

The Faculty of Arts and Design, Cluj-Napoca

**REFLECTION EXERCISES,
ASPECTS OF AN ARTISTIC PROJECT**

**Doctoral thesis
(Abstract)**

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These *Reflection Exercises* express the natural intention of a practising plastic artist, who is a lecturer at the same time, to clarify his position within the field of art and, implicitly, that of existence as well. This clarification will be done by scrutinising the general artistic environment in which he was trained and he developed, and by identifying the main factors that determined the specific features of his conceptual and artistic evolution.

The first of these factors is biographical. Every artist has roots in a certain space and a certain community with all this implies: its ancestral memory, its myths, traditions, symbols and beliefs. In my case, this space is Maramureş, where I spent my childhood. I was thus able to share in its rich heritage, both the mythological, religious one and the artistic one, with its particular tradition of peasant art.

The second factor is connected, I think, to the time of my apprenticeship, the school influences and those of the professors that guided me at university.

My formation began in the artistic environment of Baia Mare. It was an environment still under the influence of the “Baia Mare School,” vitalised by the presence of certain young lecturers (Mihai Olos, Ilie Cămărăşan, Nicolae Apostol), who had a fresh, profoundly Romanian vision, which they superimposed on the old Baia Mare tradition.

Insofar as my academic studies are concerned, it was the Cluj school of painting that had an impact on my formation, through the rigour of the compositional construction which they professed. This was doubled by the balance and chromatic warmth of Paul Sima and by the fresh ways of approaching images that I learned from professor Victor Ciato, following a scholarship in Paris.

The third factor is closely connected with the artistic climate in Romania at the time, a climate strongly affected by the internal political situation and by the international movement of cultural ideas.

The evolution of the Romanian plastic arts of the 1980s has been closely analysed by several critics, some of which actually belonged to the '80's generation': Magda Cârneli (*Arta anilor 80. Texte despre postmodernism; Artele plastice în România, 1945-1989/ The Art of the 1980s. Texts on Postmodernism; Plastic Arts in Romania, 1945-1989*), Adrian Guță (*Texte despre generația 80 în artele vizuale/ Texts on the '80's Generation' in the Field of Visual Arts*), Mihai Ispir, Călin Dan, Anca Vasiliu or Aurelia Mocanu. Their articles, published mostly in the "Arta" magazine, offered me a broad panorama of this artistic phenomenon. With the help of these texts I have tried (in the chapter "Panorama of the Romanian Art of the 1980s") to "survey" the Romanian artistic landscape, with the purpose of capturing specific aspects related to the socio-political situation, to the artistic heritage, to dominant tendencies and major cultural events that marked the evolution of Romanian artists and art throughout that decade.

Underlying any creation there is a "discourse legitimising the work," and so in the subchapter "Postmodernism – A Concept under Debate" I have included opinions that can give an idea of the dynamics and fundamental aspects of a phenomenon that is, after all, to do with the physiology of the spirit, with the *Zeitgeist* of the period under scrutiny.

The entire volume of "Caiete critice" (Notebooks of Criticism), no. 1-2, 1986, was dedicated to this debate which literary and art critics, writers, architects, and musicians took part in. Something similar happened in the pages of the "Arta" magazine, no. 2 of 1989. These discussions on this culturally complex phenomenon, which is difficult to account for in one single definition, put forth the idea that the exhaustion of the solutions offered by modernism was followed by the emergence of a new cultural paradigm.

Postmodernism, however, is not a radical negation of modernism but "tries to overcome it by perpetuating it" (Călin Dan). This is made obvious by the very semantic structure of the term adopted, which is

formed with the prefix **post-** and not **anti-**. If one can speak of a reaction to modernism, this refers to a saturation of means, an exaggeration of the autonomy of language, of the idea of **art-as-art-in-itself**.

Of the series of neo-avant-gardes, the most significant reaction against the modernism defended by Greenberg seems to be that of the hyperrealists of the 6th decade, a trend “endorsed” by *Documenta 5* of Kassel, which was dedicated to investigating reality.

After a period of formal purism, of strict delimitations between artistic genres, postmodernism proposes the solution of mixing languages, of hybridising the means of expression.

The Romanian art of the 1980s is marked, on the one hand, by the internal political constraints which ‘muffle’ its tone but, at the same time, render it more subtle. On the other hand, it is defined by the neo-avant-garde echoes of the free world. It is not difficult to notice the attempts made by certain top Romanian artists to keep abreast of the latest European trends. The political thaw and opening up of those few years after 1965, the snippets of information available about what was happening in the West in terms of artistic experiences, enabled a refreshing of the means of expression and of approaching form and image in Romania.

Artists such as Ion Bitzan, Mihai Olos, Ana Lupaş, Ion Grigorescu, Cornel A. Ailincăi, Constatin Flondor, Geta Brătescu, Mircea Spătaru, Sorin Dumitrescu, Horia Bernea had a crucial role in revising and re-evaluating the artistic language, the very artistic act as such.

The generation of the 1980’s, to which I myself belong, has had a decisive role in establishing certain dominant tendencies within contemporary Romanian art. In their turn, these tendencies are rooted in the two great directions identifiable within the general movement of Western art. On the one hand, there is the so-called “realist” direction, illustrated by the multitude of current pseudo-avant-gardes that use

combinations of styles and languages (which resort to sometimes striking “mass-media-like visual and psychic mechanisms”), “syncretic quotations,” and even try to reintegrate the kitsch within the compositional field. It is an art placed under the sign of *irony* and *parody*. On the other hand, there is another direction that has endured, i.e., the “formalist one, which has preserved some of the features of self-referentiality and aesthetic purism. The main idea here is that abstraction identifies, in fact, with the only way in which the iconic can be preserved in the contemporary entropy, a minimal set of normative and limitative rules without which the image would be “pulverised”.

These postmodernist breezes bring about a new type of figurativism in Romanian art, one focused on the daily and the biographic, as well as a violent chromatism, which resorts to re-using the expressionist arsenal. We refer here to the *neo-expressionist direction*.

The young artists of the ‘80s generation who base their visual discourse on the “new realism” are the painters Anilela Firon, Vasile Tolan, Marcel Bunea, Ioana Bătrânu, Ioan Aurel Mureșan, Vioara Bara, Andrei Chintilă, Marilena Preda-Sînc, Teodor Graur, and, to a certain extent, the author of these lines; the sculptors Darie Dup, Mircea Roman, Aurel Vlad; the graphic artists Laszlo Ujvarossy, Dan Mihălțianu, Rareș Pantea.

Attempts to “integrate in the visual discourse syntagms originating in the mass-media, cartoons, grafitti, video art” are part of the spirit of the “new sensitivity/new figurativeness” as well. These attitudes constitute themselves in the “intermediate direction” of the 1980s’ art. Part of this direction are painters such as Theodor Graur, Roxana Trestioreanu, Petru Lucaci, Bartha Sandor; graphic artists such as Olimpiu Bandalac, Dan Mihălțianu, Laszlo Ujvarossy, Dan Perjovschi; the sculptors Rudolf Bone, Marian Zidaru; the ceramic artists Alexandru Antik, Titu Toncian or the designers Laurențiu Ruță, Dorel Găină and

Aniko Gerendy. Due to the socio-political context, which was increasingly hostile to the freedom of expression, most of the “events” organised by this movement took place in small spaces, flats or personal studios, and had an experimental, “laboratory-like” character. This conferred on them the features of an *underground* movement.

However, within the Romanian plastic arts, there is also another, graver and more profound variant of the postmodernist sensibility, i.e., the “neo-byzantine” direction. It “consistently tries to reformulate in modern terms a visual language based on Orthodox metaphysics.” This is a tendency represented by great artists, such as Horia Bernea, Paul Gherasim, Marin Gherasim, Sorin Dumitrescu, Vladimir Zamfirescu, Gheorghe Anghel, Horia Paștina, as well as the younger Mihai Sârbulescu, Marian Zidaru, Ștefan Râmniceanu, Constantin Pacea, Cristian Paraschiv.

The starting point of this direction can be identified in the original artistic solutions put forth by Horea Damian – the hieratism and archetypal character of his doors, pyramids and thrones. A significant part of the supporters of this direction form the “Prolog” (Prologue) group. These artists set out, more or less consciously, to achieve a double form of resistance through culture:

- a. – against an alienating, atheist and aberrant political system;
- b. – at the centre of a world placed under the sign of entropy, of a syncretism completely devoid of any sacred element.

An exterior eye could notice in the evolution of my own way of treating images/forms a movement in time from formal preferences relating to my affinities for the first variant, the “realist” one, towards the symbolical and trans-mimetic option that reveals connections with the second, “neo-byzantine” variant.

Examining retrospectively the body of work created in the 1980s, one can identify a series of significant elements that emphasise the

adherence of this new generation to the new sensibility, as well as the fact that my own undertakings draw on this sensibility:

- a. – a pronounced tendency towards individualisation, subjectivism;
- b. – the implied presence in the texture of the image of the mirror-motif as a reflexive representation of the labyrinth;
- c. – a certain degree of detachment as a consequence of becoming aware of the act of drawing;
- d. – the things drawn are of a drawing which includes them and which is in the process of changing;
- e. – the use of an arsenal of signs, markers, arrows and hatching inside the drawn image, as traces of the conceptualist reflexes;
- f. – a focus on the fragment as a defining element of the postmodernist preferences, but against the background of a desire for a new synthesis (by resorting to archetypes) and, ultimately, for recovering the idea of centre;

All these elements are dealt with in the subchapter “Aspects of an Artistic Project,” in which every work is approached in terms of motivation, ways of articulating the artistic language, and technical devices and their semantic load.

The constant desire to grow spiritually meant, naturally, reading the main body of work of several personalities of great authority in the field. Among them, Mircea Eliade (*Sacrul și profanul/ The Sacred and the Profane; Drumul spre centru/ The Way towards the Centre; Mituri vise și mistere/ Myths, Dreams and Mysteries; Comentarii la Legenda Meșterului Manole/ Comments on Manole’s Legend*, etc.), Nikolai Berdyaev (*Un nou Ev Mediu/ The New Middle Ages; Sensul creației/ The Meaning of the Creative Act; Împărăția Spiritului și împărăția Cezarului/ The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*), Alexandros Kalomiros (*Sfinții Părinți despre originile și destinul omului și al cosmosului/ The Holy Fathers on the Origins and Destiny of Man and*

Cosmos), Thomas de Koninck (*Noua ignoranță și problema culturii/ The New Ignorance and the Problem of Culture*), Ernest Bernea (*Trilogie filosofică; Spațiu, timp și cauzalitate la poporul roman/ Philosophical Trilogy; Space, Time and Causality in the Romanian People*), David Bohm (*Plenitudinea lumii și ordinea ei/ Wholeness and the Implicate Order*), as well as writings by the artists themselves (Marin Gherasim, *A patra dimensiune/The Fourth Dimension*), etc. These are crucial texts, which articulate the imperious need to reactivate a “dimension forgotten in us,” a fundamental given, planted in the structure of our conscience, i.e., the **sacred**, whose presence leads to the recovering of the central vector of existence which contemporary man has lost, i.e. the **meaning** and, through it, **the wholeness of being**.

The second chapter of the thesis, entitled “In Search of the Lost Sacred. An Attempt at Recovery,” represents a plea for regaining wholeness of being by retrieving the sacred dimension of the creative act. My suggestions, which are the natural consequences of a way of thinking focused on the idea of the sacred, of a superior entity governing the great “order,” resort to symbolical and archetypal forms, capable of expressing more than what they represent.

In this respect, Chapter III, “Archetypes, Motifs and Symbols. Reflection and Creation,” puts together sources of inspiration, artistic suggestions, starting points, motivations, meditations on the theme of the profound relations between the idea of book and that of honeycomb, and between the latter and the idea of beginning or building.

The first subchapter, “Books and Honeycombs,” reveals by means of associative imagination the symbolic similarity between the honeycomb, as a multi-alveolar structure (whose cells even contain grains of life), and the honeycomb-like text of a book, whose word-cells can contain seeds of life (ideas) for the spirit. The honeycomb is food for the body, while the text-honeycomb is food for the spirit. This idea is

embodied in a series of archetypal works, whose formal simplicity contains an entire stratification of meanings and significances. If we can say that everything in the universe is physics, mathematics or vibration, etc., then we can also say that everything, from a “swarm of cells” to a galactic honeycomb, is a honeycomb. But we can also say that everything is divine wisdom, knowledge encrypted in a colossal system of logical interrelations. Works such as *Thought on the Book of Genesis*, *Thought on Time* or *Book of Prayers*, created with wood, cardboard, sand, mirror and vegetal elements, are just a few in a longer series emphasising the same idea. Each work is presented both in its conceptual/motivational aspects and in terms of its means of artistic concretisation and symbolical significances.

The next subchapter focuses on “Motifs and Symbols of Beginnings” as guidelines and possible artistic solutions for themes and ideas born out of contemplation, meditation and searches at an artistic and conceptual level. The works analysed here continue to explore the honeycomb motif, but this time its meaning is that of a principle of propagation in time and space of energies and vibrations originating in an initial impulse.

My thoughts, feeding on the fascination with the idea of the beginning, are expressed in simple, archetypal forms, which come to life around a core-centre, which connotes either the First Impulse (which triggered the evolution of the universe) or a bell, whose sounds propagate out into space from a centre, enveloping it and materialising their waves. *Beginning of the World*, echoing a universal dimension, and *Basilica* or *Bell Sound*, referring to the founding of a primary Christian community, send to the same underlying idea of an “irradiating centre” of spiritual energy/vibration which governs the whole process – from the stage of potentiality to the evolution subjected to subtle and mysterious structuring laws.

The subchapter “Archetypes, Motifs, and Symbols of Building” discusses a set of works whose structuring is conceptually motivated and governed by the idea of a “**law of building**” as a principle which controls both the interior ordering or building, and the exterior one as an expression of the interior one. The axial thought crossing the verticality of each work is the aspiration towards heights as a counterpoint to immersion. “One cannot climb unless one relies on a depth” (Andrei Pleșu).

The series of works circumscribed by the idea of building unfolds between “The Interior Building,” which alludes directly to our being built on the basis of a good orientation and measure, and “The Resurrection Place,” which is a threshold between two ways of existence, a terrestrial and a celestial one, and contains implicitly the meaning and significance of redemption. “The Interior Building” is in contrast with the rebellious building of *The Babel Tower*, which is a sign of “the pride that precedes the fall”. *The Oven* sends to the creation of the fundamental unit of building, the brick, but also to the idea of purification through fire.

The chapter “Filiations, Consonances, Elective Affinities” presents briefly several great Romanian artists whose artistic attitude I too resonate with partly. They are Horia Damian, Horia Bernea, Paul Gherasim, Sorin Dumitrescu, Marin Gherasim, Silviu Oravitzan, Eugen Tăutu, and Constantin Flondor. They all build their artistic discourse based on a certain spiritual orientation and as an expression of a “sidereal awareness of the world”. Their work is imbued with the presentiment of a meta-world, of the existence of an “establishing presence from beyond” which governs the universe.

Trying to realise what my affinities were with these important artists’ attitudes and projects, I have identified the following similarities:

- a. – there is a “trans-mimetic intention” at the basis of every image or form;

- b.- the tendency towards a certain form of asceticism mediated by colour and materiality (the chromatic restraint, the roughness of surfaces coated in sand);
- c.- the return towards the old, the opening up towards the great cultures, towards the human element inscribed in the dawns of humanity, the use of archetypes and symbols;
- d.- the attempt to recover the idea of centre, to give the being, and consequently the work too, a new axis;
- e.- the attempt to simplify the form, the use of the expressive potential of the frontality of image/form, the use of geometry and symmetry;
- f.- the use of the “anatomical” type of symbolic analogue (the door, window, tower, tumulus, icon, book, beehive);
- g.- the preference for motifs of ascension;
- h.- the idea of building, the use of architectural motifs (the oven, barn, church wall, empty tomb, etc.);
- i.- the use and valorisation of the expressiveness and symbolism of the honeycomb motif;
- j.- the attempt to recover the way in which the Romanian peasant was placed within the field of existence, the idea of local tradition
- k. – the aspiration towards integration, towards recovering the wholeness of being and general human values, towards the values of permanence and endurance.

These consonances or affinities are not so much to do with an exterior adoption of certain themes, patterns or similar artistic solutions, but with the type of attitude that legitimises the work, with the quality of one’s placement within the field of existence, with one’s way of understanding the function of art.

Personal propensities do, naturally, generate individualising elements as well, which distinguish among the different artistic visions.

The elements that give unmistakable features to my works and that ultimately make up what we call artistic vision relate to:

a.- a certain way of transfiguring images and experiences that I have from Maramureş, a space imbued with a particular kind of tradition and mythology (the works focusing on the expressive and symbolic potential of wood fibre are *Deserted Gate*, *Church Wall*, *Vesper Bells*, *Via Veritas Vita*, etc.);

b.- a certain way of selecting and extracting the fragment out of the whole – the detail of maximum symbolic relevance (the window, gate, roof, vesper bell, etc.)

c.- the almost obsessive decision to valorise the motif of light as the sign of a spiritual energy, of a meta-world (the cycle *Light and Matter*);

d.- the deeply-rooted desire to harmonise two inner, polarised tendencies: the preference for the richness of detail with the minimalist desire to simplify the image/form in order to facilitate a symbolical reading;

e. – the use of means connected to the “meeting” of certain artistic solutions on the border line between the medium of painting and that of objects (*Bread from the Sky*, *The Offering/Sacrifice*, *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, etc.);

f. – objectifying the painting (but not in the Greenbergian meaning of the autonomy of the painted work) by expanding the painted surface onto the canvas-clad edges of the frame (*Icon I*, *Shutters*, *The Window*, *The Dinner*, etc.);

g. – the aesthetic integration of the **ready-made** within the corporeality of the work and its investment with symbolical valences (*The Offering*, *Bread from the Sky*, etc.);

h. – approaching and artistically solving certain “lofty” themes by resorting to humble, unconventional matters, such as sectioned

cardboard or Saharan sand (*Thought on the Book of Genesis, Simnel Cake, The Martyr's Aura*, etc.);

i. – the preference for a certain chromatic and formal asceticism, as a reflex of spiritual asceticism;

j. – the synergic relation between the abstraction of the exhibited drawings' or oil paintings' bi-dimensionality and the concrete tactility of the archetypal forms developed in space towards an enhancement of the general message (the Exhibition "The Meanings of Silence," Art Museum, Baia Mare, 2005);

k. – an exacerbation of materiality, aiming, apparently paradoxically, at a transfiguration according to the principle enunciated by Ortega y Gasset: "the real can be overcome by exacerbating it" (*Ballad, Laus raerum, Nuts*, etc.);

l. – the valorisation of the honeycomb motif by relating it to that of the book (the cycle "Books and Honeycombs");

m.- the original way of enhancing expressiveness obtained by the game of contrasts of material textures of different natures (*Book of Prayers*);

n.- typical mixtures of organic materials (wood, pine needles, tree branches) with mineral ones (Saharan sand) (*Thought on Time, The Book of Genesis*, etc.);

The subchapter entitled "An Artistic Project in Chosen Mirrors," included in the Annexes, consists of a selection of abridged and unabridged texts, published along the way in cultural magazines or other publications in Romania (the Magazines *Arta, Steaua, Vatra, Orizont, Flacăra, România literară, România liberă, Cotidianul*, etc.).

I think these exegeses, which show the way in which different sections/stages in my artistic career have been perceived by competent people (Călin Dan, Gheorghe Vida, Radu G.Țeposu, Simona Vărzaru, Coriolan Babeți, Mircea Zăciu, Horia Medeleanu, Pavel Țușară, Corneliu Antim, Marcel Tolcea, Viorica Buică and Ion Parhon), support

the overall image of my evolution which this doctoral thesis proposes and thus validate an artistic project coherently carried out over three decades.

As a general comment, I think the works analysed in these pages of *Reflection Exercises* illustrate relevantly the representative stages in my development as a plastic artist. Naturally, this evolution is in progress, exploring further already tackled ideas. New connections and new artistic ideas will appear in my “inner crucible,” and once they have found a bi- or tri-dimensional expression, they will join my body of work and will organically, coherently integrate in my own vision.