



ORIGINAL PAPER

Art and Democracy. The Body in Post-Communist Romanian Art

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Abstract:

I will analyze the transformations of the representation of the body in post-communist Romanian art, arguing that this visual mutation reflects and, at the same time, contributes to the reconfiguration of the democratic imaginary after 1989. During the communist period, the body was integrated into an ideological iconographic apparatus: either idealized in the socialist-realist paradigm of the heroic worker, or disciplined and normed through strict biopolitical control, which particularly affected corporeality. The official body was a total, productive body, subordinated to the abstract community of "the people."

After 1989, in the context of the transition to democracy and the emergence of a plural public space, the body becomes a place of vulnerability, fragmentation and critical exposure. The practices of artists such as Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu or Adrian Ghenie mark a break with the monumental aesthetics of the communist period: the body no longer functions as a symbol of political order, but as a space of traumatic memory, identity instability and confrontation with recent history. If in communism the body was represented as a stable and teleologically oriented form, in post-communist art it often appears distorted, precarious, or self-reflexive.

I will argue that this transformation is not only stylistic, but structurally political: the transition from the collective, ideologically normed body to the singular and vulnerable body corresponds to the mutation from a totalitarian regime of visibility to a democratic one, characterized by pluralism and contestation. In this sense, the representation of the body in post-communist Romanian art becomes a privileged indicator of the democratization process and the reconfiguration of the relationship between the individual, community and power.

Keywords: *Art, Democracy, Body, Post-communism, Romanian art.*

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Introduction

The relationship between art and politics is often thought of in terms of reflection or representation: art would mirror the political realities of an era, translating them into images, symbols, or visual narratives. At the same time, art can be used as an ideological tool. Also, the way in which corporeality is represented in a society can reflect the type of political regime that governs it. In these conditions, the body becomes a social construction and a symbolic support of power. Political regimes do not only govern institutions, but shape bodies: they discipline them, expose them, hide them or transform them into emblems of the social order. Starting from these premises, this article investigates the transformations of the representation of the body in post-Decembrist Romanian art, in direct relation to the transition from the communist to the democratic regime. The central hypothesis is that this transformation is not only stylistic or thematic, but structurally political. We are witnessing a shift from the exemplary and ideologized body of communism to the fragmented, vulnerable and plural body of the post-1989 period, which also reflects a reconfiguration of the regime of visibility in Romanian society.

1. Art, Politics, and Regimes of Visibility

Art and politics are closely linked, not only at the level of the artist's message, which can sometimes be an instrument of political propaganda, but we can also see a kind of affinity between the two domains at the level of perception and visibility. While politics determines who can speak, who can represent, and who can participate in public life; art, in turn, configures what can be seen, felt, and imagined. Therefore, some changes at the political or ideological level can be transferred to the aesthetic and art can become a carrier of the political message, sometimes even an instrument of censorship.

In Jacques Rancière's opinion, politics is, above all, a "distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*): a system of sensible evidence that determines what is common, who belongs to the community, and what forms of experience become recognizable (Rancière, 2004: 12). In other words, the political order is always a perceptual order. We can deduct from this that art is not a secondary domain to politics, because in addition to the role of sometimes supporting existing politics, it can also destabilize it by introducing new forms of visibility. For Rancière, the "politics of art" does not consist in slogans or in the direct thematization of social conflict, but in the capacity of works to rearrange the relationships between the visible, the invisible, the possible and the impossible (Rancière, 2010: 140–151). Thus, an image, an artistically represented body, an absence or a deformation can have a political effect precisely because it modifies collective perception.

Depending on the political regime, totalitarian or democratic, we can also witness different regimes of visibility. In totalitarian regimes, the distribution of the sensible tends towards closure and homogenization. The state aspires to control not only institutions, but also forms of representation, visual memory, etc. It is no coincidence that Claude Lefort defined totalitarianism as the attempt to suppress the constitutive divisions of society and to represent the people as a compact unit. In totalitarian society, writes Lefort, power seeks to merge with law and knowledge, and society is imagined as "a body without cracks" (Lefort, 1986: 279–280). By contrast, modern democracy is founded on the impossibility of such a total embodiment. Lefort's famous formula, "the place of power is an empty place," means that no person, class, or party can claim to be the definitive embodiment of the social whole (Lefort, 1988: 17). In democracy, power is temporary, it is contestable

and is no longer identified with the body of the ruler. We are witnessing here a different regime of visibility, where conflict, plurality of images and interpretations are admitted. Visibility is no longer monopolized by the state.

Piotr Piotrowski argues that the experience of totalitarianism produced specific artistic forms in Eastern European countries, marked by the tension between political control on the one hand and strategies of symbolic resistance on the other. Unlike in the West, here we witness a continuous tension between art and politics, as artistic practice was frequently defined by negotiation with power. (Piotrowski, 2009: 15–34). After 1989, art in Eastern Europe became a laboratory of the new democratic public sphere. “Democracy,” he notes, “is not a finished political form but a field of permanent negotiation, conflict and visibility” (Piotrowski, 2012: 9). Post-communist art is important precisely because it makes visible the conflicts that official discourses tend to neutralize: inequality, traumatic memory, marginality, precariousness. This tension can also be observed in the Romanian artistic space, where under communism, official art participated in the regime of centralized visibility, to confirm party ideology, but after 1989, the state's monopoly on the image collapsed.

Returning to Rancière's idea that any community is organized through a “distribution of the sensible”, that is, through a system that decides what can be seen, who can appear publicly, and what types of experience acquire legitimacy (Rancière, 2004: 12–13), it can be stated that the totalitarian regime of visibility is characterized by the tendency to monopolize this distribution. The state not only administers political institutions, but also the field of images, memory and representations. It decides what is legitimate and what has meaning, sometimes even what has artistic value. In a totalitarian system, plurality is perceived as a threat. Therefore, as Claude Lefort shows, totalitarianism seeks to suppress differences and present the people as a compact unit, reconciled in the figure of the party-state (Lefort, 1986: 279–281). Power no longer appears as a separate and contestable instance, but as an organic expression of the social whole. From this logic also derives its specific iconography: healthy, productive, typified bodies, heroic figures, ordered masses, hyper-visible leaders. Michel Foucault has shown that political modernity produces “docile bodies,” that is, useful and obedient bodies, shaped by school, army, factory, hospital, or prison (Foucault, 1977: 135-169). In Foucault's terms, the body becomes simultaneously an object of discipline and a symbolic support of biopolitics: it must be useful, obedient, and recognizable according to the norms of the state (Foucault, 1977: 135-169).

In democracy we witness a different regime of visibility. Here a definitive image of society is no longer possible, as in totalitarianism, but there is room for uncertainty, incompleteness, plurality. Lefort's formula regarding the “empty place of power” expresses precisely the fact that no instance can permanently embody the community, and the public space remains open to interpretations, but also to conflict (Lefort, 1988: 17-26). Consequently, democratic visibility is plural, admitting differentiations of class, gender, identity and orientation, without reducing them to a single image. The two regimes of visibility, specific to totalitarianism and democracy, also lead to different ways of representing corporeality. If the totalitarian regime aestheticizes consensus and order, the democratic regime legitimizes the representation of fissure, ambivalence and contestation. In art, this mutation translates into the abandonment of the exemplary body and the emergence of the precarious, fragmented and vulnerable body.

2. The Body as an Ideological Instrument in Communism

In communist regimes the body becomes a strategic territory of power. Political power controls the individual body and uses symbols of the collective body, by concretely disciplining individuals, on the one hand, and by producing an official image of society as a unitary, healthy and future-oriented organism, on the other. In this sense, the body functions as a means of legitimizing ideology. In Michel Foucault's view, modern power "invests the body," trains it, optimizes it, and integrates it into a system of political and economic utility (Foucault, 1977: 25–26). In Eastern European communism, this investment takes on a particular intensity, as the party-state claims not only the governance of institutions but the integral shaping of social life. In communist Romania, the body was placed at the center of official visual rhetoric. The regime produced a "pedagogy of the gaze," through which citizens were trained to perceive reality through the authorized images of the state (Cordali, 2023: 4-8). The totalitarian gaze was selective and normative and decided which bodies could be exposed and how. For example, posters, press illustrations, films, official works of art ideologically exposed corporeality. We are talking about the body of the worker, the soldier or the leader as expressions of the socialist order. Thus, "visibility itself became a mechanism of discipline" (Cordali, 2023: 27).

For Lefort, totalitarianism attempts to eliminate the separation between state and society, between power and the social body, imagining the community as a transparent totality (Lefort, 1986: 279-281). The body thus becomes the privileged metaphor of political unity. Although they are intended to be collective representations of popular enthusiasm, orderly crowds, synchronized workers, and sports parades in reality visually transpose the idea of a unitary and orderly society. Consequently, the individual counts only as an organ of the whole.

In Ceaușescu's Romania, the leader's body was publicly displayed, contributing to the cult of personality. Through the official portrait displayed in all institutions, Ceaușescu became hyper-visible and occupied the symbolic center of the community. A symbolic coincidence was thus created between the leader and the people. We can see here a confirmation of Lefort's idea that totalitarianism seeks to reunite imaginary power and society in a single political body (Lefort, 1988: 17-20). At the social level, the body becomes an instrument. After Decree 770 of 1966, the female body was transformed into a demographic resource of the state. Birth rate became a political objective, and motherhood a patriotic obligation. Here, the state intervened in reproduction, sexuality, and private life. Foucault had observed that modern power operates through imperatives of growth, health, and reproduction (Foucault, 1978: 137-139). The Romanian communist regime provides a radical example of this trend.

Moreover, in communism the body is associated with productivity. The worker and the peasant appeared as vigorous, serene, oriented towards work and solidarity (Ghenea, 2014). As Piotr Piotrowski notes in his analysis of Eastern European art, socialist realism produced a "visual utopia of social transparency," in which real antagonisms were absorbed into an optimistic image of progress (Piotrowski, 2009: 52-57). The official body knows no failure, illness, or fatigue; it is always represented as vigorous, energetic, and productive.

Consequently, artistic representation was called upon to confirm ideological norms: robust bodies, clear gestures, monumental compositions, affirmative expressions. Vulnerability, deformation, eroticism became suspect. That is precisely why, after 1989, we will witness a change in the representation of corporeality, and art will be able to make visible the fragility, traumatic memory and plurality of real bodies.

3. The Body in Democracy: Vulnerability and Plurality

With the collapse of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, we are also witnessing a change in representations of corporeality. Now the body becomes an expression of individual autonomy and difference. We could say that in post-communism the body is both emancipated and precarious. Democratization implies the recognition of the person as a subject of law, holder of civil liberties and private autonomy. This change directly affects corporeality, which regains freedom of movement, sexual freedom and expression, which had previously been confiscated by the state. In Claude Lefort's terms, democratic society can no longer be represented as a single political body, because it is structurally plural and traversed by irreducible differences (Lefort, 1988: 17-26). Consequently, the body no longer appears as a simple organ of the whole, but as the legitimate seat of singularity.

Madalina Asavei states that, in the postcommunist context, the body remains a “site of salvation and resistance” — a place of symbolic salvation, but also of critical resistance (Asavei, 2020: 131). After decades of ideological control, we are witnessing a symbolic recovery of the body's autonomy. But, at the same time, it retains the memory of previous discipline and reacts to new forms of constraint. It is precisely this double condition that explains why corporality occupies a central place in the postcommunist social imaginary (Asavei, 2020: 131).

Moreover, democratization was accompanied by the reconfiguration of public space, as squares, streets and city centers once again became places of assembly, protest and collective expression. Zoran Poposki observes that in the postsocialist city “spaces of democracy are produced through embodied practices of presence, protest and participation” (Poposki, 2011: 715). In other words, democracy is also visible in the bodies that gather in public space, protest, and thus become visible. We can speak of a performative dimension of democracy, in agreement with Judith Butler, for whom the gathering of bodies in public space constitutes a form of political discourse in itself (Butler, 2015: 58–72). In a post-communist context, the bodily presence in the street compensates for the precariousness of democratic institutions still in formation and reaffirms the sovereignty of citizens.

However, although the changes in the representation of corporeality are visible, we cannot speak of a radical mutation. Cristian Preda emphasizes that postcommunism does not mean a pure rupture, but the slow reconfiguration of inherited structures, including social and institutional practices (Preda, 2011: 598-601). Mihnea Rațiu shows that the contemporary art world and post-communist cultural institutions developed in a tense climate, marked by institutional transition, precariousness and slow adaptation to Western models (Rațiu, 2016: 256-272). Thus, the democratic body appears in a still uncertain space, crossed by economic inequalities and identity uncertainty. Carmen Stoenescu also notes the existence of “continuities and contrasts” between the communist and post-communist periods, suggesting that new forms of freedom coexist with old mental and institutional mechanisms (Stoenescu, 2011: 687-699). Applied to corporeality, this thesis may suggest that the autonomy of the body is always negotiated.

In conclusion, the body in post-communist democracies is neither just an expression of emancipation, nor can it be reduced to the image of simple precariousness. Representations of corporality are tuned to the tension of the moment, oscillating between freedom and vulnerability, between civic participation and economic pressure. If in communism the body was visible only to the extent that it served as an ideological

instrument, in post-communism it becomes visible through difference, protest, performance and individual expression. It is precisely this pluralization of corporality that constitutes one of the decisive signs of democratization.

4. The Body in Post-Communist Art in Romania: Memory, Vulnerability and the Pluralization of Representation

I will now trace how the political and social transformations that occurred after 1989 changed the way the body is represented in the Romanian artistic space. While during the communist period the body was supposed to be healthy and productive, in post-communist art it becomes unstable, fragmented and vulnerable. This change can be interpreted as the effect of a new political configuration of visibility. With the disappearance of the ideological monopoly on the image, the body becomes a site of traumatic memory, introspection and contestation. Piotr Piotrowski observes that Central and Eastern European art after 1989 must be read in relation to the specific experience of totalitarianism and transition, not as a simple imitation of Western paradigms (Piotrowski, 2009: 15–34). In the case of Romania, post-December artistic corporality is marked both by the memory of communist discipline and by the pressures of the new market economy. Madalina Asavei shows that in Romanian post-communist art the body frequently functions as a "site of salvation and resistance", a place of self-recovery and, at the same time, a terrain of social criticism (Asavei, 2020: 131–138). The body is no longer triumphant, but is affected by anxieties and subjected to new forms of precariousness. Precisely for this reason, the representation of the body becomes one of the most sensitive areas of articulation between aesthetics and politics. I will continue to analyze the new representations of corporality in post-communist Romanian art through three representatives: Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu and Adrian Ghenie.

4.1. Ion Grigorescu: The Body as an Archive of Control and Freedom

Ion Grigorescu's work is useful in this endeavor because it crosses the two historical periods we are considering, thus offering a unique perspective on the paradigm shift. In works such as *Self-Portrait* (photographic series, 1970–1980, reexposed and reinterpreted after 1989) or in his performative films, the artist uses his own body as a medium for reflection on control and identity.



Ritual Bath © 1979 Ion Grigorescu

Uploaded on Jun 30, 2023 by James Taylor

<https://arthur.io/art/ion-grigorescu/baie-rituala-ritual-bath>

Grigorescu's representation of the body opposes the official image of the body under communism. In him, the body appears naked, vulnerable, often uncomfortable. If socialist realism produced exemplary bodies, Grigorescu exposes the contingent, fragile and finite body. We could say that the artist reverses the gaze from the body as a passive object of surveillance, to the body as an instrument of self-observation. Grigorescu's works can be seen as corporeal archives of an existence under control, but also as anticipations of democratic freedom of expression. The body is no longer a symbol of collectivity, but a place of recovered singularity.

Ion Grigorescu's body-art practice can be understood as one of the most radical forms of questioning corporeality in the Romanian context. In his performative actions, films and photographs from the 1970s and 1980s, which were later recovered and reinterpreted, the artist's body becomes simultaneously subject and object, medium and message, space for experiment and resistance.

As Petruța-Iulia Luchian emphasizes in the article dedicated to his practice, Grigorescu "transforms his own body into a laboratory of artistic investigation, testing the boundaries between public and private, between interiority and exposure" (Luchian, 2024). This type of body art is not spectacular, as in Western performance art, but expresses austerity and intimacy. The body is not exposed to provoke, but to register the tension between subject and power. Petruța-Iulia Luchian identifies certain similarities between Ion Grigorescu's creation and Gilles Deleuze's poststructuralism. Both were interested in exploring individuality and subjectivity, a theme that can be observed in the Romanian artist especially in photographs and videos, in which he investigated the relationship between subjective experience and external reality, an investigation that can

be associated with Deleuze's concerns related to the theory of subjectivity (Luchian, 2024).

Moreover, Grigorescu's concern with the relationship between body and space, in which art becomes a way of exploring the limits of spatiality, can be linked to Deleuze's concept of the "body without organs", developed together with Félix Guattari (Luchian, 2024). For Deleuze, the body without organs does not designate a body devoid of structure, but a field of intensities that escapes the functional and hierarchical organization imposed by social and symbolic norms (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 149–166).

In this sense, Grigorescu's bodily experiments can be seen as attempts to disorganize the disciplined body (see also Foucault's concept of the "docile body") and to recover a non-normative corporeality, open to flows of experience and self-reflexivity. However, we cannot ignore the difference between the two, because for Deleuze the body without organs is a theoretical construction oriented towards the liberation of desire, for Grigorescu this disorganization is experienced concretely, under the conditions of a regime that strictly supervises and regulates the body. Thus, his body-art is not only an ontological experiment, but also an implicit political gesture. His body becomes an archive of constraint and, simultaneously, an instrument of a fragile freedom. In this sense, Grigorescu's art cannot be interpreted as a total liberation from corporeality, but rather as a liberation of corporeality, with political connotations, as a detachment from a regime that claims absolute control over the body.

4.2. Geta Brătescu: Fragmentation of the Body and the Autonomy of the Subject

In Geta Brătescu's work, especially in works such as *Hands* or the *Medea* series, we witness representations of a dislocated, fragmented body, recomposed through artistic gesture. The hand, torso, profile or silhouette appear as autonomous fragments. This aesthetic of the fragment can be interpreted politically. As we have seen, in the totalitarian regime, the body had to appear coherent, transparent and functional, but in Brătescu, the body is open, multiple, incomplete. Under these conditions, we can say that fragmentation becomes a language of freedom. Moreover, the female body in Brătescu is not objectified, but self-reflexive. It belongs to a creative subject that is continuously reconfigured. In this sense, his works anticipate central issues of the post-communist period: identity autonomy, gender difference, etc.

The fragmentation of the body in Geta Brătescu can be interpreted as a form of contestation of the unitary body model imposed by communist aesthetics and ideology. In works such as the cycles *Hands*, *Self-portrait* or the *Medea* series, the body no longer appears as an organic, coherent and stable whole, but is decomposed into autonomous fragments (hands, contours, silhouettes, lines), which suggest presence without enclosing it in a definitive form. This disarticulation can be understood as a critical report on the symbolism of the body in communism. If in the official communist representation the body had to be complete, functional and ideologically transparent, in Brătescu it becomes open, incomplete, processual.



Self-Portrait in the Mirror © 2001 Geta Brătescu

Added: 16 Sep, 2012 by yigrueztil

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/geta-bratescu/self-portrait-in-the-mirror-2001>

We can also refer to the concept of “body without organs” of Deleuze and Guattari in the case of Geta Brătescu. They describe the body without organs as a strategy of resistance to the hierarchical and functional organization of the body imposed by social and symbolic structures: “the body without organs is not opposed to the organs, but to that organization of the organs called organism” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 158). It is therefore not a question of a denial of the organs, but of the way in which they are rigidly fixed in the body, which determines the identity of the subject.

In this sense, Brătescu's body fragmentation can be interpreted as a visual practice of “dis-organization” of corporeality. The fragments are not remnants of a lost whole, and by dislocating the body's unity, the artist suspends the idea of a body as a closed totality and proposes, instead, a body open to multiple possibilities, a body in the making. The body thus becomes a process, not an object; becoming, not a fixed identity.

4.3. Adrian Ghenie: The Traumatized Body and History as Deformation

In Adrian Ghenie's painting, the body often appears as a deformed, unstable figure, caught between recognizability and dissolution. In works such as *The Trial* (2012), *Pie Fight Study* or the series dedicated to Charles Darwin, faces and bodies are subjected to deliberate pictorial violence: faces melt, identity disintegrates, flesh becomes uncertain

matter. Unlike communist propaganda that idealized the body, Ghenie insists on its precarious and vulnerable character. History no longer produces sculptural heroes, but bodies marked by violence and memory. The body is no longer reconciled with history, and painting becomes a space of confrontation (Piotrowski, 2012: 93-96).



The Trial © 2010 Adrian Ghenie

Collection SFMOMA

<https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2010.94>

In contrast to the stable and idealized representation of the body in official communist art, Ghenie proposes an unstable, fragmented corporality, a “traumatized body.” In *The Trial* (2012), the human figure appears partially recognizable, but subjected to an aggressive dissolution. The face is deformed, features are melted or erased, and the contour of the body becomes uncertain. We can speak here of a form of “traumatization” of the image, in which the painting no longer represents the trauma, but performs it. The thick paste, the violent gesture of the brush, the repeated overlapping and erasures produce an effect of instability that evokes not only physical degradation, but also the impossibility of a transparent representation of the past. In this sense, the body in Ghenie is not only an object of memory, but the place where memory itself becomes problematic. Trauma does not appear as a clear narrative theme, but as a distortion of the visible.

This approach can be linked to the observations of Piotr Piotrowski, who emphasizes that post-communist Eastern European art is marked by a tense relationship with history (Piotrowski, 2012: 93-96). In Ghenie's case, the body becomes the support of this tension, because it can no longer be represented as a coherent whole since history itself no longer represents a unitary narrative. At the same time, bodily deformation can also be seen through the prism of a critique of the official image of power. Unlike the hyper-visible and idealized body of the leader in totalitarian regimes, in Ghenie the body of power becomes grotesque, unstable, subject to degradation. Thus, while the official art

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of communism produced secure and stable bodies, Ghenie shows us that, after the historical experience of the 20th century, the body can only be uncertain, decomposed and crossed by the traces of a history that has not fully passed.

Conclusions

During the communist period, the body functioned as an ideological instrument. It was simultaneously disciplined materially and idealized symbolically. The state controlled the body through institutions, demographic policies, labor norms, and surveillance mechanisms, while official art produced the image of an exemplary body: healthy, productive, harmonious, subordinate to the collectivity, and integrated into historical teleology. Thus, representations of vulnerability, difference, or ambiguity were excluded. The official body was, in essence, the visual expression of the fiction of a unified social body.

The change of regime in 1989 led to a transformation of representations of corporeality. With no longer an ideological control over visibility, the body ceases to be the image of order. In post-communist democracies, the body appears simultaneously as a bearer of individual autonomy and as a space of new economic and identity precarities. It is freed from the symbolic constraints of the totalitarian state, but it is exposed to other mechanisms, becoming a terrain for the expression of freedom and vulnerability.

In post-December Romanian art, this change is expressed through the abandonment of the exemplary body and the emergence of the plural body. The works of artists such as Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, Adrian Ghenie and others illustrate a vulnerable and fragmented body, a body traumatized by history. We can say that one of the most significant mutations produced in Romanian visual culture after 1989 is the transition from the model of the exemplary body, specific to the communist regime, to the regime of plural body representation, characteristic of democratic and post-communist society.

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