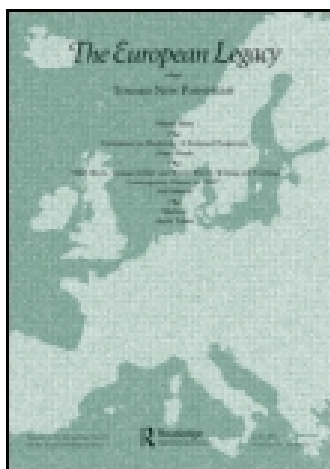


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## Artistic Critiques of Modern Dictatorships

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## Artistic Critiques of Modern Dictatorships

~ CATERINA PREDA ~

**ABSTRACT** *Under a political dictatorship it is primarily from the margins that an artistic critique can be articulated, as suggested by the examples presented in this article from Romania and Chile during the 1970s and 1980s. By focusing on their threefold marginality—of the artist, the art form, and the subject of art—and by applying to them Jacques Rancière’s concept of dissensus, the analysis of artistic variants of marginality sheds light on the relationship of art and politics in totalitarian regimes.*

The many limits a dictatorship imposes may suggest its deconstructions. This is so because in a dictatorial setting there are several threads that connect marginality, as a unique site of protest, and artistic discourses. In dictatorships where everything is intended to be organized, programmed, and structured, it is thus on the margins that an alternative appears. The present article analyzes these connections using examples from the visual arts in two modern dictatorships: Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965–89) and Chile under Augusto Pinochet (1973–89),<sup>1</sup> with additional examples from Argentina (1976–83), Poland (1945–89), and Czechoslovakia (1948–89). The regimes in Eastern Europe and those in South America stand at opposite ends from the point of view of ideology (communism vs. anti-communism), the organization of art and artists (the state vs. the market), and the degree of artistic freedom allowed. While these are quite different regimes, I argue that people living under similar conditions share the same perception of their experiences and that the artistic rendition of these experiences is analogous. The artists discussed in this article and the themes identified in their artworks are not exhaustive, since my intention is to show how marginality is perceived in two very different contexts and to identify their common threads. Thus, while acknowledging the evident differences of the art produced the reason for choosing dissimilar cases is to examine the relationship between art and politics in dictatorial settings that cut across the left–right divide. This examination suggests that the attempt to control and alter artistic expression so as to conform to an ideological stance leads to comparable artistic endeavors that are politically relevant. Art, in other words, is necessarily created in relation to the political.



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From a theoretical point of view, I adopt Jacques Rancière's definition of the relation between art and politics as encapsulated in his term *dissensus*. For Rancière dissensus represents both the essence of politics as "the manifestation of a gap in the sensible" and "the kernel" of what he calls "the aesthetic regime"—"a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products."<sup>2</sup> Thus, "art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible," and the role of art is to "reconfigur[e] the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers, those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals."<sup>3</sup>

This capacity of art is also evoked by Gilles Deleuze who quotes the "famous formula of Klee [who says that the obligation of painting is] 'not to render the visible, but to render visible'. The task of painting [and by extension that of art] is defined as the attempt to render visible forces that are not."<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is from the margins that, by drawing attention to what was until a given moment either unseen or forbidden to be seen by the center, that an artist can impose a new critical perspective. Deleuze's notion that art creates possibilities is important. In fact, says Deleuze, the possible becomes an aesthetic category, and this, I think, is a vital task for art under a dictatorship.<sup>5</sup> The role of art as a creator of alternatives is also emphasized by several political scientists working in the subfield of politics and the arts.<sup>6</sup> "Because art offers alternatives, it questions the status quo;"<sup>7</sup> it "visibly constructs realities and so demonstrates how easily that can be done."<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, scholars associated with the Frankfurt School have studied the role of art in modern society and its cultural industry. In this vein, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have argued that only 'high art' safeguards a critical stance, of negation in the uniformed, mass society that produces and privileges cultural industries.<sup>9</sup> The capacity of art to transmit *another* message is emphasized by Adorno, for whom art is both autonomous and a *fait social* and thus can criticize society by its mere existence.<sup>10</sup> Viewed in this way, a work of art takes a stand on empirical reality even when it bypasses it, so that the power art has also resides in its capacity to deny reality as it is.<sup>11</sup>

Nationally specific conceptualizations are also useful for our discussion, as those by the cultural critic Nelly Richard, who focuses on art at the margins in Chile. Because the official discourse of both the military regime and the leftist opposition constructed total histories, an alternative discourse was created from the margins of meanings by what she calls the *Escena de Avanzada* (the neo-vanguard scene), whose marginality made it all the more destabilizing: "As the political was no longer a viable option for action or discourse under the authoritarian regime in Chile, prohibitions shifted from the public sphere to the individual or private sphere, overburdening everyday practices with a clandestine and uncontrollable surplus of meaning."<sup>12</sup>

But even when its origin is unknown, there are ways for marginal art to become very well known by large parts of the public. Relevant in this respect is the work of a group of Chilean artists, who belong to the *Escena de Avanzada*: "No+" (1983–84) by C.A.D.A. (Collective of Art Actions),<sup>13</sup> whose name translates as "No more," consisted in the artists, accompanied by many others, going out at night and writing this sign on the walls of Santiago. Thereafter, the sign was completed by other anonymous people, with an image or a word "No+ dictatorship, No+ torture, No+ guns, No+ disappeared,

No+ death, No+ and the image of a revolver.”<sup>14</sup> “The work in the end belonged to the entire community as an anti-dictatorial slogan,” so that a few years later “all the manifestations against the dictatorship were led by the ‘No+’ watchword.”<sup>15</sup>

While the present article is not concerned with the reception of such artwork, because the intention of the artist and the reception of the work are two very different things, the various examples presented all express, from the margins, views on the given dictatorship that are otherwise absent from the official recollections of the past. These artistic discourses are sometimes subversive by their mere existence, for as Edelman notes, “art is always potentially subversive,”<sup>16</sup> and even more so in a dictatorship where everything is strictly controlled.

One of the problems of art that is made under a dictatorship is that it relies on allusions, metaphorical reconstructions and codes that are hard for an outside reader/viewer/listener to understand. The over-stratified discourse of such art demands a crisscrossed “reading” that cannot be performed today, when the context of shared interdictions, submissions, adaptations, and subterfuges, has disappeared. Artistic subversion hinges almost entirely on the specific context and particular type of dictatorship in which it was created. As such, under the Ceaușescu regime creating “art for art’s sake” came to be viewed by many as an act of resistance, an act of resisting the control of the party and the low quality of art it imposed on artists. In contrast to Romania, in Chile art for art’s sake was exactly what the regime demanded from artists, while social commitment in art was banned.

In dictatorial settings artistic marginality can be understood in one of three ways. The first is that of the *artist*, where marginality is perceived as an expression of freedom or of escaping control by refusing to integrate in a coercive society; under communism, where work is mandatory, this also means refusing to work. This characterizes the outcast, the excluded person par excellence, as illustrated by Ion Bârlădeanu in Romania and Miroslav Tichy in Czechoslovakia. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari observe, if the artist “is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows . . . all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.” What Deleuze and Guattari see as the “minor” resembles the “marginal” and thus a marginal artistic expression or a marginal subject of an artistic work are intrinsically political by their status outside of the center.<sup>17</sup>

The second sense of marginality refers to the artistic *expression* itself. Since marginal art may be considered not to pose any danger, the political regime may allow rather than prohibit it. This applies to art made at home, outside the public space, where it is forbidden, as in the case of the Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu, and may also apply to art that makes use of minimal signs, as the works of the Chilean artist Lotty Rosenfeld.

Third, marginality can also refer to the *subjects* of artistic discourse under a dictatorship. Here, there are three interesting variants. The first variant is the attempt to include the physical margins of the city and of society as the subject of art. In a series of slides from the years 1975–78, Ion Dumitriu portrayed the margins by recording the forbidden reality of the landfill, “The Dump,” on the outskirts of Bucharest where the excluded Roma minority live.<sup>18</sup> In these works the marginalized—unrecognized, ugly, smelly, and dirty—were brought clandestinely to the fore. Another example is the Chilean Diamela Eltit, who portrays the marginalized in her novel *Lumpérica*.<sup>19</sup>



Figure 1. Andrei Pandelescu. *Ode to Romania—The Big Show, Placards Up, Books Down*, 23 August, Stadium, Bucharest, 1982. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

The second variant refers, in the words of Rancière, to the “minimal histories” or details of insignificant existences, the small adventures and “the ordinary [that] becomes beautiful as a trace of the true.”<sup>20</sup> Examples of this are the works of Romanian photographer Andrei Pandelescu. His snapshots exhibited after 1990 are brief moments, fragments of anonymous lives in the 1980s. They document “a reality” that was forbidden under the dictatorship, which always displayed the official mandatory happiness and cheerfulness. His furtive shots evoke today a long-gone time, with the duplicity of existence registered by a simple click (Fig. 1): here the image captures how the people placidly raise their red parade placards, while with the other hand they hide their books or newspapers. This shows the double game or message, amusing and painful at the same time, of the official obligation to participate in a political rally and the need for personal pastimes.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, there is the variant of those who have “disappeared,” a common phenomenon in the Southern Cone dictatorships, especially in Argentina and Chile.<sup>22</sup> The disappeared, both in the past and at present, are invoked in a variety of artistic forms, including, among others, film, photography, and painting.

### AN ‘AESTHETICS OF POVERTY’

The general destitution that characterized Romanian society under communism can be detected in the poor quality of materials that were available to artists especially in the 1980s. As Ruxandra Balaci describes it: “The lack of high quality photographic materials on the Romanian market led to the use of small prints with poor definition that inherently make the technique look ‘intentionally modest’.”<sup>23</sup> The same is true of the video cameras, the possession of which was limited by the *Securitate* (secret police) to the members of the Nomenklatura. This gave rise to an “aesthetics of poverty,” of “amateur filming techniques and poor editing conditions.” The poor quality of the filmed artworks, as well as the restricted public that enjoyed them at the time, make them relics of a bygone era.<sup>24</sup>

In Chile, on the other hand, the appropriation of the marginal was imagined, re-imagined and used to transmit a different picture than that of the militant left culture,<sup>25</sup> especially by the artists included by Nelly Richard in the *Escena de Avanzada*: “The margin served as a concept-metaphor so as to render productive the social discard of marginalization and marginality.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the *Escena de la escritura* (scene of writing) was identified by Eugenia Brito in the new literature emerging after the Chilean coup d’Etat of 1973, which, developing from the margins, attempted to “recompose a different symbolic order,” with the writers, like the visual artists, “occupying these marginal spaces.”<sup>27</sup>

The writer Diamela Eltit, who participated in both of these *Escenas*, approaches marginality in various ways: she explored the life of beggars in shelters and prostitutes, perceiving them as “a potentially powerful force to the degree that they are negatives, photographically speaking, of society.”<sup>28</sup> Her novel *Lumperica* is considered, as Francine Masiello says, as “one of the most radically avant-garde texts to have emerged from Latin America;” it deals with “those subjects neglected by the state [that] become actors on the poetic stage,” “addressing matters of representation as a crisis of the authoritarian gaze.”<sup>29</sup> Through its female protagonist it presents “the synthesis of the feminine with the lumpen. It takes place at night, during curfew, in an emptied space. She breaks the norms of nighttime to set up a curious spectacle with those who gain access to that place from their marginality: at one and the same time there results contemplation of the surroundings and of a ‘contemplated being’. There is also a recognition, an interaction, between her and the city. It’s like the re-appropriating of public space that had been arbitrarily usurped from us. Vagabonds are the only ones who dare to transgress.”<sup>30</sup>

Whether acting as a member of C.A.D.A. or individually, Eltit includes the marginal as an integral part of her work. For example, in her 1980 work, “*Maipú*” she read passages from *Lumpérica* inside a brothel after having washed the pavement in front of it. In “*Trabajo de amor con un asilado de la Hospedería Santiago*” (Work of love with a derelict from a flop house in Santiago) of 1983 she kissed the mentally ill.<sup>31</sup> Both these actions are examples of her work with “zones of pain or marginal areas of social confinement: brothels, psychiatric hospitals, flophouses, jails etc.”; as she argues, these are “a form of individual pain confronting the collective pain,” which she chose so as to “expose these places, to become one with them by [her] physical presence.”<sup>32</sup>

The marginal is also the subject of Chilean director Pablo Larrain’s 2008 film, *Tony Manero*, which portrays a psychopath during the years of the constant presence of the military. The same type of approach is seen in Larrain’s most recent film, *Post Mortem* (2010), which narrates the beginning of Pinochet’s rule through the eyes of another marginal, a clerk at the Santiago morgue.

At the end of the 1980s, a pair of artists, Pedro Mardones (later Lemebel) and Francisco Casas, appeared on the Chilean art scene reclaiming their marginality in *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* (The mares of the apocalypse). These two homosexuals, who “imposed transvestism as their identity mark,” launched their “art by assault,” reclaiming a “marginality they had not to simulate,” so as to “talk about those Chileans who suffered silently the rejection of their country closed to the difference” (as the Chilean dictatorship did not recognize or allow sexual differences). One of their art actions consisted in dancing barefoot on top of a map of Chile covered with fragments of Coca-Cola bottles letting it at the end stained in blood as the dictatorship did with the real Chile.<sup>33</sup>





Figure 2. Zbigniew Libera. *Nut*, 1985. Reproduced by permission of Fundacja Raster.

Their self-proclaimed marginality collided with the “resistance culture” of the leftist opposition and with the *Avanzada* positioning. *Las Yeguas* used *détournement* to mock the leftist resistance that was confrontational and used traditional artistic expressions such as *Nueva canción* or painting; *Las Yeguas* also exposed the limits of the *Avanzada* discourse that did not include those who were “invisible” (homosexuals, travesties, queers), and to express gender diversity.

Art of the margins also characterizes the Polish artist Zbigniew Libera’s work, *Nut* (1985), which depicts the mentally disabled (Fig. 2). Describing his work, Libera writes:

During the martial law the city services and the police would clean the streets erasing all writings and posters, particularly those distributed by underground organizations. I have noticed however, that small papers, covered in handwriting and usually hung at bus stops, electricity poles, etc. were ignored. I don’t know who wrote them, but I’m sure it was the work of one man – “some crazy person.” The papers interested me as examples of an activity so marginal that it didn’t even disturb the authorities or attract the attention of other services.<sup>34</sup>

### THE MISSING PUBLIC SPACE AND THE FORBIDDEN SCENE

The closing of the public space led *actionist* artists to deploy their work inside their homes or studios. In Romania of the mid 1980s, visual artists were marginalized and could no longer enter the only professional organization available, the Union of Visual Artists (UAP), and therefore increasingly developed subversive, and at the same time marginal, artistic discourses of body art, performance and post-happening practices.<sup>35</sup> Magda Cârneci suggests that, in progressively isolating themselves from society, trying to safeguard their “precious artistic autonomy” that was tolerated by the authorities, Romanian artists reached a point where they no longer needed a wider public.<sup>36</sup> They had a restricted audience, made up of their fellow artists or sometimes just the photo/video-camera. This led to the creation of a private and hidden art.

Their subversiveness may seem negligible today, but as the example of the poet-engineer Gheorghe Ursu shows, even the private artistic sphere was erased by the communist dictatorship. Ursu was arrested in 1985 and subsequently beaten to death in the Securitate headquarters for having kept a diary in which he criticized the Ceaușescu regime while describing the absurdities of everyday reality.<sup>37</sup> These “barely perceptive disruptive gestures” are depicted in the artistic “photographic registers” below.<sup>38</sup>

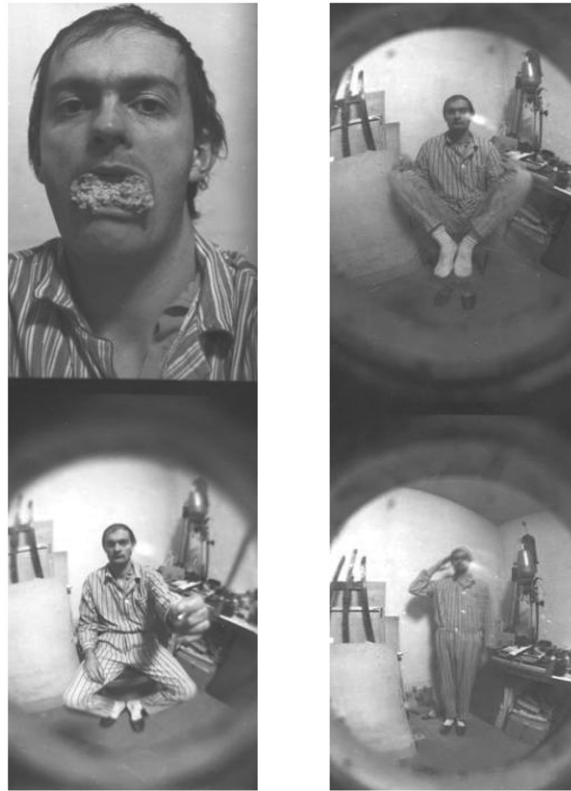


Figure 3. Ion Grigorescu. *La închisoare* [In prison], 1978. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Another example is Ion Grigorescu's series of art actions from the 1970s and 1980s, seen at the time by only a few friends and colleagues, which were documented by camera and video. One example is his 1978 work *La închisoare* (In prison), where he is photographed in his apartment seen as if through a spyhole the image of the "surveying eye" of his home becoming a metaphor of an open prison (Fig. 3).

Two other examples on the same theme are Geta Brătescu, who confined herself in her studio "as a space of freedom by excellence" and was documented by Ion Grigorescu's camera, and *Annulment* (1989) (Fig. 4), where Lia Perjovschi is seen tied down inside her home, "the only refuge and space of manifestation when the public space is inaccessible."<sup>39</sup>

Finally, in "*Mere roșii*" (Red apples) (1988) Dan Perjovschi wrapped his apartment in white paper on which he wrote: "the TV was also covered and two twin figures contemplated the room" from its surface; "it became an action because they lived in this 'wrapped' environment for two weeks." This art action highlights the desire to isolate oneself from the social and political context and to withdraw to a protected intimate space. At the end of the 1980s, the group called "Bucharest House Party (1 and 2)" gathered in the private home, garden and annexes of Nadine and Decebal Scriba, and organized a series of short performances with the participation of Wanda Mihuleac, Dan Mihălțeanu, Călin Dan, Dan Stanciu, Andrei Oișteanu, Teodor Graur and Iosif Király.<sup>40</sup>



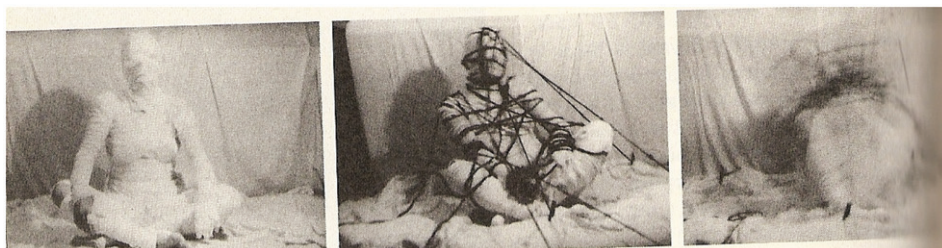


Figure 4. Lia Perjovschi. *Annulment*, 1989. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

In contrast to the art actions in Romania that took place indoors, Chilean artists went out into the streets to advance their counter-institutional discourse in public. It is important to note that when it came to art the streets and public spaces were also forbidden in Chile, especially at night when the curfew was in place and whoever went out risked being shot with no warning, for repression was in force throughout the period of the dictatorship. Despite this prohibition, it is the actions of C.A.D.A. that best exemplify the “reclaiming [of] the street as the ‘true museum’,” one of their aims being “to intervene in the daily space of Santiago with unusual images so as to interrogate the conditions that had become routine in dictatorial Chile.”<sup>41</sup> José Joaquín Brunner writes that the Avanzada artists “intervened [in] everyday life, breaking its habitual codes” “with the intention to ‘interrupt’ daily processes of repressed signification using for that purpose, everyday materials.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in her commentary, Andrea Giunta emphasizes the necessity of “thinking the city” as a constant of Chilean art, as the interventions/performances of Rosenfeld, Eltit, and C.A.D.A. testify, together representing “a symbolic reappropriation of a city whose senses were emptied by violence.”<sup>43</sup>

Alongside C.A.D.A.’s actions, which show how art “invades” life, Lotty Rosenfeld, a member of the group, is a paradigmatic example of art that uses the city as a canvas, and specifically uses the street as an artistic medium. Since 1979, Rosenfeld has been performing in public spaces by transforming traffic signs into crosses or plus signs, “as a way of altering the codes of urban movement” and somehow signaling that “the most inoffensive of signs” can be submitted to inversion” (Fig. 5). “Her gesture of *intersecting the code* is disobedient in that it provides the basis for the rearticulation of meaning.”<sup>44</sup> Her aim is to attract the attention of passersby and make them confront the nature of authority; what she wants is to show

how people can reflect on obeying orders, where power acts in a subliminal manner so as to help forge unthinking subjects because this is convenient for all systems. [I did] this through a signal that is given. My intention... is that someone that is passing by sees a line that he never saw before and he crosses the line to which he obeyed until then.<sup>45</sup>

This manner of playing with official signs was not restricted to the Chilean space. The Polish artist Ewa Partum reworked the signs of authority too, in order to expose their limits. “In 1971, she placed several road signs in Freedom Square in Lodz, with absurd commandments such as ‘Prohibition is forbidden’ or ‘Authorization is prohibited’—while the local police stood looking on at the installation.”<sup>46</sup>



Figure 5. Lotty Rosenfeld. *Una milla de cruces sobre el pavimento*, 1979. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

The street was also reclaimed by Chilean theater and dance artists. Different independent dance companies were formed during the dictatorship, and for the most part they developed a postmodern approach to dance, inspired mainly by Merce Cunningham.<sup>47</sup> Cifuentes argues that dance, by its intrinsic allegoric stance, was not censored and thus performance art was “a means of political action against authoritarianism . . . integrating a diversity of disciplines, mixing music, theater, visual arts and literature.” Many independent companies used the street as a stage, including theater companies such as that of Andrés Pérez, the Teatro Urbano Contemporaneo, or the Dance company of Manuela Bunster - Grupo de Danza Calaucan (1983), which danced in the streets to live music.<sup>48</sup>

Although an exception in the tightly controlled Romanian public space, Romanian artists performed in the streets too, as, for example, Paul Neagu, whose “Collector of Merits” was enacted in 1968: “Intrigued by the means of ‘quantifying’ merit in communist Romania when it came to awarding titles, honors and ‘merit medals,’ P. Neagu imagined some ironical robots that would provide the criteria and capacity for the selection of merits, and applied them to random people on a busy Bucharest street.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in 1989 in his action “*Calea*” (The path), Rudolf Bone linked the galleries with the street in a participative action.

We may thus see in these examples the contrast between the Chilean artists, who could perform in the streets, and the Romanian artists who were confined to their studios and only marginally staged their dissenting art in public spaces.

### THE MARGINALITY OF DISAPPEARANCE

One of the most interesting connections in Chilean art is between disappearance and photography—or absence as a missing trace. This correlation stems from the practice of displaying the photos of missing relatives and friends under the tag “*Donde están?*” (Where are they?), and integrating them in artworks. Jean-Louis Déotte comments on the extreme importance of the use of photography in the case of the disappeared and tortured as “a minimal proof against growing uncertainty.”<sup>50</sup> Drawing on Roland Barthes’s analysis of photography as “a singularity that by its own existence affirms that there was effectively a referent, a *this was*: something indubitable,” Déotte maintains that the art of disappearance requires photography because it presents “the traces of an imprint: of how an object had to leave physically its traces in an artistic support.” It thus affirms the referent even if only in the past sense.<sup>51</sup>

For Nelly Richard “both the photographic trace and disappearance conjugate the *not anymore* with the *still*,” because as Barthes says, “photography mechanically registers what cannot be existentially repeated anymore.” In fact both the photograph used by the families of the disappeared and the disappearance itself are “the law made series that de-personifies, massively obscuring the signs of the person that disappears in the repetition and anonymity of violence.”<sup>52</sup>

An example of this is the work of Eugenio Dittborn, who systematically worked with photographs during the dictatorship. In his 1977 “*Fosa comuna*” (Common grave), Dittborn brought together many anonymous photos, “assembling the resemblance between the images abandoned in a photographic shopwindow and the corpses thrown by the machine of dis-identity (torture and anonymity) in the regime’s clandestine cemeteries.”<sup>53</sup>

Other examples include the work of Luz Donoso, who in 1976 modified the television screens of a downtown Santiago shopwindow by displaying on them the images of one of the disappeared, as if to draw attention to the horror the regime itself denied, by transmitting them through its preferred means, the television;<sup>54</sup> and Hernán Parada who used absence to proclaim presence in 1978 by photographing himself with the image of his disappeared brother in different representative sites in Santiago.<sup>55</sup>

After 1990 Carlos Altamirano, a member of the *Escena de Avanzada*, included in his collection of *Retratos* (Portraits) large etchings printed on paper. Each of these colored images of everyday Chile carried a superimposed smaller black-and-white photograph of a disappeared and the question “*Donde están?*” According to Nelly Richard, who adopts Gilles Deleuze’s definition of the identity photo, this is “a product of disciplinary societies that have two poles: the signature which indicates the individual and the identification number which shows his position in a mass,” so that power accomplishes its role of both “massifying and of individualization.”<sup>56</sup> For Déotte, the work of Altamirano is important because “each photograph of a disappeared becomes, in the epoch of numeric photography, a resistance point against the generalized disappearance of the link to



Figure 6. Carlos Altamirano. *Retratos*, 2007. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Figure 7. Gustavo Germano. *Ausencias*, Caso Maria Irma Ferreira, 2006. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

the referent.” Thus, the ingenuity of Altamirano resides in the “fight he carries against disappearance through disappearance.”<sup>57</sup> In his retrospective exhibitions in 2007, Altamirano reinterpreted his artworks, enhancing their effect even more. In one of these retrospectives, held in the Galeria Animal, he placed mirrors instead of the photos of the disappeared: “These mirrors are the spectator. Each of the disappeared is the one who approaches the mirror.” Another part of the show is more biographical (Fig. 6): “I have displayed photos of Chile of the last thirty years and this is my Chile. There are landscapes of my life and of my background, families, fields, and a girl from a commercial that sells underwear, because I worked for a time at Falabella [a famous chain store].”<sup>58</sup>

Photography, then, is perhaps a privileged medium for recalling the disappeared. In his work “*Despedidas. El amor ante el olvido*” (Saying goodbye. Love before forgetting, 2008), Claudio Pérez shows images of the relatives of the disappeared: wives, mothers and daughters. The same approach is taken by the Argentinean Gustavo Germano, whose *Ausencias* (Fig. 7) “reconstructed absence by way of a recreation of the locations and poses of old photographs. Germano displayed 14 pairs of large format photos that created a series of contrasts through the absence of each person who had disappeared. Their siblings, parents, and relatives appear in the same position as in the photo where they had posed together; the following shot, taken thirty years later, has an empty space, the representation of he or she who is no longer.”<sup>59</sup>





Figure 8. Nicolás Guagnini. *30.000*, 1998–2005.

In 2001 Claudio Pérez also used photography to reconstruct a permanent mural formed of 950 images out of the 1,192 detainees who had disappeared under the Chilean military dictatorship. These images were collected from various places, including the archives of the Solidarity Vicariate and the Rettig Commission (Human Rights Investigation Commission). Pérez's aim was to keep the spirit of those who had disappeared alive: "That is the magic of the photograph, it fights death . . . it keeps alive the disappeared detainees."<sup>60</sup>

The disappeared are also evoked in Luis Prado's sculpture *Memoria de piedra* (Stone memory), which reconstructs the geographical outline of Chile with pieces of stone from the demolished Monument of Disappeared Detainees from the General Cemetery of Santiago and placing them on metal poles of varying heights. The stone pieces have fragments of names and years on them, and together they map the phenomenon which exceeds the whole expanse of Chile's rangy geography. The emotional impact of Prado's work is even stronger than Altamirano's, because the viewer is directly confronted with the stones that recall in writing those who have vanished, although the names are not clear and are mixed up with the years. This form of blending of the facts, the names and years, seems to extend the presence of the disappeared throughout the land of Chile.

Similarly, the work of the Argentine artist Nicolás Guagnini, entitled *30.000* (1998–2005) (Fig. 8), which is located in the Memory Park of Buenos Aires, reproduces the portrait of the artist's vanished father, "Luis Guagnini, a journalist who disappeared on December 12, 1977. The face that is distributed across a series of metal supports driven into the ground transforms as we move around it, as if it were a kinetic work whose formal aspect mutates in order to make the idea of identity-disappearance visible and more powerful: the photographic image is translated into extremes of contrast and is reconstructed again."<sup>61</sup> The thirty thousand of the title reminds us of the huge number of those killed in the so-called "Dirty War" launched against "leftist subversion," during the Argentinean dictatorship from 1976 to 1983.

As may be seen in Figure 9, another work from Argentina, *El Siluetazo* (1983) (The silhouette) recalls the permanent absence of those who "disappeared" by orders of the military junta. In this work three artists, Rodolfo Aguerreberry, Julio Flores, and

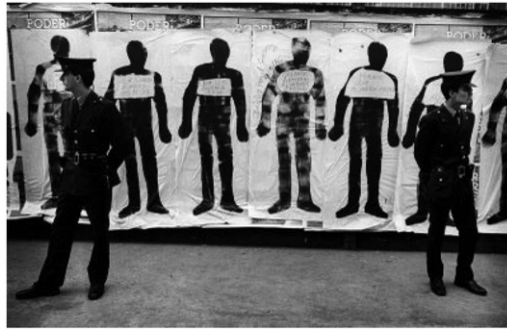


Figure 9. Eduardo Gil. *Siluetas y canas*, 1983. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Guillermo Kexel drew silhouettes on paper and then posted them on walls; they were helped by human rights organizations (such as the Mothers of the May Plaza), and by anonymous participants who volunteered to have their bodies drawn.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, the subject of the disappeared is also present in films, both documentary and feature films. Some of the more recent and impressive documentaries include: the Chilean Silvio Caiozzi's 1998 *Fernando ha vuelto* (Fernando is back), René Ballesteros's 2010 *La quemadura* (The burn), and Patricio Guzman's 2010 *Nostalgia de la luz* (Nostalgia of the light); and the Argentinean Albertina Carri's 2003 *Los Rubios* (The blonde ones). All these films address the endless suffering of the relatives of those who have vanished, their sense of irredeemable loss, the need to find out the truth and be able to mourn and close this chapter of their lives. Guzman's documentary strongly underlines the marginality of the mothers and wives of the disappeared and absent in present-day Chile by drawing a moving parallel between the archeology of the Atacama desert these women engage in (to find the remains of their lost ones) and the archeology of the skies the astronomers undertake in the same place.

### THE MARGINAL ARTIST AND THE PERIPHERY

Perhaps the story of Romanian artist Ion Bârlădeanu best illustrates how a critique of a dictatorial regime can be articulated from the margins. Initially an unknown amateur artist, Bârlădeanu was discovered by chance in 2007 and then promoted by Dan Popescu, owner of the H'art Gallery in Bucharest. Gaining international fame following Alexander Nanău's 2009 documentary, *The World According to Ion B* (which won several prizes),<sup>63</sup> Bârlădeanu was discovered while living inside the garbage disposal unit of an apartment block. Throughout his life he was on the margins of society, whether as a gravedigger or an unskilled worker. Somewhat like Bârlădeanu is the Czech artist Miroslav Tichý (both artists' work was exhibited at the Anne de Villepoix gallery in Paris in 2008). Unlike Bârlădeanu, Tichý studied art but then withdrew from society and in the 1960s started taking photos of women with self-made cameras; his works "constitute a large oeuvre of poetic, dreamlike views of feminine beauty in a small town under the Czechoslovak Communist regime."<sup>64</sup>





Figure 10. Ion Bârlădeanu. Untitled, n.d. © Dan Popescu, Galeria H'art, Bucharest.

Bârlădeanu's photo montages (his "films" as the artist calls them), which made him famous, were never exhibited before 2007 and were therefore not seen during the dictatorship.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, in many cases they include direct references to the surrounding reality centered on the image of Ceaușescu, who is ridiculed in many of them; he is made fun of although he is still the over-dominant figure appearing in all contexts: with international celebrities, in parades, with or without his wife Elena, in Romania or abroad. The image above (Fig. 10) is not the typical image of Bârlădeanu's work, but it is interesting because it hints at the surveillance (the militiaman in the first row watching over by Ceaușescu,) and the hunting passion of the dictator all in sepia and a nostalgic atmosphere.

Since being discovered, Ion Bârlădeanu has remained a challenging figure on the Romanian artistic scene. His status as an amateur and sudden rise to fame have made several of more recognized artists critical of his works. His extreme outsider status may have allowed him to stray from formally organized frameworks and to create a subversive art form that was unknown at the time.

An interesting contrasting case is offered by the work of Ion Dumitriu's two series of snapshots portraying the world on the periphery (referred to in the introductory section). In his images Dumitriu portrays the Roma, the marginals officially excluded, who live on the margins (Fig. 11). These images, taken furtively, show a world which was not supposed to exist: its utter destitution and sordidness invalidating the glorious and shiny reality promoted by the Communist Party. Whereas Bârlădeanu lived in the garbage cans, making art out of what others had thrown away, Dumitriu documented the Roma, scavenging the refuse heaps to make a living. Both artists, however, use garbage to expose the underside of the official reality, the truth that is denied and remains largely invisible.

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As shown in the various artworks from Romania, Chile and other places, a dictatorship's perfectly arranged showcase is undermined by artistic discourses that infringe the official line. Yet because these discourses are marginal and accessible to only a small number of viewers, some of these subversive artworks are allowed to coexist alongside the official images. Since their perspective on reality deconstructs the carefully



Figure 11. Ion Dumitriu. *Diapozitive – Groapa de gunoi 03*, 1975–1978. Reproduced by permission of the Fundatia Ion Dumitriu.

orchestrated public images, for the marginal artist is free to see the surrounding reality without the ideological lenses forced upon the rest of society, such works enable us to gain a better understanding of dictatorial regimes. It appears that marginal art can criticize a regime because marginality, under certain conditions, equals freedom. Similarly, artists can claim artistic freedom only if they deliberately choose a marginal status. Thus, Ion Grigorescu showed his art only to very few people, for clearly had he chosen to exhibit them to the public, he would have been punished accordingly (as he himself admitted).<sup>66</sup>

Artistic marginality evokes the daily, sordid details of human existence on the margins of society and of life. It recreates the forbidden world of those who have disappeared from public view, those who are destitute, dispossessed, ugly or dirty, within the context of the mandatory, universal happiness promoted by a dictatorial regime. Marginal artworks of this kind all signal nonconformity: they reveal what is systematically obscured by the dominant political power system, reminding us through their pathos what it means to be forgotten and discarded by the world.

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Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Romanian, Spanish, and French are my own.

## NOTES

1. For more on this subject, see Caterina Preda, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Artistic Expressions of the Political in Romania and Chile (1970s–1989) No paso nada...?* (Florida: Dissertation.Com., 2009).
2. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 38, 140. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 22.
3. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 140; Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Trans. Steven Corcoran. (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 24–25.
4. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 57.
5. Gilles Deleuze, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2005), 168.
6. Politics and the arts is an eclectic subfield. As Maureen Whitebrook writes, “over the past 20 years or so, American political science has shown some interest in the way in which politics and literature might be connected as an aid to political understanding. . . . a newsletter among 200 political scientists circulated and regular panels at APSA meetings were held as well as an attempt to form a politics and literature section in the APSA.” Maureen Whitebrook, introduction to *Reading Political Stories: Representations of Politics in Novels and Pictures*, ed. Maureen Whitebrook (Boston, MA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 2, n. 1, 21. Since 1974, in the United States, in conferences on Social Theory, Politics and the arts (STP&A), presenters have discussed various “links between art and politics,” dealing with issues related to “how the arts were influenced by politics and vice versa” as well as “links between art and society.” See Carrie Lee, “Twenty-Five Years of the Conference of Social Theory, Politics, and the Arts,” in *The Arts in a New Millennium: Research and the Arts Sector*, ed. Valerie B. Morris and David B. Pankratz (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 211–23. Maureen Whitebrook was one of the founders, in 1995, of the Politics and the Arts Standing Group inside the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), which now convenes yearly and organizes its own conferences inside or outside the ECPR, publishes a newsletter (Polarts) and its works. For the history of the Polarts group, see also: <http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/polarts/meetings.html>.
7. Whitebrook, “Introduction,” 7.
8. Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 68.
9. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
10. Theodor Adorno, *Teoria estetică* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2006), 11, 321. Trans. Andrei Corbea (Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970).
11. Adorno, *Teoria estetică*, 11, 321.
12. Nelly Richard, “Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile since 1973,” *Art & Text* 21 (1986): 18–19.
13. C.A.D.A. did five art actions: “Para no morir de hambre en el arte” (1979); “Inversión de escena” (17 October 1979); “¡Ay Sudamérica!” (12 July 1981); “Residuos americanos” (18 March and 23 April 1983); “No+” (end of 1983–1984) and “Viuda” (1985).
14. Robert Neustadt, *CADA día: la creación de un arte social* (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio 2001), 36.
15. Neustadt, *CADA día*, 37.
16. Edelman, *From Art to Politics*, 68.
17. Although in their text on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari refer to the writer, their ideas can be extended to the visual arts. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,” *Theory and History of Literature* 30 (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 17.

18. "Ion Dumitriu Diapozitive 1975–1989," at the Galeria Posibilă (16 November 2007–27 January 2008), including images from two series, "The Dump" and "Children's Park Giulești-Sîrbi, Ilie Blejan."
19. The English version was translated as *E. Luminata* by Ronald Christ (Santa Fe: Lumen Inc., 1997).
20. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 34.
21. Carola Roșca, "Andrei Pandele," *Time Out* (January 2008). Ode to Romania (*Cântarea României*, 1976–89) was a national festival organized yearly with the purpose of promoting the official version of art imbued with Party principles, which increasingly meant "amateur art." The entire population, at least in theory, had to participate in this massive, all-encompassing event.
22. In the Southern Cone countries (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay, and for some, also Brazil), the dictatorial regimes of the 1960s–1980s introduced a new repressive measure, the disappearance of opponents imprisoned or tortured, leaving thousands of citizens unaccounted for till today.
23. Ruxandra Balaci, "Photography – a Proposed Chronology of an Experimental Epoch," *I-Can* (2003), at: [www.c3.hu/ican.artnet.org/ican/text1c91.html?id\\_text=20](http://www.c3.hu/ican.artnet.org/ican/text1c91.html?id_text=20) (accessed 21 February 2011).
24. Călin Dan, "The Aesthetics of Poverty," *I-Can* (2003), at: [www.c3.hu/ican.artnet.org/ican/text7825.html?id\\_text=21](http://www.c3.hu/ican.artnet.org/ican/text7825.html?id_text=21) (accessed 21 February 2011).
25. In Chile, prior to the military coup of 11 September 1973, which brought the Pinochet dictatorship to power, the country was ruled by a socialist government led by Salvador Allende (1970–73). Members of the leftist movement who did not go into exile after September 1973 tried to rearticulate a cultural option that was cut off by the coup, which included such expressions as folk music (inside *peñas*) or *Nueva Canción*, mural painting, resistance theater, etc. All these expressions were declamatory, explicitly against the official military perspective.
26. Nelly Richard, *La insubordinación de los signos* (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2000), 67.
27. This "new literary scene" was similar to the "new-vanguard scene" described by Richard, designating the writings of Chilean poets and writers under the dictatorship of Pinochet, which conceptualize their experiences *differently*. Brito defines it as "a literary program, that invented a new verbal code, which, in the opacity of its maxims, developed the keys, both literary (formal) and potential (metaphoric) for the configuration of a cultural map that includes an imagery that begins in this period with more force than that of previous periods." Eugenia Brito, *Campos minados. Literatura post-golpe en Chile* (Santiago: Ed. Cuarto Propio, 1994), 16–17.
28. Diamela Eltit, *E. Luminata*, trans. Ronald Christ (Santa Fe: Lumen Inc., 1997), 6.
29. Francine Masiello, *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 67.
30. A.M.F., "Diamela Eltit: Acomplamiento incestuoso," *Hoy* 42 (12–18 August 1985): 41, quoted in Ronald Christ, "Extravag(r)ant and Un/erring Spirit," in Diamela Eltit, *E. Luminata* (Santa Fe, NM: Lumen Inc., 1997), 206.
31. Richard, "Margins and Institutions," 68.
32. C.A.D.A., "Como matar el arte y, de paso, cambiar el mundo," *La Tercera de la Hora* (November 1982), quoted in Richard, "Margins and Institutions," 73.
33. Oscar Contardo and García Macarena, *La era ochentera. Tevé, pop y under en el Chile de los ochenta* (Santiago: Ediciones B., 2005), 186, 187.
34. At: [www.raster.art.pl/gallery/artists/libera/prace.htm](http://www.raster.art.pl/gallery/artists/libera/prace.htm) (accessed 14 March 2011).
35. Magda Cârneci, *Artele plastice în România 1945–1989* (Fine arts in Romania 1945–1989) (Bucharest: Editura Meridiane, 2001). Ileana Pintilie, *Acționismul în România în timpul comunismului* (Actionism in Romania during communism) (Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2000), 14.
36. Cârneci, *Artele plastice în România 1945–1989*, 111.

37. See the website dedicated to Gheorghe Ursu's memory at: [http://gh-ursu.org.ro/e\\_index.htm](http://gh-ursu.org.ro/e_index.htm) (accessed 28 July 2011).
38. This appeared in a review of the acclaimed exhibition "Ostalgia," on show at the New Museum in New York (6 July–25 September 2011). The artists from Eastern Europe, whose works were exhibited (including Ion Grigorescu), were said to belong to "the underground." Holland Cotter, "When Repression Was a Muse," *New York Times*, 21 July 2011, sec. Art review.
39. Pintilie, *Acțiunismul în România în timpul comunismului*, 50, 76.
40. Pintilie, *Acțiunismul în România în timpul comunismului*, 75, 78; Călin Dan, "The Aesthetics of Poverty."
41. Richard, *La insubordinación de los signos*, 43; Neustadt, *C.A.D.A. día*, 15.
42. José Joaquín Brunner, *Vida cotidiana, sociedad y cultura: Chile 1973–82* (Documento de Trabajo Programa FLACSO-Santiago de Chile, Numero 151, Julio, 1982), 82.
43. Andrea W. Giunta, "Chile y Argentina: Memorias en turbulencia," in *Pensar en la Postdictadura*, ed. Nelly Richard and Alberto Moreiras (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2001), 276.
44. Richard, "Margins and Institutions," 60–61.
45. Interview given by Lotty Rosenfeld to Sergio Trabucco for the webpage of the Arts Faculty of the University of Chile, at: [www.uchile.cl/noticias/41869/lotty-rosenfeld-en-la-documenta-me-senti-discriminada](http://www.uchile.cl/noticias/41869/lotty-rosenfeld-en-la-documenta-me-senti-discriminada) (accessed 20 December 2011).
46. Christine Macel, "Ewa Partum," in *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2010), 132.
47. These dance companies were: Estudio 17 (later known as Grupo de Danza del Centro), created in 1976 by Gregorio Fassler, which mixed several art forms, music, visual arts and photography; the Mobile company created in 1977 by Hernán Baldrich, which mixed sculpture with dancing "dance sculptures"; and the Taller de Danzas Antiguas, directed by Sara Vial. Maria José Cifuentes, *Historia social de la danza en Chile. Visiones, escuelas y discursos, 1940–1990* (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 2007), 142–45.
48. José Cifuentes, *Historia social de la danza en Chile*, 152, 156, 157.
49. Pintilie, *Acțiunismul în România în timpul comunismului*, 15.
50. Jean Louis Déotte, "El arte en la época de la desaparición," in *Políticas y estéticas de la memoria*, ed. Nelly Richard (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2000), 156.
51. Déotte, "El arte en la época de la desaparición," 156.
52. Nelly Richard, "Imagen-Recuerdo y Borraduras," in *Políticas y estéticas de la memoria*, ed. Nelly Richard (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2000), 172, 165, 167.
53. Richard, *La insubordinación de los signos*, 21.
54. Richard, "Imagen-Recuerdo y Borraduras," 168.
55. Rita Ferrer, "El alfabeto, la combinatoria, el acontecimiento," in *Retratos de Carlos Altamirano*, ed. Fernando Balcells *et al.* (Santiago: Ocho Libros editores, 1996), 51.
56. Richard, "Imagen-Recuerdo y Borraduras," 166.
57. Jean Louis Déotte, "El arte en la época de la desaparición," 158.
58. Cecilia Valdes Urrutia, "Carlos Altamirano: 'Busco tensionar al máximo el arte'," *El Mercurio* (10 June 2007).
59. Andrea Giunta, "Politics of Representation: Art & Human Rights," *Emisferica* 7.2 (2011), at: [www.hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en/e-misferica-72/giunta](http://www.hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/en/e-misferica-72/giunta) (accessed 15 March 2011). Celina Van Dembroucke, "The Absence Made Visible: The Case of Ausencias, Gustavo Germano's Photographic Exhibition," *Tensions* 4 (Fall 2010).
60. Andrea González, Entrevista con Claudio Pérez, "No hay arte sin política," *Estrella Digital* (9 July 2001); [http://www.lainsignia.org/2001/julio/cul\\_029.htm](http://www.lainsignia.org/2001/julio/cul_029.htm) (accessed 20 March 2011).
61. Andrea Giunta, "Politics of Representation."
62. "El siluetazo, desde la Mirada de Alfredo Alonso" at: [www.me.gov.ar/a30delgolpe/fotogaleria/el\\_siluetazo/](http://www.me.gov.ar/a30delgolpe/fotogaleria/el_siluetazo/) (accessed 21 March 2011).
63. See the website [www.theworldaccordingtoionb.com](http://www.theworldaccordingtoionb.com) (accessed 15 March 2011).

64. Ion Bârlădeanu and Mirosław Tichy, [www.theparisian.org/en/article/1329/ion-barladeanu-miroslaw-tichy\\_2010-03-01.html](http://www.theparisian.org/en/article/1329/ion-barladeanu-miroslaw-tichy_2010-03-01.html) (accessed 26 March 2011).
65. See more of his work on the website of the H'Art Gallery, at: <http://www.hartgallery.ro/index.php?page=artist&id=11> (accessed 14 December 2011).
66. See the interview of Ion Grigorescu (in Romanian), at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoIL8d7IqI0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoIL8d7IqI0) (accessed 28 March 2011).