Beyond the Grey Zone: The Production of Space in Eastern European Neo-Avantgarde

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Abstract

The spatial metaphor that dominates the historical overviews dedicated to neo-avantgarde art of Eastern Europe from the last decades of state socialism is the "grey zone"—a metaphor deeply rooted in the dichotomies of Cold War discourses, which understood the "socialist space" as being roughly split between an "official" and an "unofficial"/underground/hidden space of dissent. However, the grey zone metaphor fails to account for the diverse, complex, and nuanced ways in which unconventional art practices from the region engaged with a wide range of spaces, from the institutional (and official) ones to spaces of everyday life, delocalized spaces of a likeminded artistic community, and to the space of the image understood outside of the confined territory of traditional practices. By engaging a theoretical perspective drawn from the so-called "spatial turn" in the post-colonial discourse, I will try to argue that the "species of spaces" (Kemp-Welch) defining the neo-avantgarde art practices in the region were not conquering but were producing cultural and socially relevant spaces while blurring/widening the conventional boundaries of art's territory, and that this complexity cannot be understood by relying on the binary terminology of the geopolitical discourses of the Cold War.

Keywords: Eastern European neo-avantgarde, grey zone, heterotopy, socialist space, boundary, uncertain territories

Introduction: The Grey Zone and Its Lack of Shades

The art produced in Central and Eastern Europe in the last decades of state socialism is usually discussed in the recent tradition of art historiography—and within the curatorial discourses considering it—by appealing to one or several of the so-called *great dichotomies*

that generally dominated the (re)writing of the region's history.[1] *Official* versus *unofficial*, *state-approved* versus *state-sanctioned*, (publicly) *visible* versus *hidden*, (politically) *neutral* versus *dissident*, and others, have constituted the binary categories (ramified in a multitude of related subcategories) among which the art of this region was divided. Hierarchies derived then from here, the art production being appreciated as servile or complacent, or, on the contrary, heroic and benefiting a corresponding interest (or lack of) in contemporary art historiography. Not only art was seen through these divisive lenses, of course, but socialist societies in their entirety. The supposition was that, under socialist totalitarian political regimes, the very nature of societies presupposed, somehow axiomatically, the absence of a private sphere, as all the aspects and spaces of the social life were "officially" public, and the public sphere was itself monopolized by the state (Siegelbaum, 2006). Since everything bearing the label *official* was emitted by the regime, it was by default understood as being bad, immoral, repressive, and corrupt. As such, an extensive range of *negative categories* was called to define the spheres of social, political, and cultural life in their whole, a perspective that left no other choice but to exile all that was *normal*, or even *good*, to a series of counter-categories, of opposition with all which represented the *official*. This binary vision and all the dichotomies it generated have their origins in spaces outside socialist societies and/or in periods following the fall of the socialist regimes, in contexts dominated by anti- or post-socialist positions (Haraway, 1991).

Being especially vocal in the Western academic discourse during the Cold War, this binary vision reflected the geopolitical tensions of the time. As an *outsider's view*, this perspective inevitably triggers an incompatibility between the terms of the binary discourses and the everyday realities of socialist societies they were supposed to describe while reproducing, instead, the general coordinates of the (Western) anti-communist propaganda. Being imported or appropriated in post-communist cultural spaces, these binary models produce effects of self-colonization while at the same time generating distortions when it comes to understanding and retrieving the everyday realities, the functioning and dynamics of these societies, and their cultural scenes. In Romania too, as generally everywhere else in the region, this dichotomic understanding of the recent past not only persisted and dominated the mainstream cultural discourses long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but it was taken for granted as representing the historical reality *as such*, and the only filter for attributing value (and making justice) inside the local culture, where it was put to work in its legitimizing powers.

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[1] For an extensive discussion on the binary categories still marking the historical account of Soviet socialism, very relevant also for the Romanian case and other cases from the region, see: Yurchak (2005). *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More.*

Filtered through this binary perspective upon the recent past, those cultural productions of the socialist era that did not reflect the prescriptions of the official political agenda are usually framed either in a more radical or softer version of the dichotomic discourse. The radical version understands all forms of art that were making use of non-traditional media and/or that were taking place in other places than the institutional ones (i.e., galleries or museums) as about some underground, hidden spaces—spaces that were hosting a subversive culture, cultivating an active opposition towards the regime.[2] The softer version of the same dichotomic perspective places all the forms of *non-aligned* art in a large and diffuse *grey zone*—a term whose meaning is utterly unclear, and which is supposed to indicate a form of compromise, or a middle position between the *regime* and the *opposition* (between *black* and *white*).[3] More often than not, the notion of *grey zone* even bears accents of moral sanction, even though the poles of its extremes cannot be clearly outlined, and that it is not obvious which of the two antipodes was more active in generating that *zone*. To what extent might it be possible to trace, especially in the art field, the direct action/influence of the regime, and from what point further might be possible to identify the dissent when, for example, all the exhibitions labeled as *alternative* that happened on the local art scene were transpiring with the support, and in the institutional spaces of the state (i.e., the *official* ones)? If it did exist a *grey zone*, which melted or weaved together the sphere of the regime with the one of its oppositions, what was the amplitude of their intersection, and which one of the two spheres was more active in generating and producing that conjunction? Was this grey zone more of a deliberate product of the *regime* (or tolerated by it), or was it the outcome of a passive opposition that managed to turn to its own advantage weaknesses or failures of the regime's desire to control the whole realm of the social?

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[2] As far as Romania is concerned, I am thinking, especially of the art produced in the late 1970s and 1980s, which is explained mainly through this radical version of the dichotomic discourses, in the writings of Ileana Pintilie (2000), Adrian Guță (2001, 2008) and Magda Cârneci (1996, 2000), as well as in some recent contributions of Magda Predescu (2016) and Caterina Preda (2017).

[3] See, for example, Knudsen, & Frederiksen (Eds.) (2015) *Ethnographies of Grey Zones in Eastern Europe: Relations, Borders and Invisibilities*; Fehérváry (2013) *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary*; Šiklová, Poláčková-Henley & Turner (1990) The "gray zone" and the future of dissent in Czechoslovakia. There is yet no transnational genealogy of the term "grey zone," and various authors point to different sources: either towards ones that treat the socio-political question of the socialist block—as do Šiklová, Poláčková-Henley & Turner, who are citing a samizdat article from Czechoslovakia dated 1989; or towards sources external to this specific space-time frame, but which were also related to repressive political regimes—as, for example, the "grey zone" described by Primo Levi. However, the term did not benefit clarifications and critical insight. At Piotr Piotrowski, the "grey zone" is used mainly in relation to the intellectual and artistic environment of Czechoslovakia (Piotrowski, 2009), when it is not used to refer to Central and Eastern Europe as a whole, in the way the region is reflected from the perspective of the Western canon (Piotrowski, 1999). In the intellectual environment of Romania, the term "grey zone" started to circulate only in the last decade, in debates concerning recent art history, a situation explained by the fact that previous writings were especially considering the antipodes of the dichotomy, drawing a very contrasting black-and-white image of the "official" and the "unofficial" realms.

Was this grey zone emerging from the lenience, from the premeditation, or the incapacity of the regime? Moreover, how can such a theoretical instrument be functional to analyze a social context (along with its intellectual and art scene) where there did not exist a manifest and persistent dissidence, such as the one in Romania: from what could have the grey been formed here? However, the fact that there was no public opposition against the political regime and that the art practices did not programmatically manifest forms of dissent does not mean that the artistic field as a whole should be understood as a visual extension of the dominant ideology as such. In this respect, the *grey zone* is more than a restricting concept when confronted with an artistic context where different (or sometimes even divergent) art forms and ideas were functioning mainly in the frames of the official structures, as it happened on the art scene in Romania. It is an equivocal instrument for such a case.

"Species of Spaces" of Eastern European Neo-Avantgardes

Klara Kemp-Welch observed that theoretical perspectives as the ones which the notion of the *grey zone* also stems from are remnants of an understanding of space in terms of the Cold War. What all these perspectives share is a tendency to ignore the immediate spaces where the artists worked and to consider the physical space as a stenography of the geo-political space (Kemp-Welch, 2015). What the author advances is that the question of space itself should become the instrument through which we are discussing the extremely diverse and fundamentally hybrid forms that are shaping the historical fields of experimental art in Eastern Europe during state socialism and in Latin America during military dictatorships. Kemp-Welch states that the artists in these regions "conquered" and were *operating in* what she calls, after George Perec, new *species of spaces*, which they were using for personal or collective investigations while generating, at the same time, "new forms of agency by repurposing and occupying new spaces" (Kemp-Welch, 2015, p. 1).

A brief list of cartographical landmarks of these new spaces, which can be also identified in the practice of artists who were active in Romania during the last decades of socialism, has to include—maybe in the first place—the spaces that substituted the artist's studio, either as a personal choice motivated by aesthetic explorations or as a compromise solution dictated by contextual constraints.

One of the most used of such studio-surrogate spaces was the artist's home, a place that hosted numerous creative activities, and sometimes even events, which became documented and were occasionally presented in exhibitions. In fact, *the artist working at home* might be certainly considered a *topos* of the art scenes of the former socialist countries, starting mainly from the 1960s. To remain only to a few scattered examples,

I would mention here: the apartment exhibition planned by Tamás Szentjóby and Gábor Altorjay in the middle of the '60s, a precursor of the first happening in Hungary, "The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan)"; the exhibition "First Open Studio" Rudolf Sikora organized in 1970 in his house in Bratislava; the *apartment studios* of Július Koller, Jiři Kovanda or Mladen Stilinović; the "Artpool" archive founded in the '70s by Júlia Klaniczay and György Galántai in their home in Budapest; the situations and actions photographed by Decebal Scriba in his apartment, which he exhibited afterward in several exhibitions dedicated to photography in the second half of the '70[4]; the collective "house pARTy" events, from 1987 and 1988, held in the house of Nadina and Decebal Scriba in Bucharest; Ion Grigorescu documenting his various *domestic*, daily, and artistic actions, as did later on Károly Elekes in Târgu-Mureș, Károly Ferenczi, Rudolf Bone, László Ujvárossy and Dan Perjovschi in Oradea (among others). If, for the majority of the cases in the region of *artists working at home*, they opted for this alternative in its radical version—i.e., completely abandoning any involvement with the official cultural institutions and cultivating instead different para-/non-institutional models of artistic production, especially in Czechoslovakia and Hungary—however, in Romania very few of the similar examples can testify for such an exclusive engagement.[5] On the contrary, here the existing examples indicate that *the artist working at home* was a coextensive topos for *the artist working in the studio*, and both were pursued as complements of the artists' activity in the official institutional sphere, not as indifference towards it, because in most of the cases the results of the artists' work made at home were exhibited in the state-supported galleries. For example, I would cite one of the most vehiculated cases from Romania, the home-action "Red Apples for Lia," staged by Dan Perjovschi in his apartment in Oradea in 1988, which he exhibited in the same year, in the form of documentary photographs, at the National Youth Biennial "Atelier 35" in Baia-Mare.[6] The apartment installation was visited by some of Perjovschi's colleagues, artists from Oradea, but the event did not remain a closed-circuit one, did not pertain to an *underground*, *isolated*, or invisible artistic sphere, since it was presented, documented by photography, in a large-scale official national exhibition.

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[4] A series of group exhibitions exploring the use of photography in the practice of visual artists was held in the second half of the 1970s at the "Friedrich Schiller" House for Culture in Bucharest.

[5] Among these are the *house pARTy* events and some of the actions carried by artists mentioned above. However, the reason for not displaying these events in exhibitions was that there existed no opportunities for doing it and not the artists' intention of articulating a critique of the institutional system by forging different models for art production and distribution.

[6] In this home-action, Perjovschi covered completely the walls and furniture of his apartment with white paper, on which he drew a multitude of synthetic and symbolic figures, along with textual messages, which referred to his love relationship with Lia Perjovschi. *Red Apples for Lia* is discussed, among very few other examples from Romania, in Bryzgel, A. (2017). *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*. Manchester University Press.

As such, Perjovschi's action "Red Apples for Lia" marked out an independent space—that of the artist's home, as a different space from the ones traditionally designated as belonging to the art's institutional system (the *proper* studio, the gallery, the museum)—that extended or substituted the studio as an exclusive and privileged space dedicated to the creation of art. At the same time, the artist working at home had, in this example, as in most examples from Romania, the function of consolidating a *continuity* between the profession and the daily, private life of the artist by erasing the lines that would presumably separate them. This function of assuring continuities was especially significant and active on that artistic scene, and it would be false to mistake it for the isolation of the creative work from an oppressive social and political context. The displacement of the work made in a domestic environment into the gallery space, even if this displacement was made by means of photographic documents, shows an effort to ensure a continuum between the private space of the artist as a potential source and host of artistic acts, and the institutional space, and not an effort of isolating and delimiting enclaves of artistic *freedom* out of the artist's private space.

Another category of space that substituted the artist's studio was the workplace of the artist, in its turn a sort of commonplace for Eastern Europe's art scenes. The majority of the artists were, at least in Romania, *workers in a worker's state*[7], being employed in full-time jobs in various institutions, factories, or the education system, in positions more or less compatible with their training, as useful citizens in a society that was centered, at least propagandistically, on production and efficiency. In the logic of that system, the creative endeavors of the artists were secondary activities to be pursued in their free time, the main context where the activity of the artist-citizen belonged to being in one of the state's institutions/factories/craft cooperatives. It is in one such cooperative that Miklós Onucsán staged his action "C'est ici que j'arrive tout le matins" in 1982 and, in the following year, the one titled "The Limit of the Working Area." In the same cooperative, Onucsán found some scrap materials that he would use in various works, such as "Hygiène de L'Art, Contre Culture" (1987)—where he stamped a former cover canvas for the printing table of the factory with the stamp of the French artist Hervé Fischer; or his work "Expression of the Human Body" (1986)—where he used plastic doll heads rejected, due to deformations, from the production process. In 1983–84, in a different workplace, a school for children with special needs, László Ujvárossy was initiating his experiment "Hand / Portrait," exhibiting its results in those years and debuting thus a multiple-stage artistic process which he would carry out over the following years.

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[7] I'm using here the title of the renowned book of Haraszti, M. (1978). *A Worker in a Worker's State.*

Also, in the interval between 1978 and 1980, Károly Elekes carried several actions and happenings in his place of work, a craft cooperative in Târgu-Mureș, which he documented by photographs and later exhibited. As is the case for all the other artists cited above, both of Onucsán's actions were also made in plain sight, during working hours, in the courtyard of the cooperative, being photographed by one of his colleagues. By hanging a placard on his neck reading "C'est ici que j'arrive tout le matins," Onucsán posed for the camera, in an action by which he declared his status of an artist within the very daily context that seemed to disregard it, by considering him only as any other laboring man. Still, there is no self-victimization in his protest, but rather, strong signs of adaptation and negotiation as ongoing processes, and the phrase on his placard might be sub-textually continued as: "It's here where I arrive every morning, but this doesn't prevent me from consistently carrying out my creative work here as well." It is this very meaning of the inscription on Onucsán's placard that is confirmed in some of his later works, including his action from 1983, "The Limit of the Working Area." Here, he pursued several attempts to pose in a stance similar to that of the "Vitruvian Man" of Leonardo da Vinci, making use of a continuous ribbon, stretched by his hands and feet in a rectangular shape, on the background of an immense circle of an industrial wooden reel. The series of photos from this action show him attempting to enact the correct position while the wind was blowing away his ribbon, and he was failing to discipline his body in rendering the ideal prototype he was trying to mimic. But far from reflecting a critique of those imperfect, improvised, and un-ideal means he was working with, or the context he was working in, Onucsán's action was operating in elevating those means and that context to that of valid and fruitful ingredients for artistic practice, by formulating a *paragon* between what he had at hand, and a major reference of the canonical history of art. All of these actions were opening up intervals, instead of tracing delimiting lines, intervals that established continuities and ensured the mobility of ideas and negotiation of the rules, both in what regards the designated functions of the physical and abstract spaces they inhabited, as in the conventional territory of art. As his intervention shows, the *limit* in its title makes it an allegory of adaptation and circulation rather than one of isolation and separation, which is equally true for all the other examples of the artists making art in their non-artistic places of work from Romania, at least.

Besides their homes and places of work, the other spaces where artists were staging experiments and interventions may also be understood as extensions or substitutes of the studio and, at the same time, as cancellations of the studio's status as a privileged space that hosts and preconditions the artistic creation. The nomadism of the artistic practice benefited from a significant interest among artists in the region, and it spread in all the spaces of daily life, signaling the urgency the artists felt to integrate among ordinary people:

to become part of the crowds populating the streets, the parks and squares, thus bringing art closer to life in a direct, raw manner, unmediated by any of the official filters and, usually, without special labels or explanations that it was art happening there. The artists' interest to displace artmaking into the ordinary context of public places was so wide-spread—and took so many forms—that it is difficult to restrain the examples at only a few. I would still mention here, briefly, Gyula Konkoly's "Five Identical Persons Apply Here!" (1969–79), Miklós Erdely's "Two Persons Who Decisively Influenced My Life" (1972), and László Lakner's "Scenes from a Workman's Life" from Hungary; the actions-exhibitions organized by The Group of Six Artists on the streets of Zagreb in the second half of the '70s, and the public actions of Tomislav Gotovac, in the former Yugoslavia; Milan Knížák's series of street action from the 1960s, and Jiři Kovanda's *invisible* artistic actions in public spaces from the '70s, in the former Czechoslovakia; Decebal Scriba's urban actions, such as "The Gift" (1974), various happenings and public spaces interventions made by the group MAMŰ in Târgu-Mureș in late '70s and early '80s, in Romania.

Besides the populated, urban place, the artists in the region systematically engaged in working outdoors, in and with the natural environment. In Romania, in particular, we can find several such interventions since the end of the '60, in the practice of Paul Neagu, Horia Bernea, Mihai Olos, Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, Ana Lupaș or the Sigma Group in Timişoara, as well as in the activity of the group MAMŰ in Târgu-Mureș in late '70s and early '80s. In all of these examples, too, irrespective of the fact whether they were acknowledged as art by the passers-by or not, the artists sought to integrate more easily into the everyday, into the ordinary, and by this, they created new spaces that were cul-turally meaningful, that were opening up breaches for continuity, circulation, and mobility into areas that were usually seen as separated—i.e., that of unconventional art, and that of a public space confiscated by oppressive political regimes. Through their wanderings and creative interventions that happened in places of ordinary life or natural environments, the artists opened up new cultural territories and produced testimonies about experiences of the space in which they lived—a space they usually perceived as a continuous entity that was shaped by transitions, returns, and intermediations, the very same space that is completely obliterated when the metaphor of the *grey zone* is put to work.

Moreover, a different kind of spaces, but equally rich and fervent, were those of likeminded artistic communities: more often than not, communities that were dispersed in geographic parameters but which nonetheless maintained a vivid dialogue and joined efforts in orga-nizing events and exhibitions, working as artists' networks that transgressed the physical and geopolitical confines. In some cases, these de-localized communities opened up a space of communication and exchange of ideas in the particular frames of mail art.

Finally, all of the spaces listed briefly and illustrated by very few examples here have to be understood as coalescent with the space of the image. In Romania, the space of the image had, in the decades of late socialism, a dominant consensual understanding confined to the conventional mediums of art, in their canonical traditions, an understanding that did not derive from the political ideology but was constituent to a predilection for the conservatism of the local culture. In this respect, this last space, that of the image, gathers a large variety of questions regarding representation and visuality, tradition and novelty, authority over the field of art, and others, and the debates that referred to the space of the image were the essential stake for all the activities the artists carried in all the other places.

The Creation of Space

If Kemp-Welch speaks of artists *conquering*, *occupying*, and *operating in* new spaces, I believe that it would be much more productive to discuss the artists *creating/producing* these new species of spaces, and the forms of mediation, negotiation, and circulation of the artists used in order to open up the diverse micro-spaces which are now configuring the cartography of experimental / neo-avant-garde art of the *former East*. A space that is (or might be) conquered—as Kemp-Welch understands it—is a passive, static space, one that stands there already made; it is a given. However, precisely such a comprehension of space was convincingly contested from an interdisciplinary perspective, along with what was called *the spatial turn* in postcolonial critical thinking (Warf & Arias, 2009; Teverson & Upstone, 2011; Withers, 2009).

With a genealogy indicating Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre as pioneers of this *spatial overturning* (Soja, 1999), the new thinking on and by means of space states, as its fundamental thesis, that space and place are not given, but *made*: they are created through the social production of lived spaces or as results of inter-relational actions. As such, space and place are in a constant process of re-creation, of practice and making, a process which assigns them a mobile and relational status (Massey, Allen & Sarre, 1999). The new way of looking at space meant a breakup from the dualism that used to dominate the geographical imagination—in other words, the binarity formed by the notion of the *perceived space* (or the material space, or the First Space, in Lefebvre's term), with the notion of the *conceived space* (or the space that is imagined or represented, the Second Space of Lefebvre) (Lefebvre, 1992).

Edward W. Soja coined a *thirdspace*, developed from Lefebvre's *trialectic of spatiality* and from Foucault's notion of heterotopy, a Thirdspace which he identified in what Lefebvre called the *lived space* (Soja, 1996). This *thirding* Soja advanced is not searching for

a middle position between the two extremes of the initial dichotomy but presents itself as an alternative that reconstitutes, develops and, at the same time, goes beyond the original binarity. The *thirdspace*, as a lived space, is a multifaceted and contradictory one, a space that is able to support multiple representations. It is a space that can be investigated through binary oppositions but, at the same time, it is also a space

> …where *il y a toujours l'Autre*, where there are always 'other' spaces, heterotopologies, paradoxical geographies to be explored. It is a meeting ground, a site of hybridity […] and moving beyond entrenched boundaries, a margin or edge where ties can be severed and also where new ties can be forged. It can be mapped but never captured in conventional cartographies; it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practiced and fully *lived*. (Soja, 1999, p. 276)

Through the lens of the *thirdspace*, all the *other* spaces that hosted collective or individual situations, events, happenings, and artistic interventions in the non-conventional art from Romania (and the region) were marking out a dislocation or an expansion of the traditionally designated territories for art's production and presentation (i.e., the studio, the gallery, the museum). As such, these spaces became as many intervals of mediation and negotiation, of displacement and return, generating new meanings and tensions. They largely reflect what Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro meant by the double metaphor of *migratory aesthetics*—a movement of transportation/instability, followed by a movement of productive tensions (Bal & Hernández-Navarro, 2011). The non-conventional spaces of the Eastern European art scenes were political spaces in the literal sense that Bal and Hernández-Navarro understand the *political character*, distinct from *politics*, as a preservation of the conflictual nature of the social life in general (Bal & Hernández-Navarro, 2011). They were political spaces precisely because they were spaces in which art was being made, spaces in which the antagonisms and the critical negotiable tensions were able to coexist, where meanings were able to be recalled, suggested, involved, and were able to function without necessarily being transmitted (Bal & Hernández-Navarro, 2011).

Even if Bal and Hernández-Navarro speak of migratory aesthetics as an attribute of the present global culture, I believe this metaphor of the circulation might also be revealing at a micro-scale and in relation to the experimental artistic production from socialist times because the two movements described above—that of transportation/instability, and that of productive tensions—can be identified as dynamic components and as agents that were activating all the species of spaces where art happened, turning them into *political* spaces. In this view, they shouldn't be understood as marginal spaces

in a hierarchical sense, whether we are talking about a political-cultural hierarchy, a geographical, or a geopolitical one. However, these spaces were margins, that is, hybrid and indefinite spaces, wilful chosen by the artists for the openness they offered.[8]

Even if the notion of *grey zone*, in its structural ambiguity, could have contained such a conceptual extension as the one drawn by the spatial *thirding* Soja proposed and could have well tolerated the status of a *place of manoeuvre* that hosts and facilitates the transportation and the productive tensions generated by the migratory aesthetics, it seems far more cautious to entirely abandon this notion, in order to stop perpetuating the conceptual distortion it carries with it. In fact, the only valence of the grey zone metaphor that must be preserved is precisely the spatial one because the problem of introducing the immediate, daily, *lived* space in the territory of art was a recurring idea in the majority of the nonconventional interventions made by the artists of the region. While this idea overlaps in surprising ways with the theory of *thirdspace*, it also fails to be contained in a binary conceptual model.

On the other hand, if we choose to regard the *regime* less as a monolithic and abstract structure infused by bureaucracy, ideology, and fixed rules, and we see it instead as a structure that was formed, mediated, and held together by people, at every social and institutional level, then the *regime* itself reveals its own *identity* of lived space. In Romania, at least, the immediate space where the artists lived and worked intersected with the *regime* as lived space, and these encounters did not, most of the times, have the impact and spectacular appearance of a clash of contraries, nor did they leave the impression of dissolution in a neutral and indiscernible grey. Quite the opposite, they had the air of some continuous and cautious groping, translation, transposition, and intermediation of a series of different (but not necessarily opposed) meanings, indicating mostly the conflictual nature of social life in general, towards the productive latent tensions it contains, and which art is capable and eager to capitalize.

The Space of the Boundary

The status of margins—of art's territory, foremost—of these *other spaces* of nonconventional art, and their migratory/motive functions meet in the notion of boundary—as it was theorized by Inge E. Boer—which is a specific state of the *thirdspace* (2006). First of all, for Boer, the boundary is the theoretical instrument that leaves aside the structures of thought founded on binary oppositions and thus makes visible rich, diverse, multifaceted,

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[8] In Lefebvre's view, *the margin* appears as a place of passage, of encounter, and of negotiation, a place of hybridization. For Bell Hooks, the margin is a space of radical openness—the author highlights an essential difference between that marginality imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance, as a place of radical openness and possibility (Hooks, 1990).

and chaotic relations that compose the much larger spaces contained between the poles of any binarity. Considering binary oppositions to be reductive, Boer proposes to shift the theoretical perspective towards analyzing the ways in which a different interval is created: a space—rhetorical and equally cultural—where opposition leaves room for negotiation, a space situated *in between*, which functions as a relay, as a "contact zone where different beliefs about life and what it means meet or collide" (Boer, 2006, pp. 2–3).

To Boer, boundaries are not fixed and empty *lines* that install and support separations but are flexible and inhabited *spaces* where, by means of, and in the name of which processes of negotiations can take place. In her analysis, the boundaries lose their anonymity, along with the impersonal character and the truth value usually assigned to them—they start to exhibit, instead, the mechanisms and human activities that are constantly building them. As such, boundaries get to be analyzed not as much in *what* they are as in the *function* they fulfill—that of a place of negotiation (Boer, 2006).

Such a negotiation, as Boer explains, has a linguistic nature, language itself being at the same time a boundary and a space for negotiation, and *translation* standing as an example for producing boundaries as functional spaces. However, this function, the author states, becomes even more obvious when it is composed together with the visual equivalents of the linguistic expression. The human mediator involved in crossing the boundary is the very medium that transforms (translates) the message/codes he is carrying with him on one side and the other side of the border, and the *meeting* is the concept that makes it possible to analyze boundaries as spaces in which events and translations can take place (Boer, 2006).

Particularly complex intermediary zones, boundaries, are, in Boer's understanding, *uncertain territories*, flexible and temporary spaces that cannot be made to disappear but which can better fulfill their ordering roles if we accept their existence, along with their uncertain state. The spaces of boundaries may be material ones—a window, the desert, the fashion; as well as abstract ones—theories or ideas in their transcultural circulation; or invisible ones—the rules that govern any space inhabited by people. However, in any case, they do not pertain to a natural order but are *constructed* along processes from which a series of general rules can be discerned—rules that apply to any boundary space be it physical or immaterial. Precisely these processes of constructing the boundaries are then eluded and depersonalized for the boundary to appear afterwards as a given of a natural order. However, these same processes are also the ones that have to be questioned in order to reveal the boundary's status of *created space*, a space that separates worlds of difference but which is itself a world of difference (Boer, 2006).

Species of Spaces in Eastern European Neo-Avantgarde: The Production of Uncertain Territories

I believe that the essential and common function fulfilled by all those *other* spaces the artists created through their artistic production beyond the traditional frames of the art's territory was that of opening up some places for translation and negotiation of the codes and norms in the form of boundaries as *uncertain territories*. Also, the fact that those artistic *species of spaces* shared the status of functional and productive boundaries is obvious from the very impossibility of delimiting them by clear lines of separation—the same impossibility that initially pushed those spaces into the diffuse category of *grey zones*.

The boundaries may gain a graphic expression (lines) or a material one (barriers, fences, walls) only when two distinct entities of some sort meet but do not mix (or their mixture is prohibited). In the Romanian art scene of the last decades of socialism, there usually cannot be identified such pure contraries that existed without mixing, conditioning, or modifying each other. Quite the contrary: the large majority of examples of nonconventional art's practice and exhibiting reveals territories that host reciprocal conditioning and altering between the different (and not necessarily opposed) elements involved—those pertaining to the *official* realm and those that did not in any direct way. After the intricated and continuous processes of negotiation took place, each of the elements involved became more flexible and transformed. Those territories of the boundary may have belonged to any of the realms they had to separate, like Derrida's *parergon*, but they could also be formed by overlaps between various realms.

There are many boundaries, many crossings of those boundaries, many translations and returns, and many negotiations that can be traced on the local non-conventional art scene, the institutional (and non-institutional) frames being also constantly negotiated, along with the boundaries of art and with what was designated as its exteriority. And it is precisely because they were not born from a program of institutional critique (in its Western terms) that these *exits* the artists took to unconventional spaces have to be connected with the immediate places where they lived and worked and with their daily existence, for it was there their experiments and creative explorations were searching to be integrated, and accepted, in their social and institutional reality. Without programmatically aiming to implement some strategies of opposition towards cultural institutions (by questioning their legitimacy) or towards the political system (by questioning its authority), the wanderings the artists undertook in other spaces were exploring the productive tensions that sprung when their practice interacted with these spaces, irrespective of the fact that these wanderings were fuelled by an indifference towards the institutions and politics,

or by dissent, discontent, frustration, and discomfort. A similar strategy was functioning, in the majority of the cases, in the aesthetic field as well—in what I called the space of the image. Here, the fossilized conventional dimensions of art were the ones to be challenged by a constant questioning of their loopholes and a flexibilization of their rigid outlines in order to transform these dimensions into (more) open grounds for negotiations and translations. By tackling this area of the local art scene through the theoretical filter of the boundary, it is possible to identify continuities produced by the artists there, where the dichotomic perspectives showed only fractures/segregations. Continuities in the form of *uncertain territories* that are not limiting but are opening up, which are not smoothing down the contradictions nor canceling the oppositions, but are offering the human (and artistic) existence *the place* where to metabolize and experience them.

I believe that artistic life described by the unconventional practices of the local art scene has to be understood as a continuum that negotiates and conciliates the numerous contradictions and inadvertences it confronted and which, to a significant extent, formed it. In that continuum, the macro-scaled polarities of the geopolitical discourses may have had some representations in the artists' imaginary, vaguer, or clearer; however, they did not have the concreteness, the impact, and the urgency of the immediate reality where they had to practice and be accepted as artists, in their own terms. The immediate reality did not reflect directly, at the level of daily existence, the macropolitical polarities even if it reflected too many other contradictions that defined it and did not always result straight from the register of the official politics. The experience the artists had with those other spaces was a path breaker in the local visual culture. But it was, at the same time, one that happened in very loose frames: the artists always understood their activity outside the conventional spaces of making or exhibiting art as a complement to their activity in conventional institutional spaces. The boundaries the artists produced were the places where their negotiation with their daily present realities took place, the very spaces they were using to connect to and integrate into the context they lived in; places which did not ensure a separation of antagonistic ideas, territories, and entities, but guaranteed instead different forms of symbiosis that enabled distinctive elements to become mutually constitutive.

If the *grey zone*, and the binary terminology fuelling it, focused especially on the relations between the art practice and the status quo, the boundary (as *thirdspace*) is a theoretical instrument that encourages us to consider the relations art has with itself, and with its immediate context (be it a local, national, or transnational one), by recording the degrees and variations of scale and intensity with which the political factor interfered and was efficient

in the social field. The metaphor of *uncertain territory* preserves the spatial reference of the *grey zone* metaphor, without perpetuating the antagonistic patterns or the moral sanction note of the *compromise* the latter did. Even if it is not easier to define than the *grey zone*, the uncertain territory of the boundary increases the degree of unpredictability and lack of concreteness of the *space* in discussion and, at the same time, diversifies and enhances the unclear rules, the over turnings, and the surprises populating it. Yet, its efficiency as a theoretical instrument is significantly increased by the fact that, as Boer explained, the boundaries are not relevant for *what* they are, or for *where* they are situated, as they are for their analysis as functions. Space itself becoming the theoretical lens through which the diverse and fundamental hybrid forms of experimental art in Eastern Europe in the decades of state socialism are discussed is only possible if space is understood as a function, not as an object of study—as a generic, variable, and indefinite site, marked by different movements of passage, of transgressing, of transporting, and transformation. By putting the concept of boundary in use as an analytical instrument, we may study the functions that were activated in those *other* spaces by means of artistic interventions. The boundary may operate then as a conceptual filter able to analyze the very mechanisms through which diverse normative limits were imposed, identify their sources, and understand how they were eluded, adapted, and managed by the artists. This function of the boundary did not belong to a specific place but it could be activated anywhere. It generated, where it became operative, new spaces where norms gained concreteness, exhibited gaps, and uncovered their status of codes that could be translated.

If we accept Canclini's argument:

> art lost its space when it left the home of its language, which was the painting; when it questioned the institution that contained it, which was the museum; and when it shared with globalized cultures the experience that the national model is insufficient to encompass social imaginaries, (2011, p. 27)

then the experimentation and negotiation in such a drift, in the absence of a fixed own space (and in the refusal of one), is the very code through and for the sake of which the artists created the *species of spaces*, the uncertain territories that map a large amount of the local neo-avantgarde art of the late socialist era.

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