

Vladimir Bulat

Historia Culpa?

[First published in "Contrafort" nr.10-11 (36-37),
October - November 1997, pg. 22]

[1.921 words]

Moldova



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



Institute for
Contemporary
Art Zagreb

This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Vladimir Bulat

Historia Culpa?

(Sporadic notes upon a century of Bessarabian fine art: between "fashion" and "model")

In the following lines I intend to sketch the physiognomy of the native fine organism from the end of the XIXth century to the present day, from the perspective of the radical metamorphoses occurred in the last years, transformations that also imposed a new way of analysing fine and mental phenomena, as a result of the process of deconstructing the communist myths and of disintegrating the soviet colonial colossus.

The present moment is the first when the visual arts here fully "speculate", perhaps, their creative autonomy, freedom of expression, particular imaginary, marginal mentality, rejection of standardization.

A foray of historical order imposes immediately. **In Bessarabia there never existed a tradition of the visual arts**, in the classical meaning of the concept, because there did not exist, unless since very recently, a superior school of art education. Thus, perhaps, it can be explained in the most frustrating way the lack of a visual culture synchronizing with that of the modern times, the unavailability to relate to the European historical "avant-garde" issues, resting in a paradoxical, but not entirely unreasonable way between the poles of a conservatory, provincial mentality and of a romantic-anchylosed creative potentiality, corrupted by the "immense vapours of the exotic primitivity".¹ Still in the

¹ Nicolai Costenco, *Basarabian Ideologies*, in: "Viata Basarabiei", no 12, 1937

pre-war period Bessarabia's art was obviously out-dated, as a result, it seems, of a respectful attachment of the artists from Chisinau toward the academic-realistic tradition, and then toward that "critical realism" of the Russian "Wanderers", attachment particularly explicit if it is to take into consideration the multiple exhibitions of the "Wanderers" in the city on the river Byc at the end of the last century and the beginning of our century. Thus, between 1873 and 1900, there were organised in Chisinau not less than 7 exhibitions of the "itinerant" Ukrainian and Russian painters, and after 1903 - the year when the Society of the art lovers was founded in Bessarabia - there were organised common exhibitional meetings of the native visual artists and the artists that had come from the Russian space². This fact could not remain without any notable, I would say, ill-fated consequences, even if many Besarabian artists were accomplishing their studies at the European institutions of high education. Returning home, they "conformed" somehow to a super-annulated "Wanderers' spirit" that dominated here. The modernist influences that some of them experienced (or reached at by coquetry) during their stay in the West **did not perpetuate in any way**. It's something almost incredible, but absolutely provable on the basis of the work from that epoch. Even the attempts of "art nouveau", undertaken by artists as E. Maleshevski (1878-1940) and P. Shilingovski (1881-1942) (there must have been others too), had a strongly **individualized** character, extremely **diminished** as regarding the **modernist source**. The last one had had access to it only by mediation, i.e. by means of the background of the Association "Mir isskustva" from Petersburg, where he accomplished his studies. The analysis of that atmosphere, obviously **retrograde, unpermissive toward the spirit of novel**, needs a particular study; now I shall confine myself to signalling that only a few kilometres away, at Tiraspol, in the first decade of the XXth century, there was creating one of the most important representatives of the Russian avant-garde, the promoter of the exhibition "Diamonds Jack" of 1910, exhibition that had an European echo by the issues and principles formulated by its participants. That was **Mikhail Larionov**. Strangely, isn't it, that at a such small distance, two entirely different phenomena occurred: one **zone-isolated phenomenon**, but explosive, volcanic, innovatory, iconoclastic (Mikhail Larionov)³, and on the other side - a **mass phenomenon**, perfectly tributary to a corporation, missionary, conservatory, academic spirit, characteristic for the end of the last century (the artistic movement in Chisinau). **I consider, as a hypothesis, that this**

² Tudor Stavila, *Some aspects of the constitution of the professional fine art in Basarabia*, in: "Actual problems of the national art" pp. 111-112, 1993; also: N. Ezerskaia, *Peredvijniki I natsionalinye hudozestvennye scoly narodov Rossii*, Moskva, 1987, pp.124-130.

³ An extremely synthetic upon Larionov's work has been undertaken recently by G. Pospelov, *Bubnovyi valet. Primitiv I gorodskoi folklor v moskovskoi zivopisi 1910-h godov*, Moskva, 1990, pp.22-49, especially pp. 38-49.

stat of affairs was due first to the tzarist ideology of expansion, not only the military but also the socio-cultural one, by keen supervising of the “artistic processes” at the Empire’s borders, and also of the geographical coterminous, South-East European zones.⁴ Another supposition could be related to the **social command** on the spot, that came from the commendatory (the bourgeois townsman with doubtful aesthetic tastes) toward the visual artist, forced to answer to these retarded preferences. We are talking here about fashion, as well as about models, that need to be studied in detail.

The period 1918-1940 **was extremely short for an artistic viable mechanism to be constituted in this space**, the visual artists from the zone were traveling extensively, studying in Europe, participating to exhibitions within the Kingdom, never, though, within manifestations of European proportions. They remained out of the continuously metamorphosing, ideational and aesthetic pulse of the Western culture. That isolation increased even more in the 50’s, after Bessarabia was reconquered by the USSR. The things were somehow clear at the respective epoch, the art from MSSR being easily definable in the terms of “socialist realism”, illustrating in a national variant in some places the gregariousness of that horrid method of “illustrating the reality”, a counterfeited, mystified, gummy reality. The only interesting and worth studying moment is, perhaps, the period of hrushciovian “thaw”, extremely relative for a marginal province, far away from the Center, and especially, practically lacking an “intelligentsia” conscious of its historical mission, that of formulating artistic and cultural issues that would correspond to the **European time**, the contemporaneity. Therefore, a group of people, few and too shy, - it’s hard to reconstitute now if their gesture was one of group solidarization or actions on their own (or vanity) - undertake attempts to refresh the cultural atmosphere in Chisinau by appealing, especially, to **the folklore tradition, to the lode of the mystical-rural sensibility, to the ancient “wit” of the “Moldovan”**. That recrudescence of the national spirit, manifested in some cultural forms, I have defined as contemporary “pasturage”, which became a **fashion** oriented against the official **model**. The cause born the effect - there started talks about a “national Moldovan art” and even about a “national school of Moldovan painting”, “Moldovan tapestry” etc. The authorities knew how to “speculate” in an extremely perfidious and intelligent way the endeavours of a part of the intellectuality, anchoring it on the machine of falsifying the “specificity” of each national republic. The artists stayed with the sweet impression that they had the **liberty to create what they wanted**, in reality **creating what they were**

⁴ I express my gratitude to professor Razvan Theodorescu for the information offered in this regard.

requested to, as a result to the multiple social commands which they didn't show insensitive to. Much of that epoch has to be re-thought, re-defined. How much of the artistic "patrimony" of that time is creation and which part of it constitutes the imposition, the ideological illustration, the propaganda through images and cultural forms? I also consider as being particularly urgent the need to remove the make-up off the "hero's face" in order to see who (and why) was chosen as a model of the "national Moldovan art". Reaching this point, we shall not talk any more about the phenomenon because it is clear, but about persons, concrete artists, with concrete works, with the "images" of a public, ethical stateliness, etc. We shall realize the "**fertile duplicity**" of some of them, the others, though, will come into the light as fools-marionettes, manipulated for years, scarifying their work and morality.

The "thaw" was gradually substituted by the period of stagnation and "cold war", period in which the praiseful, thematic, etc. exhibitions were abundant in the visual arts. Almost nothing happens, the **model** seems to be taken over, strictly respected. But the freedom "fissure" of the '60s already became a "caprice", an open "window". In the studios there are produced all kinds of timid "experiments", which had the merit of being attempted by a limited group of young people. Among their works there have to be mentioned **Andrei Sirbu's collages, made of heterogeneous materials, Valeriu Rotaru's post-pop art, Iurie Horovschi's sculptures⁵, Mihai Prepelita's lyrical, vividly colored "abstractions"**. Later, at the beginning of the '80s, there is constituted a group of visual artists that "experimented" in color: M. Cheptanaru, Inessa Tapina, Elena Bontea, Ada Zevin, A. Tonceva and others, a kind of feminine "gallery" of the Basarabian chromatism, that had formulated issues eluded from the ideological engagement, constituting a model of new free thinking, with a stylistic and formal distinct system. That moment prepared, indirectly, the "autonomization" of the creative action, and, implicitly, it outlined the moments of getting rid of the obtuse ballast of a socialist-realist heritage, especially after 1987. In this period many young people make their appearance, conscious of the international artistic pulse, even if the temporal distance, in the first place, was extremely great, and the stages of society development - totally separate. This time too the renovations do not come from the West but, it may seem particularly paradoxical, from the East, exactly those centres where formerly the **ferment of standardization**

⁵ Interesting for the "experimental" atmosphere of the second part of the '80s there seems to be the study of the background in the artists' studios at the "Sculeni Barrier", where the "multiple disciplinary" attempts (combinations of materials, paint introduction on the sculpture surfaces, mixed papier-maches etc.) were observed at many authors from that milieu: Valeriu Moshcov, Simion Rabincof, Iurie Horovschi, Nicolae Ischimji, Grigore Pototschy etc.

came from. With a great delay the young graduates of the institutions of high education from Moscow, Sankt-Petersburg, Kiev, Minsk, Tallinn⁶ bring to Chisinau the wave of artistic “novels”, which in the Center already became a **fashion**, being encouraged tacitly by the authorities themselves. They brought with them the undigested remainders of the same **phenomenon**, undigested because it was already uninteresting, confuse, out-dated. **We had not an alternative art**, but only **imitations** of something like that, an accumulation of clichés. Exemplary in that sense I would consider the exhibition “Quests ‘89”⁷, where the artistic intentions had not, most of the time, any cover at the level of fine, formal, stylistic expression. Anyway, that, as well as some more manifestations of the same year (the Biennale of sculpture in the open air, the “Homage” to Eminescu, Iurie Horovschi’s individual exhibition, etc.) focused the visual artist’s attention upon the pure act of creation, upon the inner artist’s **trace**, externalized one way or the other. The Bessarabian visual artist is now in the quest of a cultural model, worth following, or, perhaps, in the quest of some foundations for the constitution and instrumentalization of an own one?

⁶ About the first important exhibition from the point of view of the “perestroika’s” beginning in visual arts, entitled “Tineretea tarii” (Country’s young people), from 1987 at the Art Museum: Constantin Ciobanu, “Performance or failure?” , in “Literatura si arta”, April 2, 1987, pp. 6-7; N. Ponomariova, “Skola I mastera” in: “Molodezi Moldavii”, April 7, 1987, p. 4.

⁷ A pertinent report about that exhibition was signed by N. Ponomariova, *Razdumia*, in: “Sovietskaia Moldavia”, September 7, 1989, p. 4