright) color and composition.

possibility of small folkloric detours, under the pressure of Țuculescu's⁶ model, pressure which in Romanian art is generally felt around the year 1965⁷, from Horia Bernea⁸ to Ion Grigorescu⁹ and from Doru Bucur¹⁰ to Andrei Cădere (André Cadere). Unlike the avant-garde artists of the '20s, Mitroi's debut and initial steps revolved on the orbit of a strict conformism. No hint of a rebel teenager, no sign resembling the roaring riot of Tristan Tzara, Ion Vinea¹¹ or Marcel Iancu could be found in the early work of Florin Mitroi.

At the beginning of the '60s, there was no such thing as a (visual) culture of rebellion, one could hardly conceive an art that would debut by an insult against public opinion. The regression, in terms of what freedom of expression was concerned, was so nonnegotiable and vast, that the mere challenging (through a refusal of early regimentation) was unimaginable. The authentic vocation of young artists was not the freedom of individual expression, but technical expertise in operating the official propagandistic mechanism. Their visit card was that of a building engineer of the visual, all of them engaging collective iconographic prefab but with different skills. This final aspect granted their high position on the social ladder, the only field open for competition in the absence of a real artistic competition, based on freedom of expression.

It is difficult to presume what exactly hindered Florin Mitroi from an easy enrollment within the social trajectory along with the huge majority of his fellow artists. He graduated in 1961 from the section of painting of the "Nicolae Grigorescu"¹² Institute of Fine Arts from Bucharest, from the class

6. Ion Țuculescu (1910–1962), painter, biologist and physician, whose posthumous influence in the Romanian artistic space is felt through folkloric, abstract and decorative elements, intensely adopted by the following generation.

7. 1965 is the year of *The Retrospective of Ion Țuculescu*, from Sala Dalles (Bucharest), through which the popularity of Țuculescu increased considerably among young artists. Used in a propagandistic purpose by the Communist regime, Țuculescu is proposed as an exemplary figure of healthy Romanian art.

8. Horia Bernea (1938–2000), painter and founding director of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant / MȚR (1990–2000).

9. Ion Grigorescu (b. 1945), experimental artist (author of videos, performance, body art) and, along Bernea (from 1989), member of the *Prolog* group (central pillar of the neo-Orthodox movement in the last 30 years of Romanian art).

10. Doru Bucur (1922–1969), painter with an abstract and symbolist thematic direction.

11. Ion Vinea (1895–1964), writer and editor in chief of the avant-garde magazine *Contimporanul*.

12. National University of Arts Bucharest, titled between 1948–1990 as „Nicolae Grigorescu“ Institute of Fine Arts.

*There's nothing more daunting on the path
to knowledge than the fear of heresy.*

Lucian Blaga

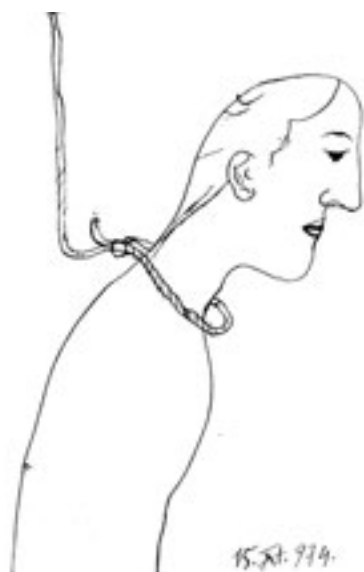
(annotation by Florin Mitroi
on a drawing)



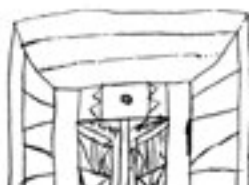
Florin Mitroi
Self-portrait with women's robe
(photo, 1997)



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