

Some Marks in Marcel Iancu's Creation

CĂLIN STEGEREAN*

Abstract: The paper emphasises some aspects of Marcel Iancu's creation during his dadaist period in Zürich and after his return in Romania where he was one of avant-garde movement leaders and author of some important theoretical articles.

Keywords: Avant-garde, Dadaism, Constructivism, *Contimporanul*.

Marcel Iancu (1895-1984) is known as a painter, graphic artist, stage designer, architect, organizer of exhibitions, journalist, and theoretician, being one of the most important representatives of the Avant-garde movement. In the Catalogue of the "Dada" exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, in 2006, Yves Peyré says that

Without his contribution, it is obvious that in Zürich, Dadaism would have lacked the wild intensity which he had the gift to implement by endowing it with a peculiarity one could see both in his practising and defining it. Iancu, a peer of Tzara, Arp, and Ball was the soul of Cabaret Voltaire. (Peyré, 2005, 536)

In this context, Iancu made paintings, etchings, sculptures, masks, illustrations for books and magazines. Together with Tzara and Huelsenbeck, he was the author of simultaneous poems. The best known of such poems was *L'amiral cherche une maison à louer*. In these poems, the de-structuring typical of Dadaism affects language and results from the use of cacophonies, recitatives

* Muzeul de Artă Cluj-Napoca (Cluj-Napoca Museum of Art), e-mail: stecalin@yahoo.com

with elegiac, humorous, and simultaneously bizarre sonorities interrupted by songs, onomatopoeias, or mere whistles expressing a society deconstructed because of war. "The shows from Cabaret Voltaire owe him a lot because he gave them a total expression: corporal, original, and harbinger of new times." (Peyré, 2005, 536)

Although lost, *Cabaret Voltaire*, Iancu's most reproduced painting from the period of Dadaism in Zürich, was done in an Expressionist manner. Most of the paintings and etchings from the same period were decidedly abstract or rather done in a form which defies the classical, figurative morphology of the image. The technique Iancu used when making posters and book illustrations was the lino printing and the xylograph which gave the image an abrupt, disturbing aspect with asymmetrical compositions.

Painted colours were sometimes added to the black colour that had been printed. It is worth mentioning the book illustrated with linoprints *La première Aventure celeste de Mr. Antipirine* by Tristan Tzara which is considered "an icon of the [Dadaist] revolt" (Peyré, 2005, 536), the poster for the first Dada exhibition in 1917 printed in linoleum, the illustrations carved in wood for the covers of the Dada magazine, and the exquisite polychromous poster for Tristan Tzara's lecture from 23 July 1918.

Another personal contribution was the intensely geometrical abstract reliefs made in wood or coloured plaster that gave the paradoxical impression that they are abstract paintings. We can say that Iancu even created a sort of in-between-painting-and-sculpture genre.

The artist did a series of masks for the dance shows taking place at Cabaret Voltaire. They were made of cheap materials, such as newspapers, thread, and cardboard packing boxes and relied on images evoking, for most people, the art of the cultures from Oceania or Africa very fashionable at that time. In fact, they are rather inspired from the ritual masks traditional in Iancu's native Romania. Hugo Ball wrote down in his diary that these masks not only claimed an adequate costume, as one can see from a photo with Sophie Taeuber from that period, but they also generated new corporal hypostases with gestures hovering on madness. The role of the mask was to go beyond "the mask" of social conventions and allow access to that place neighbouring madness where there are no barriers. (Dickermann, 2006, 32)

Having come back to Romania in 1922, Marcel Iancu published, together with Ion Vinea, the journal *Contimporanul* which would express the first avant-

garde tendencies in Romania. Previously, in 1912, Iancu edited, with the same Ion Vinea and also with Tristan Tzara and Adrian Maniu, the journal *Simbolul* (*The Symbol*).

In *Contimporanul* Marcel Iancu published drawings, linoprints, xylographs, reproductions of his paintings and pictures of his work in architecture and design, interviews, theoretical texts, and exhibition reviews. He also initiated the "Contimporanul" exhibitions, as well as the exhibitions of the "Arta Nouă", the "1934", and the "Criterion" groupings. He illustrated several volumes: *Antologia poezilor de azi* (*The Anthology of Today's Poets*) – 1925, F. Aderca – 1929, Ion Barbu – 1930, *Paradisul suspinelor* (*The Paradise of Sighs*) by Ion Vinea – 1930, N. D. Cocea – 1931, Jacques Costin – 1931, Sașa Pană – 1933. He would publish fragments from these books in the avant-garde journals as well. In his work the artistic expressions from the Dadaist period relied on principles derived from his contact with Constructivism which he took and applied in a personal way. This made Hans Arp write to him at a certain moment, "your art remains a sort of Oriental constructivism... It is the opposite of intellectual art." (VlasIU, 1994, 41)

Thus, in the first two years since the publication of *Contimporanul*, Iancu excelled in painting portraits in India ink, for instance Ion Călugăru, T. Bobeș, painter Daniel, Iser, Nona Otescu, Dida Solomon, Urmuz, M. Mircea. Stylistically, "they belong to Expressionism, an artistic structure which was closest to his temperament". (VlasIU, 1994, 41) This experience was then turned to account by the publication of many of these portraits in *The Anthology of Today's Poets* by Ion Pillat and Perpessicius.

Issue no. 46/1924 of *Contimporanul* would signify a big turn in Iancu's programmatic affiliation to Constructivism by the publication of *The Activist Manifesto to the Youth* (*Manifestul activist către tinerime*). We witness a change in Marcel Iancu's artistic vision, a metalanguage of forms. The etching on the cover of this decisive issue of *Contimporanul* is significant in this respect. The works he published afterwards have a significant abstract character and their titles are relevant for this new trend: *Plastic Alphabet* (*Alfabet plastic*) (issue 47), *Central Construction* (*Construcție centrală*), *New Nature* (*Natură nouă*) (issue 50-51), *Decomposition* (*Decompoziție*) (issue 63), *Modern Construction* (*Construcție modernă*) (issue 69).



Fig. 1-2. Abstract linoprints by Marcel Iancu in *Contimporanul* no. 48 and 49.

The compositions turn to account the tensions created between rectangular forms by the horizontal and the vertical lines intersected by the dynamical oblique ones or by curved contours on full white and black surfaces, the idea of a plastic show based only on the resonance of the primary forms being eloquent.

Marcel Iancu also published, in the avant-garde journals, articles which supported the avant-garde movement theoretically. His most consistent contribution was in *Contimporanul* where he published 23 articles from 1922 till 1932.

In issue no. 4 of this journal, he published *Notes on Painting*, an article where he explained the peculiarities of "abstractionism" and the new way this and other modern trends, Expressionism and Cubism, opened to art. He emphasizes the fact that imitating nature is not a priority, rigid resemblance being "sacrificed and left to the photographers". The classical themes, such as "faces, landscapes, still nature" are replaced by "movement, vibration, harmony" and they act like music which "groups sounds with a view to a harmony which expresses a mood, the abstract painting makes use of sounds and colours with a view to an equally harmonious result". (Iancu, 1922, 13)

In issue 45/April 1924 of *Contimporanul*, Iancu published an article entitled *Comments on Art (Însemnări de Artă)*. It is, in fact, a manifesto, a programme which, to a certain extent, reminds one of the *Manifesto of Futurist Painters (Manifestul pictorilor futuristi)*, but its substance is Constructivist. The article is made up of 17 arguments where Marcel Iancu defends the pure gesture which can be found in the art of the primitive populations, the children, in folk art: "primitive peoples do not make primitive art. In art, there is no primitivism, there is no gradation in development" and folk arts are considered to be "the most powerful standard samples of sensibility". (Iancu, 1924, 7)

In his article *The New Style: Architecture (Stil nou: arhitectura)* published in issue no. 48/1925 of *Contimporanul*, Marcel Iancu pointed to the influence exercised in architecture by the manifestoes of Dadaism. Here are some of them.

The collaboration of abstract plastic arts with rejuvenated architecture (their isolation was the cause of their helplessness); 2) Against art trade and exhibitions (venality indirectly gave birth to the artist's loneliness and bohemian misery); 3) Against framing abstract paintings (they are no longer naturalist sections; only architecture is the background); 4) Against the artist's super-human pride cultivated since the Renaissance (the new artist is the man returning to society). These manifestations were, then, accompanied by samples of the collaboration between abstract plastic arts in architecture. Later on, we, the group of the radical artists (Arp, Eggeling, Richter, and Iancu) even demanded the anonymity of the art work. (Iancu, 1925, 2)

In the same issue of the journal, in the article *New Architecture (Arhitectura nouă)*, Marcel Iancu set forth the new architectonic principles,

The simple cubic objects: the cube, the sphere, the cylinder, the prism, the pyramid, purely compositional elements are the basic elements of any architecture. [...] The origin of architecture lies in geometry. (Iancu, 1925, 2)

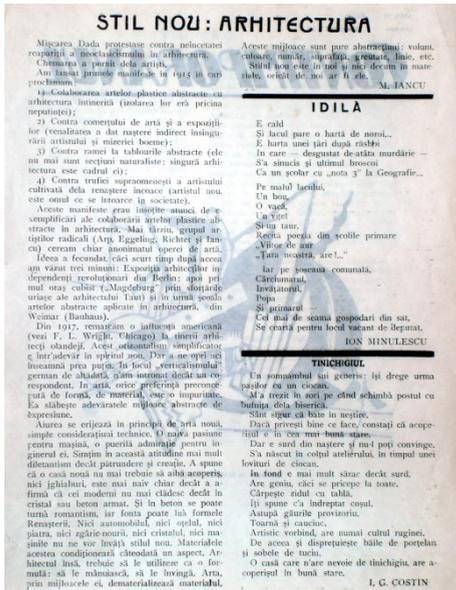


Fig. 3-4 Pages from *Contimporanul* no. 48 with articles by Marcel Iancu.

In the journal *Point (Punct)*, issue no. 13/1925, Marcel Iancu published an article in French *Pour le métier*. Here he developed the constructivist perspective of a utilitarian art meant for society: "Ce n'est pas en voulant rendre l'artisan artiste mais l'artiste artisan qu'on relèvera le métier d'aujourd'hui." (Iancu, 1925, 1) The artist's exceptional status as a being remote from the world is questioned.

J'ai dit ailleurs si l'artiste du temps a eu ou non raison de prétendre être autrement traité qu'un serviteur ou un artisan du noble seigneur, mais aujourd'hui on fait par sentimentalité bien trop d'abus avec cette dignité d'artiste. (Iancu, 1925, 1)

In issue no. 1 of the journal *Meridian*, Marcel Iancu published two pages (9 and 10) of plastic considerations as aphorisms. Their title is *Useful Notions (Noțiuni utile)*. In fact, these are notes about the new Constructivist aesthetics which aims at approaching plastic language to the abstract language of music.

About painting, now when the subject has become secondary, we shall soon be able to talk using the dictionary of music: about the matching of minor and major colours, the rich colours, about the tough and the elegiac values, about the main motif and the construction, about rhythm and autochthonous expressions, about harmonies and dissonances, about harsh sound or sweet harmonies. (Iancu, 1934, 9)

Marcel Iancu rather meant the deconstruction of the consecrated aesthetic compromised by the excesses of the bourgeoisie and the atrocities of the World War I. Deconstruction and the refusal of the old forms resulted in the new aesthetic revealing both the complexity of the outer world and new dimensions of man's sensibility and mind. Breaking the old blueprints brought to light the "voice" of impersonal, abstract forms which could be endowed with no ideological content and only resonated with intrinsic archetypes of the human soul.

References

- DICKERMAN, Leah, "Zurich." In *Dada*, 16-44. Washington: National Gallery of Art Publishing Office, 2006. Print.
- IANCU, Marcel, "Noțiuni utile." *Meridian* 2 (1934): 9-10. Print.
- IANCU, Marcel, "Pour le métier." *Punct* 13 (1925): 1. Print.
- IANCU, Marcel, "Stil nou: arhitectura." *Contimporanul* 48 (1925): 2. Print.
- IANCU, Marcel, "Însemnări de Artă." *Contimporanul* 45 (1924):7-8. Print.
- IANCU, Marcel, "Note de pictură." *Contimporanul* 4 (1922): 13-14. Print.
- PEYRÉ, Yves, "Marcel Janco, Gravures et reliefs." In *DADA*, catalogue publié sous la direction de Laurent Le Bon à l'occasion de l'exposition DADA, 536-539. Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2005. Print.
- VLASIU, IOANA, "Idei constructiviste în arta românească a anilor '20: integralismul." In *București, anii 1920-1940: între avangardă și modernism*, 41-44. București: Simetria Publishing House, 1994. Print.

CĂLIN STEGEREAN. *Graduated the Fine Arts Institute from Cluj-Napoca. Master degree in cultural management at European Studies Faculty of Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. PhD in philology at Babeș-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca with the dissertation entitled The Fine Arts and the Interwar Avant-guard Magazines. Director of the Art*

CĂLIN STEGEREAN

Museum Cluj-Napoca (2009-2014) and deputy-president of the National Museums' Network (2010-2014). He is member of the Imaginary Research Centre of Babeş-Bolyai University and collaborates with articles at Observator Cultural, Steaua, Tribuna, Ziarul de Duminică, Arta magazines. He won the National Prize "Petru Comarnescu" of the Romanian Culture Minister for the exhibition "The Avant-guard from Romania in Cluj's collections".