

**Interview Dan Lungu\* - Matei Bejenaru**  
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**Dan Lungu (DL)** – *I would like to begin our discussion with the following question: Matei, would you define yourself as a left artist? I'm asking you because it's a quite dangerous "label" in today's Romania.*

**Matei Bejenaru (MB)** – My artistic projects, that I would call situationist if I were to use a poetical term, are the outcome of a political way of thinking, with a special awareness when it comes to social issues; it's a reality that proves to be very inspirational in what my artistic practice is concerned. Labor of all types and its results have always been a constant motif in my works, no matter if we're talking about photography, videos, performances or any other kind of actions. In my family, work has been the only way of ever getting somewhere, and everything I've achieved so far was the fruit of persistent, sometimes exceptionally hard work. I have the utmost respect for those who work, and from this viewpoint I can say that I am indeed a left artist.

Certainly, there are several types of left artistic attitudes that I could mention here: one critical and radical, occasionally subversive, which has solid ideological roots and investigates thoroughly the social and political conditions of today's world; a second one, characterized by a more trendy leftism, which laments over the consumerist intemperance and evades in daily life strategies or socialization models displaying a leftist "trim" or "lifestyle"; finally, there is an artistic attitude that borders on social activism, when artists decide they want to bring about actual and tangible changes in the real world.

**DL** – *So you are striving to make a difference through your art... How would you define the artistic substance of your projects? Could one find it in the communication you facilitated, in the unexpected emotions you generated, in the subversive message related to different situations or power structures?*

**MB** – Most of the times, I don't define with precision what is artistic about my projects. Things become clear by seeing and by doing. For instance, in a 1997 project at the Saxon castle Calnic in Transylvania, I photographed 50 villagers and then I placed their enlarged pictures on the circular wall of the castle. At that time, there was a single Saxon old man left in the village, whose population had once been mainly Saxon. The rest had emigrated to Germany. I wanted the locals to be part of the exhibition, although a contemporary art event with installations and video projections didn't make much sense to them. The photographing process was difficult, because people hesitated to have their picture taken by a stranger with a weird explanation. After knocking in vain to every door in the village, I went to the priest's house and explained my idea to him – and he agreed to help me. Although I am not a believer, I went to the Sunday service in the village, and the priest introduced me as "the professor-photographer from Iasi who wants to take pictures"; at the end of the service, people of all ages waited patiently in line to be photographed. Obviously, they trusted the priest completely. After that, some of the villagers invited me in their homes, offering me lard and plum brandy and telling me about their life with the Saxons in the old days. These were fair people and kept their word when dealing with the Romanians, who worked their fields but didn't mix in their social life. Romanians were not allowed to participate to the Saturday balls organized at the castle, and their only opportunity to dance with the Saxon women presented itself only after '46, when the Saxon men were deported to Siberia for having fought with the Germans. For me, this type of communication with the villagers was the artistic substance of the project, which materialized latter in the portraits displayed on the walls of the fortress.

**DL** – *If a "social activist" happened to be in Calnic, I guess he would have tried to bring about an actual change through a punctual activity. You say you didn't have such a well-defined agenda. I'd say you acted in keeping with that "gratuity of art" principle. There's nothing pragmatic about what you achieved; there's more of an intent to create an atmosphere, a communication on an emotional level, to produce a context different from the daily existence of those people. Actually, you created a "feast day", in the village language...*

**MB** – Whenever I make a social project, I try to establish a sincere, fair and principled relationship with the people I'm working with. I was going for an emotional interaction with a human community

with which I felt somehow solidary. Secondly, I was also expressing my artistic standpoint towards an elitist way of presenting art within that particular context.

**DL** – *What would be the characteristic features of providing your social practice with an artistic dimension? What makes it different from that of a sociologist or of a “social activist”?*

**MB** – First of all, such an artistic project would be different from a sociological study in terms of its purpose, which is not a concrete, a measurable one. It should be “read” in a metaphorical key. Also, as Bourriaud stated in the *Relational Aesthetics*, a great part of the contemporary artistic projects achieved during these last two decades involved social interactions, created new sociability patterns or employed artistic objects and situations that produced sociability. These new sociability forms are creative and original and go beyond the usual patterns of the conventions we are used to.

**DL** – *This means that artists promote new ways of experiencing inter-human relationship...*

**MB** – Yes, that’s the truth. These projects determine us to go beyond the “social routine” and take off through art, at least for a short time, the “tight social clothing” that we’re wearing virtually all the time. In comparison with the Western societies, where the degrees of social freedom are well defined, in our post-communist society you still have all sorts of freedom degrees, which afford you the possibility to be a “social outlaw”.

**DL** – *Is this type of artistic projects a way for you to experiment a certain social weightlessness, a state of grace and creativity obtained through “parenthesizing” the social constraints? Weightlessness supposes a getting out of the system, whereas critical thinking is found within it. Weightlessness is not against the system, but in spite of it.*

**MB** – Each and every artist is responsible for the artistic standpoint he or she adopts. There are artists who can afford to make any type of art, because their financial means are independent of their artistic production, a production that doesn’t have to be capitalized a priori. And the artistic system makes the existence of this type of art possible. Within the Romanian context, there isn’t a well-structured mechanism yet, and the artists are as weightless as they are hungry. Many of them cannot cope with the situation more than a few years, and after that they give up and go work in advertising or in the media in order to survive. As for those who manage to resist and go on doing non-commercial artistic projects, sometimes even using video or digital technology, I think they have a very clear political standpoint.

**DL** – *Why did you decide to take on social criticism in your works ? why not use it in the media or the public events...?*

**MB** – First of all, because I believe the art field to be a bulwark that proves hard to conquer or buy out by the system. The period that we’re now living in Romania is dominated by a primitive hoarding up of capital, when by the side of the road that has been recently asphalted with European money you can see a lot of barefoot people. This gets to me, and I couldn’t confine myself in the test-tube space of the studio when I know that there are so many terrible and unfair things happening out there. Moreover, my projects based on the social practice are also a challenge addressed to our artistic system. Only these last few years have began to appear the first institutions (museums, galleries) that are trying to “feel the beat” of these types of artistic forms.

In 2003, in a project done for the second edition of the Tirana Biennial, I aimed at criticizing the institution of the Albanian biennial. During my preliminary visit there, I had found out that a great part of the population living in Tirana didn’t have access to drinking water. And so I asked myself: what is the point of having an international biennial of contemporary art, with video projectors and computers in a city afflicted with such chronic and serious infrastructure problems? The outcome was a project placed in the centre of the city, and thanks to which I was able to supply free water to the locals during the biennial. I improvised a so-called water pump by drilling a pipe that was going into the residential area. On this occasion too I chose to involve the local population into the project, but this time the work had a functional dimension instead of an aesthetic one. I was thrilled to see every day hundreds of people with buckets and plastic bottles coming to take home water ...

**DL** – *These “signals” that you keep sending, are they of any consequence? What was the feedback*

*from the public, the media, the institutions?*

**MB** – Going back to the Tirana project, I can say that a first level of efficiency was the fact that a few thousands of people had free access to drinking water during the biennial. The second level would be the fact that a competent audience and even some of the local authorities took notice of an urgent social issue. The mayor of Tirana, who is himself a painter and is involved in an ambitious project of painting the exterior walls of the apartment buildings, by signing me the authorization to build the improvised pipe couldn't help but thinking, at least for a moment, that he had a big problem to take care of, one more urgent than the grayish appearance of the apartment buildings dating from Enver Hodja's time.

I had an unexpected feedback on the occasion of the project called "Strawberry Fields Forever". In a public space in Barcelona, I made jam of the strawberries gathered by our "strawberry pickers" and then I offered it to the Spanish. Some of them told me that their parents too had gone during the sixties and seventies to work in France or Belgium.... The discussions about the exploitation of the cheap labour force from the north-western African or east-European countries had a deeper significance...

**DL** – *How did your own artistic vision and attitude change from the older project involving the devices for smoking pork meat to the more recent "Traveling Guide" for the illegal immigrants in England? How do you relate to your own artistic itinerary?*

**MB** – The project involving the smoking devices placed at Christmas time in the workers' neighborhood Alexandru cel Bun in Iasi, which took place almost 15 years ago, had been based on intuition mainly... I was still a student at that time and I knew virtually nothing about the social practice in the artistic field. Installing that smoking devices was for me emblematic for the way of life of the unemployed workers in our cities, workers who were no longer peasants, but who hadn't become city people either. I was living in that neighborhood and I was sharing with them the morning queues for prime minister Văcăroiu's state subsidized milk. In 1997, on the occasion of the project than took place at the Calnic Castle, I think I introduced a certain critical attitude towards the local community there.

**DL** – *In the project of the smoking devices I see in fact a sympathetic attitude, a fellowship with the unemployed in the neighborhood ...*

**MB** – That's true. The "Alexandru cel Bun" project is a sad one, which reflects also the tough period that my family was going through at that time.

**DL** – *In the Alexandru cel Bun neighborhood you created in fact a certain sociability pattern for the people in the building, who, crowded in the communist apartment buildings, had poor social relations. You created through your smoking devices a context and a new sociability space, which was a friendly one.*

**MB** – That project was important to me because it elucidated my relationship with the people living there, it helped me define my own standpoint. The conversations I had with the people who were smoking sausages had been for me an opportunity to find out about their sometimes very serious problems... and at that time there were not many solutions for solving the crisis. After that project, there were people who referred to me as "the painter". I had gained a sort of identity in the neighborhood.

I believe that the experience of this project was the basis for the social culture project cARTier that I initiated a decade later within the Vector Association. By painting the exterior walls of several apartment buildings in the Tătărași neighborhood in Iasi, my colleagues and I were trying to change the mentalities of the people, to make them take responsibility for the public space. In other words, we were trying to get positive social results through employing artistic means.

**DL** – *Going back to the course of our discussion, which were the important moments that made you feel that you were going in the right direction and that you had developed your artistic vision?*

**MB** – The experiments I conducted on my own as a student played an important part in defining my sensitivity in relation to the projects that involved the social practice and the interaction with the people. Not at all accidentally, as a student I achieved several performances that helped me get to

know my own resources and artistic energies. As I was reading and seeing more and more things, I became aware of the fact that I was gradually including social practice in my projects. Through my speaking performances and the endurance projects in which I was testing my physical limits, I provided my works with a political dimension. In the performance that took place in Chisinău in 1999, when I read, facing the wall and without making any pause, all the words in the Romanian dictionary, I wanted to stress the paradox of the Moldavian language, which in fact doesn't exist, as it is identical with the Romanian language; its only purpose is to serve as a diversion to the pro-Russian authorities in Chisinău.

After 2000, as I was traveling more and benefiting by artistic residencies, I had the opportunity to "uncouple" myself for a time from the Romanian situation and to re-contextualize what I had achieved as an artist. It was then that my artistic practice oriented towards the social and the critical and political thinking became clear to me.

**DL** – *It is a very interesting fact, and it happened to me also as a writer and sociologist: once you begin to go abroad, your political sense sharpens and you become a more "political" individual.*

**MB** – My recent project "Travelling guide" is explicitly political and somewhat subversive. I take on here the impersonal and objective language of this type of publications, but the information I provide is a detailed how-to meant to teach a Romanian citizen to get to England without having a visa. This contradiction between form and content is in fact the engine of the project. This guide is no longer operational in 2007, as Romania has joined the European Union, but when it was written, in 2005, many of the information were valid, their source being the immigrant Romanian workers who had penetrated into the UK illegally.

**DL** – *If you had conceived it as a guide per se, not as an artistic project, do you think it would have sold? Supposing it would have been legal, of course...*

**MB** – I don't think it would have been legal, as it was encouraging the breaking of the immigration laws... Therefore, it wouldn't have been lucrative. I had to explain over and over that it was an artistic project... that art had the right to be on the verge of the law and to criticize the system. In fact, I had conceived this guide as a sign of solidarity with the Romanian young people who couldn't find their place in their own country and who were taking great risks to get abroad and make something of themselves. I would say that the tragedy of the two young illegal immigrants that were thrown overboard in 1996 by the Taiwanese captain of the ship Maersk Dubai is a symbol of the desperate '90s following the dark '80s dominated by the communist dictatorship...

\* Dan Lungu is a writer and sociologist from Iasi, Romania.