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EXTRAS

ALEATORISM IN MODERN ART

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...Theseus, the son of Aegeus, king of Athens, the well-known mythological character to whom so many thrilling adventures have been attributed had promised his father at his departure on his long expedition, that he would advise him, by the white or black colour of the sails of his ship, whether he had come out victorious or not.

Chance — which always insinuates itself alongside necessity, constituting together with the latter the indestructible nucleus of their unity and contradiction — brought about a tragical flow of events, important not so much by its proportions as by the fact that it signifies the weight which aleatorism can have in the cycle of life.

Therefore, while now referring to artistic creation, it is not hazardous to assert that during the historical development of art and literature, aleatorism has permanently represented a considerable component, of course whose weight was never constant. The assertion, in modern art, of a growing — and in certain cases predominant — aleatory substance implies the appreciation of the reasons of this tendency as well as of its complex significances, taking into account most especially the part played, in the life of modern society by artistic production and the prospects of its future metamorphoses.

Expressing the consciousness of its own existence and covering, in this sense, the evolution towards the relative autonomy of forms, modern art implies an increasing aleatory component in the narcissistic gesture of featuring the brownian movement of its sensitive matter. The objective ground of the tendency towards aleatorism is, in the first place, that of the aleatory contents of the very natural phenomena reflected in classical art. But it acted with a relative constancy during the entire development of that which Marx called "the practical spiritual perception of the world"¹. (K. Marx — Fr. Engels, *On Art*, vol. 1). Its resuscitation, in modern times, consequently, corresponds both to some impulses determined by the critical reevaluation, into the present, of anterior creation as well as to some other ones, directly determined by the objective conditions of production and consumption in

¹ K. Marx, Fr. Engels, on art, 1 vol., p. 66, Roumanian ed. 1966, Editura Politică, Bucurest.

this epoch. There is involved the general progress of human creation — and here, the progress in art “as the progress of man finding himself in the midst of more and more complex situations and social relations”². (K. Marx — The economical-philosophical manuscripts of 1848) — achieved in a succession of negations and adequations — as well as the tendency to reject canonization, the reaction towards serialization, the vitalization of the spiritual product by the inclusion of a more and more important substance of life.

A new assertion, of a different kind, of the unique simultaneously takes place with the process of evolution from the projection into the work of an imaginary spectator (J. P. Sartre), meant to meet the real one and down to the latter's integration within the work. On the whole, aleatorism alongside a large number of other strongly controversial features of modern art — is the symptom of this tendency of the latter to turn it to good account in the performance, marking the growth of the improvisational contents, of spontaneity. Appreciated from the angle of the sociology of art, aleatorism acts in the direction of the pronounced changing of the relationship between the artist and the public. Often marked by the fact that the artist expresses a crisis of confidence in his representation by the work — here is involved the classical one, somewhat impersonalized — modern art has even set up forms of “self-devouring” in whose contents, alongside the well-known relationship between audience and work, there appears a new one, between the creator and his product manifested in violent forms of self-negation.

From a strictly technical standpoint, aleatorism reveals itself, in its first characteristic manifestations, but as an illustration, an element of contrast meant to outline more precisely a determined substance. The aleatory element masks the sophisticated construction of the point of fugue in classical painting, it also establishes the connection between the elements of the sonata (the so-called bridge, with its unsteady structure masking the shaking of the first tonal centre), constitutes in Renaissance dramaturgy — Shakespeare's “Taming of the Shrew” is an example among many others — the pretextual framework, reaching down to cinematic creation, in the first years after the war, expresses the context of filmic action.

Herefrom, from this hypostasis of framework, of illustration, that is to say of signifier of the context meant to reproduce the natural condition in which the artistic event is taking place, aleatorism itself becomes an object of art, that is to say it makes out of the totality of coordinates of man's presence (as a character or as a presence pointed out by the objects of his activity) an emotional product, trying to place man, *here-now*, in his reality and not in his ideality. The tendency corresponds, when examined in its intimate articulations, to the philosophy of art as a form of life, being accompanied by all the values and shortcomings of this philosophy.

Chance contains the unique and consumes itself in the act of its production: the irrepeatability, in this respect, undoubtedly has something heroic about itself, but quite often this heroism verges on gratuitousness. Entailing

² K. Marx, F. Engels, *Scrisori din tinerețe*, Editura politică, 1968, București.

most especially man's reactions, thus programmatically following the road of his liberation from prejudices, the aleatory component of the modern work of art, severs these (no matter how ingenious or complex these reactions may be) from thought which operates with representations and symbols. It acts by signals — in the sense defined by H. Wallon³. (H. Wallon — From Act to Thought, Editura Științifică, București, 1964, page 188) — which are neither acts of discursive intellection, nor a simple joining of the "stimulus to a reaction", but derive their strength from the "initial fusion with the situation they are part of".

While avoiding to decide whether the functional stages marked by the signal, index, simulacrum, symbol and sign, are genetical stages, we can nevertheless notice taking into consideration the evolution of the language, that the direct, spontaneous, hazardous expression — as far as any of our gestures can be hazardous in a world defined at a given moment — has an expressive value, but leaving out that which we call the representative contents. The work of an aleatory intention — either in the sense of its production or in that of its turning to good account — opposes both analysis and synthesis, its existence being only global and exclusive.

That which made in the case of the classical literary or artistic work, that the images be accessible and exert their power of fascination over people — and namely their relative identity between expression (form) and contents — acts, in this case, rather mystifyingly. The image, which has simultaneously become signifier and signified, destroys the aloofness implied by the moment of interpretation. It manifests itself, as an act, therefore as a pure intention at the moment when "man's senses exerted in artistic creation, have become, in a certain way, "theorists"⁴. (K. Marx, *Economic-philosophical manuscripts of 1848*). "The poetics of indetermination" contains in its concrete determination, the virtuality of that committed human mode, about which writes Francastel⁵. (Pierre Francastel, *La figure et le Lieu*, 1967), resistance in front of pseudocreation (mechanisation, serialization, standardization).

Implying the aim of expressing self-movement, the aleatory component included by the work of art calls in question the quality of the work of being a conscious product devoted to the aim of improving human condition, meant to achieve itself, in the spirit of a positive philosophy, in social reality. In the area of the evanescent, whence it draws its substance, the future does not appear as a work consciously achieved under the imperative of certain conceptions on inter-human relations, but as an abstract possibility. Truth is that in the process of turning *in actu* the huge reservoir of chance, he resorts to, the artist does not become abstract; he lives, either directly expressing it or not, a certain historical concreteness, through the inter-medium of which he can reach, to a greater or lesser degree the generally human. As an experience of the artist which "gets its active significance at the very moment in which the painter's gesture brings about the concrete

³ H. Wallon, *De la act la gândire*, Editura Științifică, București.

⁴ K. Marx, Fr. Engels, *op. cit.*, pag. 211.

⁵ Pierre Francastel, *La figure et le Lieu*, Plan, Paris, 1967.

shape" ⁶. (Nello Ponente, *La peinture moderne*, Skira, 1960, page 131) a tendency of the type of *action-painting* — analysed before — cannot be appreciated globally (and rejected or accepted as such), but depending on the concrete character of its achievement. We discern in this moment that *the aleatorism implied to the act of creation* shifts the latter — irrespective if it belongs to the writer, the painter or composer — to the sphere of the performance bringing along the value of spontaneous expression, implying improvisation and — as a whole — constituting the ground of a most elastic interaction between the creator and the public.

The aleatorism implied in the work means something else, qualitatively. Irrespective if we are referring to Calder's "Mobiles" (J. P. Sartre, *Situations* — "They are strange beings, half matter, half life"), to the compositions in open structures by John Cage to the poetical canons of the dadaists, to the automatic dictation, we feel the necessity of aesthetic revision. Thus Lessing's, distinction, between the arts of succession and of simultaneity, is annulled the assimilation of the reality of time in the field of visuality constituting (in Calder's case) an exceptional mutation. If to sculpture, in the classical sense, the aleatory component associated itself discretely (in the sense of its location in time or space or the surprises of matter) and the artist took care to conceal it, to the new literary, musical, theatrical forms, etc. — it lends a richness which can be expressed only by the genuine emotion of the beholder. Like-wise we can consider that the instrument on which John Cage applied his "accidents" is no longer a piano but something else, the artist attempting the experience of dilating the reality which transfigures it. Between Édouard Hanslick's attack (E d u a r d H a n s l i c k, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, 1891, page 66) of the idea according to which music expresses human feelings and Cage's experiments one cannot draw a line of filiation as each asserts another principle and another conception on music. While knowing not only the world but also the artistic work as a unity of opposites, in its spontaneous development, the modern epoch conquered a new territory propitious to sensitive expression.

Implying the coordination of two languages — of which one easily reveals its double articulation (in significant and distinct units) constituting the support of the manifestation of the aleatory component — and the second one tries to constitute itself as such in spite of the fact that its own system of significations tends towards the irrepeatable — the aleatory work actually makes use of a metalanguage. It appears as a structure which tends towards another one, so that analysis discovers here, in its unities, three layers. While examining the happening, which we do not assimilate to the theatre, but to the tendency of the arts towards the performance — these layers prove to be those of the grapheme, the phoneme and the spectacular image of synthesis. The aleatory component, thus, brings along a new number of signs — a spectacular one, *ci-néma* (in the sense used by Passolini), the plastical sign, the poetical sign. We, thus, witness a process of semantic amplification; undermining the static relation between the signifier and the signified, aleator-

⁶ Nello Ponente, *La peinture moderne*, Skira, Basel, 1960, pag. 131.

ism opens the scope of action of transsignificance. Here we come across the verb of an inner language which is conjugated independently of the verb of the narration. The metasyntax which enforces itself, captures the live state of sensitive matter (word, colour, sound), exerting itself formatively.

The morphological peculiarity of the new structures consists in the fact that they signify a process. In this way there is being followed, here as well — with a particular value but in a zone rather ignored so far — the supreme aspiration of art, the expression of movement (and implicitly of its spatial-temporal framework), therefore of the form of existence of matter. It is only partially the expression of the movement of thought and likewise partially the seismogram of consciousness. The symbolical or emotional potential, diminished to the benefit of the spontaneous, neutral, noncommittal effect, indirectly comes to the fore. Taking into consideration the contents of a performance, of the kinetical type, that is to say its human value, we are supposed to keep in view, in accordance with a broader, more dialectical vision on the condition of contemporary man, the conception of the *environment*, which completely wraps up the participating spectator. It is a chromatic surrounding as well as one of linear rhythms which acts upon the spectator along different paths than those (established by psychology) of painting, music or the theatre (hence the irreducibility of this type of performance to them). Ranging above the forms of entertainment verging on farce, the gratuitous visual or sound aggressions, the erotic stimulus, which they may contain, the images can permit the creation of perfectly controlled surroundings, of differentiated climates that is to say they can be placed in the service of that objective tendency of modern art that of simultaneously addressing itself to huge groups as well as to each person individually.

Accepting the assimilation of the aleatory component into modern art as a modality of resuscitating its emotional potential, we also keep in view the danger of its turning to account according to ideals hostile to the progress of the human condition. The Destruction in Art Symposium (London, 1966) featured, in the experiments of Werner Schreib (the cremation of Erhard's portrait), Yoko Ono ("Cut piece", the performance of the cutting of a living model's clothes), Hermann Nitsch (the slaughtering of a sheep over the reclining body of a woman), Ralph Ortiz (concerto on the wires, of a piano by striking them with a living hen — Henny Penny), the propensity of violence, the tendency towards self-destruction, significant on another level, than that of art.⁷

Though it is possible that "the very modern success of cybernetics and automation should made modernity grant superlative value to what is in process of achievement and not to what has already been achieved" (Marcel Breazu, *Modernity and Decadentism in Art*, edition 1963) we cannot but refer to the creation of computers, while dwelling upon the aleatory component of modern art. The art of the computers, serially permutational, aleatory in the premises and in the unselected series of its solutions, is not aleatory in its finality. The aleatory content, marked by the

⁷ A. Charlotte Willard, *Violence and Art* in "Art in America", January-February, 1969.

selection of words of the dictionary, attributed for the making of the autopoems, by sounds, by attacks etc., was crystallized, sedimented in several solutions. The experience of the automated manipulation of linguistic units (making use of the Monte Carlo programmes) performed in several great specialized centres has led to the assertion, to quickly adopted within the circles of aestheticians, that the rejection from the standpoint of nonsense of the autopoems could be applied, with the same right, to dadaism as well⁸.

Even if, by making use of the instrumentarium of informational aesthetics, we identified an aleatory content similar in both cases, the above-mentioned conclusion should not be accepted. In the case of dada literary production the content — in the categorial sense — is *the attitude* (complexly determined) of the authors, the content of the autopoems is reducible to the content of the algorithm. In this respect the aesthetic value of programming would be worth pointing out, but as far as I know this was not insisted upon.

While advancing the idea of the valuation of the aleatory contents, with the means of informational aesthetics, we keep in view the fact that the work of modern art which includes it, does not appear with a given entropy, its very variation being significant for it. The variable redundancy is implied to the work and not to the spectator, which obliges us to appreciate aesthetic information, more *differentiatedly* both as *free information*, relating to accidental association as well as *bound information*, relating to the conditions of the concrete physical system. The entropy will appear both as a physical entropy (determined according to Boltzman's formula) as well as an informational one (the Shannon formula and Max Bense's applications); here we have to mention that the equivalent of the demon of Maxwell (famous for the controversy over the II-nd principle of Thermodynamics) is possible in art.

...Theseus returns a victor. And he feels that the ship is too slow in reaching the shore of his fatherland. He hoists all the sails — both the white ones and the black ones — committing us from the shore, we are watching and judging him, with the entire richness of unity in contradiction, of our being.

⁸ *Die Kunst aus dem Komputter*, Nadolski Publishing House, pag. 14.