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**PH.D. THESIS: 2006**

**POSTMODERNISM IN VISUAL ARTS**

**SUMMARY**

To be contemporary means to keep abreast off current times. This does not mean to be the latest “fashion” by any means, but to accept the emergency of a new vision on the individual and his/her relations with the world around, to cultivate new values.

The analysis of such a subject involves some obvious risks. One needs courage to advance judgments on recent history, as a consequence of the shortcomings which result from the research of a phenomenon unrolled ahead us. Our Ph.D. thesis does not aim to give verdicts, but to signalize, to draw attention upon the phenomenon, unassuming its exhaustive or global coverage. The international studies have not reached unanimously accepted definitions or verdicts. Postmodernity and postmodernism have not reached yet but a small history (of over 50 years), but the total acceptance of these concepts by everybody is made both shyly and in a restraining manner. We are aware of the beginning of this epoch (its roots are found in the sixth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), its development still goes on. We are contemporary with the building of this era.

Besides, the first signs of change in ideas, opinions and concepts, in all domains, appeared at the same time with the First World War. The first planetary conflagration has seriously weakened the trust in human qualities (goodness, trust, truth, strong individual personality), in progress (unlimited progress) and in the linear course of history. This first

social shock, unconceivable for future generations, was followed by others: the first recession of the 30's, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The decades after the Second World War have been animated by huge social and political worries and anxieties. We mention the fights for decolonization, for civil rights in America of the 60's, the social engagements of young people of the 70's, with the hippy, flower-power movements, the European 68<sup>th</sup>, the birth of the ecologist trend and the anticommunist resistance movements of the 70's-80's.

The period after 1945 has been circumscribed and marked by an exacerbated consuming hedonism (of course, not on all continents), defined by a world of spectacle, of sexual liberties, of tourism, all influencing the types of necessities, but, in the same time the cultural and social offers.

It is the period when everything reports to the modern age, it integrates with the times after modernity and defines itself through the prefix post: post-colonialism, post-comunism, postmodernism.

As a consequence, under the pressure of these modifications, the driving forces of society, politics, philosophy, and science change the ideas register. Ideas taken from these activity domains put an accent on concepts such as: discontinuity, differentiation, indetermination, and distrust, participating in the appearance of some instability beliefs over the reality.

Truth and knowledge become relative.

The informational boom has led to the forming of this new vision. The Internet information, the media society made changes, traveling and access to other cultures or philosophies possible. The world becomes smaller and smaller. Practically, we have been witnesses to the appearance of a global phenomenon, which suggests the meeting of plurivocity and heterogeneity. In a word, the contemporary age is defined by complementarities.

The key words for naming this new historical situation are: globalization / internationalization and industrialization, multiculturalism, artificiality, plural world, fragmentation (of the society and of the individual), marketing, image, etc.

The vision of our epoch about world (society, reality) is based on mediated images, received through the television screens and the computer monitors. These full of

information images are offered and constructed by the mass-media, by the television, film or advertising industries. We live in a media society that produces dependence and forced knowledge. The postmodern world is a fictitious world, inside which reality becomes an obsolete convention.

A postmodern universe defined by images follows a modern world defined by the power of the word.

On this social, political and historical background, new changes are made in the cultural domain. Postmodernism in visual arts has established new relations with the image. Throughout history, art has held the monopoly over images, but after the invention of the photography, of the reproduction and spreading techniques, we were assaulted by an enormous quantity of images which surround us, which invade us psychically or physically (photographic, television, video, advertising, propaganda, cinematographic, scientific or medical images).

As a consequence, in the visual arts domain, the images taken as a working motif have to be, as quality concerns, competitive with the other making images industries. The 60's of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century offered a first solution as an answer to this dare: the recycling images of the so-called popular culture. The Dada collages, the abstract Expressionism, then Pop Art, the Fluxus movement, the Body art are some artistic movements that changed the look of the art image. Important is to emphasize that a new Dada and vanguard spirit was inspiring, at the time, new creative energies and vigor to the arts.

In the seventh decade of the past century, this dynamic and experimental spirit gave birth to a multitude of artistic trends and movements. These have contributed, through special effervescence, to the overthrow and cancellation of the notions connected to the art object. The theory of culture and arts, through its representatives, Jaques Derrida and Harold Rosenberg, introduced new terms in the analysis of the artistic image: de-construction, de-defining, de-aesthetisation. The difficulty in defining art as a consequence to a too wide freedom of creation produces confusion in the discerning of values.

In that moment, a crisis connected to the trust in art is released, having as a purpose the spread of the idea of the death of art.

This has been the historic moment of the acceptance by the artists and the audience, by the cultural establishment, of the postmodern concepts. Art has entered a new functioning regime.

New key words define this new cultural space: internationalization and commercialization, the cultural pluralism (multiculturalism), international homogeneity. Histories, lots of small histories are being written in this area, as opposite to a unique history of art (meta-narration). Periphery voices of new groups, once discriminated (women, ethnic or sexual minorities, emigrants, etc.) are added to the old, classical centers of decision in the art sphere. Periphery and centre get into a fusion, new art markets appear: in the Eastern Europe, Asia, and South America. The democratization of art is real and achieved through the enlarging of the access to the arts, both in what internationalization concerns (as an access for lots of different groups) and in the works offer. Art on the Internet is an example, in this matter, of democratic art through offer and unlimited access, but also through creative interventions.

A new vision is active, not only in the terms of form or message, but more, in the sensibility terms. The artist's message becomes relative in the sense of a loss of the dimensions of the serious in art. In the new artistic productions, one can rather "read" perceptions, feelings, opinions about existence the art works aiming at producing intense and particular experiences (rather than representing or signifying them).

The artist is no longer a privileged being in society, but a mediator in the community in which he/she manifests or intervenes. The postmodern artist becomes a social operator built from a mixture of features taken from a business man, from an illusionist or a shaman, collaborating in the realization of his/her works with physicists, chemists, programmers etc.

The contemporary visual artists resort to a large gamut of media and ways of expression, such as: the critical quotation, the ironic quotation, analytic deconstruction, loans, resort to pure text. They appeal to simulation, approximation, detournment, formal mixture and metissage. They try to integrate in their images the raw reality taken from the mass media, the photo-video domain, or the close environment.

The subject of this thesis has been also approached from the inside part of the phenomenon, from the view of my personal creation began during the studies. In the

Ph.D. thesis, I have analyzed the conceptual and formal marks due to which my work has been integrated into what is called “The 80’s Generation” in Romania.

The “80’ers” are chronologically situated after graduating university (1980 ± 5 years). “The background consisted in the branches of the *Atelier 35* of the 80’s – there was, on the one hand, the local artistic life and, on the other hand, there were the initiatives of some group exhibitions or symposiums with diverse geographic participation. The most important meant the providers of important opportunities of mutual knowledge and communication as well as the taking of the general pulse”<sup>1</sup>. A special creative emulation was on the verge of emerging inside different artistic groups.

“The 80’ers have brought about major changes in the Romanian fine arts domain through lucid approaches doubled by the impetuosity of the age, stimulated by the (legitimate) will of synchronization with the international pulse, a will (rendered in the need for communication) potentiated with the increase of the censorship pressure, approaches determined also by the internal impulses in the visual culture area. On the background of a modernity fractured by the historic conjuncture, of the Romanian vanguard sinuosity, from the interwar period to the recent neo-vanguard, the 80’s Generation has settled guiding marks of the artistic postmodernity.”<sup>2</sup>

The 80’s Generation determines the settling down of postmodernism in the Romanian visual culture.

A lot of the actions of the *Atelier 35* have been underground and had a strong alternative character as opposed to the socio-political context, to the official art developed until 1989. New “visual languages” have been initiated: the object art, installation, photography, and performance – certainly these were only at their beginning, but they manifested extremely as quantity. The 80’s Generation does not hold the monopoly and the priority of these gestures. In the art up to that date there had been attempts of the same nature, but they were singular. The 80’s Generation is significant for “institutionalizing” them. The potentiality of new sensibility, more specifically, of a sensibility mutation, was demonstrated.

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Guță, *Texte despre Generația '80 în artele vizuale*, Editura Paralela 45, Pitești, 2001, pag. 140.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Guță, *Op.cit.*, pag.16

The art of the 80's Generation in Romania repeated, in a certain manner, the experience of the beginning of postmodernism in the whole world. In a first phase, it superposed the last throbs of artistic vanguard, "it was post-vanguard, rather than anti-modernism."<sup>3</sup>

These are years marked by an experimental spirit as an attitude of social and cultural frond, creating one very parallel culture, "camouflaged". These are the years of the eighth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when, in Romania, the dictatorship had taken aberrant forms in exacerbating evil.

The 90's are marked by the earned freedom, which leads to the disappearance of censorship. The message of the art becomes direct; the "underground" condition of art acquires access to the big audience. Freedom means democracy, tolerance, mixture, fragmentation, and imitation in a mediatic cultural ambiance and mediated images. The movement of the 80's Generation is "classicized", preparing the appearance of a new generation.

I have been a part from the *Atelier 35*, contributing as participant and co-author to a lot of exhibitions of this artistic group. The *Atelier 35* in Cluj organized and prepared the Youth Biennials and Symposiums carried on over one decade (1980-1990) in: Alba-Iulia, Bistrița, Oradea, Sibiu, Târgu-Mures, Timișoara. The *Atelier 35* proposed and coordinated the National Youth Biennale in Baia-Mare in 1988. The *Atelier 35* participated in the construction of an artistic emulation marked by youth and novelty, offering a viable variation to the official Romanian artistic life.

## ARGUMENT

"Laokoon" tempera on Letea paper, 400x200cm, 1988

(The Collection of the Transylvania Museum of Art, Cluj-Napoca)

"... one work which left a lasting imprint upon my mind was a large-scale painting of the Cluj ceramist (as a profession) Titu Toncian, a dramatic interpretation

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<sup>3</sup> Dan-Eugen Rațiu, *Disputa modernism – postmodernism*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2001, pag.9

after **Laokoon and His Sons**, “yelling” of forms and colors: I consider that the work proves to be symptomatic for a natural state of being and for the spirit of the times, for an attitude, as a fructification of a mythological mark belonging to the history of art”.<sup>4</sup>

The work was made by appealing to a well-known postmodern artistic method: “the quotation” (a quotation from the Greek art, more precisely an image of the statuary group which illustrates the legend of Laokoon and his sons). Through time relocation, the action is moved in 1988. Resorting to the “allegory” reason (another postmodern working medium) that “says some particular things in order to make the reader/viewer understand something else”, the work of art becomes the image of a different image. Through the tension inoculated in the composition, through the drama of the deformations, of the human body contortions, the work of art constitutes a genuine anti-totalitarian remonstrative act, “an authentic neo-expressionist manifest, and the pathetic visualization of a baroque moment (read “dramatic” of the Romanian life.”<sup>5</sup>

Three premises make me affirm I am a postmodern artist:

- 1) The affiliation of the artistic life where I work and manifest myself, to a temporal space even to a postmodern period (the years after 1975).
- 2) The equivalence of the artistic experiment to a method, to a postmodern way of action, so specific, so defining, so particular for the 80's Generation.
- 3) The 80's Generation provoked and led to the fixing of postmodernism in the Romanian visual culture.

As a conclusion to this succinct analysis of the postmodern phenomenon, I can state the fact that I am a polyglot of the artistic expression (which characterizes most of my generation colleagues). The mixture, “the language coexistence” in diverse statements and varied materials used in their creation, reveal a fresh vision, specific for experimentalism in the manner of approaching art. A rich range of means of transposition with mixed techniques applied on diverse media is added. The artistic procession to which I appealed to is based on materials and techniques in which the rough material

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<sup>4</sup> Adrian Guță, Op.cit., pag.35

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Guță, Op.cit., pag. 125

(ground, veneer, lighting spots) fuse with drawing, color, lime, paper, projection screen etc.

The artistic experiment produced the first anticipative forms of postmodernism. New artistic languages are explored: object art, performance, installation, photography and experimental movie, etc.

This alternative in finding new artistic valences necessary for formal concretizations was also a consequence of the experimental spirit of the 80's Generation. The experiment in the expectative condition, underground, has searched really new forms, different from the official establishment.

I used the experiment as a research and investigations method, permanently maintaining an open-minded attitude (without any political or commercial obligations), with a direction, with a precise purpose, namely, the synchronization with the spirit of the times, with the international art.

My work creates a pluralist formal writing, a hybrid, in an eclectic mixture of elements and data. We deal with an approach that goes beyond the frontiers between different artistic genres, allowing us to use the postmodern critic terms of an impurity of the apparatus and of the iconography.

I excel in the installation area, the intermedia - installation, macro – installation, in the ceramic collage sector, in the object art, in the photographic experiment, in the creation of fine-art situations and in the elaborative processes. In the artistic media mentioned above, my works were made by clay or neon, paper and veneer structure, sawdust objects and expandable polyurethane foam, porcelain, clay or shamus pieces.

My works belong to symbols, thematic cycles which have obsessed me along the time: book, sieve, mirror, fountain, human archetype, ark, etc, themes which consisted in a continuous preoccupation and to which I tried, with the artistic media at my reach, to give birth, solutions, answers and a meaning.

As compared to modernity, I built a picture of the postmodern phenomenon, inside which the acceptance of ideas and postmodern working methods visualize an application of this mixture and a fusion of the mass-media practices (that can be included in the so-called minor culture) with the classical, modern artistic experiences (of the major culture).

Thus, the postmodern period conjugates in a constant action of “aesthetic” treatment over new technologies and expanded and internationalized cultural reality.

The artistic existence and procession in the postmodern spell submit to certain informative actions, which are valid and, on the other hand, which can be applied to any historic period: - of decay to a spiritual minor, characterized by devaluation, degradation, artificiality, kitsch, immediacy, obscenity; - of raising to a superior floor, to a major cultural stage, defined by spiritual balance, transcendence, mystery, inventiveness, particularity, consistency, density and value.