

## INTERVIEW WITH MATEI BEJENARU

WRITTEN BY CRISTIAN NAE

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Matei Bejenaru is a visual artist who lives and works in Iasi, Romania. He teaches photography and video art at "George Enescu" University of Arts. He is founding member of Vector Association in Iasi and director of the Periferic Contemporary Art Biennial (1997-2008). He has participated in several group exhibitions, including those at Level 2 Gallery, Tate Modern, London (2007) and the Taipei Biennial (2008). Between November 2010 and July 2011, his experimental project for choral music *Songs for a better future* was shown at The Drawing Room and Tate Modern (Turbine Hall) in London, at Western Front in Vancouver, and at Kunstlerhaus Buchsenhausen in Innsbruck. From 2011-2012, he was a guest instructor at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Since 2012, he is associate artist at the Kettle's Yard art gallery, Cambridge, England.



Matei Bejenaru, "On Beauty: Building a Darkroom," 2013, installation (detail). Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, England. Courtesy of the author.

Bejenaru's latest works explore the imbrications of poetry and politics. He conceives artistic structures that enable him to visualize historical transformations and processes of knowledge revolving around spatializations of temporality as possibilities to rethink the experience of multiple, overlapping and often incongruous modernities in different parts of the world, with a focus on post-socialist Europe. He is interested in expanding notions of collectivity and community by means of relational projects, and he conceives and questions spaces of

thinking that can be analyzed as both cultural geographies and structures of memory. His latest projects, *On Beauty: Building a Darkroom*, a work-in-process commissioned by the Kettle's Yard art gallery in Cambridge, England, and *From A to B*, a new photographic and performative structure recently exhibited at Tranzit.ro/lasi, question the relation between forms of knowledge and processes of subjectification by examining technology, industrialization and the material conditions of artistic production.

**Cristian Nae:** I propose to start our discussion by introducing your last commissioned project, *On Beauty: Building a Darkroom*. Your response to the invitation by Kettle's Yard art gallery in Cambridge, England, was to transport the technology for analog photography that you have personally acquired from Germany and other former socialist countries over time and, thus, lay down the conditions for building a darkroom that may be activated by the viewer (accompanied by a small manual of analog photography). It is a sort of "reverse gift," a donation to the Kettle's Yard, which also owns a small collection of modern art. Therefore, the project may also be interpreted as a questioning of multiple modernities in different geopolitical spaces. Is this a more or less accurate description of your project?

**Matei Bejenaru:** In fact, the project I proposed for Kettle's Yard consists in donating all my equipment from my first darkroom that I initiated at the beginning of the '90s in post-socialist Romania. Starting from the specific situation of this center, which is based on a collection of modern art, I have built a Mobile Darkroom Unit that resembles, more or less, Marcel Duchamp's *Boite-en-Valise*, and can be transported by car and installed in any space in maximum one hour.



Matei Bejenaru, "On Beauty: Building a Darkroom," 2013, installation (detail) (Mobile Darkroom Unit). Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, England. Courtesy of the author.

The project has multiple meanings and I think that the most important for me is the one connected to the idea of questioning the East-West distinction from the perspective of technological transfer. As a result of rational, Cartesian knowledge, technology is mostly the product of the West, which was exported elsewhere. By realizing a reverse transfer of an obsolete technology from East to West, the technology needed for analogical photography, I want to question the relations that we, the people who live in Eastern Europe, have with the West from the perspective of technological belatedness. There are also other interpretations of my project such as the investigation of the relations an artwork can produce or the way we look at the past and define beauty.

**CN:** It seems to me that, among the multiple conceptual strata you build upon in this work (comprising questions of cultural translation, relational art and educational practices), there is a fundamental tension that concerns the asynchronic conditions of reception and production of the same industrial object in different cultural conditions. They touch upon the question of distinct logics and legacies of modernism in different parts of the world. However, I would be interested, first of all, in how you would consider the differences between the post-socialist space and the former West. For many people, these differences have mainly concerned the economic and political conditions of living. How do you relate to these differences in your work? Which distinctions are important and formative for you as an artist?

**MB:** I think that the differences between the post-socialist space and the former West should be judged on a much more nuanced basis. First of all, the ex-socialist space was and still is heterogeneous; for instance, we cannot compare the situation in the Czech Republic with the one in Romania, just like the differences between Albania or Bulgaria and the Baltic States are significant.

Even if I have a certain interest in the way rational, scientific knowledge regressed in post-communist Romania, accompanied by the resurrection of orthodox religious practices, I am interested in understanding how the collective self is constructed in comparison to the self of a Czech or someone from England, for instance. We (Romanians) did not have the big emancipatory waves of the West -- the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution -- therefore, I think that people are differently constructed on the inside. This is how I explain to myself why religious practices are so popular in Romania in comparison to Western secular lifestyles. The communists attempted to modernize the country, but it was a forced process, lacking resources and based on many false premises. Technological belatedness, together with the disparities of social practices and the way state structures function, are a consequence of different historical evolutions. The differences that shaped my artistic practice concern the comparative study of dominant patterns of knowledge in society.

**CN:** Your interest in technology and industrialization, their cultural representations and the way they affect the construction and the definition of the self, also appears in other, more recent works. For instance, *Songs for a better future*, the project created and presented at the Tate Modern in 2010, suggests the importance of connective thinking by means of digital communication for the Western world. How would you compare it, for instance, to the Romanian version? Here, you also use the motive of the chorus, of a body of people performing and singing in synchronicity, but with different socialist overtones, related perhaps to the idea of progress and its emancipatory promise. May the latter also be read as a piece about the condition of work in post-socialist times and the memory of utopian promises of socialist modernity?

**MB:** In a certain way, yes, Socialist modernism created the conditions for the imaginary construction of a utopian future. I keep thinking that a better world for all is possible. And, for me, poetry represents the incentive that fosters hope and fuels imagination.

**CN:** This also relates to another constant theme in your artistic practice: the notion of work, often connected to relational geographies, with questions of migration and notions of borders that seem to be constantly shifting. This notion has a very strong Marxist legacy and has undergone deep changes in post-socialist countries. What does this mean to you? Why this interest?

**MB:** The identification of the values we lost in the last two decades in Romanian society is one of the major concerns of my recent artistic practice. Work is one of those values, together with the contemplative, unreligious forms of thinking, such as poetry or the chess game. Work interests me because I come from a family of workers and because I work all the time. In fact, the working class is the major loser of the transition to capitalism in Romania.

**CN:** As some curators have noticed about many of your past works, you often show a strong interest in relational art. Why this interest, especially in post-socialist Romania?

**MB:** My interest in relational forms of art is related to the social, political and cultural conditions according to which you can produce art in post-communist Romania. I do not think that you can ignore public space and those who inhabit it because it is in public space that I find inspiration for my artistic practice. I do not think that personal mythologies are relevant for this historical time. We may also remind the emancipatory functions of art in the post-communist context. Simply said, an artist coming from Eastern Europe is, perhaps, less egoistic. That is why the object is not set in the museum; it produces forms of socialization because it can be used. For instance, the Mobile Darkroom Unit has a functional ergonomics that is conceived in the spirit of the 1950s. Although it is functional, it can resist to present-day forms of efficiency.

**CN:** Is it in this respect that the poetic elements of your works come into play? Do you think that the poetic regime of language can undercut the dominant patterns of thinking today that you still consider to be rationalist and whose extreme form is ultra-capitalism, based on the logic of maximized efficiency and profit?

**MB:** I try to exploit the tension between a rational mode of reflection about the world I live in, which is characteristic of the type of modernity I was raised in, and poetic, contemplative forms of thinking, which have nothing to do with the dominant forms of thinking in our society today. The latter are derived from the logic of primitive consumption, specific for a peripheral context that exports a cheap labor force. The poetic forms we may generate in this context are very interesting. They are alternative forms of thinking. I find contemplative thinking a form of cultural resistance. I am interested in those formal and conceptual territories that are marginalized today, like poetry, the game of chess or the choral form. I recently made a performance in which I was interested to recite poetry about modern processes of industrialization in a certain way, accompanied by a drum solo, so that syncopated rhythms fracture the way we commonly think.

**CN:** It strikes me that, by revisiting the remains of an industrial era or looking back at this already obsolete technology, you enlighten and even reverse the process of forgetting that slowly erased the modernist memory of socialism, at least in Romanian society after 1989, where the promises of science were replaced with promises of a consumerist future. How do you see this set of relations and structures of remembrance? How does this affect the different economies of knowledge in this space?

**MB:** I am discouraged that our contemporary Romanian society does not produce advanced technological knowledge. The emancipatory processes have only touched the elites, but the profound social strata have not been radically altered. I do not agree with those claiming that communism has perverted us. Communism is only a link in a bigger historical chain. Even

though communism was a society based on lies, they had a madness in which they tried to transform the peasants, with their own temporal structures of thinking, into workers. They obviously failed, because industrialization supposes certain values that did not exist and had to be invented. The premises of capitalism are also dependent upon a certain respect for individualism. Lately, I have questioned historical transformations in the project *From A to B* that speaks about two states of fact: situation A is that of a concerted effort, perhaps unsuccessful, to produce advanced scientific knowledge,; situation B is the situation of today, where this effort is almost nonexistent. In my opinion, a society that does not produce advanced rational knowledge is not an advanced society in the present-day globalized world. The involution, the de-industrialization of Romania in the last twenty years, is the saddest phenomenon I am witnessing. Primitive accumulation of capital, extreme social polarization and an unbalanced economy transform Romania into an underdeveloped country, with no possibilities to evolve because we do not have the premises for that.

**CN:** Your artistic approach also suggests a certain condition of objecthood, close to a historically materialist perspective, according to which historical memory is inscribed in objects, together with a set of contradictions that are relevant for understanding the present. However, you are not interested in the objects as such, but mainly in exploring becoming, transformations, and intermediary spaces. How do you use objects and situations in your practice, which is mostly conceptual?

**MB:** I like to work on multiple levels. I meditate on the place and time I am living in, on its conditions of artistic production, but I try to expand my reflection beyond the concrete facts of yesterday, today and the future. I want to understand what my position in the globalized art world is and how much I colonize myself with ideas that may not fit in the local artistic context. It is often difficult to resist this temptation, given that the local context has an underdeveloped institutional infrastructure. In the last decades, international curators have often privileged narrative, humor, irony and social content and are less interested in abstract conceptual production. In my works, I try to exploit both rationalism and poetry. For instance, *From A to B* bears strong rationalist overtones: there is the state A, the state B (which are historical and social situations), and there is the trajectory between them. Point A is a laboratory for high tension at the Faculty of Electronics in Iasi, where I used to make experiments as a student of engineering in the early eighties. At that time, it possessed competitive East German technology. Point B is a metallurgical workshop, not far from that laboratory, where unemployed workers, using equipment inherited from the sixties, produce ritualistic objects for churches, which, today, are one of the few remaining markets. I also used a series of silver gelatin prints from the Museum of Polytechnics, also in Iasi, in which objects have been wrapped up and remain in a state of conservation, a state of suspension.



Matei Bejenaru, "From A to B," 2013, installation (photograph, 2 slide projections, one 16-mm projection, plywood structures), exhibition view. Cupola Gallery & Tranzit.ro/Iasi. Courtesy of the author.

**CN:** Why are you interested in exploring analog photography and obsolete technologies?

**MB:** I use analog technology because the form of presentation is related to the content of the image -- the remains of the past, because it allows you to have a temporal projection, a temporal lap.

**CN:** Is technological belatedness a way of visualizing and transforming the relations between the former West and the actual East?

**MB:** Yes, it is. At the Kettle's Yard I found photographs by Alfred Stieglitz. They have a collection of modern art, ranging from the 1930s to the 1960s, the period the collection was formed and that corresponds to the peak of analog photography. This is how the idea of designing a kit for producing analog photography and a book came to mind. Of course, they do not need another book written by some artist from Eastern Europe, but this is precisely the point: it is an educational process that attempts to reverse today's processes of mental colonization.

**CN:** It seems to me that processes of historical and social transformation are often translated and reconsidered in your work as processes of artistic transformation, resulting in poetic cartographies of thinking and diagrams of subjectification with an autonomous form.

**MB:** I make art out of life. I try not to make art out of books or ideas, although this may be equally relevant. I try to understand processes of social transformation. My problem is how to translate social situations in artistic forms that may have their own autonomy. I work with

algorithms of thinking, which produce artistic forms. For instance, in a work that I made six years ago, I worked with economic ratios. I produced supersized clothes from a factory that produced sport clothes on loan. The enlargement algorithm resulted from the profit rate of an Italian investor, which became visible by translating it into raw materials. Surplus value and underpaid labor are, thus, rendered concrete.

**CN:** Instead of a conclusion, I want to advance one more interpretive hypothesis. I assume that after 1989 technology played a major role in a new type of colonizing discourse unfolding in former Eastern Europe. It seems to me that one possible way to understand the effects of global processes of neo-capitalist colonization is through the structures of temporality itself. For instance, the normative idea of "catching-up" with technologically more advanced societies in the former West supposes that time has to be accelerated. This actually gives us less time to rethink our own past and present, therefore, we are forced to borrow already constructed conceptual frameworks and histories in order to describe it. Everything had to be synchronized and differences in Europe had to be leveled. If you agree with my argument, then I would claim that your "gift" of a belated technology not only reminds us that the post-communist condition meant abandoning the promises of modernism, but also reverses the dominant logic of modernity, which is based on notions of progress. This is also a reason for me to consider that your work also comprises a bold political statement, covered in a poetic form.

**MB:** It is true that I am also interested in decolonization. My works are multilayered. There are political layers in my works, just as there are social layers, visual poetics and art historical references, but how important these layers become depends on the context in which my works are interpreted.



Cristian Nae is an art critic and theorist, currently working as a Ph.D. lecturer in art theory and aesthetics at "George Enescu" University of Arts in Iasi. He is a former NEC and Getty-NEC fellow of the New Europe College Institute of Advanced Studies in Bucharest (2010-2012). He is also the recipient of a Pattern Lectures research grant financed by Erste Stiftung (2010-2011), and of a postdoctoral research grant financed by CNCSIS. He contributes regularly to several journals and reviews, including IDEA, ARTA, and ARTMargins Online.