

Ion Grigorescu

(Bucharest, Romania, 1945)

Ion Grigorescu belongs to the generation of Romanian conceptual artists that emerged in secrecy during the dark years of the Ceausescu regime. The dictator had employed artists to sculpt numerous statues of himself and his family, lavish icons to be paraded through the streets of Romania. He ordered many citizens' houses to be torn down to make way for his private palace, called the People's Palace. The arts in Romania were similar to those in all the Soviet countries and in totalitarian regimes in general: material celebrations of the image of the head of state. Artists such as Grigorescu, who did not endorse government demands, made immateriality, a negation of the object, and the absence of commercial value an unavoidable aspect of their work. Moreover, only the idea, with its elusiveness, could truly avoid the dictatorship and aspire to free expression under those political conditions.

Grigorescu created performances, wrote diaries, and recorded his stream of consciousness in 16 mm films shot out of view of the authorities. Verbal annotations and filmed recordings possess the same meticulous qualities and make note of everything that is happening without being traced back to large narrative or theoretical narratives, but instead allow reality to take shape through simple addition, in a continuum of data and small everyday events. All things considered, it was in the often-serene flow of individual and domestic life of people that some form of normality could still emerge, which the dictatorship pervasively distorted at every step. Ceausescu reached the point where he wanted to decide and regulate the smallest aspects of citizens' lives, even decreeing what type of food they could put on the table. Confronted with similar invasions of private space, a detailed diary of one's life constituted a sort of epic tale of the individual, a manifesto of political resistance against the psychological as well as social interference of absolute power.

Balta Alba, 1979, is a 16 mm film shot in the streets of Bucharest. The first images focus on the forest of Soviet housing projects that seem to close off the view in every direction. Grigorescu rotates the lens of his movie camera over the surface of the facades, as bare and geometric as prisons, using the zoom to seek out a human presence where it seems that none is to be found; he finally tilts the frame, heightening the feeling of vertigo and claustrophobia that this alien architecture creates and which is inscribed in its style. And the artist himself is alienated from it, as if it were some strange landscape on an unknown planet. Everything, however, seems to fall into place when his lens shifts from the reinforced-concrete giants to children playing and to people at the market. Here there is a core of individual truth, of irresistible humanity that nurtures the artist's private resistance to any sense of spectacle, order or authority. (EV)