

Visual Marks of Gender in the Art of Ana Lupaş

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Abstract: *The topic of this research revolves around certain sculptures produced by Ana Lupaş in the 80s and 90s and never analyzed from a gender perspective. The way in which the feminine and the masculine presence in a socialist society are stylized through visual abstraction is treated in detail, on specific examples. Together with the titles of the works, that convey a subtle message, the reasoning behind some visual solutions shall be debated from a historical, political, but also sociological point of view. The final purpose would be to give a better understanding of how this artist was able to identify social gender relations at the time of her creations.*

Key-words: *stylization; abstraction; femininity; masculinity; soft power; undermining.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Context of the Research

A gendered perspective upon the history of art is not something typically thought of in the context of Eastern Europe. Gender, understood here as the duality of 2 biological and then social identities of a female and a male figure, has been the subject of many artistic creations, be it in a subsidiary or direct way. Marks of gender can be found in various forms by: displaying accepted roles in society; representing the universal human body, compared to femininity and masculinity; showing details of the body in an unconventional way, as a means of subverting gender norms.

This research is set on a specific geographical location, that of 1960s-1989 Romania and time frame, that of transforming the political ruling system from a People's Republic into a Socialist one. As the political shifts of power occurred, so did the art practices of the female artist from Cluj county, Ana Lupaş. The People's Republic was officially instating a socialist perspective upon governing, coming directly from the examples of the USSR. However, 1965 is the year that the constitution changed, favoring a rather nationalist approach to socialism, having yet another shift of power in the 80s as it gradually turned into a dictatorship, depriving people of their rights and freedom. In that context, the art of Ana Lupaş debus and blossoms. As the politics radicalizes itself, going into such details as to organizing people's private life, her art focuses more and more on abstracting subjects which could have not been directly expressed. Subjects that were TABU, since they were strictly depicted in a one-way-manner by the officials, or simply not at all, included anything dealing with the individuality of one citizen, be it the mind, body or position in society. The most influential socio-political contexts for the world of art, in general, and for this artist specifically, were the government-controlled Art and Culture Apparatus and the notion of building a New Socialist Man. The Apparatus instated the legality of being an artist by being a part of the state Unions and the legality of being a socialist human being by conferring certain rights and obligations. Thus, all that was produced, could have been officially displayed only with the acceptance of the state, shaping the way in which visual solutions were found to express individual ideas while dealing with censorship.

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1.2. Methods

In order to identify these visual marks for Ana Lupaș, my research methods involve constantly comparing the chronology of the art works with the chronology of the laws and comparing representations of ideas with decrees that were passed to shape the way in which the private sphere was organized. Placing a political view on the analysis of art gives it a deeper means of understanding the choices made when producing culture. Because this artist was involved in the Union's exhibiting system, at some time even being the chair of it², she could use the official system to display her production abroad, gaining slight international attention and she had access to a broader diversity of socialist systems from Central-Eastern Europe. Comparing the chronology of politics and art production is helpful in finding a gradual, yet unilateral radicality. As the grip of power tightened, visual representations displayed a stronger abstraction of TABU subjects. As the socialist system ceased to exist with the revolutions of 1989, her art reached a climax of representation, placing cloth at the core of visibility. The evolution of socialist politics is the time frame of art itself, the works rooting their meaning in the regime's system.

The place where she has been based is not void of significance for her choice of visual representation. The fact that she lived in Cluj county, an area with a substantial cultural minority group, paired with her strong understanding of the traditional world of the surrounding villages, brought a different take upon the way in which she displayed what women's and men's social roles were about. In my research, I am constantly adding a traditional turn to the analysis. In this sense, anthropological studies have helped in elucidating the meaning behind social roles. The same anthropological view builds the background of the duty of house chores, home arts and crafts and materials, all of which have been gradually undertaken by the artist and included in her representation.

The final method of research has been the act of consulting archives, including articles, critical debates or pictures of the works of art. Two museum digital archives have proven to be particularly useful, those of the Ludwig Museum, Budapest, and Székesfehérvár King St. Stephen's Museum. I have also referred to institutional archives such as New Europe College digital archives or the private collections of magazines, such as *Arta*, *Project*, *Balkon* or Ovidiu Șandor's collection. Another extensively useful tool has been consulting the archives of exhibitions from various galleries, especially that of P420 Gallery from Italy.

2. Feminine and Masculine Presence

2.1. Gender in Socialist Romania

In order to understand the later sculptures of Ana Lupaș it is important to view the context of the society in which she lived at the time of creating those pieces of art. The governing system was the Communist Party, officially recognized by the Constitutions. The time frame of interest for this study focuses on a period of thaw in the 70s, marked by Stalin's death and a shift in the ruling ideas of the USSR, reflected in the changes in the Romanian society with the radical nationalism of the 80s. 1965 is the year that the country became a soviet state, emphasizing Marxist and Leninist ideas regarding the socialist man. The core notion was that of the Universal Man who happened to be a worker, in the service of the nation and providing the well-being of the people by bringing a personal contribution through work. In this context, theoretically, there was no distinction of gender. However, such notions of undistinguished rights of citizens did not take into account the traditions of a patriarchal society, accustomed

² Magda Cârneli. 2013. *Artele plastice în România 1945-1989, Cu o addenda 1990-2010*. Bucharest: Polirom, pp. 100 - 120.

to having strong gender roles. The Constitution introduced the rights for equality and for work. However, the necessity of the state shifted as there was a population shortage after the war. Thus, the universally accepted soviet ideal of the woman-mother, coming from the model of Vera Mukhina was brought to a level of utopian idealization. In theory, the state came in the aid of families by creating the legal background for maternal leave, child support or nurseries. Emancipation was viewed as the core of providing rights and freedoms to the citizens, especially empowering women workers who had the chance to be independent and theoretically could have had access to any type of profession. De facto, gendered social balances of power still existed and the government acted as an extra infringement on the already burdened individuals³. The notions of an individual not having a family, constituted of a spouse and children or not having a career were inconceivable. So much so, that a tax was placed on bachelors and women's control of their own bodies was limited by placing restrictions on abortion. The July Theses of 1971 represented a turning point for focusing on nationalism. Building the New Man, which had to be "profoundly devoted to socialism and communism"⁴ was at the core of this movement. The utopian vision of well-being was presented officially and it was considered that any gender or social problem was already fixed.

2.2. How Ana Lupaș Identified Gendered Social Relations in Her Art

Ana Lupaș was not only an artist, but also a professor in Cluj at the Institution of Arts and a member of the Artists' Union and later became the chair of the organization. She was also the head of the Cluj county 35 Workshop, a smaller division of the Artists' Union focusing on promoting young artists⁵. Not only did she have a detailed understanding of society and the roles of individuals in it, but she could also observe them throughout the generations, as well as serve as a model for other artists. Some of her works from the 70s and 80s, as they can be analyzed nowadays, place a dialogue between the State's utopia of citizens' well-being thanks to the involvement of the power and that which the society actually reflected. I am going to point out specific examples and define the meaning behind those creations. The role of people in society was highly gendered, the state having made it a priority to define equal rights for men and women in the Constitution, while taking control of women's reproduction rights on the other side, with a decree in 1966, which restricted the act of abortion. Representation of women in society also placed a heavy toll on how one could identify with being a universal man first and a socialist woman second, the later focusing more on the example of powerful mothers, bearing children as a way of providing aid to a nation in need of man power.

There are three ways of representing gender as Ana Lupaș understood it in the socialist society that she lived in, by illustrating femininity, masculinity or gender neutrality.

The mere fact that in order to have a means of flying somewhere away one would need a device that resembles a phallic object would need to make us think about a subversive means of questioning new policies regarding gender. Giving access to education, equal pay and equal possibilities of getting a job was the state's way of ending the debate about the Woman Question. However, as many took notice, the reality differed quite substantially. Even though some social aspects did change, it was significantly harder for female figures to proceed with higher education and consequently harder to find a higher paid job. Maternity leave was also an aspect that slowed down or halted the general female rise to a better paid job. Thus, even though possible, the access to power from a feminine stand was significantly

³ Oana Lavinia Ciucă. 2010. "Etapete ideologizării conceptului de emancipare a femeii." In *Antropomedia 2*: pp. 80 - 90.

⁴ 1971. *The July Theses*, approved at the Communist Party Meeting from the 6th of July, Art. 12 - 14.

⁵ Miklós Onucsán Nicolae. 2016. „Note despre istoria recentă a Uniunii Artiștilor Plastici din Oradea: Ultimul comunist și primul deceniu de „tranzitie” din mărturia unui participant direct” In *Crisia XLVI*: p. 204.

harder. In the work entitled *Flying Machine in a Day of Holiday*, in Figure 1, the utensil that sets power in motion does not resemble something feminine; instead it is a device of masculinity. The phallic textile sculpture is abstracted to some degree. It is composed of 6 spheres and one elongated crooked shape, all covered in a colorfully loomed material, being displayed by dangling from the ceiling.



Fig. 1. Lupaș, Ana. 1971. *Flying Machine in a Day of Holiday*. Galați: Contemporary Art Museum Collection.

The word „nest” has the meaning of home in Romanian culture and when one makes a nest, it shows the process of building a family⁶. It also encompasses fertility, having a role in rituals involving the productivity of the harvest, of the earth, but also that of the human body, a nest being the synonym of the womb, thus an egg in the nest signifying here a bun in the oven. A red egg would inevitably be linked with the festivity of Easter, having been recorded examples of using red eggshells as a part of traditional habits⁷. Fertility, family and building a home by having children were also topics of high interest to the socialist government. The constitution of 1965 included Article 23, mentioning the fact that “The state protects marriage and family and defends the interests of the mother and the child.”⁸ If in the previous work, the topic was a device of manliness signifying the device used to fly, in this context, *Flying Carpet with a Red Egg in the Nest*⁹, Figure 2, was formed of a textile fabric folded in the center where a loomed material was inserted, with a spherical object in the center.



Fig. 2. Lupaș, Ana. 1971. *Flying Carpet with a Red Egg in the Nest*. In *Arta* 8: 12.

⁶ Vasile Ilinca. 2015. *Dicționar de expresii românești în contexte, A-C*. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, p. 287.

⁷ Ivan Evseev. 1994. *Dicționar de simboluri și arhetipuri culturale*. Timișoara: Editura Amarcord, pp. 125 - 126.

⁸ 1965. *The Constitution of Socialist Romania*, Bucharest: The Official Monitor, Article 23.

⁹ Ana Lupaș. 1971. *Flying Carpet with a Red Egg in the Nest*. In *Arta* 8, p. 12.

The overall composition was treated as a tapestry with protrusions, being an environmental object through its lack of flatness. It invited the public to touch the texture of the materials, as it was displayed in a snapshot from the exhibition, when a school girl was inspecting the piece up close. The art critic who discussed this work, Mihai Drumeş¹⁰, identified the idea of going back to one's origins through the technique of creating tapestries. People's minds were put at ease with nature, bridging thus the gap between man and nature. The reoccurring theme of the woven tapestries was flight. However, the meaning of the origins encompassed in the symbol of an egg were not linked to fertility and the ritualistic aspect of an Easter egg were omitted. The true feminine significance of the piece was alluded at the time of the criticism, the text presenting a safe way of dealing with a sensitive topic: the role of femininity in society. In that context, an individual's identity was questioned further with a series of coat-artworks by altering the idea of a coat into pieces of cloth hanging on a metal support. The only parts that remained were the roll lines, stitched together to form a poncho-like fabric, dripping on the supporting stand. The material itself was stitched together from bits and pieces, in *Coat for Reaching the Heaven*¹¹, punctured with torched-like holes, in *Coat for Reaching the Purgatory*¹², or patterned by sowing machine stitches, in *Coat for Reaching the Sun*¹³. In a later series, the coat was boxed and framed in collaged worker's shirts. *Identity Shirts, The Second Generation*, maintained a fold to the side of the buttoning line that resembled the lapel. The front darts of the shirt were stylized with stitched pieces of fabric of a different color, laid on top of the coat's fabric, while the inner stuffing was broken from its lining and acted as epaulettes. One particular version of this series, presented as *Seraphim Shirt*¹⁴, illustrated a peculiar identity in which the coat made place for 6 limbs. Both the title and the outlook of the piece referred to an extraordinary identity, not that of a human being. A religious identity was a slight presence of a TABU subject in these art works. As the government looked at instating the belief in the Communist party only, atheism was the promoted and socially accepted belief¹⁵. Even so, a traditional society still based its convictions on that with which it was familiar, its unique spirituality. The series of shirts presented above are void of gender, almost presenting the government's idea of a Universal Man, the Universal Worker, be it man or woman. *Identity Shirts, The First Generation*¹⁶, abstracted the notion of a human being altogether by laying flat the fabric of a coat and zig-zagging patterns of stitches with the sowing machine. Such means of abstraction were ways in which artists in Eastern Europe in general, and in Romania, as well, managed to display their non-abstract ideas and thoughts regarding the society they lived in. Censorship usually omitted works that did not directly confront the power of the regime, thus abstraction having the power to serve as a modernist tool of eluding propaganda.

Because children were placed by the traditional Romanian society and by the Socialist State alike in the care of women, who were acting under the role of mothers and caretakers, art topics related to games, plays and children had an underlying link to femininity. While it was not banned for masculinity to be in the role of children caretakers, it was not an image depicted in socialism. On the other hand, the symbol of Vera Mukhina, the powerful mother, or the hero mother was omni-present in the late 60s, 70s and 80s in Eastern Europe. The series

¹⁰ Mihai Drişcu. 1971. "Structuri ale stilului. Ana Lupaş." In *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹¹ Sebestyén György Székely. 2015. "Ana Lupaş. 1962-1964. *Coat for Reaching the Heaven*." In *Ana Lupaş. Early Works Catalogue*. Bologna: P420 Gallery, p. 19.

¹² Sebestyén György Székely. 2015. "Ana Lupaş. 1962-1964. *Coat for Reaching the Purgatory*." In *op.cit.*, p. 20.

¹³ Sebestyén György Székely. 2015. "Ana Lupaş. 1962-1964. *Coat for Reaching the Sun*." In *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁴ Ana Lupaş. 1970. *Seraphim Shirt*. Timișoara: Collection of Ovidiu Șandor. Displayed In Timișoara: 2017. Art Encounters Biennial.

¹⁵ 1971. *The July Theses*, approved at the Communist Party Meeting from the 6th of July, Art. 7.

¹⁶ Ana Lupaş. 1969. *Identity Shirts. The First Generation*. Timișoara: Collection of Ovidiu Șandor. Displayed In Timișoara: 2017. Art Encounters Biennial.

of *Tiny Identity shirts*¹⁷ is both fascinating and intriguing. These pieces were displayed at the 2017 Art Encounters Biennial in 7 metal boxes containing 7 white pieces of cloth cast in gypsum. The eerie aspect of the pieces of white fabric was their display: insertions of rolled, yellowing plastic forms were allusions to small arms, plastered together with small, white sleeves. The placement of these fragile pieces of children's clothes in metal boxes, created the suggestion of metal coffins, at times being covered by transparent sheets of glass. While the allusion to the death of a generation, through the death of its children can only be guessed in the afore-mentioned series, the fact that childhood and death are re-occurring in the works of this artist, help define a niche for a chosen theme. Her psychological analysis is underlined by a Polish art critic's perspective, in 1973, who described Ana Lupaș's creations as rooted in traditions, but breaking free from their limits through her interest in "anthropology, [...] symbolism of shapes, the psychology of perception, as well as primitive art and children's art"¹⁸.

The child was viewed as being neutral, void of marks of gender and being just the product of a society's will to have manpower. When that aspect was connected to the body of the mother viewed as a child-bearer, a particular art work from 1982 unveiled a grueling sight: a postcard displaying *My Baby* with a fetus in a jar, an art piece from the artist's participation at the Lausanne Biennial¹⁹. Olivia Nițș made the connection between this artwork and the political interference in the private sphere of Romanian women, limited abortions. These marked the lives of women who no longer could be in control of their own reproductive capacity and led to illegal trials of abortion, the only contraceptive measure of the socialist times being that of performing this act or abstinence. In that context, the remake of *Humid Installation* from 1994, at the exhibition from Bonn, *Europe: A Century of Avant-Garde in Central and Eastern Europe*²⁰ received a different meaning. As the white sheets were displayed indoors, the artist soaked the edges in red dye, letting the liquid drip in pots and pans commonly found in a typical socialist household. Such display eerily recalled the process of either birth or abortion, as white linen, blood and metal pots were typically used to collect medical waste. The art works have been altered over time and they have embodied different connotations. *Humid Installation* started under a different title, *Flying Carpet, Symbol of Peace*²¹, on the hills of the Mărgău village by involving village women in the act of hanging white sheets on ropes held by wooden polls. It was a delicate means of showing female attributes of household chores in an installation symbolizing the idea of peace enacted through a collective action staged by Ana Lupaș. At that time, art was viewed as a means of performing a ritual typical of a holiday and the festivity itself was viewed as a work of art. Thus, the acts of mere chores were elevated to the level of art works, offering a different representation of female identities, which differed greatly from the state's official view of women-mothers and women-production-workers. The double burden of home caretakers and socialist workers was elusive in the installation's first context, that of the village's hills. However, a triple burden was presented in 1994 as the act of bringing a life in this world was linked to the display of the blood-market white sheets.

Symbols of passing away were present between 1977 and 1991 in *Preparations for a Round Grave, Monument of Rags* first shown in 1991 at the University Square in Bucharest²²

¹⁷ Ana Lupaș. 1973. *Tiny Identity Shirts. The First Generation*. Timișoara: Collection of Ovidiu Șandor. Displayed In Timișoara: 2017. Art Encounters Biennial.

¹⁸ Zbigniew Makarewicz. 1973. "Project, 4". In *Arta* 9, p. 2.

¹⁹ Olivia Nițș. 2016. "Politici ale corpului și mecanisme de putere în arta românească în perioada 1970-1990." In *Arta în România între anii 1945-2000, O analiză din perspectiva prezentului.*, ed. by Călin Dan, Iosif Király, Anca Oroveanu, Magda Radu. Bucharest: UNArte, pp. 154 - 155.

²⁰ Sebestyén György Székely. 2015. *Ana Lupaș. Early Works Catalogue*, Bologna: P420 Gallery, p. 8.

²¹ Mihai Drișcu. 1974. "Covor zburător, simbol al păcii." In *Arta* 2, pp. 7 - 8.

²² Ramona Novicov. 2008. "Three Female Hypotheses of the Romanian Avant-Garde". In *N.Paradoxa* 20 April, p. 48.

and then in 1999 in Syékesfehervár at the King Stephen Museum's garden and *Solemn Process* displayed at Tate Modern in 2012 by taking the hay shapes and caging them in her already signature metal caskets. Representations of non-gendered identities through abstractions of clothes, culminated with *The Jacket* of Ana Lupaş, Figure 3, which was a piece distributed amongst artists who could wear it and leave a mark or shape it and then pass it on to a further participant²³. An identity of celebrating a festivity and flying was gradually encased in boxes, frames, placed under glass or metal and finally distorted by becoming a part of a collective being. Individuality was thus lost, as the climax of 1989 approached. The post revolution years, marked further reinventions of the textile sculptures in gloomy ways of presenting an engaged identity, but with a much bigger freedom of display.



Fig. 3. Lupaş, Ana. 1989. *The Jacket*, worn by Gina Hora at the *Experiment* exhibition.

3. Abstracting Reality through sculptures

Femininity was also presented with a female portrait, respectively, the artist's self-portrait which gradually became abstracted into a form varying from a flat surface to sculpture. An earlier example was displayed through a *Study* of 3 female faces, done in wool, at the *Decorative Arts Triennial* in 1973, Dalles Hall, Bucharest²⁴. A sketch found at the Ludwig Museum, referred her as Figure 4, (dated 1998 in the Ludwig Museum Archive, but most probably the work predates that moment) showed her self-portrait stenciled in black and white with annotations defining the place of the eyes, nose and mouth.



Fig. 4. Lupaş, Ana. 1998. *Sketch*, Budapest: Ludwig Museum Archive

²³ Liviana Dan. 1997. "Haina Anei Lupaş." In *Experiment în arta românească după 1960*. Bucharest: Soros Contemporary Art Center, p. 99.

²⁴ Ana Lupaş. 1973. "Study." In *Arta* 10, p. 10.

This turned into the porcelain and the bronze sculptures, *Portrait* and *Double Portrait*, Figure 5. The first one displays a head, placed upside down, on which the neck, chin, mouth, nose, eyes, ears, forehead and hair are written down in Spanish and Romanian words.



Fig. 5. Lupaș, Ana. 1975. *Portrait* (left), 1988.

Double Portrait (right) Bologna: P420 Gallery Collection

All that could be distinguished from the abstracted shape was the form of the head, with the contour of the hairdo. However, the head itself was symbolized as the night's sky, being dotted with blue stars. The second piece placed 2 heads in one form, joining them at the neck, creating a mirrored effect. The contour of the hair line could still be seen, however the words that marked the eyes, nose and mouth were engraved in the bronze material in German, Polish, Latin and Estonian. Masculinity, on the other hand, was depicted by stylizing the patriarchal symbol of power, the masculine sexual organ. The series of *Insignia of Power*, Figure 6, showed a variety of small sculptures, shaped out of miscellaneous materials. In a first instance, wood chips, lead and a metal wire were used between 1976 and 1977.



Fig. 6. Lupaș, Ana. 1976-1977. *Insignia of Power* (left), 1988. *Insignia of Power* (center and right) Bologna: P420 Gallery Collection

These structures were placed on miniature stone cubes. The technique of encasing a natural dried material, in this case wood, in a metal casket reminded me of the alteration of *Solemn Process*, when the wheat wreaths traditionally created in Transylvania, as a part of a harvest ritual, were preserved in metal coffins at Tate Modern. Later, in 1988, using the same materials as *Portrait* and *Double Portrait*, the phallic signs of power were cast in porcelain and then in bronze. They did not remain in their natural form, but they were twisted, reshaped and abstracted to the point of which they were reduced to mere objects. If an insignia of power is displayed as something cast aside, the subliminal message is that of subverting power. While the bronze cast was displayed on a white pedestal, just as any sculpture would be, the porcelain series was placed on a wooden board. The overall appearance brought the idea of a kitchen with meat on a cutting board, waiting for the chef to perform the act of cooking. Who remains the one in power in this case? Is it the public viewing the art works? The potential chef? Or the artist who chooses these versions of display? Whatever the answer may be, masculinity depicted through signs of power was reduced to objects laid flat on horizontal surfaces. In comparison, the female portrait is rounded at the edges and hung upside down from the ceiling or placed vertically on a pedestal.

5. Conclusions

The core of this paper was to show the existence of a gendered identity of the Romanian socialist society in the art of Ana Lupaș in sculptures produced in the late 80s and early 90s, specifically the works displayed in Figure 5 and 6. By exemplifying the evolution of abstracted representations of feminine, masculine or non-gendered identities throughout her career, one could observe how the theme is reflecting the persona of a socialist human being, constantly asking who that person actually was. Her solutions are placed somewhere between what the Communist regime imposed on its citizens and what the tradition of society visualized in the roles of social relations. At times subverting political norms was done by treating TABU topics related to the body or sexuality by abstracting the male organ of power and by creating a visual metaphor of pregnancy or childbirth. At other times it was done by showcasing the marks of a human being in atypical ways, with the image of a baby in a jar and distorted pieces of clothes. Central and Eastern Europe in the times of the 80s presented strong examples of using available materials, means or places of display to convey individual thoughts, feelings and ideas, even if they were not in tune with the officially accepted view. In the case of Ana Lupaș, she swiftly displayed the levels of socialist identities in Romania. The inheritance of a rural society was not completely abolished. Inserting spirituality, rituals, traditional actions, habits and crafts into contemporary art elevated those ancestral roots into a contemporary presence. The control of one's body by the state by dictating the idea of having a family as the generally accepted norm is questioned with the signature theme of dying. The allusion to a socialist man's obligation and right to work, not taking into account the already existent role of a child-bearer and home caretaker displays the difference observed by the artist between the public and the private sphere's reality.

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