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## THE THIRD NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE UNION OF PLASTIC ARTISTS

Summary: In recent years, Rumanian plastic arts have become markedly diversified and enriched in content and form. Breaking loose from the grip of socialist realism, the plastic arts are today in a stage of intense search. The increased contact of plastic artists with the most varied arts of the West, as well as with their own cultural heritage -- forbidden during the period of socialist realism -- brings a many-sided influence to bear upon them. The Party leadership would like to continue to guide the plastic arts, this time using the formula "socialist humanism." The insistence with which the official critics urge artists to concern themselves increasingly with historical and patriotic topics generates mistrust, especially among the younger artists. The recent Conference of Plastic Artists, at which Nicolae Ceausescu spoke, was highly disappointing. The Secretary General of the RCP repeated a number of "aesthetic" ideas which one would have thought had long ago been removed from the arsenal of the policy that guides artistic life.

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### Introduction

The Third National Conference of the Union of Plastic Artists took place in Bucharest on 17-19 April 1968. The Second Conference had taken place in May 1963. The proceedings of the two conferences were strikingly similar. In May 1963, just before the conference, a national exhibition of plastic arts was put on to mark the occasion, and was visited by Party leaders. Taking advantage of this event, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej laid down a number of

"guide-lines" for the development of the plastic arts in Rumania. Later on, Emil Bodnaras conveyed a message from the Central Committee to the artists attending the conference. The Second National Conference ended with the sending of a telegram to the Party leadership in which the plastic artists of Rumania assured the Party rulers of their boundless devotion.

The Third Conference was conducted in a similar manner. On 15 April 1968, Party leaders headed by Nicolae Ceausescu visited the 1963-1968 retrospective exhibition of painting and sculpture. On this occasion, Ceausescu set down a number of "guide-lines" for plastic artists, with a view to improving their activity. On the last day of the conference, Ceausescu made a long speech in which he surveyed the state of Rumanian plastic arts, expressing dogmatic views about the plastic arts all over the world. The conference again ended with the sending of a telegram to the Party, restating the loyalty of the artists. The telegram ended with the following words: "We assure the Central Committee of the Rumanian Communist Party and you, personally, dear comrade Nicolae Ceausescu, of our willingness to dedicate all our talent, all our creative power, to the lofty program of constructing socialist Rumania, to the prosperity of the culture, the arts and the spirituality of our nation" (Scaptea [Iasi], 20 April 1968).

If the formal arrangements for conducting the conferences were strikingly similar, the same is true of the problems discussed. The official conference materials, as well as Nicolae Ceausescu's speech, are pervaded by a disquieting dogmatism. The object of the National Conference of the Union of Plastic Artists (UPA) was to survey the activity of the Union over the last five years and to elect a new leading committee. It also made some changes in the Statutes of the Union. The conference elected the leading committee, consisting of 35 members, by secret ballot. In its first session, the new leading committee elected the Bureau of the Union. The former chairman, Ion Sales, was "promoted" to the position of honorary chairman, and replaced as chairman by Bradut Cevalas, who had held top positions in the union along with Vida Ghese, Ovidiu Maites and Ion Frussetti as vice chairman, and Virgil Almasan, Marcel Chiriac, and Patricia Mateescu as secretaries.

These elections do not represent a step forward, when it is borne in mind that most of the artists elected had also been members of the leading bodies of the union in the past.

Despite these hardly encouraging events, a far-reaching and renovating process is going on in the artistic life of Rumania,

where the younger generation is struggling to find its own way, steering clear, as much as possible, of IPR agencies. In the following section, we shall describe below the main characteristics of the Russian plastic arts, with a view to emphasizing the differences between Russian artists and the official bodies.

### The Plastic Arts in Russia

In Russia, the plastic arts are experiencing a revival, coinciding with the resumption of contacts with the West and with the reconsideration of the cultural heritage of the past. After the dark era of socialist realism, which was particularly harmful to Russian culture and art, the plastic artists were granted first tacit and subsequently specific permission by the Party leadership to employ artistic styles other than those of socialist realism. The invitation issued by Nicolas Cozzescu in May 1963 to experiment with a wide variety of styles acted as a strong impetus to diversification on the younger artists. The exhibitions that took place in recent years were marked by the appearance of abstract, non-figurative art in Russia. After a long period of artistic frustration and total isolation from the universal artistic mainstream, it was quite natural that the plastic artists should rediscover styles and means of tackling the themes which had enjoyed a considerable success in the West and in the Russia of yore. A genuine explosion of abstract, non-figurative art broke out in Russia. The younger generation of artists, together with many older ones, are abandoning figurative, thematic art, based on a definite social and political message, in the plastic arts. In this particular connection, the works of the painter Tuzluev, who died under Communist rule without having been able to exhibit, and even more the modern sculptures of Brinzeoi, who opened up a new era in 20th Century art, have given an unprecedented impetus to the younger generation. They took courage and began to bring increasing pressure to bear upon the Union of Plastic Artists and, especially, upon the State Committee for Art and Culture, the state body that guides artistic life in Russia. Art critics are unable, in the face of this outbreak among the younger generation, to explain this movement. As they follow the road to new, as yet unexplored areas, the younger artists are impeded by a narrow-minded administrative and organizational system, which may have suited the era of "socialist realism," but is entirely out of keeping with the new era.

The younger artists rebelled against the ECP's closed administrative and organizational system of guiding the arts. Their inspiration was the academician George Oprescu, one of the most prominent art critics and historians of the country, and a man enjoying considerable international prestige.

The rebellion found expression in a number of articles published by the daily Scantia Tineretului in January 1967. In its regular "Friend and Cow" column this newspaper conducted several objective inquiries, which for the first time revealed the faulty system of artistic organization under Communist rule in Rumania. These inquiries demonstrated that the arts had been mis-led by both Party and state, since in Rumania, the state is the only customer for works of art. Scantia Tineretului stated in its issue of 19 January 1967, that in 1966 the state purchasing board had examined 40,000 works of art, of which 3,000 were finally purchased. This resulted in the loss of the 37,000 works which were not bought, the inquiry concluded. Of the 500 members of the UPM who live in Bucharest, OVER 100 did not sell a single work in 1966. In spite of this, the state continued to pay salaries and bonuses under various forms to artists who produced no works at all. A ten-member board was appointed to purchase those 3,000 objects; and as the findings of the inquiry showed, a handful of men cannot possibly regulate the development of the plastic arts for the entire country.

In this connection, George Oprescu stated in an interview published by Scantia Tineretului (28 January 1967), that this board was not impartial and that it acted on the basis of entirely unprincipled considerations. The conclusions to which the younger generation of artists came, as expressed in the columns of Scantia Tineretului, was that works of art be sold directly to connoisseurs; that individual exhibitions should be organized; that the system of having artistic life directed by a limited board be done away with; that the rates set by the State Committee for Culture and Art be revised, since they were not realistic and particularly favored the older generation of artists, who made their names by producing works of socialist realism. As an example of the rates, Scantia Tineretului gives the following: "Between 1,000 and 40,000 lei are paid for a painting up to three meters in size. Paintings over three meters are considered special orders, and there is no price ceiling. In conclusion, the inquiry emphasized the failure of socialist realism, since thousands of works of art lie unseen in the store-rooms of the State Committee for Culture and Art.

The campaign initiated by Scantia Tineretului was eagerly taken up by other Rumanian publications. An increasing number of young artists elaborated on the conclusions of this inquiry; they also tackled theoretical problems dealing with freedom of creation, and urged the Party to stop interfering in artistic creation. The young plastic artists attacked unqualified art critics who were in the habit of rejecting a priori any work of art that did not fit into a pre-established pattern.

The eagerness of the regime to increase its prestige all over the world, was a boon to these artists. For propaganda purposes, the regime agreed to let a number of artists participate in large exhibitions in Venice, Paris, Sao Paulo, Milan, London, etc. Non-figurative, abstract works predominated, and their authors enjoyed a certain amount of success. Those who were awarded prizes at these international exhibitions repeatedly defended and promoted their art, despite the criticisms and adverse comments of official Party aesthetes. The success these artists enjoyed at such international exhibitions, enabled them to undermine the prestige of the official critics. The young artists (such as Virgil Almasanu, Ion Gheorghiu, G. Filibete, Ion Bitan, Georgeta Napreas, Elena Vasiliu-Chintila, Benedict Ciasescu, S. Apostol, Victor Buzau and G. Iliescu-Galinesti) no longer heed the Union of Plastic Artists, and call for a purge of the artistic atmosphere and the creation of a climate conducive to artistic creation, where each personality can express himself without being hampered by dogmas and creative "methods."

A considerable number of artists in Bucharest and the provinces emphasized the necessity of establishing a climate favorable to the development of a normal artistic life. In an interview published in the last weekly Gronia (11 April 1948), the painter Ion Seago said that by a healthy climate he meant professional honesty, which should be the critic's watchword. In the April 18 issue of the weekly Gazeta Literara, the painter Octavian Barboas said that a climate favorable to work did not exist, and that was the reason for the incessant talk about the creation of such a climate. Barboas had characterized the artistic atmosphere as follows in the 11 April 1948 issue of Gazeta Literara: "haven't you noticed how clearly, in our speeches at the recent section plenary sessions prior to the national conference and at the yearly plenary sessions, we set forth what is wrong in our artistic life, what we should do to put things straight, what splendid solutions we suggest, what admirable resolutions we pass so enthusiastically? However, when the year is over, we discover that we are in the same fix as before.... Did you never wonder why, if we are so perfectly aware of the type of art we need, we never start to create it, or rather end by creating it, after all?" These words express the dissatisfaction of the young artists at Party interference in creative activities.

The national conference of plastic artists was conducted in this atmosphere.

### Preparations for the Conference

Acting on a "suggestion" by Party leaders, and in order to emphasize how "democratic" the preparations for this conference were, the UFR Bureau published a programmatic document in the weekly Contemporain (22 March 1968). The object of this document was to discuss "the main problems of current artistic creation, the role of art in socialist society, the responsibility of the artist as an important factor in Rumanian culture." The document, pervaded by a marked dogmatism, laid down several rules for plastic artists regarding the subjects they should tackle. It deplored "the fact that creative exercises in which the effort to communicate is not infused with genuine artistic thinking." The Bureau of the UFR called on Rumanian artists to return to the old creative tenets of socialist realism, re-characterizing it this time "socialist Rumanism," which was said to unite socialist content with national style. The UFR leaders invited the artists to deal with the themes of socialist construction in a language easily understandable by the masses, and to give up borrowing forms and manners alien to "the specific national features."

No doubt this document affected the young artists like a cold shower. They had hoped that this conference would mark the beginning of a new era in the artistic life of the country. That the document was highly unpopular is testified to by the fact that the most prominent artistic figures have ignored it.

The press campaign, staged according to the customary rules of Communist propaganda, destroyed any hope of free and constructive debate. The central and local press vied with each other in publishing the hullest and most laudatory comments on this document. No article contained a single idea contradicting the views advocated by the UFR document. But numerous artists belonging to the old generation, who had been accustomed to having their paintings paid for by the meter, attacked the young artists who had rebelled against "socialist realism." Thus, in an article published by the weekly Cronica (6 April 1968), Val Gheorghiu said: "The exhibitions of recent years have presented viewers and critics with a number of intricate situations. More often than not the artists, especially the younger ones, left the viewers extremely puzzled." Ion Jucea put it even more clearly in the April 13 issue of the weekly Evening: "Men of good faith are not abstractionists. Abstractionists are those who have turned into artists overnight."

Saapta Literara (April 11), Scritoria Pinerobului, (April 16), and Scritoria (April 18), all devoted whole pages to articles which tried to persuade the plastic artists to draw their inspiration

from the past and present history of the people. In order to "orient" artistic activity, these publications made a number of recommendations, citing works of art dedicated to historical figures and subjects, such as Stephen the Great, Michael the Brave, Mircea the Old, the Givvits heroes of the Romanian Railroads, and the struggle of youth for peace. In Scantala (April 10) the painter Sabiu Balasa had the following to say on this topic: "The historical composition on which I am working suits me perfectly. I am honored by this order, since I hope the painting will be one of my best works. Great art is essentially figurative. You may take this for a personal opinion, but I doubt whether non-figurative art can have the same emotional hold as can figurative art." (Sabiu Balasa is painting Maria, one of the heroes of a peasant uprising).

The quotations above indicate the basis on which preparations for the conference were made. To this must be added the recent visit made by Nicolae Ceausescu to Tulcea and Constanta counties. The Party Secretary General was accompanied by a group of artists to whom he wished to show "the grand achievements of socialist construction," against the light-opera background past which the suits of official care was sweeping.

### The Conference

After these preparations the younger artists no longer expected any surprises to turn up at the Conference. The sculptor Ovidiu Mauter, secretary of the UFA, delivered the Union leaders' report which contained some favorable appraisals of the positive "contribution" made by younger artists in recent years. On the other hand, it emphasized the past contribution of the creators of Romanian art and culture -- the popular painters of the Voronet monastery and the Romanian school of painting and sculpture (Grigorescu, Luca, and Brucusa). The report called on the artists to continue "organically" the lefty traditions of national and universal art with the "spiritual values representative of the socialist era." It also called for "bold works," but warned the artists that they should reflect "present-day life in this country," and that "freedom of creation should be understood as a rousing echo of the demands of society." The speaker also re-assessed the main theses in the programmatic document referred to above, adding a few facts regarding the elaboration of a new pension system for artists and a new framework for the organization of the Union of Plastic Artists.

Nicolae Ceausescu's speech, delivered on the last day, was the pre-staged climax of the conference. Ceausescu reiterated a number of the theses he had laid down as far back as 1969, when he

said, "The Party and state encourage the free development of a wide variety of artistic creativity, of ample and laborious artistic research and experiment in order to achieve constant improvement in craftsmanship, of the means of expression, of a broad variety of styles and creative techniques, which can enrich and continually add to the palette of our contemporary art." The Secretary General of the PCP did have to admit that "art cannot be locked up in dogmas and established clichés, its evolution cannot be halted at a given stage."

Following the happy example of another great art critic, Nikita Khrushchev, the Secretary General of the PCP gave his opinions on the arts in Rumania and all over the world. Ceausescu stated that a number of artists had estranged themselves from reality and that their works were poor, because they were devoid of content and had no social, human message. He emphasized that this tendency was manifest in the Rumanian plastic movement. Capitalism was to blame for this "since it tries to isolate the artists from the main recipient of their creation -- the viewers at large, the people." Using a catalogue of problems of the arts reminiscent of the Soviet art critic Kuznetsov, Ceausescu specifically stated that "the common factor in socialist art is the Marxist-Leninist philosophical outlook," and that art has been given the task "of enlightening the mind and thoughts of the popular masses." Referring to the tasks with which the artists are faced, the Secretary General stated: "It goes without saying that creative freedom, which is guaranteed in our society, does not mean indifference on the part of the press, of the art critics, of the unions, to the orientation of one or another artistic genre, to the content of works of art" (Manufacture, 20 April 1968). Ceausescu ended by making an appeal to the Communist activists in this field, who must be in the first line of creative artists.

After this dogmatic speech, the new chairman of ..... the Union of Plastic Artists took the floor "to thank the Secretary General of the CC of the PCP, in the name of the plastic artists, for his speech, from which artists can draw many lessons, and for the permanent concern of the Party and government in the development of Rumanian culture and arts." (Scantala Tinctorului, 20 April 1968.)

There is no doubt that the conference of plastic artists represented an offensive launched by dogmatic forces against the younger generation of artists, who have discovered new means of artistic expression and are no longer willing to accept the clichés turned out by the ideological board of the CC of the PCP. The Third Conference of Plastic Artists may bring pressure to bear upon these artists, but socialist realism can never return. Young artists have more contacts with the West than in the past and it would be hardly possible to isolate them from the universal artistic movement.