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A Theoretical Excursus on the Concept of Political Art in Communism and its Aftermath

MARINA ALINA ASAVEI

The aim of this article is to offer a conceptual clarification of "political art", a label generally applied to a wide diversity of art activities, situations and productions. Moreover, political art is usually used as an umbrella term which accommodates both arts which support the *status quo* and arts which criticize and abhor it. There is great confusion concerning the question of what should be considered "political" in art, as there is still a debate on what *is* political. Two points should be emphasized from the beginning: first, when trying to answer the question of what is political in art, one could argue that art is always political. Second, there is another theory which holds that politics takes place only in political institutions and not in art[1]. In other words and in the name of art's autonomy, art is only art and everything else is everything else.

My claim is that art is not always political and should be considered sometimes as mere entertainment, as the expression of a deep private feeling or emotion (like the aesthetic emotion in front of a sunset). There is art which is neutral to society's political and social problems. As Noël Carroll suggestively argues, "it's potentially politically pernicious to regard everything as political, because it takes the force out of things that clearly are political"[2].

I argue that art is not necessarily political if it contains a message which is overtly political. Moreover, art is political even if it does not convey a direct political message but only indirectly calls our attention to social or political injustices and strives to arouse viewer's awareness of the mechanism of domination, turning him or her in a conscious agent. In this sense, I think that some works of art are political in a more accurate and narrow sense than others which are simply *vulgäre Tendenzkunst* ("vulgar tendentious art" or propaganda) and don't leave the possibility for flexibility *both* in the production *and* reception of the so-called "political art" because their politics, commitments and meanings are imposed from above. Their politics is an enforced politics in which the deliberative stance of the artist/audience is totally disregarded. Political art cannot be simply reduced to the status of a container for political slogans because political art's main function, unlike propaganda art, is to act in a counter-hegemonic manner. Thus, art which is accurately political is that art which opposes the *status quo* of the moment both in communist regimes and in liberal democracies.

In order to understand what is the meaning given commonly to "political art" by those that lived under the communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe I

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[1] Marco MATINIELLO, Jean-Michel LAFLEUR, "'Ethnic Minorities' Cultural and Artistic Practices as Forms of Political Expression: A Review of the Literature and a Theoretical Discussion on Music", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 34, no. 8, November 2008, p. 1195.

[2] Noël CARROLL, interview with Ray Privett and James Kreul in *Senses of Cinema*, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2001/13/carroll/ (accessed 30.10.2011).

have made an experiment. I have asked Romanian[1] citizens: what does "political art" stand for? I have to acknowledge that this question has been addressed to people which are not really *connoisseurs* in art business, in the sense that they don't have a professional interest in art. The (almost) unanimous answer was that political art was the official art of communist regimes, art that depicted happy miners, peasants and, of course, more often, the leader as a national hero. For the next question: "Why is this art political?" most of the answers said that "official" art is political because it served the party or the political power. They added that they did not like that type of art because it was not "true art" but a lie and that they have never seen during communism any art piece that was beautiful or that criticized the regime. Nevertheless, most participants to the artworld make aesthetic judgments that do not necessarily coincide with art theorists' arguments, even if those art *connoisseurs* usually study the premises and arguments people use to justify and classify things and activities as "beautiful", "artistic", "art" and "non-art". I have introduced the examples above in order to illustrate the unidirectional understanding of political art among the non-professional art public from Central and Eastern Europe. They don't find the concept of "political art" a contradiction in terms (as some art critics and aesthetics theorists) because they don't struggle for an art definition; they understand political art as art which is complicitous with the political power.

For the sake of the overall argument, a quick clarification is necessary: "political power" can be understood in the sense defined by Steven Lukes[2] as *power over* (domination) – the key aspect of power and the capacity to make other actors act against their real interests. In this paradigm, power is the capacity to shape the preferences of other actors misleadingly in order to reinforce one's domination. Nevertheless, this is not the only possible or acceptable meaning of the idea of political power[3] even if it is an unavoidable part of it. Political theorists are eager to provide us with understandings of political power which make the analytical distinction between political power and power as domination. For example Peter Morriss published an audacious critique of political power as domination. In his view power is to be understood as *power to* affect outcomes or to achieve specific goals rather than *power over* in the sense of domination. But, on the other hand, many times (even in liberal democracies where political power is largely about collective action) *power to* can lead to domination, something that Morriss seems to totally overlook. How is that possible? Power resources, the resources that allow actors to act together in a "collective action" in order to reach their desired political goals are unequally distributed. Then, "placing

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[1] The intention of this article is to make neither a cross-country comparison regarding East European citizens' understanding of political art, nor a specific case study. The goal is to critically discuss the normative implications of the commonly held view of political art as the official art of the communist regime.

[2] Steven LUKES, *Power: A Radical View*, Palgrave McMillan, London, 2005.

[3] Michel Foucault is, for example, one of the most influential theorists of power. Power is a procedure/technique which individuals can engage in. It is never monopolized by one center but it circulates through a net-like organization. Power is not only negative but it is also productive (not only *power over* but also *power to*): according to Foucault there is a power to fight oppression when one sees it: "The analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the 'agonism' between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence". Michael FOUCAULT, "The Subject and Power", in James D. FAUBION (ed.), *Power*, New York Press, New York, 2000, pp. 298-325.

inequality at the center of the definition of political power is the best way to recognize that *power to* can lead to domination, which is a particular form of inequality"[1].

In Central and Eastern Europe political art was considered to be exclusively official art, produced under the domination of political power of the moment and which was meant only to reinforce that power. In what follows I will argue, contrary to this common opinion, that the official art of totalitarian regimes is politically irrelevant precisely because its forcefully committed stance, while the unofficial art, mainly opposition art, is political art in the accurate sense precisely because of its non-imposed commitment to dissent.

After the fall of communism many "official" art pieces have been burned or destroyed. For a long time after the fall of communism official art of the totalitarian regimes was seen as a "foreign element" in the context of 20th century art. The works of art created under totalitarianism have been hidden in the dark basements of museums; in this way, it was underlined their total exclusion from the world of art. Recently Boris Groys noticed that "the official and unofficial art of the former Soviet Union and other former Socialist states, for example, is largely excluded from the field of institutionally recognized art, usually on moral grounds"[2]. Obviously, the art of totalitarian regimes (both official and unofficial) deserve more attention.

A Unique Style: Socialist Realism as Political Art

The communist ideologues used the formula "political art" in order to denote "Socialist Realism", the official canon of all art adopted in the Soviet Union in 1930. In this view, Socialist Realism has been the *only* political art accepted and acceptable. The ideologues of Socialist Realism did not see the "unofficial" art understood here both as art that was directly confrontational to the regime, and purely aesthetic art as political at all[3]. These art practices of opposition have been considered by the regime as "degenerate" art forms but not as "political"[4]. In the former Soviet Union, party's officials condemned, for example, the writings of the satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko, accused of writing "vulgar parodies on Soviet life". They also censured the poetess Anna Akhmatova, who was charged with writing "empty and *non-political* poetry"[5]. Creating "non-political" art was seen by the communist party as the artist's big fault, as a "devil-may-care attitude" and "ideological indifference". The artist's duty was to disseminate the communist values:

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[1] See more on this issue in Daniel BELAND's article "The Idea of Power and the Role of Ideas", *Political Studies Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, May 2010, pp. 145-154.

[2] Boris GROYS, *Art Power*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008.

[3] For a different view see Caterina PREDA, *Dictators and dictatorships: artistic expressions of the political in Romania and Chile (1970s-1989), No pasó nada…?,* Dissertation.com, Florida, 2009.

[4] Igor Golomstock in his book *Totalitarian Art* supports the opposite idea, namely that because totalitarian leaders assigned to art the role of ideological instrument they also considered as dangerous any other artistic expression. The latter had to be eliminated because it was *political*. Igor GOLOMSTOCK, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China,* Collins Harvill, London, 1991. My argument goes in the opposite direction since my understanding of the political differs from Golomstock's.

[5] Ann DEMAITRE, "The Great Debate on Socialism Realism", *The Modern Language Journal,* vol. 50, no. 5, 1966, p. 265.

> "Artists think that politics is the business of the government and the Central Committee […] We demand that our comrades both as leaders in literary affairs and writers, be guided by the vital force of the Soviet order – its politics"[1].

Maybe this is one of the reasons why, long after the fall of communism, at the level of collective mentality in Central and Eastern European countries, political art is still understood *only* as the official art of the communist regimes.

With few exceptions, it is generally stated/accepted that Socialist Realism has its roots in the Marxist theory of aesthetics. I am going to argue that Socialist Realism in the form of the official canon of art in Soviet Union and its satellites is only *partially* consistent with the logical development of Marxist aesthetic theory. Marx's comments on literature emphasize the interrelationship between art and society and for him art is an expression of social and economic substrate. He also mentions that literature may be a vehicle for a particular ideology and he asks who writes literature, and for whom, and why. Marx also mentioned that the political correctness of a literary work is not equivalent to its artistic merit. In evaluating the artistic merit of a work, factors of style, form and craftsmanship have to be taken into account. This aesthetic evaluation is different from the mere identification with the socio-political content. As some art theorists are quick to point out, there is no evidence in Marx and Engels's writings on art such as *Literature and Art* in which art is considered a purely ideological tool. Marx and Engels apparently separated the artistic merit from ideological purpose and effectiveness. Moreover, they believed that political correctness is desirable but open tendentiousness is to be avoided[2]. Paradoxically, at the same time they also enforce the artists' participation in social and political struggle as a commitment to the militant proletariat: "For some periods of time he has to suspend his private morality and personal explorations of the universe for the sake of advancing collective justice and history itself"[3].

Until the "the Great Literary Debate" which was centered on questions of nature and functions of art within Proletkult as well as shortly afterwards, Marxist aestheticians such as Georgii Plekhanov and Lev Trotsky among others tried to combine the two Marxist views, that of *the aesthete* and of *the agitator*. Plekhanov argued that the "weightiness of content" is the last factor which determines the merit of an artistic work but, on the other hand, he repudiated the claim that the artist has a "duty" to promote particular political objectiveness. In short: even if he privileged art with a narrowly realistic and socially relevant nature, he believed that "art was finally inaccessible to external directive, and the less it was expressed in a logical and didactic manner, the better"[4]. Trotsky managed, to a degree unknown to Plekhanov, to separate the artistic value from art's ideological content, but as a member of the revolutionary government he stated that the state must apply a "political, imperative and intolerant standard to art, that it must censor overtly counter-revolutionary tendencies in art

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[1] *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, September 21, 1946, p. 83. My translation from Russian.

[2] For more on this issue see R. J. MATHEWSON, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, 2nd ed., Stanford Press, California, 1975, pp. 129-131.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 145.

[4] Plekhanov's Marxist aesthetic theory is discussed in Margaret M. BULLITT, "Toward a Marxist Theory of Aesthetics: The Development of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union", *Russian Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, January 1976, pp. 57-62.

and forego a liberal policy of laissez-faire"[1]. In other words the artist has the right to create whatever (s)he likes if his/her work is not against the Revolution. On the one hand he required from the artist a genuine revolutionary commitment, but on the other hand he emphasized his respect for personal freedom of the artist because art was not a vehicle for ideological education. At a first glance this is a paradoxical position but, in fact, it echoes perfectly Marx's ambivalent stance (the autonomous aesthetic component of art versus the artist as an individual wholly committed to the militant proletariat).

After the 1920s "Great Literary Debate", all Marxist considerations about the artistic merit were thrown aside by Socialist Realist art theorists in the 1930s. Lenin is now considered the aesthetician of Socialist Realism and not Plekhanov. Lenin was not interested at all in the "complicate" issue of establishing the nature and functions of art. Instead, he operated a reductionism: art must be immediately intelligible to the masses and unilaterally correct ideologically; all the organizations engaged in cultural activity "must be penetrated with the spirit of the proletarian class struggle"; the political takes priority over the aesthetic and it does not matter if some artistic devices, complexity of form, etc. are sacrificed; art must teach and inspire the masses and must serve the party; it must approach only some aspects of reality, not all of them (this is the so-called *selectivity* principle in Socialist Realism, according to which the party dictates which aspects of reality should be represented in art productions and which ones should not be addressed). In a nutshell, art is reduced to the mere role of a source of ideological information and artists are reduced to a "singleness of aspirations, singleness of ideas, and singleness of aim"[2]. In this new formulation of the Socialist Realist canon, Marx and Engels were not even mentioned.

No wander then, that Socialist Realism was, and sometimes still is regarded as an inferior genre. Those Socialist Realist productions which really respect the canon and whose artistic value is due to the Socialist Realist style reduce indeed art to the level of vulgar propaganda. Those art productions have been considered "good art" by the party leaders only because of their Socialist Realist style. But on the other hand, works of real artistic value cannot be disregarded in spite of their realistic style like Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein's movies and the whole avant-garde of the 1920s, as, according to the social historian Eric Hobsbawm, until 1920 there was no serious official attack on the avant-gardes. The communist party disapproved even of these productions because their appeal to masses was negligible.

The argument used by Socialist Realist theorists was that art had to be "realistic". As a consequence of this credo, all imaginative art has been dismissed. The issue of realism in the official art of totalitarian regimes has been intensively discussed in various studies both in the Eastern bloc and in the Western art critique world. In the first category, the official discourse stressed the artist's obligation to reflect "reality". By "reality" they did not mean "reality as it is", but as it was "supposed" to be. The so-called official style of communist art is the result of avant-garde influences, rather than a result of Realist influences[3]. Socialist Realism is not a type of Realism, because

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[1] Lev TROTSKY, "Literature and Revolution", quoted in Margaret M. BULLITT, "Toward a Marxist…cit.", p. 65.

[2] Karl RADEK, "Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art", in *Problems of Soviet Literature*, vol. 35, 1948, p. 9.

[3] Although there are authors who consider that Socialist Realist canon imposed on art during communist regimes is reminiscent of the 19th century Realism (like Igor Golomstock

"its truth" is ideological, and in most cases reality itself is mystified. Socialist Realism does not depict the common people and the working class as they really are, but as "heroes", "comrades", and "super humans". While Realism was defined as a protest against official painting[1], Socialist Realism was the official style of art in totalitarian regimes. In other words, if reality was impossible to change then the perception of reality had to be altered.

The contemporary reader of communist art, as Alla Efimova remarks, hardly calls to mind any association with aesthetics of beauty[2]. But the rhetoric of Socialist Realism claims that art must not merely instruct, or educate but also "powerfully attract". This statement speaks of an aesthetic intentionality that contradicts the view according to which communist art was not conceived to be "attractive" but to "tell the truth".

Unofficial Art: Two Forms of Opposition Art

Nonetheless, Igor Golomstock is right when he argues that not everything created in the art field under a totalitarian regime could be explained through a single party's monopoly[3]. Not all art and visual productions that have been created during totalitarianism can be defined as "official art". In the case of communist art, "autonomous" productions have been a social and political strategy by which artists both engaged with and differentiated themselves from their contemporary field of cultural politics. "Autonomous" art in a totalitarian political regime means in my approach the art which resisted Realist Socialism's constraints. "Autonomous art" is not used here in the sense in which sometimes it has been used, as "art for art's sake" for example. Unofficial art means not only "autonomous art", or "vanguard art", but also political art, art made politically. Autonomous art is still socially and politically critical. Both hermetic and protest art converged in the refusal of the status quo. There is a "politics of autonomous art" and the underground artists of totalitarian regimes knew how to make politics out of art's autonomy. The fact that art is autonomous does not mean that it is not mixed with politics or that it is *pure* art. Autonomous artworks are not political in the lax sense imposed by the communist propaganda machine, but on the contrary, their political meaning is determined by their autonomy. As Adorno would say, that was not a time for political art "but politics had migrated into autonomous art"[4], because the official committed art was only faithfully reproducing the directives of those in power without any deliberation or agonistic political dynamism compared to the freedom enjoyed by artists in both deliberative and agonistic liberal democracies. The unofficial artworks manifested their politics

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argued), I consider that Socialist Realism is not a version of Realism at all. It is not realistic at all because Social Realist artists reflect what the political ruler decrees reality to be.

[1] After a decade of participation in the official salons, Gustave Courbet opened a one-man exhibition in 1855 to protest against the official painting (at that time represented by academic painters as Ingres, Delacroix, etc.). Courbet called his exhibition *Realism.*

[2] Alla EFIMOVA, "To Touch on the Raw. The Aesthetic Affections of Socialist Realism", *Art Journal*, vol. 56, no. 1, 1997, p. 72.

[3] Igor GOLOMSTOCK, *Totalitarian Art*...cit.

[4] Theodor ADORNO, "Commitment", in Andrew ARTO, Eike GEBHARDT (eds.), *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Continuum, New York, 1982, p. 318.

through various strategies of opposition: from the overtly anti-communist critique to the ways in which they indirectly opposed the official canon of art production, interpretation and distribution.

Two examples are useful so as to understand this variation; one for each category of opposition' political art. The first example is Ion Bârlădeanu's direct opposition. His political collages are examples of overtly anti-communism and express his anti-Ceaușescu stance. His work openly criticizes and mocks the political power: the dictatorial couple, the party's requirements etc. Interestingly enough, Bârlădeanu's art is still confrontational because it makes fun with a lot of cynicism of the main important communist political leaders. His art production is the best example that the philosopher and art historian Boris Groys was (half) wrong about when he stated that any political notion of art created under liberal capitalist democracies is impossible because politics is annihilated by the laws of the art market[1]. He claimed that political art (in the truly[2] sense *political*) is only the unofficial art realized during totalitarian regimes and all the so-called political art produced in a free art market are not truly political because the dominating art discourse identifies art with art market and remains blind to any art that is produced and distributed by any mechanism other than the market. Bârlădeanu's art made public after the fall of communism proves that art can be truly political even in the era of free market, at least in what regards its production. But Groys is only half wrong because even if Bârlădeanu's work has been produced totally outside, or behind the art market and its discourse, it is still the art market and its discourse that disseminated his artistic production.

The second example is that of the Czech artist Miroslav Tichy described by Michael Hoppen as follows:

> "A student at the Academy of Arts in Prague, Tichy left following the communist overthrow of 1948. Unwilling to subordinate to the political system he spent some eight years in prison and psychiatric wards for no reason, other than he was 'different' and considered subversive. Upon his release he became an outsider, occupying his time by obsessively taking photographs of the women of his home town, using homemade cameras constructed from tin cans, children's spectacle lenses, rubber bands, scotch tape and other junk found on the streets"[3].

The curator Roman Buxbaum who "discovered" Tichy mentioned that after the communist takeover in 1948, the rules of the Art Academy were changed completely. Instead of drawing women models, the students were forced to draw workers in overalls. Tichy refused to draw them. Tichy's *opposition* is not as straightforward as Bârlădeanu's. Some art critics don't find his art political at all even if nobody denies that he was a political dissident since he was persecuted for more than twenty years by the communist police, hospitalized by force in mental institutions and treated as

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[1] Boris GROYS, *Art Power*…cit., pp. 5-7.

[2] Groys uses the term "truly political art", while I'm using "accurate political art". He wants to argue for the power of art outside the art market, while my intention is to conceptually clarify what it means for art to be political.

[3] "Unique Photographs previously Unseen in the UK at Michael Hoppen Gallery", in http://www.artdaily.com/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=37704&int_modo=1; http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/blogon/art_news/miroslav_tichy_at_michael_hoppen_gallery (accessed 12.10 2011).

an ideology freak and adversary. I consider his art as truly political, in spite of these considerations. He did not overtly criticize the regime through his photographs and paintings with naked or semi-naked women, even if he criticized the regime very harshly by refusing the official canon and preferring the mental institution instead of an artistic carrier. His resistance resides in his willingness to live and create an art which is free of any ideological constraints. The women in bathing suits or in negligees are not what Tichy's art is all about. His art is motivated by his visceral and painful struggle to live and to "see" freely and without distortion the two irreconcilable worlds: that imposed from above and that which he saw naturally, through the lens of his improvised camera. His photographs are documents of resistance in the sense that they capture the normality of human life with its romanticism, eroticism and innocence under the pressure of an abnormal political struggle which controlled every aspect of human life: condemned nudity, the length of women dresses was a matter of state regulation, sexuality was de-eroticized being reduced to reproduction which was itself supervised by the state, etc. All visual art production represented only a half-naked worker or peasant, always a male figure, building socialism as a proper New Man. Tichy's art does exactly the opposite: it re-eroticizes and re-appropriates the feminine body. He refused to see it through the lens of "motherhood" and he refuses to see it as a "revolutionary comrade".

All in all, these unofficial productions are not the result of a forced committed stance. Their dedication to a logic of opposition is not imposed and it is not controlled from above. In this sense they are accurately political art works and my claim is that only opposition art is particularly politically relevant. The official art of totalitarian regimes is politically irrelevant in spite of its political character emphasized by ideologues and precisely because of its compellingly committed stance. This can be applied to art which wants to be political in any society not only in totalitarian societies but also in liberal democracies. Namely that, the noisier and pressing the demands, the more open the possibility of affecting political change disintegrates. Commitment in itself in the case of opposition art remains politically polyvalent, while propaganda of the official art has no flexibility. The official art's imposed committed stance leaves no room for deliberative thinking, for debate and no doubt for *what the work may say*.

Obviously, the politics involved in the official Socialist Realist art (or in Benetton's art posters) is not the same with the politics of Botero's *Abu Ghraib* paintings. In other words, Botero's art *is political in a radical different sense* than Vera Ignatyevna Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* is. I would go even further to claim that Botero's art is an *accurately political art* because it is an open-ended art in terms of its meaning and significance. The viewer/spectator has the liberty to see whatever he/she desires to see in the *Abu Ghraib* paintings: the cartoonist style of human misery, the relationship between victims and perpetrators, the cruelty of human nature, and so on. Even if Botero intended to say something more specific, like to express his opposition regarding the Iraqi war, the open-endedness of his art pieces does not chain it down to the status of a mere container of a political message. Almost any political artist asks "What do I want with my art?" or "Where do I stand?", because this is part of doing art politically: to decide in favor of something without trying to impose on the others your own decision[1]. Even if, as a political artist, you don't try to impose your politics

[1] This couldn't be argued about Vera Mukhina's *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, which does exactly the opposite: it imposes to the viewer what he or she has to understand.

on others, this does not mean that you are not taking sides. Even if you decide to withdraw from the artworld this is still a political gesture and it means that you still take sides.

Socialist Realism, the unique concept imposed on the cultures of the Eastern European bloc, was not directly integrated in the local art-worlds although it generated many works of compliance solicited by political propaganda, in an attempt to create its own mythology. Most of these cultures rejected it when it became a jeopardizing factor in the genesis of certain original phenomena; these are relevant precisely as phenomena of opposition. The role of the so-called "underground", "alternative", or "apartment-art"[1] cannot be disregarded. These art productions, truly political art pieces, accompanied official art of that time even if they went underground and have never been exhibited in mainstream art galleries, they circulated among only small circles of friends, and could not be sold or bought etc.

It is worth mentioning that totalitarian art theorists manifested an overt disapproval for photography. Many unofficial artists used photography as a tool of making art politically in order to oppose the "normal" reality to "reality as it is supposed to be". For example, the Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu, an unofficial artist of Ceaușescu's era used to mix enlarged photographs with painting. The officials did not accept this art as he states:

> "It was a general conception according to which the medium of painting is very different from the medium of photography… In painting the artist has a role, has a mission, because he transforms reality. Reality is not a 'regular' one because art has a high scope in intervening in reality. In their interpretation, reality becomes 'more real'. In painting the artist strives to find his own territory. In the case of photography the author is disintegrated or in other words the photography explodes the author. In a communist reading the photography which is mixed with painting is 'ideologically dangerous' because a document (the photography) is distorted by the intervention of the hand of the artist"[2].

Ion Grigorescu's political art rejected the canon of "realism" as imposed from above and, instead of it he produced works of "neo-documentary realism". His works are courageous documentations of people's way of life under communist rule, in which "reality" is not disguised or mystified but it is documented as brutal as it was. The deviation from the canon is a political gesture. Ion Grigorescu himself defined his style as "Realism which does not impose to the real a style"[3].

Another example of opposition art under communism is Corneliu Baba's sculpture entitled *The Miner.* Baba's miner was initially sculpted in white stone, his eyes being empty like in Greek statues. *Comitetul de Îndrumare* ("The Commission of Guidance"), a communist committee which decided whether an artwork was or was not "clear enough", considered Baba's miner "too white" and "too sleepy". That was not a politically correct work of art. They said that this inappropriateness with the real miner cannot be permitted and intervened in the sculpture perforating its eyes with

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[1] "Apartment art" is an underground art movement which is an anti-mass-consumer manifestation of art practice. The artists transform their apartments and homes into private galleries in which they exhibit their art. The latter remains totally unnoticed to the official artworld.

[2] My interview with Ion Grigorescu, Bucharest, 14 April 2007.

[3] See Ion GRIGORESCU, "Artistul Realist", *Arta*, no. 12, 1973, p. 22.

a drill and painting the miner in black. According to one of Baba's colleagues, the painter Dan Hatmanu, the modifications were made without asking Baba whether he accepted these changes in his work. The need to be politically correct dominated art, conversation, both public and private, and behaviour. If you complained about being hungry then you became a state enemy. As Ion Grigorescu suggests artists during communism:

> "Had to become their own secret police… and to depict the heroes and the dreams of communism… a painter, one of my colleagues, painted a huge piece of meat and a knife. He wanted to sell this painting in a special shop called *consignație*[1], but in order to be sold every painting had to receive at that time, back in the 70's, a signature from an official responsible with art. This painting did not receive an approval to be sold because it could have been interpreted as a need for food, as a lack of meat in Romanians' alimentation"[2].

The official canon of art did not prohibit the freedom of *form* in art making. The artists were given the greatest possible freedom to choose whatever form they wanted for expressing their views, from New Expressionism to Op art. But the freedom was only that of form as long as they did not express through that form politically objectionable opinions. As far as we accept Shusterman's argument according to which "aesthetic censorship" could be more beneficial than harmful to art we could argue that generally, a work of art is aesthetically objectionable only if it is aesthetically bad[3]. In communist regimes the situation is different: a work of art can be objectionable in spite of its aesthetic qualities. The only critical standard for evaluating any artwork was wholly based upon ideological criteria. As Victor Terras points out, "the official canon narrows the scope of art, an obvious loss without any apparent compensation"[4].

Thus, art is a means to many ends and reducing it to the status of only conveying an imposed political slogan makes it lose its artistic quality and politically irrelevant. Nobody really takes it seriously. This does not mean that official art has been always aesthetically bad. In order to be considered "good", "relevant" or "appealing" a piece of art should disclose to its public much more than craftsmanship.

In totalitarianism, art which is accurately political does not simply reflect the realities of the moment. The strategies that the political artist chooses to adopt construct a particular intervention into the political struggle. It is above all a critical gesture as opposed to merely acquiescent commentary. Political art production does not stop with the fall of totalitarian regimes. Neither did art which is politically and socially concerned and involved appear in the 20th century's totalitarianisms; actually it existed long time before these political regimes and it did not stop after their fall either.

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[1] *Consignația* is a kind of shop in which Romanians used to bring old and used objects or hand made products in order to be sold usually for little money.

[2] My interview with Ion Grigorescu, Bucharest, 14 April 2007.

[3] Richard SHUSTEMAN, "Aesthetic Censorship: Censoring Art for Art's Sake", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 43, no. 2, 1984, pp. 171-180.

[4] Victor TERRAS, "Phenomenological Observations on the Aesthetic of Socialist Realism", *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1979, p. 448.

Political Art after Communism (in Liberal Democracies)

After the collapse of Soviet communism followed the process of integration of the Eastern bloc countries into the world market and their transition to liberal democracy. This process brought with it some familiar problems as one of the characters from Kusturica's movie *Underground* (1995) would say about capitalism economy – "a catastrophe!". To various degrees this process of adhesion of CEE countries to Western capitalism has been painful. In the movie *Two or Three things about Activism* (2008) many people complain about the lack of social and welfare securities:

> "We have now a lot of consumer goods available on the market, we have freedom of speech but we don't have money to buy those goods and we have no available and secure jobs. We are living under very stressful conditions, as never before – what happens if I lose my job tomorrow and the landlord will kick me out?" [1].

In the course of transition from communism to democracy, some countries succeeded in adopting the political system of liberal democracy while others implemented patterns of democracy which are not fully liberal[2]. The answer from the West came very promptly. In a nutshell, the impression was that these people from the former bloc were not ready yet for self-determination:

> "The belief was that the Soviet system had been a prison of beliefs, of nations, of free thought and association, of enterprise. It had: but the prisoners had in many cases known nothing else but prison life. Like old trusties, many like it, or at least found it impossible to adapt to the loss of confinement"[3].

Many artistic voices in the East started to condemn the hegemony of capitalism in spite of Fukuyama's suggestion that the latter was the only socio-economic system that "worked".

Political art from both communist regimes and liberal democracy is similar, but this does not mean that relevant differences cannot be highlighted. While the political art of communist regimes remained mainly outside the official art institutions being mostly an apartment-art type, in liberal democracies critical-political art tends to be institutionalized. A very interesting phenomenon, known as the "institutionalization of dissent", started in the 80's: the political, opposition art is gentrified by the mainstream culture and by its institutions. What at the beginning was intended to be "critical" suddenly becomes a pretended "mainstream". This is not such a big surprise since the "enemy" looks familiar, being the hand that feeds the contemporary opposition artists. As Lucy Lippard honestly puts it,

> "we were picketing the people we drank with and lived off. We were making art in a buyer's market but not a consumer's market. We were full of 'mixed

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[1] From the counter-documentary *Two or Three things about Activism*. Directed by Joanne RICHARDSON, Cluj-Napoca Romania, A D Media Production, 2008.

[2] Michael McFAUL, "Lessons from Russia's Protracted Transition from Communist Rule", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 114, no. 1, 1999, p. 103.

[3] John LLOYD, "Transition in East", *Financial Times*, December 24, 1994, p. 4.

feelings', because we wanted to be considered workers as everyone else and at the same time we were not happy when we saw our products being treated like everyone else's, because deep down we know as artists we are special"[1].

But in spite of this tendency, there is still room for true dissent even if these "gifts of resistance" are not always visible because of their marginality. The art theorist Gregory Sholette appropriately describes the emergence of these aesthetics of resistance in the form of "militant theatre, counterfeit corporations, interventionist research portals, knitting networks, pie throwers, ninjas, snake, charmers, river rafters, amateur scientists"[2].

Political art of liberal democratic regimes continues to co-exist with the art of a globalized mainstream artworld which is fully developed providing distribution systems which integrate artists into the global market. But if an established distribution system rejects what it considers to be inconvenient art pieces both on political and aesthetic grounds, there will always be possible to organize a *Salon des Refusés* more or less fully developed in providing distribution. In other words, artists can choose various distribution systems, not necessarily the gallery or the art magazine, which serve them best or constrain them least. Artists who are interested in the political effectiveness of their work would be rather content that their public is not the typical public of contemporary art galleries which has only a professional interest in art[3]. In liberal democracies, political art does not cease to be oppositional and critical. The art which is called "political" but only reaffirms the dominating art market or the dominating *power over* something is political only in a lax and too general sense. It is difficult to criticize the art market while you are a proeminent part of it. On the other hand, the separation between art market and opposition art is not always a radical one because artists sought to express "varying degrees of opposition and autonomy toward the marketplace"[4]

Following this line of thought, it is worth mentioning Boris Groys' considerations. The Russian author states in *Art Power,* that Islamist videos and posters functioning in the context of the international anti-globalist movement are political creations made outside the dominating art market, and which are overlooked by the institutions of the art market because this art is not a commodity[5]. But I don't think that this is enough for art to be truly political. The non-commodity status of the art piece is, to some degree, a condition for art to be accurately political but, on the other hand, this is not a general rule. In some contexts even the commodified art pieces preserve the political, oppositional value. For instance, Rap music which deals with problems of discrimination, poverty and violence may remain in some contexts a powerful tool for

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[1] Lucy LIPPARD, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power", in Sally EVERETT (ed.), *Art Theory and Criticism*, McFarland Pub., Jefferson NC, 1983, p. 191.

[2] Gregory SHOLETTE, *Dark Matter*: *Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Pluto Press, London, 2011, p. 188.

[3] According to Howard Becker, "70% of the visitors to a typical contemporary art gallery have a professional interest in art". Howard BECKER, *Art Worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1982, p. 106.

[4] Gregory SHOLETTE, *Dark Matter*…cit, p. 44.

[5] Boris GROYS, *Art Power*…cit, p. 9.

Afro-Americans to express their anxiety and difference even though sometimes it is mass commercialized through MTV and other channels of consumerism[1].

Conclusions

In conclusion, artworks which are accurately political share similar features both in totalitarian and in liberal democratic regimes: opposition, critique, appraisal, giving a voice to the oppressed and neglected. Contemporary political artists, through their artistic practices, strive to question the capitalist hegemony exactly as the oppositional artists of totalitarian regimes have questioned the Nazi and Communist authority in spite of so many voices claiming that art had lost its critical power after the fall of totalitarianism, because any form of critique is automatically neutralized by the capitalist order. Democratic politics is not based only on right-left wing decisions taken rationally after public deliberation but it is based on pluralistic antagonisms rather than on rational consensus[2]. For some political thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, or Giorgio Agamben, democratic politics has to be understood in its antagonistic dimension if it is to be understood at all. But what does it mean an antagonistic democratic politics? Chantal Mouffe is eager to explain it:

> "What is at stake in what I call 'antagonistic'/'agonistic' struggle, which I see as the core of a vibrant democracy, is the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured. It is a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally. An agonistic conception of democracy acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic politico-economic articulations which determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment"[3].

This antagonistic understanding of democratic societies clearly rejects the possibility of any rational consensus. In the political space which for Habermas is a 'public sphere' there is possible no deliberation aiming at a rational consensus. All we have there instead is a plurality of antagonisms. For Mouffe, the "rational consensus", seen as a regulative idea, is no more than a *conceptual impossibility*. In real politics people don't have time for debates in the public space in order to gain a universal consensus. Their antagonistic conflicts remain vividly vibrant under the appearance of a liberal "rational consensus". What lies behind this empty form are in fact exactly these antagonistic conflicts. In other words, even if one formally accepts

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[1] For more details about the way in which Rap groups accept to soften their message for reaching a global audience as an effect of commercialization, remaining at the same time opposition artists, see T. ROSE, *Black Noise. Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 1994.

[2] For the "deliberative" democracy model see for example Amy GUTMANN, Dennis THOMSON, *Democracy and Disagreement*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London, 1996; John RAWLS, "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus", *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1987, pp. 1-25. For the "antagonistic/agonistic" model of democracy see Chantal MOUFFE, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces", *Art and Research*, vol. 1, no. 2, Summer 2007, p. 7.

[3] Chantal MOUFFE, "Artistic Activism…cit.", p. 7.

and respects the "tyranny of majority" and its so-called laws based on a "rational and consensual" basis, still this "consensus" cannot eradicate one's true beliefs. One's antagonistic feelings cannot be simply removed or replaced by a "harmonious and rational consensus", even if one formally adheres to the latter. For the moment it is enough to point out the unveiling power of political/critical art which tends to make visible what the dominant consensus tends to obliterate and finally eradicate. Jacques Rancière has introduced the distinction between politics (as a space of *dissensus*) and the police (as a space of consensus) showing that politics has to do with making visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure[1].

Both totalitarianism and liberal democracy struggled to hide their incapacity to fulfill individuals' basic needs like food and shelter, and this concealment is ideologically motivated by the fact that there is no place for hunger in the best socio-economic system that works. But hunger is made visible in art both in communism, a huge piece of pork meat depicted on canvas was refused to be sold in the art shops of that time as Grigorescu recalled, and in liberal democracies, a plate was painted over with the message: "A poor man has no friends – HUNGER" and exhibited at the Istanbul biennale of Contemporary Art (September 2011) without provoking too much appreciation. Economic growth is consensually desired and acclaimed as a very advantageous situation for all the members of society but behind this hegemonic consensus there are/critical art discourses such as the recent movies *Lilja 4-ever* (Lukas Moodysson, 2002), *Mandragora* (1997), and *Not Angels, but Angels* (1994) (both directed by Wiktor Grodecki), which critically and sarcastically explore how money and consumer goods dominate society after the fall of communism leading meanwhile to the growth of prostitution and human decadence. Art can greatly contribute at illustrating the antagonistic dimension of the political in liberal democracies. Artistic practices still play a critical role in society. The aesthetic strategies of counter-cultures could question the dominant hegemony. Whether this critique is effective or not is another discussion.

[1] Jacques RANCIÈRE, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London, New York, 2010.