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## Cosmopolitanism and Creativity in the Romanian avant-garde : The First Two Years of the Contimporanul Movement (1922-1923)

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**Cosmopolitanism and Creativity in the Romanian avant-garde:  
The First Two Years of the *Contimporanul* Movement (1922-1923)<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

*The study focuses on two major points. The first point – considering that our major thesis is that cosmopolitanism as an explanatory framework seems to offer a new way of interpreting the social, political and aesthetic transformation within the modern artworld at the beginning of the 20th Century – seeks to put to work new theoretical paradigms of cosmopolitanism in order to explain the history of the avant-garde. The second focal point of our research will apply the theory of creative cosmopolitan imaginary to the cosmopolitan milieu of the Romanian interwar avant-garde group “Contimporanul.” We consider 1922 and 1923 as the period of the highest aesthetico-political development of the Romanian avant-garde.*

**Keywords:** *cosmopolitanism, avant-garde, creativity, Romania*

**Introduction. Cosmopolitanism as an Elusive Concept**

A standard view on cosmopolitanism is that it generally supports the idea that all human beings should be “citizens in a single community.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that cosmopolitanism, when put to the test, is quite an elusive concept – at least historically or politically, if not theoretically.<sup>3</sup> Some historians<sup>4</sup> agree that the roots of cosmopolitanism as a notion are Greek and Roman, and that Antiquity understood it as mediating “the tension between global and local, universal and particular.”<sup>5</sup> Throughout modern history, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been historically and politically related to the emergence

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1 Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Romanian are my own. Fragments of this text have appeared in my “Is Cosmopolitanism a Feasible Paradigm for Understanding Modern Art? A Methodological Proposal,” *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 149 (2014), 513-17. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments during the early stages of the writing of this paper.

2 P. Kleingeld, E. Brown, “Cosmopolitanism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online*, accessed 2.07.2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmopolitanism/>.

3 See Ulrich Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies,” in *Theory, Culture and Society* 19-2002, 17-44, which will be discussed in the following.

4 Michael L. Miller, and Scott Ury, “Cosmopolitanism: the end of Jewishness?,” in *European Review of History – Revue européenne d’histoire*, vol. 17 no. 3 (June 2010), 337-59.

5 Miller and Ury, *Cosmopolitanism: the end of Jewishness*, 340.

of the nation-states. From the 19th Century onwards, "cosmopolitanism" has been explained as the *opposite* of nationalism within the political life of the European nation-states; it was just a side in the conflict between the universal (cosmopolitan) and the particular (national).

Many twists and turns took place with cosmopolitanism in the political arena of 19th- and 20th-Century Europe. Historians, such as Friedrich Meineke in his *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (1907), explained cosmopolitanism as a "necessary step" towards nationalism. At the beginning of the 19th Century, the national state was considered to be an end in itself and also a safeguard of cosmopolitan values. Precisely at the same time in history, the more and more aggressive anti-Semitism of the European elites began to associate cosmopolitanism with a "Jewish" political view. The concept became a political weapon of the anti-Semitic propaganda arsenal in the Nazi occupied Europe but also in the Soviet Union after 1949.<sup>6</sup>

It is immensely difficult, even nowadays, to agree upon a definition of "cosmopolitanism." One of the leading voices of the "new cosmopolitanism," the German sociologist Ulrich Beck,<sup>7</sup> acknowledges that cosmopolitanism is rather explainable as a *process* than as an outcome, using the term "cosmopolitanization" instead of "cosmopolitanism." He stands for a "de-territorialization" of cosmopolitanism, stating that "cosmopolitanism is another word for disputing about cosmopolitanisms,"<sup>8</sup> thus eliminating the ideological paradox of cosmopolitanism, the "-ism," from "cosmopolitan." He concludes, that "there are no generalizable characteristics which allow it to be clearly distinguished" from other notions, such as multiculturalism, and that, in the end, the "vagueness and equivocalness of [its] definition"<sup>9</sup> gives it a positive advantage.

### Cultural Diversity, Modern Art, the "Cosmopolitan" Artworld and Beyond

It appears that the influence of the cosmopolitan way of life upon the modern arts began around the start of the 19th Century. With the impact of international trade and international travel, different cultures, styles and ways of life exerted a powerful influence upon the metropolitan life of major cities, especially in the case of nations that had large colonial empires overseas, but not exclusively.<sup>10</sup> The birth of a *social* and *cultural* cosmopolitanism is generally connected with the European imperialisms of the 19th Century and with the development of

6 *Ibid.*, 347.

7 Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society and Its Enemies," 17-44.

8 *Ibid.*, 35.

9 *Ibid.*, 36.

10 Cosmopolitanism is specific to all imperial capitals of the 19th and early 20th Centuries: Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin, and also New York, Istanbul or Saint Petersburg. On the subject of cosmopolitanism in the literature of the Victorian age, see T. Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century: Visible City, Invisible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). On the subject of cosmopolitan Paris and the adoption of "foreign modernisms" in art, see Ihor Junyk, *Foreign Modernism. Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Style in Paris* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

the metropolitan cities in Europe which were also capitals of empires, such as Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin.<sup>11</sup>

Recent studies<sup>12</sup> have emphasized the presence of an “aesthetic” or “cultural” cosmopolitanism in our contemporary globalized societies, a cosmopolitanism located “at the *individual* level,” defined as a “cultural disposition involving an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards peoples, places and experiences from different cultures, especially those from different ‘nations’ (...) or as having taste for ‘the wider shores of cultural experience.’”<sup>13</sup> This attitude of openness will transform the political idea of a *cosmopolis* into a cultural idea, a “place or political space that encompasses the variety of human culture. It *promises* [*emphasis mine*] the potential to meet and become acquainted with all the strands of cultural diversity. The cosmopolitan is therefore someone who can cope with *unpredictability* [e.m.]. Cosmopolitans know what is expected in different cultural settings and can move between them with confidence and assurance.”<sup>14</sup> This cosmopolitan view effectively tells us that the terms *culture* and *cultural identity* must be read anew, methodologically differently, in a “glocal world” (Roland Robertson) whose realities are transforming, perceptibly or not, our major ways of looking at it. It is what I would define as an application of Beck’s idea of “cosmopolitanization” to the field of culture. The example of Motti Regev,<sup>15</sup> discussing the “ethno-national uniqueness” or “authenticity” of a local music as (paradoxically) a phenomenon of aesthetic cosmopolitanism, is a good example of dismissing the distinction (exclusion) between “our own culture” and the cultures of “others.”<sup>16</sup>

We may see a cosmopolitan lifestyle as informing modern art in a fundamental manner starting from the Industrial Revolution onwards. Certain features that may be seen as *cosmopolitan* will circulate from the *social* and *cultural* sphere to the subsphere of the modern arts. Ihor Junyk<sup>17</sup> sees *hybridity*, *transience*, *metamorphosis* and *openness* as cosmopolitan features relevant to the Parisian artistic works of the avant-gardes at the beginning of the 20th Century. These developed, within the French culture, a version of “foreign modernism” that is marked by an increasing tendency towards inter-cultural hybridization and towards challenging the prerequisites of a traditional French academism. Junyk would observe the same tendency in other cases, such as Rainer Maria Rilke’s prose and poetry,<sup>18</sup> whose “uncanny” modernism adopts classical, historical

11 On the issue of colonial empires and culture, see Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (NY: Vintage, 1993).

12 Cf. Motti Regev, “Cultural Uniqueness and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism,” in *European Journal of Social Theory* 10 (1), 123-38; Nikos Papastergiadis, “Glimpses of Cosmopolitanism in the Hospitality of Art,” in *European Journal of Social Theory* 10 (1), 139-52; David Chaney, “Cosmopolitan Art and Cultural Citizenship,” in *Theory, Culture and Society* (2002), vol. 19 (1-2), 157-74; Mica Nava, “Cosmopolitan Modernity. Everyday Imaginaries and the Register of Difference,” in *Theory, Culture and Society* (2002), vol. 19 (1-2), 81-99.

13 Regev, “Cultural Uniqueness and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism,” 124.

14 Chaney, “Cosmopolitan Art,” 158.

15 Regev, “Cultural Uniqueness and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism,” 124 ff.

16 *Ibid.*, 125.

17 Junyk, *Foreign Modernism*, 7 ff.

18 Ihor Junyk, “‘A Fragment from Another Context’: Modernist Classicism and the Urban Uncanny in Rainer Maria Rilke,” in *Comparative Literature* 62:3, 262-81. Rilke is another example of the cosmopolitan

themes and tropes precisely in order to challenge not just the classical model, but also the modern one, defined by Baudelaire as “ephemeral, fugitive and contingent,” yet sometimes too unilaterally confined to its own values, themes and styles.<sup>19</sup>

This challenging of the mainstream, traditional notion of culture by these localized yet cosmopolitan cultures<sup>20</sup> goes hand in hand with a shift in the appreciation of culture by the modern public. Thus, due partially to social and economic transformations, partially to the impact of technology and science, the modern public will begin to associate authentic cultural value with novelty and not with tradition anymore: what has been disseminated ever since by the “cultural industries” and the “systems of scholarly knowledge” will emphasize the “novelty” over the “traditional.”<sup>21</sup> However, the impact of the cosmopolitan lifestyle in the arts is *not* to be related to the myth of the autonomous or independent artistic creation, which has informed the image of the modern “artworld.”<sup>22</sup> The *individual artistic creativity* thesis pertains to an essentially non-cosmopolitan worldview: it emphasizes the stark identity, the authenticity of the artist, continuing to uphold the basically conventional view that there is a certain inclusion/exclusion mechanism that functions inside the subfield of art, and that the artworld legitimizes itself through its alleged aesthetic autonomy (Kant).<sup>23</sup>

The emergence of a cosmopolitan “heterogeneity” of tastes within the artworld during high modernity is only a small part of a larger picture. If we follow the *cosmopolitanization* thesis thoroughly (Ulrich Beck), the cosmopolitan trend has everything to do with the constant challenging of the notional divisions/exclusions in relation to the artworld in modernity. These delineations have kept the modern notion of the artworld within its known confines: national/international, European/non-European, art/non-art, artistic/non-artistic objects, aesthetic/non-aesthetic objects, artist/non-artist, creative activity/non-creative activity, informed/non-informed spectator. Yet, from the 19th Century on, modern art constantly kept challenging and changing its own identity. The

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intellectual. He represents the typical “uncanny” foreigner of high modernity. He saw himself as “strange to everyone, like one dying in a foreign land, alone, superfluous, a fragment from another context” (quote in Junyk, *op. cit.*, 273).

19 Quote, in Junyk, “A Fragment from Another Context,” 263. Baudelaire himself challenged the glorifying view of modernity as a historical epoch by arguing that “every old master has had his own modernity” (*idem*, 277).

20 There are interesting analogies between the situation in early 20th-Century avant-garde cultures and the contemporary status of cultures, cf. N. Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), chapt. “The Deterritorialization of Culture;” “The Limits of Cultural Translation,” 100-45.

21 Regev, 133.

22 I use the term “artworld” as a mindful reference to Arthur Danto’s theory, to the fact that the modern work of art is to be seen not as the unique, single embodiment of its meaning, but in the context of an “interpretive community” (Stanley Fish) pertaining to the artwork, a community which is comprised of the artwork itself, the artist, the critic and the public in general. On the subject of the birth of the modern public and the role of the public and the critic in shaping an aesthetic public sphere in the 18th Century, see J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991), 31 ff.

23 On “autonomy,” see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, transl. P. Guyer, E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 27-28, 164, 187, 195.

advent, on one hand, of new artists, new establishments, new publics, and, on the other hand, of new genres, new subjects, new styles, new techniques and new foreign influences in the modern arts has transformed the very nature of the artistic subfield and challenged its identity. It seems that the presence of a process of cosmopolitanization in the arts themselves is much more pervasive than the “banal”<sup>24</sup> cosmopolitanism of different cultures, different subjects or different styles mixed into and captured by the same artwork.<sup>25</sup> Thus, our thesis about the cosmopolitanization of the Avant-gardes goes beyond considering the avant-garde as a mere side-effect of 19th-Century cultural circulation.

Although the historical political and social conditions for the development of a cultural and artistic cosmopolitanism cannot be overlooked, since these shaped the background on which arts and their cosmopolitanism flourished,<sup>26</sup> avant-garde seems to be more than just this. Nikos Papastergiadis<sup>27</sup> speculates upon the possibility that aesthetics itself provides us with an “imaginary constitution of cosmopolitanism through aesthetic practices,” i.e. “a cosmopolitan worldview produced through aesthetics.”<sup>28</sup> Appealing to the concept of a “cosmopolitan imaginary,” he stresses that “the process of world making” itself is a “radical act of the cosmopolitan imaginary.” He views imagination as a “faculty for both representing and creating realities through the form of images.”<sup>29</sup> This reliance on the imaginary gives art the faculty of not only creating out of its own cosmopolitan images new “orders of politics”<sup>30</sup> but, we suspect, also of transforming itself during the process of creating new images.

This idea of “cosmopolitan imagination” is to be found and explained further in Gerard Delanty’s *The Cosmopolitan Imagination*,<sup>31</sup> where the author emphasizes the reading of cosmopolitanism that envisions it as a critical and self-critical perspective pertaining to the processes of self-transformation that appear in the encounter with the Other. Delanty speaks of self-transformation as the explanatory paradigm of cosmopolitanism, a process where the Self and the Other co-exist, both being transformed during the process of cosmopolitanization.<sup>32</sup> The encounter between the Self and its Other is neither “nativism” nor the “adoption of the culture of the Other.” It is a “self-transformative”

24 Beck, “The Cosmopolitan Society and Its Enemies,” 28.

25 A development in a different direction of this thesis appears in my “Is Cosmopolitanism A Feasible Paradigm for Understanding Modern Art? A Methodological Proposal,” in *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 149 (2014), 513-17.

26 Theda Shapiro, *Painters and Politics. The European avant-garde and Society, 1900-1925* (New York: Elsevier, 1976). Theda Shapiro, in her comprehensive survey of the contacts between politics and the European avant-garde of the early 20th Century, admits that anarchism, pacifism, collectivism and humanitarianism were tendencies embraced by almost all the members of the pre-war and post-war avant-gardes (with the exception of the Futurists) and that a common transnational humanitarianism proliferated in their art. Cf. Shapiro, 114 ff.

27 N. Papastergiadis, “Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism,” in: Gerard Delanty (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 220-32.

28 Papastergiadis, *Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism*, 221.

29 *Ibid.*, 221, 229.

30 The thesis appears in Jacques Rancière’s *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (2000), which Papastergiadis quotes.

31 Gerard Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination. The Renewal of Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 2009.

32 *Ibid.*, 11.

moment that distinguishes it from “a simple matter of diversity or transnational movement.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, *creativity* becomes the synonym for cosmopolitanism in this context, since cosmopolitanism could only be a “creative” cosmopolitanism “entailing the opening up of normative questions within the cultural imaginaries of societies. In this sense, cosmopolitanism refers to an orientation that resides less in a specific social condition than in an imagination that can take many different forms depending on historical context and social circumstances. Conceived of in terms of an imaginary, it is not then a matter of an ideal that transcends reality or a purely philosophical or utopian idea but an immanent orientation that takes shape in modes of self-understanding, experiences, feelings and collective identity narratives. The imaginary is both a medium of experience and an interpretation of that experience in a way that opens up new perspectives on the world.”<sup>34</sup>

In another text,<sup>35</sup> Papastergiadis acknowledges that the cosmopolitan imaginary which is at work in the artfield is not a ready-made frame for the cosmopolitanism of contemporary arts: “a cosmopolitan imaginary is not an abstract ideal, a speculative vision of the future, nor even the necessary illusion that spurs contemplation of a better life. The cosmopolitan imaginary is the proposition of new forms of worldly existence. These forms are not bound by the outcomes imposed by the regulative mechanisms of globalizing forces, nor are they produced through the corporatised assemblage of transnational exchanges. The form of the cosmopolitan imaginary starts with the creative ideas and critical attitudes that artists and ordinary people use in their daily reflections and worldly engagements. Therefore in the beginning of globalization there is also a cosmopolitan imaginary.”<sup>36</sup> Art serves as the benchmark for funneling future political and ethical equality. It does not, however, create this equality by itself; it only stimulates it within its imaginative spectrum. Because Papastergiadis does not find cosmopolitanism in the arts as a project of a social order proposed by the artists’s work, he only identifies several “tendencies” that are “shaping the trajectories of contemporary art”: denationalization, reflexive hospitality, cultural translation, discursivity, and the global public sphere.<sup>37</sup> Yet, the tool for this imaginative projection of the arts to their public and to the world eventually is the realm of the aesthetic itself, through the aesthetic feelings which are “shareable to others.” As a consequence, cosmopolitan imagination is a product of the whole artworld as an interpretive community, not just a vision projected from an artwork. Because art always “translates its own singularity into the form of universality,”<sup>38</sup> it also energizes the possibility that these tendencies may become active. These aesthetic potentialities also enhance ethical potentialities in the artworld, because feeling is the basis for the grasping of moral and eventually political equality.

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33 *Ibid.*, 13.

34 *Ibid.*, 14.

35 Papastergiadis, Nikos, “Cosmo-Aesthetics,” online at: <http://www.sommerakademie.zpk.org/de/fruehere-akademien/2010/reader.html>, accessed 1.11.2014.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*

## The Cosmopolitanism of the Romanian Avantgardistic Journal *Contimporanul*

Following this line of argument, we speculate that the early 20th-Century Romanian avant-garde known as the “*Contimporanul* group,” forged in a small but cosmopolitan milieu of former émigré artists, of which a large part were Jewish intellectuals, proposed an art where *self-understanding, experiences, feelings* and *collective identity narratives* (Gerard Delanty) articulated an early, not globalized, yet highly creative, cosmopolitan imagination. Some of the tendencies which are clearly visible today in our contemporary artworld, such as *denationalization, reflexive hospitality, cultural translation, discursivity* (Nikos Papastergiadis) were signaled by the words and deeds of that avant-garde. We also argue that this cosmopolitan imagination at the beginning of the 20th Century was energized by at least two aspects: the relation of these avantgardists to the kind of humanistic, early 20th-Century cosmopolitanism which was so common to the avant-gardes in Europe at that particular time, but also the ways in which artistic practices were harnessed within the small but highly dynamic community. As such, we considered that the cosmopolitan tendencies present within the world of this particular group are best describable under the idea of a “cosmopolitan imagination” that synthesizes local and international cultural elements in a local yet internationalized artistic sphere, fosters hybridity and cultural translation, rejects nationalization, and encourages reflexive hospitality, being highly critical of both the “Self” and the “Other” as kept apart in a mere relation of cultural diversity.

Starting out around the middle of the 19th Century, with the return to the home country of the first generation of Romanian intellectuals schooled at the universities and art academies of the West, Romanian artistic modernism in literature and visual arts was rather uneventful, marked at first by the imitation and assimilation of Western models and styles.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the contact with the West sparked a revolt of the intellectuals against the shallow imitation of Western models. This effect created the nationalistic vibe inside Romanian literature and visual arts at the end of the 19th Century. The nationalistic intellectuals contributed, directly or not, to the emergence of a distinctive type of idealized cultural nationalism that had a tremendous impact upon early 20th-Century Romanian politics.<sup>40</sup>

The first signs of Romanian avant-gardistic modernism appeared around 1912, with the publication of the symbolistic journals *Simbolul* (*Symbol*), and *Chemarea* (*Call*), in 1915. The names associated with these journals are those

39 For analyses of Romanian visual, architectural and literary modernisms during late 19th and early 20th Centuries, see: Erwin Kessler (ed.), *Culorile avangardei. Arta în România 1910-1950/Die Farben der Avantgarde. Rumanische Kunst 1910-1950/Colours of the Avantgarde. Romanian Art 1910-1950*, Institutul Cultural Român, 2007; S.A. Mansbach, “The ‘Foreignness’ of Classical Modern Art in Romania,” in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 80, no. 3 (Sep. 1998), 534-54; Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East. The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006); Roland Prügel, *Im Zeichen der Stadt. Avantgarde in Rumänien 1920-1938* (Cologne/Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau, 2008).

40 On the origins of cultural nationalism and autochthonism in Romania and its history throughout the 20th Century, see Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism*, University of California Press, 1991; Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).



of Sami Rosenstein (later known as Tristan Tzara), Ion Iovanaki (pen-named Ion Vinea), and Marcel Iancu (Marcel Janco). It is also widely known that the Romanian avant-gardes of the 20th Century were peopled regularly by “foreigners” (Germans, Macedonians, and Hungarians) and particularly by Jews. The Jewish artists were a large presence inside the small circles of “avant-garde” artists that were active in Romania before and after the War of 1914-1918. Staying in Zürich during the War, Tzara and the brothers Janco met Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, Emmy Hennings, Hans Arp, Raoul Hausmann and others and staged in 1916 the first Dada *soirées*. In short, Tzara, Marcel Janco and others became the co-founders of European Dada. Their contribution of hybridizing Romanian and Jewish cultural motifs with, at that time, cutting-edge modernism, is present throughout the Dada productions in poetry, drawings, costumes, and masks.<sup>41</sup>

After the First World War, some of these Romanian Dadaists relocated to the “Greater Romania” – now comprising the historical regions of Transylvania, Banat, Bucovina, and Bessarabia. The Dadaists were joined by other Romanian *émigrés* from France and Germany, such as Max Herman Maxy, Corneliu Michăilescu, Hans Mattis-Teutsch, and Milița Petrașcu. However, the atmosphere in the home country was far from favorable to them. Their progressive views were set on a collision course with the establishment’s cultural nationalism. After the end of WWI, Romania embarked on a process of forging a new sense of its own identity through an extensive campaign of cultural ethnic nationalism. This cultural nationalism virtually ignored the other minority cultures. On the same course with ethnic nationalism, anti-Semitism grew rapidly into an official cultural and political doctrine.<sup>42</sup> The political and cultural elite of Romanian nationalists, even before WWI, viewed “modern civilization” as “urban, fragmented, mercantile, materialist, capitalist, liberal, rationalist, individualist, selfish, atheist, cynical, *cosmopolitan* [*emphasis mine*], internationalist, Bolshevik, estranged, uprooted, improvised, *sterile* [*e.m.*], prosaic, artificial, ignoble, sinful, illegitimate, disloyal, sick, and ugly.” The opposite, obviously, was “national culture,” deemed as “rural, communitarian, unitary, autarchic, idealist, agrarian, conservative, intuitive, collectivist, altruist, profoundly Christian, traditionalist, rooted in country soil, *creative* [*e.m.*], poetic, noble, virtuous, brave, loyal, healthy, beautiful.”<sup>43</sup> Some nationalists advocated a cultural “national offensive” or a cultural “revolution,” which was to be considered as an anti-bourgeois, autochthonistic revolution. Their aim was to fight the “contagion” of sterile, liberal, progressive modernism that had crippled the “soul” of the true “Romanian culture.”<sup>44</sup> Nationalists saw “cosmopolitanism” as a word of opprobrium and used it as a political weapon. To the Romanian avant-garde artists, this *ethos* was the official ideology of a proto-fascist, authoritarian State. Thus, not unexpectedly, the founders of

41 For a comprehensive description, see Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East. The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire*.

42 On the development of ethnic nationalism and Anti-Semitism in Romania before and after World War I, see Răzvan Pârâianu, *Culturalist Nationalism and Anti-Semitism in Fin-de-Siècle Romania*, in: Marius Turda and Paul J. Weindling (eds.), *“Blood and Homeland”: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900-1940* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2007), 353-73.

43 Răzvan Pârâianu, *Culturalist Nationalism and Anti-Semitism*, 359.

44 *Ibid.*, 361.

the new journal *Contimporanul* (Present Time), Ion Vinea and Marcel Janco, turned their progressive modernism into an aesthetic and political *fronde*. In the first years of *Contimporanul*, writers and artists, such as Tristan Tzara, Ion Minulescu, Beniamin Fundoianu (Benjamin Fondane), Ilarie Voronca, Panait Istrati, Felix Aderca, H. Mattis Teutsch, Constantin Brâncuși, M.H. Maxy, Arthur Segal, Camil Petrescu, Tudor Arghezi, Eugen Filotti, Andrei Braniște, and Dem. Theodorescu would contribute to the journal with texts and illustrations.

The first two years of *Contimporanul* (1922-1923) were probably the golden years of the newly born Romanian avant-garde. After 1918, these artists would turn the interwar capital Bucharest into an “international capital of modernism” (Mansbach). The writers of *Contimporanul* supported moderate socialist views and contested the authoritarianism of Bolshevism, although the Russian avant-garde<sup>45</sup> was highly praised, as well as the idea of a socialist Revolution.<sup>46</sup> The name *Contimporanul* recalls the name of a leftist publication that appeared in the 19th Century.<sup>47</sup> The journal appeared irregularly, and had 103 numbers, from 1922 to 1932.

*Contimporanul* started as an active forum against autochthonistic politics, corruption and anti-Semitism. The political texts of 1922 attacked, for example, the government’s imposition of constraints on press freedom and the disorganized and corrupt administration of the newly gained territories of Romania.<sup>48</sup> Other texts criticize the Statist measure of nationalizing Romania’s soil by the government, as a sign of corruption.<sup>49</sup> One text by Eugen Filotti<sup>50</sup> criticizes the politicians’ discriminatory and duplicitous treatment of religious minorities (in this case, the Romanian Greek-Catholic religious minority in Transylvania). A particular attention is given to the suppression of minorities and the discrimination against the Jews. Titles such as *Minorii și minoritățile* (Minors and the minorities) (no. 32, Feb. 24, 1923),<sup>51</sup> *Numerus clausus* (no. 32, Feb. 24, 1923),

45 See “Avantgarda rusă” (*Russian avant-garde*), in *Contimporanul* (June 10, 1923, no. 42).

46 See Crysaor, “Constituția orbilor” (*The Constitution of the Blind*), in *Contimporanul* (no. 29, Feb. 3, 1923): “The small states crumble into bankruptcy. And, over the emerging chaos, we hear Lenin’s invincible laughter. In Romania, a group of politicians are building, in preparation for the coming storm, a bureaucratic fence made of printed, sanctioned and promulgated paper. Irrra!;” see also “Sărbătoarea Revoluției” (The celebration of the Revolution), *Contimporanul* (no. 41, May 6, 1923).

47 S.A. Mansbach, “The ‘Foreignness’ of Classical Modern Art,” 552.

48 H.St. Streitman, “Libertatea presei” (*Freedom of the Press*), in *Contimporanul*, no. 17, 11 nov. 1922; I. Vinea, “Politicienii, presa și ziaristii” (*Politicians, Press and the Journalists*), no. 6, 8 July 1922.

49 I.C. Costin, “Brătienizarea subsolului” (*The nationalization of the soil under the rule of Brătianu*), in *Contimporanul*, no. 6, 8 July 1922.

50 Eugen Filotti, “Ortodoxie” (*Orthodoxy*), in *Contimporanul*, no. 16, 4 Nov. 1922: “(...) Mr. Iorga persists in saying that the Orthodox denomination can be confused with the Romanian nation and the Romanian State. (...) The Greek-Catholic Church does not recognize Orthodoxy as a State religion, and asks for a full equality of religious rights among all the religious denominations (...).”

51 St. Antim, “Minorii și minoritățile” (*Minors and the Minorities*): “In 1866, when the Jewish question had been first debated, there were beatings, there were windows smashed, a synagogue had been demolished. In 1879, when the issue has been revived by the talks around the amendments to the Constitution, there were Anti-Semitic crimes again. Nowadays, when a new Constitution is being debated, the mob in the streets shouts once more. The only difference – probably demanded by progress – between then and now is that, at the moment when there were not enough students in our Universities, the shouting was done by the populace in the streets; but today, when we are blessed with large numbers, tens of thousands, in our Universities and colleges, our generous today’s youth has embraced the cause of yesterday’s mob, with all the blood boiling in their heads. In a sinister vein,

*Profesorii antisemiți* (Anti-Semite Professors) (no. 35, March 27, 1923), *Evreii și huliganii* (Jews and Hooligans) (no. 33, March 3, 1923), *În jurul unei cauze* (About a Cause) (no. 29, Feb. 3 1923), *Cultură și anti-Semitism* (Culture and anti-Semitism) (No. 30, Feb. 10, 1923), and *Et in Arcadia Fasciae* (no. 42, June 10, 1923) show particular concern for the fate of the Romanian Jews in the troubled times of interwar anti-Semitic campaigns.

Analyzing the perils for Europe's democratic life also meant including a condemnation of the emergence of a young Italian fascism, already in 1922, when Mussolini came to power in a coup against the Italian king. The article *Holera fascistă* (*Fascist Cholera*), signed by H. Verzeanu and published in *Contimporanul* no. 16 (Nov. 1922) states:

(...) The Italian Fascism (...) seems to be a chauvinistic-terrorist movement, and it is dangerous not only to Italy. Keeping in mind its strengths and its capabilities, we have reasons to believe that Europe and especially the countries which were defeated in the War have all the motives to fear Fascism. It is thus not completely unexpected that the Hungarians organize Fascism in their own country (...) and let us not be content with the fact that the Germans, which are, for the moment [1922 – *translator's note*], in a lot of trouble, do not act. Fascism is a mirage, full of temptations, as well as Bolshevism. Mussolini has explained, in a recent vehement speech, what do the Italian Fascists want and how do they see things (...) The leader of the Italian Fascists chooses carefully his own people, and he is certain that the 'vague and hesitating public opinion' will be easily drawn to the Italian Fascism. And the danger is as great as Mussolini has declared that the issue at stake is an issue of force. Fascists will need to prevail even if they will have to resort to violence alone. (...) If D'Anunzio succeeded in taking Fiume, without serious opposition, and if Mussolini has succeeded in overthrowing the Italian government by force, thus taking the King prisoner, is it surprising that the Fascist cholera will try to spread throughout the entire Europe? War has accustomed us to so many surprises; it would not be absurd for us to expect something like this. And a paradox: Fascism will never be an international movement, as Bolshevism is. Taking a very bizarre form, the Fascism will be national in all countries. Of course, the reality of the danger depends on the will and determination of our 'vague and hesitating public opinion.'

The almost astounding clarity of vision and the impressively unshaken belief in values, such as democracy and cosmopolitanism, are visible again in a review, *N. Coudenhove Kalergi: Pan Europa*, signed by Dr. Kurt Jarek (no. 61, Oct. 1925). The text addresses a theme of cosmopolitan politics, which was relatively known to the intellectual circles in Europe at the time: Nikolaus Coudenhove Kalergi's famous project of a *Pan Europa*, a political study envisioning the project of a Pan-European Union. The text from *Contimporanul* is a comment on Kalergi's book:

Vienna 1923 (...) Europe has lost, in the last quarter of a century, her undisputed political hegemony; facing the four future world empires: the British, the Russian, the American, the Asian, Europe is able to become more visible only through unification. We must end with the small states in Europe. Coudenhove represents the idea of a 'small Europe.' Pan Europa should form itself without England, not against England; the English Empire would be 'overwhelmed' and should undoubtedly act pacifistically, since it has nothing to win, but everything to lose! The Russian problem is troublesome: Russia is the 'Macedonia of Europe': its natural resources

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it started out with bodies, then cheerfully it has moved forward to the *numerus clausus* and, finally, it fell at the foothills of Article 7 [of the Constitution]. Thus, however commonplace the sentence 'History repeats itself' is, it still remained true. Every Constitution with its vandalisms, its beatings, its flaws and its anti-Semitic scandals."

and riches should be exploited; this would give Russia the opportunity to overthrow Europe at a certain moment. Especially Germany should be forced to enter an alliance with Russia, if Europe remained disunited. The Russian-German alliance would be only a matter of time. If Germany did not want to become the 'limit of Europe,' Germany should enter an agreement with France – and France would have to stop acting against Europe. Only a united Europe could defend itself against the Russian hegemony and invasion. A European customs' union would be a counterweight to the economic agreement with Russia. The mediator between Pan Europe and Pan America would be England. During the Middle Ages, the idea of the unity of the West was particularly strong; then, nations emerge, as spiritual communities between 'the elites and the people.' Yet, Coudenhove goes against this idea; he seems to envision a mixing of the nations inside the *Pan Europa*. A war against the idea of nation would be a war against culture. (...) *Pan Europa* will be a community created out of need; out of the need for self-defense against foreign economic and political superiority; for the people, which have been and still are the guardians of culture. This is the survey of Coudenhove's comprehensive study (...) What needs to be added (...) is the idea of a vital Pan Europa (...) The merit of Coudenhove is that he found the precise, appropriate expression for ideas which were widely known; the basics of his ideas are well established, well dressed into historical and economic science, a little bit rationalistic, a little bit less literary. Coudenhove is the person who has found the most appropriate formula for expressing these ideas in a popular way, at the same time serving the cause. (...) There are other important issues here, issues to which Coudenhove pays little attention. He is exactly like the scientist proud to be ahead of his time. This book is dedicated to all artists and intellectuals and to all others who create and live not for 'utility, but for prosperity.' Because only in a world which is prosperous will the artists, scientists and intellectuals, those who do care about the world about as much as the world cares about them, be able to dream, think and verify.

A text from 1923 announces the rebirth of the *Human Rights League* in Paris in 1922.<sup>52</sup> The author of the text praises the optimistic universalistic humanism promised by this European human rights enlightenment after WWI and also laments the moral decay of Romanian society after the war:

The human optimism is undoubtedly of divine descent. We could not otherwise explain the eternal turmoil that gave us, the human race – the apostles, the martyrs or the heroes, the rebels against tyranny, the rebels against faith or against political order, the martyrs of the arenas, of the barricades, or those burnt at the stakes, the famous or the unknown, the glorious or the ignominious, the fighters or the humble ones, the meek and the terrible – yet invariably and eternally representing the consciousness of Man, the divine spark hidden in the thick mud of which man is made – Humaneness. For Humaneness is Justice itself – immanent Justice – supreme Justice in its eternal and pure form – a Justice in which the executor is itself a tool. To this impetuous reaction of active consciousness of this people we owe the rebirth of the *League for Human Rights*, known to us even before the War in the person of Georges Lorand, who counted many friends among us, the Romanians. Yet the significance of this rebirth is another one, and more today than at any time in history we have to pay tribute to the saying: organ follows function. Never before has our country passed through such a disastrous moral crisis as it does nowadays. To the decay produced by the post-war restratification of society, the ruining of the old classes and the enrichment of a new, brutish and barbarian one, unprepared for its stereotypic role in society, one adds a long series of local phenomena. The economic anarchy, fraud and the state's bankruptcy; the high-level corruption, encouraged as a corrective of land reform and the general vote, implemented without the necessary preparations; the discrediting of the State's authority, the Parliament's state of demoralization, the *state of emergency* introduced under the pretext of border defense, military abuses and crimes, the sabotage of cultural life by the diabolical protection of professional instigators – all these patronized by an odious, demagogic regime, known only by its supreme cult of incompetence and by the cynicism of placing the national interest outside the Constitution and the rule of law; a sectarian, biased and impassioned regime – this is the chaos in which we have been living for seven years, this

52 Șt. Vidran, "Liga pentru drepturile omului" (*The Human Rights League*), in *Contemporanul*, no. 42, June 10, 1923.

is the vast desert in which the voice of the *Human Rights League* speaks, as did once the voice of the Prophet, speaking to those who are hungry for power and to the unfortunate alike: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" [John 2:19].

On the other hand, the aesthetic activity of the *Contimporanul* group is well documented.<sup>53</sup> The aesthetics of *Contimporanul* is complex and it develops in different phases. The first phase, the aesthetic-revolutionary phase, is influenced by Dadaism, Constructivism and Expressionism, and peaks with the "Activist Manifesto to the Young" (no. 46, May 1924) that is the programmatic manifesto of the first period of *Contimporanul*. The manifest is written in a Futurist vein and reminds us of the aesthetic anarchism of the first phases of European avant-gardes. Here, the traditional concept of "art" is questioned in an activist way and art is put to the test of its social utility. Also, "art" itself is seen as a tool in the progress towards a "great industrial-activist stage."<sup>54</sup>

As an artistic group, *Contimporanul* produced manifestoes, pamphlets, and also encouraged and publicized the artists of the Romanian Avant-garde. With the "First International Exhibition of Modern Art" organized between November and December 1924, at Bucharest's hall of the Artists' Union, where the entire Romanian avant-garde participated, alongside with famous international names, such as Lajos Kassak, Hans Richter, Hans Arp, Paul Klee, Karel Teige, Tereza Zarnower and Mieczysław Szczuka, Kurt Schwitters, and Viking Egging, the movement demonstrated its strength as a fully-fledged European avant-garde, comparable to the other European avant-gardes. Besides encouraging the development of an independent avant-garde in the country, the *Contimporanists* published manifestos and publicized works from all the major Western and Central European avant-gardes (Hungarian, Polish). They published reviews, texts, poetry or letters from major international artists they were in contact with.<sup>55</sup> One announcement from 1923<sup>56</sup> to their readers

53 S.A. Mansbach, "The 'Foreignness' of Classical Modern Art," P. Cernat, *Avangarda românească și complexul periferiei. Primul val* (București: Cartea Românească, 2007); Erwin Kessler (ed.), *Colours of the Avantgarde. Romanian Art 1910-1950*, Institutul Cultural Român, 2007.

54 Quoted in S.A. Mansbach, "The 'Foreignness' of Classical Modern Art," 538.

55 For example, Huelsenbeck's report on the city life in Berlin after the War: "The Germans are suffering a terrible defeat. The moral and spiritual blow is even harder than the political one. The weakened Germany nowadays does not have any spiritual zest for life. Art is almost gone. The German Revolution was merely a farce. Our compatriot's heads are filled with stupidity and greed. Germany is a thick fog, a cumulation of evil instincts. Women are selling themselves without any grace. The utter bankruptcy is here. Berlin is a dead city. People: soulless creatures, driven by money and greed. The public of the theatres is comprised of the same butchers and bakers. In the streets, you can feel a harrowing sadness. In the cafés, you are a ghost, watched by hostile eyes. The poets are the most despised nowadays. Speculation is thriving. The dancing halls are choke-full, the cinemas abused. Berlin is the most barbarian city in the world. The city of kitsch, not even a glitter of spirit. The city of ordinary faces." Richard Huelsenbeck, *Scrisori din Germania: Agonie* (Letters from Germany: Agony), in *Contimporanul*, no. 42, June 10, 1923.

56 *Contimporanul*, no. 34, March 10, 1923, "Pentru Contimporani" (To the readers of *Contimporanul*): "Contimporanul goes to great pains in looking for and asking celebrities of the artworld to visit Bucharest. Our assiduous exchange of letters, information, newspapers, our continuously rising visibility abroad caught the attention of our fellow artists from the West. Many of them say in their letters that they are convinced of our intellectual elite's capacity not only to catch up with the real trends in our contemporary world – speed, movement, force – but to become real artists, authentic creators, and spiritual leaders in our backward East European societies. (...) After good signals came from artists such as Marinetti and Prampolini, the Danish Hans Richter responded to our invitation and informs that he will travel here personally to present his Abstract Film, the most developed form of modern art yet seen.

shows their relentless efforts in establishing contacts with international artists and organizing exhibitions through a cosmopolitan network of fellow artists. Their journal already contained dozens of reviews and announcements of avant-garde events throughout Europe, as well as the artists' own accounts on the events (often publicized directly in their native language, German or French). The journal was actually a real melting pot of styles, theories, poetry, prose, images – a seemingly chaotic amalgam of opinions, languages, people and texts. One such aesthetic manifest was Mieczysław Szczuka's account of the avant-garde Polish group BLOK:

[M. Szczuka], 'The Artistic Movement in Poland' [on the same page: an illustration of *Guitar* by Juan Gris, Paris]

1) The most common feature of Polish art is its highly developed sensitiveness and the lack of purely formal problems.

2) In pre-war Poland, art was the only asylum for the national spirit. The artist was reviving the past: decline and grandeur, imitating folk art, creating national art.

3) The great discoveries of Impressionism were resounding in Poland also. Afterwards, they degenerated into naturalism and went into the hands of the sentimental searchers for the 'beautiful Polish landscape.'

1) The last years before the war and the years after independence have brought significant changes.

2) At the same time, in Warsaw and Krakow appeared the modernistic movements called 'Formists.' The Formists of Krakow, more radical, represented Futurism and Expressionism, the ones in Warsaw remained Cubists and Expressionists.

3) Until 1920, the Formists were very active: new editions, conferences, exhibitions. The society reacted differently: hostility, indifference, benevolence. Then, the new postulates ended up by being accommodated to the popular taste.

1) From 1920 on, the movement fades. New tendencies appear: a return to classicism. The Formists were losing ground. Exile begins: many emigrate, not able to cope with the hostile atmosphere. Alas! The eternal fate of the Polish artist is finding success and development away from his native homeland. In Poland there is no place for them. The same thing happens even to those who have already found success and acknowledgment in Europe: K. Malewicz. (The Ministry of Culture refused his return to Poland). Marcoussis, Halicka, Lipchitz, Kissling, etc. The others mingle with the Classicists, Cézanists, moderate Impressionists within the 'Rythm' group. After 1922, the paintings and the sculptures of the 'Formists' would be rare in Warsaw's exhibitions. The Formist movement, although not without flaws, brought many new things. They have explained, publicly and for the first time, the formal problems related to art. Their flaws are: an insufficient construction, lack of order and moderation, lack of a solid program, too much sentimentalism.

(In other words, expressionists):

1) The merit of the [artistic group] BLOK is that they gave a precise and clear definition of avant-garde postulates.

2) BLOK's programme was a new thing to Polish society. A totally different phenomenon compared to what the Polish public thought it knew.

3) From BLOK came the signal: *methodic work, intellectual, collective*.

4) BLOK put forward in its program the indivisibility of art problems from social problems. We have fought for the radical Left in the social movement.

1) Even when they were Formists, the current members of BLOK were in opposition, accusing the others of being moderate. In 1923, initiated by Teresa Żarnower and Mieczysław Szczuka a group was formed, joined by others, W. Strzeмиński and H. Stażewski. Exhibitions were organized.

2) In 1924, following Żarnower's initiative, we have organized and edited our first publication.

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Theo v. Doesburg, the editor of *De Styl*, will give a few lectures during his visit and will exhibit his most famous works in Bucharest. His wife, a famous musician, will travel with him and will perform some of her concerts here. Henry Walden from Berlin will also pay a visit to us and exhibit some of the *Sturm* works (...)."

3) The results are already obvious: everywhere, we hear our postulates being repeated and observe in others the influences of our activity.

Warsaw, 1924<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

*Contimporanul* is the venue of a fully mature and non-imitative avant-garde, where novelty and transformation are part of the modern process of producing artworks (literary and visual). In the end, the avantgardistic artwork that emerges at the juncture between aesthetics and politics (at least in the first phase of *Contimporanul*) is the site of a development in cosmopolitan imagination that fosters not only the self-becoming of the avant-garde itself, but also the promise of a future political and moral liberation provoked by the deeds of the artfield.

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57 M. Szczuka, *Mișcarea Artistică în Polonia* (The Artistic Movement in Poland), in *Contimporanul*, no. 48, October 1924. Numbering original.