

**The following is a conversation that took place between Kristina Lee Podesva\* and Matei Bejenaru and Livia Pancu\*\* from Vector Association at Western Front, Vancouver, in March 2011.**

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*Vector is the name given to a cultural NGO registered in 2001 by a collective of visual artists and philosophers from Iasi, a university city in Romania's Northeast region, initially founded to support the Periferic Biennial for Contemporary Art. Inaugurated in 1997 under the direction of artist Matei Bejenaru, the Periferic Biennial began as a performance festival and ultimately grew into an international biennial of contemporary art, which has presented eight biennials in a little over a decade. Guest curators of the biennial include Anders Kreuger, Marius Babias, Angelika Nollert, and Florence Derieux, among others. While organizing the Periferic Biennial initially served as Vector's primary activity, the group has, since 2003, developed and supported a number of additional projects to provide a platform for a range of artistic and institutional initiatives, including Vector Gallery (2003–07); Vector>Magazine: Art and Culture in Context (2005–07); Vector-critical research in context, a publication (2010–); Vector Art Data Bank (2004–08); Vector Backyard Residencies (2006–07); cARTier Project (2004–07); Vector Studio for Art Practices and Debates (2007–); Vector Accented Residency (2009–10); and European Network for Public Art Producers (ENPAP) (2010–12).*

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**Kristina Lee Podesva:** It is well known that Vector was started by artists and academics, particularly philosophers, in Iasi, Romania. What were the circumstances, needs, and goals of these two groups that brought you to work together?

**Matei Bejenaru:** I think that this was not a program. It just happened because of some people, some individuals. This was the reality. I started as an artist organizing the first so-called experimental contemporary art events in the city in the mid 1990s as a young student. And it was performance art that was interesting for me at this time because it was about the body and trauma. Body discourse was like an exercise for us. Of course, body discourse was nothing new in art at the time. It happened in the 1960s in the West and in the 1970s in the Eastern bloc—or at least in some of those countries. So, what was the interest on the part of the philosophers? They came to us, the artists. The philosopher Catalin Gheorghe came to one of our performances and said, "Hey, I'm interested in what you are doing." And I thought we should develop some kind of relationship with this guy and his friends. I remember in 2000—keep in mind that we were an organization for five years before we were official, on paper, in 2001—we were doing something that was very interesting: some sessions at the Faculty of Philosophy, some performances in the amphitheatre.

People were really shocked because we were doing body stuff there and video stuff. And you can imagine these professors in the philosophy department are all coming from the world of Kant and Heidegger, books and sobriety, and some kids were coming and doing some really crazy things, some really provocative things in these performances. Of course, some of them did not do crazy things. This was a banalization. But, some professors were really attracted by the performances...and they started asking questions, trying to find meaning in what we were doing. They understood that we were

not stupid, but maybe we were using intuition more than knowledge. So this is how we came to work with philosophers.... There was not a plan to do this. It was the result of a necessary intellectual solidarity among a group of young intellectuals and artists in the city a few years after the fall of Communism.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** Do you think that the shared interest here was in developing and thinking through problems of this post-Communist situation and trying to find meaning both in your art and in a shared identity?

**Matei Bejenaru:** I'd like to try to be honest with you and to try and translate into words what the state of mind and feeling was at the time. It was very frustrating because we were educated kids. We were speaking English. We were speaking French. We were living in a country that was completely destroyed. We didn't have exhibitions in 1993, 1994. It was George Soros who came and put his own philosophy and structure into place in the region. Now, I am critical of Soros, but at the time his projects were perhaps a necessary step. There was no infrastructure. Civic society was undeveloped. Independent initiatives were very weak. In general in Romania and in particular in my city, it was just *dolce far niente* (sweetness for doing nothing). Do you know *dolce far niente*? It's like wine and sex. It's necessary in life, but not enough probably. It was really very frustrating.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** A lot of people talk about multidisciplinary, but I am suspicious of it because it does not seem to extend beyond the simple mixing of disciplines. My question would be for what purpose is this mixture? I prefer to think instead of a concept of "coalitional knowledges" or "intellectual solidarity," as you phrase it. It sounds like what Vector was doing by bringing together the different perspectives, approaches, and observations of artists, academics, and philosophers was to build a coalition for a purpose—that is, to deal with an extreme lack of resources and actual knowledge.

**Matei Bejenaru:** We have been exposed to art and ideas for more than a decade now, so somehow we learned by being in the middle of things. But we didn't have knowledge. I was trained in school, in the Faculty of Fine Arts, about how to do a nice painting as maybe a Cezanne or Mark Rothko. This was the limit in Iasi, but also in Eastern Europe, except for some individual artists who taught in big cities like Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest, who came to art with some conceptual ideas. There was a big delay because all these forms of art, which we called, from a Western point of view, "contemporary," didn't exist in the East in a structured way. There were no institutions. No one supported them. Of course, from country to country there were different situations, but, in general, official art was traditional art used for ideological purposes to support the political system of power. And in countries like Poland, the intellectual tradition for independent expression was so strong that the state couldn't put as much pressure on individuals as in Romania or Bulgaria. They couldn't keep them in a cage.... Coming back to a lack of resources: people in Romania were completely disconnected from the debates about art. They were living in a world of *dolce far niente*. Some people had heard about pop art, but it was too far from them and they didn't care, and this was in fact the place where Vector arrived. We were really paralyzed and this is what I discovered in the early 1990s. We didn't know where to start.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** At some point, after working together for five years, Vector decided to become an NGO. What caused that shift? Why did you decide to do it?

**Matei Bejenaru:** I think it was natural. We had to become an institution. If you want to go ahead, if you want to be a partner in dialogue with others, and if you want to have a space for exhibitions, and things like this, then you become an institution.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** Who was your audience?

**Matei Bejenaru:** Students of art, young intellectuals, and some artists.

**Livia Pancu:** I would also have another answer to this question of why Vector became an institution in 2001. Vector organized Periferic 1 through 5, but the organizers were the French Cultural Center or the Center for Contemporary Art in Bucharest, so there was this group of people that represented institutional entities, which officially, but not practically, became organizers of Periferic in order to get funding.

**Matei Bejenaru:** When we organized the exhibition we didn't sleep nights. I carried the money for the project in a plastic bag on the train. I was organizing the hotels, finding exhibition spaces, buying train tickets, and installing the shows.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** When did you have enough people so that you did not have to do this all by yourself?

**Matei Bejenaru:** I think it was 1999. In 1997 and 1998 I did things by myself. It was an extremely hard time. Periferic was the driving force behind becoming a NGO in 2001, when there was pressure to professionalize. It was then that I invited a foreign curator, since we did not really have curators in Romania (and we still do not today, because we only have a few institutions). The focus on local artists was not what we hoped; therefore, a lot of frustrations started to come to the surface.

**Livia Pancu:** At the same time that the local artists were excluded from exhibiting in Periferic they were also included in some sense because they became the producers for other artists' projects.

**Matei Bejenaru:** But [this work] was never paid. It was volunteer work.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** So there was a tension between local and global interests.

**Matei Bejenaru:** I've noticed in the last two or three years that in reality the biennial offered a platform to some artists for the production of new work in a context that is a bit strange, exotic even. It was a kind of cultural relocation. We didn't have a lot of money. All we had was the city and its people to offer as raw material for the production of work. With this in mind, we have tried in recent years to negotiate more with our guest curators—so now we have a local team working with them. We now have an opinion. In the end, we realized that what we have to do is to produce a discourse in relation to Periferic.

**Livia Pancu:** I want to say that local people did want to be involved with Periferic. Even in the beginning, there were four or five people working with Matei. The founding members of Vector trusted Matei's vision, and elected him to represent the collective for over ten years—even if at various times maybe there were different kinds of tensions among all of them. We should also say that between 2004 and 2008 Matei worked with a

permanent team of five people. They were working particularly on the cARTier Project, but nevertheless they were there to support all Vector's activities.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** What do you think will be the motivations for guest curators to come to work with Periferic in the future?

**Matei Bejenaru:** I think the reason for curators to come now and work with Periferic is to be a real partner, and the partnership will be based on intellectual exchange—sharing the same interest in art. And this will allow us to produce something with guest curators in the future. Not because of the context. I used a metaphor in one of my texts: In the first years, we spent a lot of energy putting a satellite into orbit. We needed a lot of fuel to pass through the atmosphere. And this is the fuel that we consumed. Now, we need just small jets. We just need to position ourselves in a subtle way within a larger sophisticated discourse. But this is difficult. In the beginning, we discovered that as artists, we were all the same. Later, we discovered that while I'm interested in this kind of thing, the others are maybe interested in different things. So, we are not the same—which is normal. In the beginning it didn't really matter what we were thinking. We didn't think too much about art. We didn't have enough expertise at the time. Instead, we had to be united in the idea to legitimize ourselves. It was the time of the affirmation of the self. And later on we discovered that actually while one of my colleagues is doing that thing, I am doing the opposite from an ideological point of view.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** Vector has established and disseminated its own discourse through multiple channels, including Periferic's dialogue with foreign curators, through Iasi's university—in particular, its new media department—as well as through the magazine that you published. Perhaps you could talk about some of the motivations and mechanics behind developing different discursive channels?

**Matei Bejenaru:** We were running a social-cultural project for five years called the cARTier Project, and for this project we received a strategic grant from the Swiss Cultural Program in Romania (Pro Helvetia/SDC). Therefore, with the help of this project we managed not only to have a gallery space but also to pay salaries. Somehow we stabilized the institution because of this grant, a situation that we never had before. We somehow had time for reflection, and we achieved the top of our institutional power in 2005–06, producing our biggest biennial. We were able to employ four people and had an office because of this grant. I was using more than seventy percent of my energy for developing the institution at that time because I had a dream (I was so naive) to make the institution grow and grow and grow.... So, in 2005, in this situation where all engines were at maximum speed, I thought, "What are we? Where are we? What place are we in?"

Well, first of all, we were in a place that was becoming like an outpost of the political construction that is Europe since we are one of the major cities on the eastern border of the European Union. I understood for political reasons that the end of something is always the beginning of something else, meaning our identity would also be based on our position as a border cultural institution. We then asked ourselves, "What is East? What is happening East?" We looked toward Ukraine, Moldova, the former Yugoslav countries, Turkey, and later Lebanon and Egypt. I figured we had to develop a network and so I started to travel in the region to develop this network to exchange ideas and artists between institutions that were somehow similar. In 2006 I was carrying a lot of catalogues during these trips, and they became the basis for an art data bank, which no one had. We could then act as a centre for Western curators, to show them what was

happening East. We weren't able to continue the data bank though because we did not have the resources to maintain it. In 2006 we also had the Vector residency with Istanbul and Novi Sad. After attempting to build both this regional network and residency program, we thought, "Why don't we put all these things into a publication?" This would give us an identity and a way to construct discourse among the institutions in the region, which, despite differences, were all post-Communist and in transition.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** The magazine was a way to articulate your identity and discourse, but did it also provide evidence or documentation of Vector's activities?

**Matei Bejenaru:** Yes. When I worked with Catalin, my colleague at the time, to start to structure the magazine, we were aware of the fact that there was already an art magazine in the western part of Romania called *IDEA Arts + Society*. In the beginning we did two issues per year. We managed to produce these issues in 2006 and 2007, but it stopped because it was too much work for me in the end. I was doing layout, writing grants, and going to the printing house, which was a hundred miles away.

**Livia Pancu:** I think for all of us who work in Vector the same thing has happened to us in different ways and on different scales. Huge sacrifices were made—both financial and, sometimes, personal. Most of our time was spent in Vector, to the detriment of our families. There was a mismanagement of our lives in relation to the process of institutionalizing Vector and self-professionalizing, the two biggest demands during that period of time.

**Matei Bejenaru:** Yes. Everybody was sacrificing. What we have in common is ambition...but let's be pragmatic. It's not enough to be motivated. It's not enough to have a strong will. Probably now the challenge for our institution is to develop a smart discourse.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** As it moves forward in time, every artist-run institution, if it survives, experiences growing pains. What do you think is the difference between Vector's activities and objectives now and from when it began?

**Matei Bejenaru:** In the beginning, all the events that we organized were made under the concept of the institution in the 1990s, a time of the affirmation of the self, of a legitimization of the institution, of a group of people—the story of the satellite. Now is the time to stabilize the institution, to develop a more specific discourse, and to have stable medium- and long-term financing. And this may come only from the local government, from within Romania. Nobody is now treating culture within Romania as a tool for changing mentalities. Already these things were done to a certain extent over the last ten to fifteen years. Romania is one of the poorer EU countries. This is what it is. It is an Eastern bloc country, but it is also part of the European Union. In Romania, nobody will kill you in the street. Yes, there is a kind of poverty there, but there are also nice restaurants. You will find people who speak English. You will find universities. You will find small art institutions. Maybe you will not find these on a large, western European scale, but you will find almost everything happening. So, Periferic and Vector have to reshape to try and find a strategy to attract local money, to put pressure on local authorities. Maybe Periferic shouldn't have to be a biennial any more. Maybe it should have a chance to be a platform or a project.

**Livia Pancu:** I don't know if Periferic is a biennial in the classical sense. In my opinion, the use of the term biennial was a strategy, and fortunately this format fit our local conditions and aspirations best. It's a large-scale exhibition, an event, and a platform for international production every two, three, or four years. Only Periferic 7 and Periferic 8 had two years between them. I think that the use of the word biennial is a convenient terminology because it allows us to make use of different methodologies of production. Of course, the term is also linked to international funding.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** But the position of Periferic as an artist-run biennial is what has attracted international attention to it. Is Periferic the only artist-run biennial?

**Matei Bejenaru:** There are some in Russia, but Periferic is the oldest artist-run biennial that we know of.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** I want to return to Matei's comments about seeking local support for the organization as a survival tactic. In the beginning, Periferic had a kind of exotic appeal to the outside, but now that Romania belongs to the EU there is a different framing of Periferic. Is it possible that the story of Periferic and Vector is also the story of former Eastern European art entering into an expanded, global situation? Does the historical arc of Vector parallel, to some degree, the experiences of other post-Communist artists and art institutions?

**Matei Bejenaru:** Absolutely. I totally agree.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** So, what does the future look like for Vector, and, by extension, do your ambitions reflect on contemporary art in the region in some way?

**Livia Pancu:** It will continue to be a platform for exchange between supporting the local art scene and its exchange with the international context, but the machinery might not be the biennial as it has been up until now. I would opt for a longer process of producing and maybe a more experimental thinking and interaction with the local situation. I am still, however, very, very fond of Periferic, and I think that we can make use of the same terminology.

**Matei Bejenaru:** The strong import of models coming from the West in terms of artistic production, art institutions, and so on made us very vulnerable at first. We were subject to legitimization by some of these models. Therefore, we decided that we had to be something else and act differently. We had to be ourselves. We didn't have to be enrolled into one agenda or another, but we did have to have a little bit of power, and this power came from a network of institutions and people that we collaborated with. This was what I was dreaming of. I said this to my friends in Serbia and in Bulgaria, and they all said yes—but in practice we all focused on our own work and dreamt of being in a vitrine in a big institution in the West. One can't escape it. We were and are trying to be part of this globalized art system. Having our own network is probably the only way to get in. So, maybe we first get into the system and then later we see how we can perform a little bit of jujitsu on the system.

**Livia Pancu:** This is mainly about strategies of getting financial support that was not provided by the national or local stakeholders, with few exceptions.

**Matei Bejenaru:** Funding, knowledge, structure, and everything. Probably with money one is more relaxed, but it would be nice to keep this atmosphere of work and commitment to something and not become lazy because of some easy money that will come. When I say lazy, I mean not having the commitment to be creative, to experiment, to try to understand what art should mean, what art is used for, what its function is, what kind of awareness it can create in our context, and what kind of dialogue it can produce. These are questions that I always raise.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** These are philosophical questions. I am sympathetic to them, but I would say that many artists do not think or care about these questions.

**Matei Bejenaru:** You have to contextualize your existence in the moment when you are aware that your art is not suspended in a vacuum. There are different systems of references that judge, in different ways and with different systems of measurement, our production of symbolic knowledge. Artists think about themselves. They are like children demanding chocolate all the time. I am speaking to you as an artist who has learned about the responsibility of having an institution, and you are speaking to me because of this institution, and having the responsibility of an institution means being aware of the context in which I am living.

**Kristina Lee Podesva:** What you say is very significant because artists who make institutions are taking on responsibility. When an artist creates or works on an institution it does not simply mean receiving legitimacy or authorization from that institution, but actually taking responsibility for it.

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