

Art Exhibitions between 1920s and 1930s, Reflected in the Avant-garde Magazine *UNU*

Cristina GELAN¹

Abstract: *In the first decades of the twentieth century, when the trend of emancipation of Romanian culture - literature, but also art, under the influence of traditionalist direction and synchronization with European ideas became increasingly evident, the avant-garde movement proposed a series of aesthetic programs, aiming to impose a new vision, both in literature and in art. In this sense, the magazines founded during this period had a major role, even if many of them appeared for relatively short periods of time. Among them, there is the magazine UNU, a publication that appeared in Dorohoi, between April and December 1928, and later, between January 1929 and December 1932, in Bucharest. The magazine had declared itself surrealist and promoted the experiences of avant-garde events.*

Key-words: *Romanian art; avant-garde; new art; UNU; surrealism*

1. Introduction

In the context of the first decades of the twentieth century, in which the trend of emancipation of Romanian culture - literature, but also art, under the influence of traditionalist direction and synchronization with European ideas became increasingly obvious, the avant-garde movement proposed a series of aesthetic programs, aiming to impose a new vision, both in literature and in art. In this sense, the magazines founded during this period had a major role, even if many of them appeared for relatively short periods of time. Among them, there is the magazine *UNU*, a publication that appeared in Dorohoi, between April and December 1928, and later, between January 1929 and December 1932, in Bucharest. Its editorial board included Sașa Pană, Stephan Roll and Ilarie Voronca. The magazine declared itself surrealist and promoted the experiences of avant-garde manifestations "Marinetti's futurism, Tristan Tzara's Dadaism, Ion Vinea's surrealism, Ilarie Voronca's constructivism"², which were also in the attention of other magazines of the time, such as *Contimporanul*, *Punct* or *Integral*.

Regarding the artistic dimension, in the pages of *UNU* magazine, there are several categories of texts, namely: from short texts, which inform about the organization of an exhibition and which are sometimes accompanied by a brief appreciative comment on what to be exhibited or short announcements promoting M. H. Maxy's studio, to texts that praise artists who are considered representative of the so-called *new art* (such as Victor Brauner, M. H. Maxy), texts that question about the evolution of art in Europe (an excerpt from a text written by Louis Aragon, translated into Romanian by Sașa Pană, which questions the evolution of art

¹ Faculty of Arts, Ovidius University of Constanta, cristinagelan@gmail.com

² Retrieved January 20, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

in Europe³, a text about the history of the Dada movement, signed by André Far⁴ or a text signed by Gh. Dinu about European painting in 1931⁵) and texts in which certain exhibitions are presented in detail, in connection with the way in which Romanian art evolves, these being either laudatory or deprecatory, both in terms of the reference to the exhibition itself and in terms of the artists who exhibited. It should be noted that most of the texts, which discuss the issue of how contemporary art and contemporary artists are presented, are not always written by specialists in the field of visual art, such as Louis Aragon, Filip Brunea, Gheorghe Dinu, who sometimes signs his texts with his name, and sometimes with his pseudonym Stephan Roll, André Far, Sașa Pană, Ilarie Voronca. They are writers, poets or journalists, which indicates the lack of specialists in art theory and criticism in Romania during this period.

This study examines the category of texts that present in detail certain art exhibitions, in which the authors question the way in which art evolves both in the Romanian space, as well as contemporary artists. In this respect, 9 texts can be identified, which appear as follows: two texts in issue 7 of November 1928 and one text in each following issues of the magazine: issue 11 of March 1929, issue 12 of April 1929, issue 13 of May 1929, issue 24 of April, 1930, issue 33 of February 1931, issue 43 of March 1932, respectively issue 45 of May 1932.

2. The landscape of Romanian art in the European context

In November 1928, in issue 7 of *UNU* magazine, two exhibitions are presented: one organized at the *Oesterreichischen Museum für Kunst and Industrie*, in Vienna, and the other in Bucharest. About the exhibition at the *Oesterreichischen Museum für Kunst and Industrie*, entitled "Die neuzeitliche Wohnung", held between May and August 1928, writes Sașa Pană. The author of the article appreciates the exhibition, considering it a landmark for the formation of contemporary taste: "such standard exhibitions are most often necessary to channel the taste that is worthy of the citizen of the twentieth century"⁶. Certain innovative elements in interior design are brought to attention, which is another "rarity", and in this context Marcel Iancu is also cited for his innovative character. Sașa Pană also writes about the exhibition in Bucharest. It is about "L'exposition d'art français contemporain à Bucarest", whose opening on September 29, 1928. The author of the article notes that Queen Maria also was at the opening, along with a pleiad of officials: the ministers Lapedatu, Diamandy, Gabriel Puaux, Prof. Al. Tzigara-Samurçaș. Some of the exhibitors are cited (Jaubert and Petit, Edgar Brandt, Jeau Dunand, Georges Fouquet, Rene Lalique, Jean Mayordon, Laure Albin Guillet, Kvopil, Redier, etc.), and the article shows the appreciation of the exhibited works of art: "Flexibility, refinement, the spirit of the eternally young Paris (...). I saw original creations in which the harmony of colors, lines, surfaces, volumes escapes from the handcuffs of moldy shapes - they tyrannized enough - and knocks them out"⁷.

³ Louis Aragon. 1931, June. "Pictura la zid", *Unu*, 4, no. 36. București: Studio grafic „SteauaArtei”, p. 12. Retrieved January 23, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

⁴ André Far. 1931, October. "Histoire de Dada", *Unu*, 4, no. 39. București: Studio grafic „SteauaArtei”, p. 11. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

⁵ Gh. Dinu. 1932, January. "În 1931 Pictura", *Unu*, 5, no. 42. București: Studio grafic „SteauaArtei”, pp. 1-2. Retrieved January 23, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

⁶ Sașa Pană. 1928, November. "Die neuzeitliche Wohnung", *Unu: avangardă literară*, no. 7. Dorohoi: Tiparul „Gazeta Dorohoiului”, p. 4. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

⁷ Sașa Pană. 1928, November. "L'exposition d'art français contemporain à Bucarest", *Unu: avangardă literară*, no. 7. Dorohoi: Tiparul „Gazeta Dorohoiului”, p. 4. Retrieved March 12, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

In the March 1929, issue 11 of *UNU* magazine, a text written by Stephan Roll, praised Victor Brauner. The article is a kind of *laudatio*, which Stephan Roll makes to Victor Brauner, to present the artist for a future exhibition, which was to open on April 1, 1929. In this approach, the author of the article refers to the evolution of the artistic performance of V. Brauner, from his public debut, with illustrations for a volume of poems and the appearance in the *75 HP* magazine, at a series of exhibitions in which he participated in the past. All this are the testimony of the different stages of the artist in his evolution. Thus, after a debut that is in association with expressionism, the exhibition from 1924 presents the artist in association with constructivism, and the exhibition from *Contimporanul* - in association with cubism, after which he evolves towards surrealism - in the latter the artist finding himself: "It's painting in which she will find herself, she will be satisfied (...). In surrealism he finds the chemistry of the dream, the strange spontaneity (...) Surrealism as a spontaneous painting integrates him"⁸. The author also evokes the context in which the artist is formed, which is one of collaboration with people of letters, among whom he is also found, along with I. Voronca and Cosma: "Always next to a poem of ours, a painting of yours flourished, a drawing disturbed us"⁹. In this respect, V. Brauner is called "the painter (...) of modern Romanian literature"¹⁰. The end of the article, which also announces the future opening, presents the artist at a peak of his artistic evolution: "His evolution being in invention and in his craft, thus seeking a peak of our spirituality, he came to touch it and plant it among us"¹¹.

A text entitled "Three events", written by F. Brunea can be found in issue 12 of *UNU* magazine, from April 1929. On the front page of *UNU* magazine, from April 1929, F. Brunea presents three events: the publication of a volume of poems by Ștefan Roll, the death of his friend Armand Pascal and a visit to Max Hermann Maxy's studio. Referring to the visit to the artist's studio, the author brings to attention a phenomenon of the time, namely: the artists' studio exhibition and their visit by the public. The text presents H. M. Maxy as an artist who has evolved, fundamentally transforming himself over a period of three years: "The only detail that Maxy keeps unchanged is the autograph. (...) Between today's easel and the wall stamped by the remains of the exhibition from three years ago, there is a big road, a conquered road"¹².

The text "Exhibition of the New Art Group" is published in the *Scurt-circuit* section of *UNU* magazine, issue 13, from May 1929. It is not signed. The text refers to the exhibition that was opened at the halls of the Academy of Decorative Art, which is appreciated as "the event that interests us most in Romanian art"¹³. There is talk of a "new art", and the artists who exhibit are appreciated as bringing a new breath in Romanian art. It is about Max Hermann Maxy, Marcel Iancu, Victor Brauner, Milița Pătrașcu. The less educated, uninitiated public, incapable of a correct evaluation of true art, is criticized. As for Max Hermann Maxy, Marcel Iancu and Victor Brauner, reference is made, briefly, to the way in which their works of art were received by the public, in conjunction with the appreciations of art critics: "I remember the chroniclers who now they overwhelmed with merit the same exhibitors to whom a few years ago they recommended the clinics of neurologists; I remember the audience laughing immediately after

⁸ Stephan Roll. 1929, March. "Victor Brauner", *Unu*, 2, no. 11. București: Tip. Ludo, p. 2. Retrieved March 12, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Filip Brunea. 1929, April. "Trei evenimente", *Unu*, 2, no. 12. București: Tip. Ludo, p. 1. Retrieved January 23, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

¹³ *** 1929, May. "Expoziția Grupului de Artă Nouă", *Unu*, Year 2, no. 13. București: Tip. Ludo, p. 4. Retrieved January 20, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

leaving the exhibition (...). But here that the public returns to fearfully determine a compliant conduct"¹⁴. Reference is made to the impossibility of the receiving public to understand the true value of artistic creations. As for Milița Pătrașcu, it was offered to her a more generous presentation space, the author praising the artist's creation: "(...) Mrs. Petrașcu with her talent always surpassing our surprise and admiration. With a passion and an ideal for the subject and for the incomprehensible, looking for a weld in his vocabulary, a creative collaboration"¹⁵.

In the *Vestiar* section, from issue 24 of the magazine *UNU*, from April 1930, Ilarie Voronca praises the artists participating in the *Ileana* exhibition hall: the sculptors Milița Pătrașcu and Ireana Codreanu and the painters Marcel Iancu and Merica Rîmniceanu. Through his observations, the author positions himself more among art lovers than among specialists: "Not being a critic, I will not have to give explanations and initiate the puzzled on some aspects to which my joy alone and without reasons is directed"¹⁶. Appreciative arguments for the artists that the author mentions are full of metaphors: "the purity that Mrs. M. Pătrașcu awakens in marble"; "increased disturbance of the coarse soil material"; "each of the stones and crosses hidden there have something of the light and the smile of the sculptor"; "a deep symphony of blue"¹⁷. Among them, the characterization of Merica Rîmniceanu's works of art draws attention, which employs a plastic vision: "In general, it manifests an often cubist decorative tendency and she shown to be a good handler of drawing and color"¹⁸.

A text entitled "Summary contributions to the knowledge of the modern movement in our country", signed by Max Hermann Maxy, is published in issue 33 of the magazine, from February 1931. Max Hermann Maxy reviews the ways in which artists and men of letters, in the 1920s, organized themselves into different groups according to their avant-garde concerns. Among them of note a group of artists and writers who organized around the *Integral* magazine, which the author appreciates as "imposing a review of all art experiments"¹⁹. The phenomenon of association of plastic artists and writers around some magazines is correlated by M. H. Maxy with the organization of exhibition events, either in the country or abroad, which allowed the coagulation of a group. It is mentioned the year 1923, with the exhibition of M. H. Maxy in Berlin and M. Iancu. M. Iancu's exhibition is successful, and together with the poet Ion Vinea he will edit the magazine *Contimporanul*, which will become a modern avant-garde magazine and which will be joined for a while by H. H. Maxy, and later Ilarie Voronca, Victor Brauner, Mihail Cosma and Stephan Roll. The exhibitions made in the same period in the country by Mattis Teutsch and M. H. Maxy (the latter being appreciated as constructivist) will be greeted with hostility by critics. Another exhibition, organized on December 30, 1924 - "a first European plastic art event"²⁰, which was attended by painters from Poland, Hungary, Belgium, Germany and Sweden, where Constantin Brâncuși also participated - with works of art from the Roumania country, and also the artists Milița Petrașcu, Mattis Teutsch and Victor Brauner, is viewed with superiority by critics, implicitly by the public "critics smiled with superiority at those colorful imaginations and had fun in agreement with the audience obsessed with their

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Ilarie Voronca. 1930, April. Article published in the section "Vestiar", *Unu*, Year 3, no. 24. București: Tipografia „Steaua Artei”, p. 8. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Max Hermann Maxy. 1931, February. "Contribuții sumare la cunoașterea mișcării moderne de la noi", *Unu*, Year 4, no. 33. București: Studio grafic „Steaua Artei”, p. 3. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

aesthetic teaching"²¹. On March 1, 1925, the foundations of the magazine *Integral* were laid, through contributions of F. Brunea, I. Călugăru, I. Voronca, M. H. Maxy, B. Fondane, M. Teutsch, St. Roll, V. Brauner, E. Cosma B. Florian, C. Mihailescu. It proposed a revision of all art experiments. The affinity towards this magazine is appreciated "And *Integral*, an eyewitness of all our aspirations, has been our friend for good and for bad days. And when its collaborators scattered wherever their life and studies took them, it stopped appearing"²². After the separation from *Contimporanul*, the annual exhibitions made by M. Iancu together with M. Petrașcu, M. Rîmniceanu and I. Codreanu are appreciated as very successful. The architectural contributions of M. Iancu and Horia Creangă are also discussed in an appreciative way.

Gh. Dinu also writes about the Romanian artistic landscape of the time, in *UNU* magazine, issue 43, from March 1932. Titled "The new Romanian art", the article presents the exhibition of new art from *Ileana* exhibition hall. The author discusses two groups of artists who exhibit: on the one hand M. Iancu, M. Pătrașcu and M. H. Maxy, the latter being the only one who comes up with something totally new in the exhibition, and on the other hand, a series of artists, such as: Mrs. Popp, Mrs. Milian, Mrs. Greceanu, whom the author describes as "disoriented to conceive and reach a modern demonstration of their art"²³. The works of the artists presented at this exhibition are compared with some exhibited by the same artists at *Mozart* exhibition hall, in București. There is a critical dimension to the way the author of the article describes the exhibition: "The exhibition here presents from the point of view of tactics and the effort to impose a contemporary painting, due to its lack of eclecticism, a step back, a compromise, a blunder"²⁴. He draws attention to the confusion that such an exhibition can cause to the public. On the other hand, Gh. Dinu emphasizes the importance that artists such as M. Iancu, V. Brauner, M. H. Maxy or J. David have for the *new Romanian art*: "we find Marcel Iancu, Maxy, Brauner and more some of us who will have the merit of having brought the synthesis and activity of another era, at perhaps the most hazardous crossroads, to the point where lava flows towards a solidification that you do not yet perceive"²⁵ and "we stopped only at Jean David's avatar (...), to the possibility of giving us another name in the pauper field of our plastic art"²⁶.

In issue 45 of *UNU* magazine, from May 1932, in *Scurt-circuit* section, Stephan Roll signs the text "A book and an exhibition". It refers to the first exhibition of the artist S. Perahim, a debut "of liquidations, burns, incandescent screams"²⁷, as its author noted. St. Roll makes a virulent critique of the artist's works of art, which from his point of view prove to be a real "plastic nightmare", but from which the artist could learn. Drawing, composition, color - all illustrate the fact that S. Perahim is in the period of research and elaboration to find a way of artistic expression and a place on the art market, consider the author of the text. The article abounds in metaphors, through which St. Roll describes the artist's "free fantasy", and his works of art are called "these *papers* (...) from which wasps and dragonflies and nothingness will bite"²⁸.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 4.

²³ Gh. Dinu. 1932, March. "Noua plastică română", *Unu*, Year 5, no. 43. București: Studio grafic „Steaua Artei”, p. 4.

Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Stephan Roll. 1932, May. "O carte și o expoziție", *Unu*, Year 5, no. 45. București: Studio grafic „Steaua Artei”, p. 5. Retrieved April 15, 2021, from <http://www.digibuc.ro/colectii/unu---1928-c2129>.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

3. Conclusions

In the avant-garde magazine *UNU*, which was published between April 1928 and December 1932, the preoccupations for the evolution of Romanian art, in the European context, had a special place. Although the most texts are written by writers, poets or journalists, who have associated themselves with the avant-garde these provide an important resource in terms of the Romanian artistic landscape from the late of 1920s and early of 1930s and the ways of receiving it. The articles that talk about contemporary artists and the exhibitions where they participate, whether they are positively appreciated or are accompanied by critical aspects, offer a field of questions about how art evolved in the Romanian space, but also contemporary artists. Both in terms of exhibitions and in terms of artists, the studied texts present a comparative argumentative discourse: the references are made not only in the present, but also in terms of the past or the hope of their evolution in the future. Important references to the way contemporary national art is presented, related to what is happening at European level, references to valuable contemporary artists or those who have a potential to become valuable, but also to the way art criticism receives exhibitions of the time or the way in which the public, less reflective and educated, enslaved to art criticism, receives contemporary art, forms a synergistic framework of the Romanian artistic landscape.

4. References

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