

Transcript of conversation between Ion Grigorescu and Anders Kreuger on the occasion of the exhibition *Ion Grigorescu and Lili Dujourie* at Ludlow 38. The conversation took place on August 29, 2009 at the Goethe-Institut New York's Wyoming Building space in downtown Manhattan.

Silvia Rogozea, Events Coordinator at the Romanian Cultural Institute New York, translated Mr. Grigorescu simultaneously. Tobi Maier made the transcript from audio recording.

Anders Kreuger: First of all I would like to thank Ion Grigorescu for coming here to New York to join us for this first exhibition of his work in the United States. I would also like to thank the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York for making his stay here possible, and of course the Goethe-Institut New York for hosting this discussion here in the Wyoming Building as part of the exhibition *Lili Dujourie and Ion Grigorescu* which can be seen in their downtown satellite for contemporary art, Ludlow 38. Since Lili Dujourie unfortunately could not make it to New York for this exhibition we will focus on the work of Ion Grigorescu.

In the exhibition at Ludlow 38 there are three films by Ion Grigorescu. *In My Beloved Bucharest* (1977) shows the city of Bucharest and how it was changing in the mid 1970's shortly after suffering a strong earthquake. *Boxing* (1977) shows the artist shadow-boxing with himself. And then there is *The Truths about the Capitalist World* (also 1977). In addition, we show a photographic triptych that stems from a meeting that had to be convened as a follow-up to the exhibition *Art and History* in Bucharest in 1974, and also a sketch for the official portrait of Nicolae Ceausescu that Ion was commissioned to make in 1980. Finally, in the rear gallery at Ludlow 38, we also exhibit a C-print entitled *Homage à Francis Bacon*, a self-portrait by Ion taken in 1978.

Ion, I am pleased that after working with you over a number of years I have managed to bring you here tonight. I wonder if you would give us an entry to the works in the exhibition and how they, in your opinion, are connected to each other.

Ion Grigorescu: You make me play your role now. It is very difficult to make the connection between the artworks exhibited. Just to simplify, you may think of an independent artist who does not want to sell his work, does not want to present it to the public, really an independent artist. He does whatever he wants. He can take a tram to go about the town to show real poverty in the neighborhood where the working class really lives. Or, he can just stay in his studio, but in fact I didn't have a studio, so I could just stay at home and take nude photographs of myself. In those times when they were created, the issue of connectivity between the artworks didn't exist. After 30 years my critics start to make the connections and say in fact the works are connected through politics. What I'm trying to do is to separate politics from my artwork and try to make it a process of self-discovery: In a very politicized movie called *Dialogue with Comrade Ceausescu* that I made in 1978, I discovered only later that I had a strong resemblance to Ceausescu's son.

AK: That's very interesting. And I'd like to show you an excerpt from that film. It is rather difficult to understand in the sense that the technology available at the time, Super8 film stock, doesn't really allow for the text to be read. And this is a work that is really very much based on the written word, on the dialogue between the artist as the artist and the artist as Ceausescu. It's a work that is not easy to just look at and that's also why it's not in the exhibition but inserted into this discussion. The text is simply not legible even to those that know the language.

Now, I understand that this film, like many of the works you made in the late 1970s, could not be shown in public and perhaps not even to your closest colleagues?

IG: It was not a normal situation. The subject was very dangerous. The film was made with good intentions, and with all due respect for such a person in such a position. My intention was not that of making a comedy or something to laugh about; it was very respectful. I tried to put myself in Ceausescu's place and to imagine how he would answer tough questions

that in real life nobody would have dared to ask him. There were difficult topics like the economy, progress, revolution...

To me Ceausescu was like an investor who has his employees and puts them to work more and more and gets more and more out of everything, because he owns everything. I really considered Ceausescu as a Capitalist. I tried to find arguments out of my artistic life, ways in which things could become better. At that time it seemed to me that the Romanian people need not to buy new technology, have a heavy industry or develop. Romania was at a point where it was rich and very powerful. The text in this film can't be read but I'd really like to underline that I was very diplomatic about the subject. I followed the guidelines of a journalist who interviews someone in a high position.

AK: You also once told me that you didn't want to fall into the habit of only criticizing. Instead you wanted to enter into a dialogue. But dialogue was impossible. Criticizing was possible, in public or privately, but the possibility for dialogue was not there.

IG: This also applies to the portrait of Ceausescu I made. I was commissioned to make a portrait of Ceausescu. But in the end I couldn't finish it so I didn't receive the money and I didn't deliver the work. I made a work with three Ceausescus in one image, with the purpose of showing that Ceausescu was always discussing the important issues only with himself. He was his own critic, the only one.

AK: The portrait was refused because you showed three images of Ceausescu. Or what was the reason for the refusal?

IG: Everybody who lived under Ceausescu can easily understand that it was impossible to have three Ceausescu's in one work.

AK: What did you do once your portrait was refused?

IG: In the end I didn't understand why they wanted me to continue the work, but they asked me to do only one Ceausescu, asked me to finish the work. When they refused they said the work was too realistic, anatomically, but also that the work was showing his age. In the official portraits Ceausescu was always looking younger. And the guidelines in those times for Ceausescu portraits set out to really create an idealized image. The specificity of visual art is that even with time passing a work that can be perceived both as of bad or of good quality. Art is silent. But everybody can interpret it in whichever way they want. Today people want to say about my work that I was a dissident and others say that I was a collaborator with the regime.

AK: What we are looking at now is a still from one of the films in the exhibition, *The Truths about the Capitalist World* (1977) and this is one of the occasions where you have wandered around the city and used your Super8 camera to record. Not in Romania this time; it was during a trip to Switzerland and France. Could you develop on the title of the work and your intentions?

IG: The title was taken from a Romanian newspaper at the time and it was then very common to speak ironically about the capitalist world in Romania. That's why I underlined the word "truth". My view in this movie is not necessarily full of enthusiasm towards the capitalist world. I recorded writings on the wall, signage and advertising. The signs and images had a different effect on a tourist coming from Eastern Europe than on a Westerner. That's valid for advertising but also for example for the images of policemen on the street carrying their batons, trying to manage the crowd. The whole aspect of richness and paradise and how furs are everywhere... This, unsurprisingly, has become a post-revolutionary slogan in Romania: "getting rich and richer."

AK: You traveled to Western Europe and then you went back to Romania. What happened then? Would you regard that as an important decision in your life – to go back to Romania in

those days, in 1977?

IG: I was close to staying in Western Europe but I didn't want to. I still believed something could be done in Romania. Not only politically but also artistically, yet the whole issue of the art market was of no interest for me. I was told in Paris that the whole history of art was done in Paris. And it was true. It was interesting for me. In a certain way I was free to do whatever I wanted in Romania – if I staid at home, quiet, mute.

AK: You were not only working in your home studio but you were also working as a teacher in Romania ...

IG: Right after graduating from college I started my teaching career. But I had to commute. When I wanted to come back to Bucharest from the city I could only find a position with the House of Pioneers.

Working with children was a very innocent activity, so I was working there for three years. I discovered that my work was also used as propaganda. The children were seen as critical mass for the future that could be guided in the right direction. The children usually enjoyed marching, staying in line, putting up flags, playing the trumpet; they enjoyed all that. They were brought up with this military-style education, which probably exists everywhere, in every country. But in Romania they were also brought to stadiums for official ceremonies where the children would become a large landscape or portrait... And they were fully involved in political organizations so that they would be prepared for a future in the political hierarchy.

I really enjoyed going to suburban schools and traveling with the children and finding interesting things to do together. I'd really like to emphasize again that the political pressure was so big that I had to run away from this job, although I wanted to work with children. Three years was enough. I think three years is the timeframe in which you can realize that you're doing something wrong. A lot of people just take jobs in institutions, until they realize that things are not working the right way. It takes time and also there is the money problem... All employees have their justifications for leaving their jobs... I really enjoy those images from that time. I neglected them for a long time. A younger colleague of mine living in Sweden now, Stefan Constantinescu, has published a book entitled the *The Golden Age for Children*. When I was asked by Mr. Constantinescu to write something about these images, I had the impression that I was somehow accused and forced to rethink my work with those children in those times. At last, a happy act of confession for me!

AK: Have you had any experience with teaching after the fall of the communist system?

IG: Never again. After I resigned from teaching I went to mural painting restoration. That's how I retired from all public activities, like exhibitions etc, in Bucharest. Until the fall of communism I worked in churches and monasteries throughout Romania.

AK: Even if you're not so interested in the connections between the works in the exhibition, I still think you have made a link between the works on view in the show by telling us about your experience. When you are approached for exhibitions now, what is your experience of being "rediscovered" for what you have been doing 30 years ago?

IG: I don't think I'm a very public figure now. Even if my work is exhibited in so many places I somehow have the advantage that I don't speak English. So I just stand back and don't take part in any discussions and keep my ideas for myself, just like in the old times.

AK: And then we try to prevent you from living your life and put you and your work back into circulation, and this will continue...

IG: I made a second version of the piece *Dialogue with Comrade Ceausescu* (1978) and called it *Post mortem Dialogue with President Ceausescu* (2007). This time I added sound,

using my own voice which sometimes, when I speak louder, when I shout a little bit, resembles Ceausescu's voice. The finished product is very realistic.

This new version of the movie was launched in Sibiu in a public square. There were some older people and after viewing they were saying, "Oh, how much we enjoy to hear Ceausescu again." (Laughs.) And someone asked me if I wanted pay homage to Ceausescu or bring him back to life. But I only wanted to reveal Ceausescu as he is going through his judgment after his death and try to understand what is happening nowadays. I read this interview with former Polish President Jaruzelski where I found a lot of common ground with my film works.

AK: Do you sometimes feel that you talk to yourself through Ceausescu?

IG: Well, Ceausescu has also appeared in my dreams quite a lot. When you live for 20 years with this propaganda Ceausescu becomes a kind of Alter Ego. Maybe that's why many people today say that we lived better during his time...