

Art as social practice

Alina Serban*

Text published in *Praesens* magazine (Budapest) No.2/2005 and *Situations* catalogue, 2007

Today art no longer proposes to build imaginary or utopian realities. It becomes a mode of existence or a way of being inside the existent reality¹. The socio-political project developed through art contributes to the rewriting of historical function of the field and launches the question: does art become sociology or anthropology or does it maintain its specificity? This potential conflict marks a wide range of works and tendencies in the contemporary artistic space: from a complex articulation of a bio-political direction to the traditional relations between ethics and aesthetics or to questions of economic logic of value production in the cultural field².

In this frame of art as social interstice³, as a space of negotiation of some social proximities, I am bringing into discussion the work of Matei Bejenaru. The position of his work is singular in the Romanian artistic praxis. Reframing the aesthetic-political equation, the artist is interested in the dialogue with the nomadic communities, in the schizophrenia of transition; in the differences with inevitably interpose in global context, and in the absence of any ethical valences in the economic act. His projects must be seen from the perspective of the artist's self-mandate to act in the social space in order to discuss different tensions created by political, economic factors. He is aware also of the fact that the commodities of society, the authority of global trend minimize the need for a certain attitude discourse or the possibility to separate the position and role of different actors in the art field. Matei Bejenaru discourse is not about the "valued" or about the permanently processes of exclusion and closure which the art medium suffers. It is more about the facts, about a certain voluntarism and cultural introspection and attitude.

The series of projects-interventions achieved between 2002-05 are the result of the rethinking of the historical positions and of artistic consciousness, laying an emphasis on at least two interesting problems. The first problem indicated by a series of projects is the one of the audience. Mapping the frame of his artistic process, we have to accept that the mode of addressing the audience does not fix a certain type of consumer. While the primary viewer is the viewer of art, the subject addressed offers the possibility of experimentation from a diverse audience. There is a presence of some issues with a powerful social content, discussed by the Romanian mass-media. Is the case of the project *Strawberries Fields Forever* (2002), a photo- installation, presenting the artist's action at Lleida, Catalonia, where the Romanian women worked on the strawberry plantations. From the strawberries they reaped, he prepared some jam, during a performance festival in Barcelona, and he sold it to the public. He inscribed on the label the salary per hour of the Romanian workers. Then he sent the money he earned to the Romanian women involved. The project addresses the subject of power relations established in the social space after the opening of the borders to the West.

The second problem is the one of the constant migration of the cultural product from an inclusion zone to one of exclusion and back generates in Marius Babias'⁴ opinion three frames which interrelate reciprocally: the cultural activism as a form of art, artist as a cultural promoter and art as a medium for the manifestation of social activism. In the case of Matei Bejenaru the boundary between art and activism is extremely fragile. His work, the result of his interaction with different communities of people, reflects the way in which the individual or society grasps the changes caused by the liberalization of the economic system, by the elimination of visas, by the mobility of the people.

The artist asks himself: at what level of social and political relevance does art operate? Is there a sense in using art to articulate social, political or identity problems?

The video work, *Looking for Caslav*, documents the meeting of artist with Caslav Milosevic after 20 years in the city Cacak, Serbia. In 1982 the artist met Caslav at the Turnu Severin flea market and he

bought from him a pair of jeans, a sailor shirt and a Pink Floyd LP. The video records not just a search of one person, but rather that of the past. The project becomes a metaphor of an attempt at recovering a lost identity.

However, his projects can also be understood as a reflection upon a mode in which the experience of art can be perceived not as an aesthetic construct, but as an aesthetic view on some issues with social content. In this frame we have to see also the mobility issue, either that of individuals or of the economic market. *Mehr Chancen fur Unsere Jugend*, made during his stay at KulturKontakt, Austria, starts from the slogan of the political campaign of Chancellor Schussel (*More chances for our young people*) to scan the chances the Romanian young people have had after the change of the political system. The artist will use the budget of his residency to invite 5 young artists in Vienna. In the case of Lohn project, an installation composed of oversized objects of clothing, presented for the first time during the show *Situated Self*, at the Museum of Contemporary art Belgrade, he analyzes the production in loan system, common for the Romanian export system. The work discusses the competition index of the local commercial production in parallel with the external market and the way the small markets succeed to survive the global economy. On the basis of an algorithm he creates, the cloths are oversized in proportion to the salary differences between a Romanian and an EU worker. The artist does not put accent on the impact of the media strategies. He is more interested on the cultural politics which determine the re-mapping the artistic act, on the influence of a critical discourse which could modifies the artistic positions and annihilates the difference between perception and representation, between original and its copy.

Making the introspection of the living space its priority, his works become a traffic space for reactions, strategies, and mobility of notions. Thus, Matei Bejenaru's main concern is the questioning of the way in which audience interprets these data.

*Alina Serban is an art critic and curator from Bucharest.

Notes:

¹ Reference to Nicholas Bourriaud book *Relational aesthetics*.

² Documeta 11 tried to emphasize the problem of producing and presenting information in the artistic and cultural field.

³ Reference to Nicholas Bourriaud book *Relational aesthetics*.

⁴ Marius Babias, *The New Europe. Culture of mixing and politics of representation*, Generali Foundation, 2005