

Oppressive Art Historiography in Romania

A Case Study of Contemporary Arts Through the Files of the Romanian Department of State Security

Phd. student Vincentzu Pușcașu, University of Bucharest, Romania

Introduction

The present poster investigates the contemporary artistic creation within the frame of the Romanian communist epoch. The project aims to define the status of the artist, through the lens of the Romanian Department of State Security. The main objective is to reveal the manner in which methods of formal analysis, semiotic, rhetoric or iconography had been left behind and grossly overlooked. This endeavor will be making use of case studies, on artistic corpora, between the years of 1950 and 1989. Essentially, this entire exercise is based off of the informed presumption that the Romanian Department of State Security adopted an oppressive documentary approach towards artistic manifestation, utilizing methodologies from the field of art history.

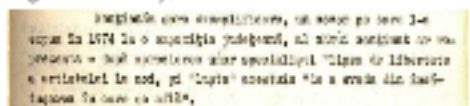
In order to facilitate a better understanding of the artistic environment of that time, it is imperative to consult the scholarly research of the Romanian contemporary art with the social and institutional point of view, regarding the profile of the artist. The selected methodological approach focuses on the investigation of artist files from the National Council for Studying the Security's Archives (CNSAS), alongside the investigation of the available main sources and researches of Romanian contemporary art history. The use of said tools, will aid in the process of identification of various social and cultural patterns, specific of the Romanian experimentalist artist that lived and created in the communist regime.

Ultimately, a separate article, will focus on developing a new method of curatorial practices, exploiting the viewpoint of the communist oppressive apparatus, when addressing networks, craft processes or artists.

Main Research Questions:

Can we consider the artist's files a form of degenerated art history and why?

How can we define an artistic profile through these forms of degenerated art history?



**Excerpt extracted from one of the files, stating that „a work of art consisting of a carpet, which was exhibited in 1974, was meant to represent the lack of freedom and the artist's will to evade the severe limits of the system.”*

References:

- Cîrnești Magda, *Artele plastice în România, 1945-1989. Cu o adăugă 1990-2010*, Polirom, Iași, 2013
Dobne Florin (ed.), *Bona Florin, Bădulescu Theodor, Drăchives Cornelia, Jemna Liviu, Securitatea: Structură, Cadru, Obiective și Metode (1945-1967)*, CNSAS, Editura Enciclopedică, Bucharest, 2006
Dobne Florin (ed.), *Securitatea: Structură, Cadru, Obiective și Metode (1967-1989)*, CNSAS, Editura Enciclopedică, Bucharest, 2006
Pădurea Magda, „Un tânăr artistilor plastici în perioada 1954-1963: între „opozanți” și „disidenți”” in *Studia Publica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 17(3), 269-291.
www.cnsas.ro

The influence exerted by the rotten bourgeois culture on some activities in the realm of art stems from the appearance of some foreign works – from an ideological point of view, these are executed in the style of abstractionist art. Hostile elements seek to minimize the Party's leading role in literature and art, demanding a so-called freedom of creation.
(Dobne et al. vol.1 486, ibid. 683)

Historical background:

Art has always implied an ideological stake, consequently political power has often instrumented the imagery as a propagandistic medium. Magda Cîrnești describes this phenomenon as a “shadow cone” under which the Romanian contemporary artists placed.

Upon the establishment of the communist party doctrine, it was deemed that the only meaningful and useful form of creation was considered to be the so called “official art”. (Cîrnești, 11-13).

Two main categories can be distinguished:

1. The Official Art – supported by the Communist Party and employed as propagandistic material.
11. The Experimental Art – banned, discouraged and seen as degenerated.

Cîrnești also analyzes an interposition between the two. On the one hand, the official art which promoted a form of “ideological surrealism” (tied within interpersonal relations). On the other hand, the artistic experimentation, which generally represented the artistic drive, and was driven from the harsh realities of the daily life. (Cîrnești, 145-146; 148-150).

In Romania, the experimental phenomenon has been gaining momentum since the 1960s. This was also facilitated by a series of artists who adhered to the “modernist manifesto” that Western Europe had practiced extensively since the 1950s. (Cîrnești, 132-136, 155; 169).

Of course, these new directions were contested by “officials”. A relevant example was the dispute over the postmodern phenomenon, which had gotten around the 1960s, also known as the protochronists versus the liturgists (Cîrnești, 155).

This historical gap could be largely attributed to the political and ideological isolation in Romania, respectively to the interventionism of the Romanian Department of State Security (censorship, oppression and intolerance).

Consequently, the experimental art forms and the non-conformist attitude of many Romanian artists were often subjected to thorough investigation by the Secret Services, in an effort to confine freedom of expression and further their own political message.

Brief archive analysis:

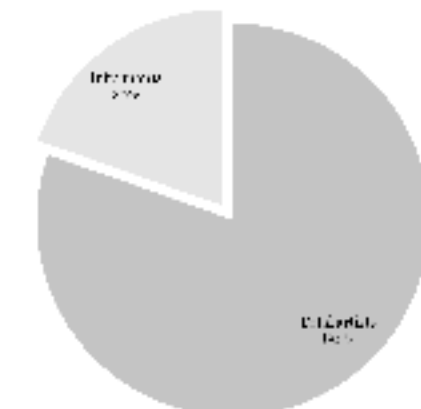
The State Security exerted a major influence on the cultural and artistic life in Romania. Experimental forms of creation were often labeled as deviationist and subversive. (Dobne et al., vol.1 146-151).

Therefore, the systematic ideological and artistic control had to be implemented by making use of an extensive network of informants. These types of artistic creations (and their initiators) were subjects of censorship and tight control. (Dobne et al., vol.1 168-169).

In 1956, the Third Directorate of Security was established in Romania. The 4th Service and its Office being in charge of “discovering the hostile activity (...) of the organs of art culture and education. (Dobne et al., vol.1 105-106). Later transformed into the 5th Art and Culture Service, it had 171 active informants dealing exclusively with issues adjacent to artistic creation. (Dobne vol.2 23).

When considering that in the same year (1956) only 701 active members were officially registered in the Union of Visual Arts in Romania, (Pădurea, 269-291), we can clearly distinguish an unbalanced proportion. That reflects the degrees of control within this particular social blanket.

Taking into account the fact that the main form of control consisted in documenting their individual life, their itinerary, etc., one can argue that these surveillance reports represent an oppressive documentary form of archiving the experimental movement in art.



Methodology:

The resources available in a digital format at CNSAS (see map), allowed for the isolation of a number of relevant case studies, which reflect the degenerate format of art criticism and art history that the State Security had practiced during the communist period.

Using the following map one can trace the Romanian counties which still have classified archives regarding art and culture (marked in light blue). Those marked with dark blue are still under research. Their data is now partially available to the public (on account of its sensitive character).



Main Methodological Tools:

1. Interviewing artists who worked until 1989;
2. Corroborating the interviews with archive research;
3. Identifying the networks mentioned in the archives;
4. Interpreting the reports filled by the National State Security;

Expected outcomes:

Although most files refer to the personal life of Romanian artists, they should also contain a significant number of writings that address the artistic corpus, and its inherent interpretation. The scope is to isolate the characteristics of the so-called “degenerated art”, by establishing equivalence relationships between the features of the artistic object and the interpretation of the communist surveillance system.

The final article will identify several curatorial alternatives that can be implemented in contemporary exhibition practice, regarding the hyper-contextualized political discourse.