

## THE THEME OF THE ENDLESS COLUMN IN THE WORKS OF CONSTANTIN BRÂNCUȘI AND TIBERIU OLÁH

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**SUMMARY.** This short study aims to present similarities, common features between two works of art. Although they come from different artistic domains, both were parented by Romanian artists, but their commonly shared characteristics just begin to unfold this point. Other aspects of their relationship are presented here, coming from many different points of view like common ars poetica and aesthetics, based on the principle of simplicity; similarities in construction and structure; the use of the principles of repetition, variation and antithesis.

**Keywords:** music, sculpture, mathematics, aesthetics, 20th century art, Brâncuși, Oláh, The Endless Column, Târgu Jiu

### A. The Endless Column by Constantin Brâncuși

Brâncuși represents a primordial innovative force in 20<sup>th</sup> century art, and its sculpture in particular, a force that draws its inspiration from folklore, in order to create his own artistic language. His works are now widely known, although his famous *Endless Column* was quite forgotten for decades, but revived with force, inspiring other works of art.

In 1935, Brâncuși, who had lived in Paris, has received a letter from Milița Pătrașcu, a sculptor who has already passed through Brâncuși's atelier, in which he was asked to create a work in memory of the soldiers fallen in World War I. This project was born from the initiative of the Gorj Women's League, led by Aretia Tătărescu. Brâncuși received this assignment with great joy: "... I cannot tell you how happy I am being able to do something such as this in our country"<sup>2</sup>.

On behalf of this project, Brâncuși proposed the idea of *The Endless Column*, to the amazement of everybody who saw nothing else in this plan than a simple peasant poll. Roaming about the places the monument was to be set – on the bank of the river Jiu – Brâncuși further extended the initial project by two additional monuments.

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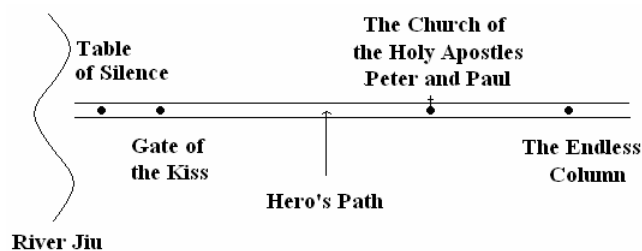
<sup>2</sup> A fragment from Brâncuși's response to Milița Pătrașcu's letter, as it appears in: Stănculescu, Nina, *Brâncuși*, Albatros Publishing, București, 1981, p. 139.

*The Endless Column* is generally believed to be a *sculpture*. However, on a more profound level, this artwork bears both sculptural and architectural traits. We can place the sculptural triptych made up of *The Endless Column*, *Table of Silence* and *Gate of the Kiss* (ensemble raised in 1937-1938) on the boundary between architecture and sculpture, having the tendency to architecturally depict the sculptural human message. A few arguments in favour of the proposed thesis would be the spreading of the monuments throughout the space, the unusual necessity of placing them within a natural setting that has a large opening (it would be impossible to conceive them inside a confined space!); as well as the protective function of the ensemble (the “gate” that shields, the “table” we sit down to, the “ladder” that takes us to the sky. The special rhythm of this ensemble suggests a connection to the music, articulated in the following quote: “In their true arrangement, Brâncuși’s statues engage a vast space. Their natural monumentality requires a space that is in dimensional proportion to their rhythm, a rhythm that is always «Largo» or «Maestoso». Brâncuși dabbled in giving his creations the necessary space they required, however he has achieved this by using sculptural architectonic elements. The ensemble from Târgu Jiu is constructed in such a manner...<sup>3</sup>”

The placement of the three monuments is symbolic, as they are situated on Calea Eroilor (a street name signifying *Heroes Path*), on a perpendicular axis to the river Jiu, but they are then separated (past the *Gate of the Kiss*) by a section of the city, thus honouring the fallen heroes by the entire town.

Fig. 1

### The placement of the three monuments in Târgu Jiu



The three monuments represent three halts made by the soul of the dead, halts that begin at the place of the battle, at the river, and which then open up to the sky, toward infinity, through *The Endless Column*.

<sup>3</sup> Jianu, Ionel, *Constantin Brâncuși. Viața și opera, (Life and Work of Constantin Brâncuși)*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1983, p. 134.

The first halt, the *Table of Silence*, situated on the riverbank, is made up of a stone tambour (placed upon another tambour that has a smaller diameter), circularly surrounded by 12 stools. It is firmly implanted in the ground (not merely sitting on a plinth), similar the other two monuments. The *Table of Silence* can be compared to a sundial<sup>4</sup>, a time measuring instrument. In addition, this table evokes the popular custom in which the relatives of the deceased gather around the table after the burial, in order to pray for his/her soul<sup>5</sup>.

**Fig. 2**

**Table of Silence**



As we leave the *Table of Silence*, a 30 meter long alley takes us to the second monument, that of the *Gate of the Kiss*. Although resembling an arch of triumph, its significance is entirely different. The two columns that sustain the architrave<sup>6</sup> symbolize two faces that partake in the kiss. In that moment the two protagonists of the kiss unite, becoming a single entity, indicated by the unity of the monument. Its function is to attract and embrace the viewer, to protect him/her. The *Gate of the Kiss* symbolizes the eternal love that defies the laws of death, never ceasing to be a source of hope and life.

**Fig. 3**

**The Gate of the Kiss**



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<sup>4</sup> Jianu, Ionel, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> According to the Definition from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, the architrave is *the lowest division of an entablature resting in classical architecture immediately on the capital of the column* in [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com).

The road that takes us from the *Gate of the Kiss* to the last component of the monumental ensemble, *The Endless Column*, guards the area of the park, and crosses a section of the city, so that it can later merge with the “new” park that dominates Brâncuși’s monument.

Brâncuși previously developed the idea of the Endless Column; however, the piece did not materialize itself until the monumental ensemble from Târgu Jiu. There had been earlier plans to build enormous columns at Philadelphia, Chicago and the UNESCO Palace in Paris, but the projects were never finalized, with the exception of the one in Târgu Jiu. If the previously envisioned columns were to be carved in wood, the Târgu Jiu columns were made out of a different, more durable material, metallic cast iron<sup>7</sup>.

Brâncuși received the financial help of the government in order to accomplish this project, and he had asked that all the technical aspects of the build be assigned to Ștefan Georgescu-Gorjan, an engineer he fully trusted. The two of them – Brâncuși and Gorjan – strived to establish the dimensions of the monument, trying to marry the artistic vision of the sculptor with the technical possibilities and financial limitations as well. The final technical solution was raising a large metal structure, starting with the massive concrete foundation<sup>8</sup>, in which to embed a solid steel pillar. Identical elements will be pulled on to the pillar, similar to large, hollow beads that are attached to the pillar using thin metallic keys.<sup>9</sup>

The concrete foundation was necessary in order to keep the pillar on which the elements – or “beads”, as Brâncuși himself called them - rested in place. A monument of this size asked for a solid base, because otherwise it could not have stood in its upright position.

The 29 330 meter tall column is made up of 16 octahedral rhomboidal elements<sup>10</sup>, produced out of metallic cast iron (shaped after a wooden mould made by Brâncuși). The elements are “pulled” on the sturdily embedded pillar, and as a result, the column emerges slowly, every element is welded to the previous one. The first element is cut in half, as if it would grow straight out of the ground, as where the last one resumes the other half of the cut form, as though it was opening up toward an infinite continuity.

The height of each element is 1.80 meter tall, height that more or less corresponds to the height of the human body. This constitutes a significant detail from the point of view of Brâncuși’s aesthetics, for he states that sculpture must begin at the human scale.<sup>11</sup> In order to remove the rugged appearance of the column, the edges of the elements were slightly rounded off, thus creating a supple shape.

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<sup>7</sup> a commercial alloy of iron, carbon, and silicon that is cast in a mold and is hard, brittle, nonmalleable, and incapable of being hammer-welded but more easily fusible than steel.

<sup>8</sup> an underlying base or support; *especially*: the whole masonry substructure of a building.

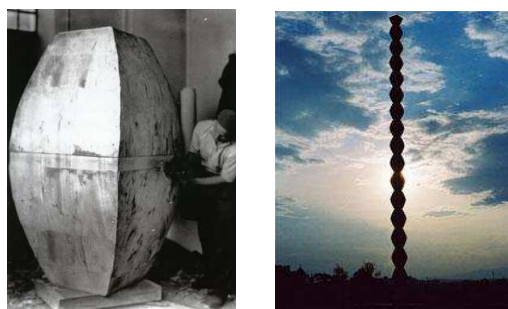
<sup>9</sup> a small piece of metal used as a wedge or for preventing motion between parts.

<sup>10</sup> The first and last element form a single unit, for they each are only one-half element.

<sup>11</sup> Jianu, Ionel, *Constantin Brâncuși. Viața și opera, (Life and Work of Constantin Brâncuși)*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1983, p. 141.

Fig. 4

Raw wooden element *The Endless Column*



By repeating the shapes, Brâncuși creates a symmetric structure on many different levels. *The Endless Column* exhibits every known form of symmetry: by shifting a unit, the column returns to its initial symmetry; the symmetry itself is perfect on all four vertical planes, the two horizontal ones as well as rotated by 180° angle.

As we look at the column from different angles throughout the space, “its edges transform into crystals or mountain chains or that ladder to the sky we can find in Aztec monuments. In addition, the even more surprising thing is that some times certain angles make a vertical procession of caryatides appear rising to the sky, whilst other times a soaring bevy of birds that are typical to Brâncuși come into sight.”<sup>12</sup> The visual images created generate a metaphorical level of understanding.

However, *The Endless Column* is primarily a symbol that can be interpreted on many different levels. Firstly, it can be a *symbol of infinity*, by means of the repeating shapes, which could be eternally perpetuated. Solely the technical considerations make it embrace this finished form.

The adopted form suggests the second symbolic form of the work. This repetitive rhomboidal form can be found in peasant sculptures in the figure of a funeral pole, a cross that symbolizes the concept of death.

Mircea Eliade suggests the third symbolic level:

*“Whatever its origin may be, “the archaic European civilization“ evolved in an original direction, a direction that differentiates it from the cultures in the Middle East or those in Central Europe and the Northern regions. Between 6500-5300, B. C. a strong cultural momentum swept over the Balkan Peninsula*

<sup>12</sup> Comarnescu, P., *Le Testament de Brâncuși*, “Journal de Genève” (*Brâncuși’s final will and testament*), no. 167 from July 18-19, 1964, p. 5-6; quoted in Jianu, Ionel, *Constantin Brâncuși. Viața și opera*, (*Life and Work of Constantin Brâncuși*), Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1983, p. 143.

and central Anatolia. A large number of objects (seals and ideograms, human faces and animals, theriomorphic vessels, divine mask images) indicate ritual activities. Toward the middle of the sixth millennium, villages guarded by moats or walls that inhabited up to a thousand people had increased. A large number of shrines, sanctuaries, and diverse cultural objects prove the existence of a well-organized religion. They had revealed the remains of a temple at the Neolithic site at Căscioarele, situated at 60 km from Bucharest. On the walls of the temple there were these magnificent red and green spirals painted on an off-white background. There were no statuettes found, just a 2 meter long column together with a smaller one, indicative of a cult of the sacred column, a symbol of axis mundi.<sup>13</sup>

## **B. Tiberiu Oláh's Endless Column**

### **The Composer's Musical Activity<sup>14</sup>**

Tiberiu Oláh (1928-2002), composer, professor and musicologist, was one of the foremost representatives of the young composer generation of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These composers have turned their attention toward the native folklore, which they have adapted using modern composition techniques.

Tiberiu Oláh attended the "Gheorghe Dima" Music Academy in Cluj-Napoca, followed by his studies at the "P. I. Tchaikovsky" Conservatory in Moscow. He gained practical experience during an electronic music internship at Siemens in Munich (1966) and has participated at classes held at Darmstadt (in 1967, 1968 and 1974, taught by György Ligeti, Erhard Karkoschka, Christoph Caskel and others) where several of his works were played. He benefited from a research and documentation scholarship in the field of musical time and space, in Federal Germany, as a guest of DAAD<sup>15</sup> (1969-1970). He was an associate professor at the Composition Department of the Bucharest Music University between 1974 and 2001.

His works were performed in numerous international music centres and were also winning awards, such as the George Enescu Prize of the Romanian Academy in 1965, the Koussevitzky International Recording Award in 1967 as well as the Grand Prize of the Composers and Musicologists Union from Romania for lifetime achievement in 1993.

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<sup>13</sup> Eliade, Mircea, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, (*The History of Religious Ideas*) translated by Cezar Baltag, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2000 p. 43 (translation of: Eliade, Mircea, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, Payot, Paris, vol. I, 1976, vol. II, 1978, vol. III 1983).

<sup>14</sup> This short biography of the composer is drawn from Viorel Cosma's book, *Muzicieni din România: Lexicon bio-bibliografic (Romanian Musicians. Biographical, Bibliographical Dictionary)*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1989.

<sup>15</sup> *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service)*.

### Work Analysis

Tiberiu Oláh has paid a tribute to the great Romanian sculptor, Constantin Brâncuși through several of his works. These creations form an homage cycle, a sort of counterparts to Brâncuși's works. The cycle is made up of the following creations: *The Endless Column* (1962), *Pasărea măiastră* (*The Wonderful Bird*), *Sonata for solo Clarinet* (1963), *Space and Rhythm* (1964), *Gate of the Kiss* (1965), *Table of Silence* (1967).

Hence, there is a musical creation for every single component of the monumental ensemble at Târgu Jiu.

In the musical version, the *Gate of the Kiss* and *Table of Silence* continue to exhibit the concern the composer has toward the applicability of concepts such as space and time, a characteristic trait of the entire cycle.<sup>16</sup> In *Table of Silence*, the composer translates the spatial-metaphoric configuration of music in relation to certain sculptures into an actual spatial rendering of the instrumental resources; at least a dozen groups of instruments encircle the compact group of the woodwind section, equivalent to the twelve stools that surround the stone table in Brâncuși's masterpiece.<sup>17</sup> The Endless column was born in 1962, being the inaugural piece of the entire cycle. *Homage to Brâncuși*, its subtitle, indicates the source of the work and conveys the esteem and appreciation of the composer toward Brâncuși's oeuvre.

The aesthetic of the piece begins at the ideal of simplicity, an ideal that had been extracted from the archaic folkloric art we can discover in Brâncuși's *The Endless Column*. Here are a couple of illuminating quotes designed to support the recognition of the two aesthetics by means of the folklore sources employed, both conveyed by simplicity:

*"Simplicity in itself is not a purpose; one arrives to it naturally if one comes within reach of the true meaning of things"*<sup>18</sup> – Brâncuși

*"The more primitive, more rudimentary a melody is – from a structural standpoint – its harmonization must be that much more special. Think for example, at the two or three note archaic melodies, which have an extraordinary inner force. We do not learn the tonal and functional barriers of them; therefore, their absence leads to an enormous creative freedom that entails a lot of fantasy in handling the tonal correlations. New melodic features lead to new harmonic concepts, generating fundamental changes in the concept of consonance and dissonance."*<sup>19</sup> - Oláh

<sup>16</sup> Sandu-Dediu, Valentina, *Muzica românească între 1944-2000 (Music in Romania between 1944-2000)*, Editura Muzicală, București, 2002 p. 105.

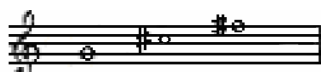
<sup>17</sup> Sandu-Dediu, Valentina, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>18</sup> Jianu, Ionel, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Oláh, Tiberiu, *Folclor și esență, școală națională și universalitate, (Folklore and essence, musical nationalism and universality)*, published in *Muzica* magazine, issue no. 5/1974, p. 4.

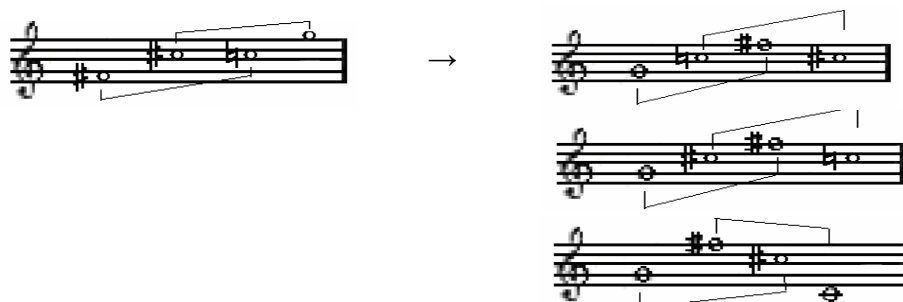
The thesis of simplicity hereby exposed by Tiberiu Oláh – a thesis by which he identifies with Brâncuși's concept – is entirely confirmable inside the score of *The Endless Column* – from the standpoint of the tonal system. The piece, written for a large orchestra, often with multiple divisions at the string section, is based on two fourths, an augmented one and a perfect one<sup>20</sup>.

Ex. 1



These tetrachords create a typical modal formula that corresponds in its intonationally aspect to a bugle or mountain horn from the Apuseni Mountains.<sup>21</sup> The modification of this succession by introducing a sharp in front of the c note, and by doubling it at an octave, will give birth to a formula shown throughout the piece in different variations<sup>22</sup>:

Ex. 2



etc.

These formulas generate melodic fragments as well as modal harmonies throughout the whole variation toil, the form in which the entire score of the piece is conceived. The variation principle used by Tiberiu Oláh implies the repetition of certain basic structures, representative of another common trait of the two creations. We can identify two planes in Brâncuși's recurring element, a positive as well as a negative one:

<sup>20</sup> Draga, George, *Coloana infinită de Tiberiu Oláh*, (*Tiberiu Oláh's Endless Column*), published in *Muzica* magazine, issue no. 9/1966, p. 4.

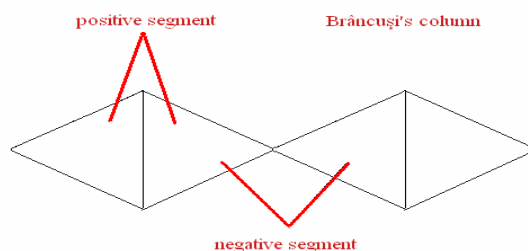
<sup>21</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.



Fig. 5

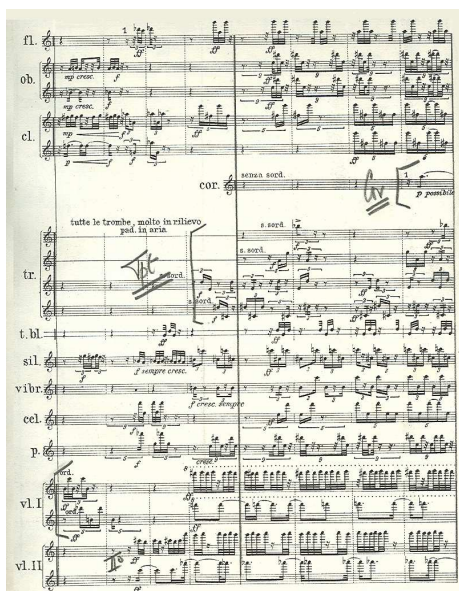
**The Endless Column – negative and positive segments**



In the case of the musical work, we encounter two basic structures, a so-called “positive” one and a so-called “negative” one. The “positive” one is a “complete”, dynamic structure, in which we can find abundant sonorous and rhythmical circumstances. The “negative” one is characterized by a “poorer”, less eventful sonorous and rhythmical segments, usually consisting of a long-held chord. Therefore, the audio moulding is achieved through a principle defined by the sculptural-architectonic paradigm. Here is one example for each of the constitutive musical structures:

Ex. 3

Ex. 4



“Positive” structure – score reference point 19



“Negative” structure – score reference point 3

In the latter example, we notice that the long-held chords are permanently moving from the point of view of dynamics, through repeated crescendo and decrescendo pairs. Thus achieving an audio image of Brâncuși's column on a vertical plane – also suggested by the visual representation of the score (see the crescendos and decrescendos underlined with red in the second example, that of the “negative” structures).

In the course of the variation of the two basic structures, Tiberiu Oláh builds the entire musical process of the work according to the following plan:

- A – static structure through long-held chords, with short overlapping comments in the form of triplets, quintuplets (reference points 1 to 14).
- B – dynamic structure, quasi-pointillist, a klangfarben type structure present at the entire orchestra, in which the triplet, quintuplet rhythmic formulas overlap (reference point 15 to 21)
- A variation 1 – held structure (with chords at the bell and cluster at the piano) completed by comments that use the three abovementioned types of rhythmic formulas (reference point 22 to 39)
- B variation 1 – B type dynamic structure (reference point 40 to 48), with successive entries of the woodwind, string or brass sections.
- A variation 2 – static structure at the brass section, overlapped by short comments occurring in blocks (clusters at an interval of a semitone), under different aspects: pizzicato, pizzicato with glissando. The interventions are alternated by general pauses (reference point 48 with upbeat to 60)
- B variation 2 – dynamic structure (accompanied at first by a pedal note at the horn), that completes the entire orchestra, in a similar structure of B, reduced toward the end by the percussion section – timpani, tom-tom, temple block (reference points 61-76)
- A variation 3 – static structure that includes the entire orchestra in an enormous cluster that gradually diminishes from an orchestral, dynamic as well as harmonic point of view.

The work concludes with the tremolo of the bells, through the “morendo al fine”<sup>23</sup> indication (reference point 77 to the end).

As far as the rhythm is concerned, Tiberiu Oláh based the entire rhythmic process of *The Endless Column* on numeric rows, one starting from number three, and another row that starts with number two and increases also by two:<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Dying at the end* (from italian).

<sup>24</sup> Draga, George, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Fig. 6

The numeric rows of the work

3	5	9	15	23	33	45	59
2	4	6	8	10	12	14	

These numbers generate different rhythmic formulas (triplets, quintuplets, etc.) within the dynamic structures, whereas inside the static ones they determine the length of the sounds, while the base unit of measurement is the eighth note (the beginning of the work):

Ex. 5

Although the music is not strange from mathematics, this clear bond of Oláh's music with mathematics brings it even closer to sculpture, an art strongly based on proportions and numbers.

Regarding the tempo, two indications are used from this standpoint:

**Ex. 6**

$$\begin{array}{l} \downarrow = 60 \\ \uparrow = 120 \end{array}$$

The first indication that suggests a moderate tempo is maintained from the beginning of the work up to reference point 15, where then the faster tempo indication mentioned above takes over. The fact that the composer is using just two indications of tempo can be paralleled with the fact that Brâncuși also used two “construction bricks” – as seen above: a negative and a positive one – to create his *Column*.

From the perspective of time signatures, we can find a large array of them, such as 4/4, 3/2, 5/4, 3/4, 4/8, 6/16, 3/16. However, the most interesting element – if we search for resemblances with Brâncuși’s column – is the *repeating* succession of four different time signatures: 5/8 – 3/8 – 5/8 – 6/8.

This musical work not only borrows its title, but it also represents the same aesthetic category of the symbol, portrayed using other means and a different artistic material, in a different homogenous environment, but also with the openness toward the visual interpretation of spatial coordinates of Brâncuși’s column. According to George Draga, the *Endless Column* of Tiberiu Oláh is a “(...) *symbolic translation of eternity, of aspiration for the cosmos and infinity*”<sup>25</sup>.

However, as we earlier mentioned, the birth of the two columns is the result of the same aesthetic vision, that of simplicity, in addition, at an essential level, they both convey the same message of the triumph of life over death. These two works of art are bound together not only by their common theme and folkloric roots, but – as we could see - by some constructional aspects as well. They are both constructed by using positive and negative structures, which are combined and repeated throughout these works. Moreover, they share a quite interesting aspect: each “wants” to transcend the boundaries of its own artistic field: the *Column* of Brâncuși moves from sculpture towards architecture, while the *Column* of Oláh borrows sculptural (and possibly architectural) features.

(Translated by: Köpeczi Juliánna Erika)

<sup>25</sup> “(...) tălmăcirea simbolică a eternității, năzuința spre cosmos și infinit” - Draga, George, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

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