

Introduction

Stefan Bertalan (1930-2014) was the main figure of research-based, process-oriented and innovation-driven art in Romania. In 1966 he founded the experimental neo-constructivist group 111, with Roman Cotoșman and Constantin Flondor. After the defection of Roman Cotoșman, another group, Sigma (1969-1982), was founded. Bertalan was a driving force both of 111 and Sigma. For decades, the two groups were the most influential, innovative art groups in Romania and shaped the artistic, educational and curatorial practices of generations of young artists and theorists.

Bertalan worked in many media, producing drawings, photographs, installations, actions, environments and happenings, often with innovative materials such as plastics, natural and synthetic fibers, X-ray photos, aluminum. However, nearly ninety percent of his output are works on paper.

The selected works exhibited in *Ends of Research* are taken from different series across Bertalan's entire career. They display the discontinuities but also the striking continuum of a career balanced between the earlier ends of his scientific-like research (the geometric, abstract perfection of shapes and objects), and the later ends of his psycho-political, manic research in which he projected himself (as self-portrait) into the biological-cosmic-fantastic world around him. *Ends of Research* shows how the research of abstract structures slowly opens towards the figures of the outer world and subsequently unfold into research of his own human traits, which then develop into research of his body, but one whose anatomy progresses into geology and cosmology.

Ecological mysticism made its way into Bertalan's experiments of the late '70s. The universal order which he perceived underneath the wide-ranging correspondences between the mind's procedures and the natural processes induced the belief in an overreaching, transcendental communication and harmony. Anything could connect to anything, the universal system being a speculative association of concealed/revealed features.

Bertalan's extensive research papers are filled with sketches, diagrams and complex calculations, geometric schemes, keen observations of plants, rocks, shells, insects, animals, landscapes, but also abstract structures, nightmarish monsters and violent politics. They re-construct earth and skies, nature, human faith, and ethics. Inspired by pioneering work in systems theory and bionics, he investigated the formal relationships between organic and inorganic natural structures, human artifacts, and spiritual visions. He aimed at disclosing the deep isomorphism between mental, abstract cognitive processes and the natural laws of growth and geometric structures. Bertalan's maps of drawings look like a scientific/speculative diary, filled with experimental observations, theoretical reflections, and political statements. Research was not a means of his art, but its proper end.

Ends of Research is an introduction to Bertalan's enthralling, creative research process, and his (mystical) ecology and blistering political criticism. The exhibition unveils utopian and modernist ambitions and paradoxes, the limits of reason, the perpetual, inner and outer emigration, the status of the artist as a risky, fragile researcher of the absolute perfection, and the weird workings of an indomitable,

critical consciousness preying on itself until the very last moments of life. It simultaneously points to the political and ethical issues raised by repression, age, and illness. Bertalan is a paragon of the emerging concerns of sustainability and conservation both in society and art. His profuse and ecstatic work foreshadowed the contemporary focus on an holistic consciousness of the nature and the human.