

Motivating Peripheries: Matei Bejenaru and art of purpose

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Matei Bejenaru thoroughly embraces the possibility that an artistic project can be valued for its capacity to be beneficial to others, as an acknowledgement of an empathetic continuity between the self and the other. He is not just an artist who gathers experiences, or collects them, as many artists now do by turning experience into yet another form of commodity. His experience provokes direct action of some kind, action that may be seen as “patronizing” in some instances, but much less so if we take into consideration his “peripheral” situation-of-speech. (i.e. the Romanian city of Iasi where he lives and works).

Let us take for example his project for the Tirana Biennial in 2003. He had visited the city before the exhibition in order to establish how he should participate at all in a contemporary art show to be held in a poor and underprivileged country which has inherited the legacy of one of the strictest dictatorships in modern Europe, followed by a civil war. He was especially concerned with evident problems with the infrastructure in the city itself, the issue of electricity (mostly supplied by individual generators) and of water supply. On the other hand, Tirana is known for the project initiated by the mayor of the city, who is a well-known painter, the project of painting dilapidated and grim facades in bright colours with the idea of making the urban environment friendlier and more pleasing to the eyes of its inhabitants and its guests. Painting the facades in Tirana is precisely the kind of action in which it is commonly believed that artists may be beneficial to society, because they have this ability to beatify things, to turn them into something else, into illusion. Bejenaru simply concluded that the problem of this city is not aesthetic, but functional, and he proposed a project in which there was nothing “artistic” as it is in the direct link between artists, paints and surface. He suggested to the local authorities that they examine some of the water sources in the city in order to build a “cesma”, a public water-pipe which can be used by citizens. The one he constructed did not have any aesthetic features; it was just an ordinary pipe: but it worked. It was the most frequented “work” at the show, there was a constant queue in front of it, a queue of people unaware that this was a work of art. “If you are constantly pointing out where or what art is, you may underestimate the spectator’s ability to relate to it,” says one curator in his statement.¹ However, here we do not presuppose the role of the spectator, but of the user, not the fictitious relation or some relational aesthetic, but a communication with substance.

We may argue that art nowadays has lost any sense of purpose and that some artists are now trying to regain it. By the “sense of purpose” we do not imply some functional application of artistic creativity, its application in ideological, commercial or ceremonial manifestations (which is now present maybe more than ever), but some structural social role upon which there exists some basic consensus. For example, after primarily serving religious purposes, art in modern times primarily served aesthetic purposes: art was there to aesthetically elevate the world, to uplift condition and environment of everyday life with aesthetical appeal. The residues of this notion of purpose are still shaping the popular view on art with its ongoing mass fascination with retinal and eye-comforting world of impressionist painting, for instance. Yet, ambitious art of the 20th century has gradually departed from its formal association with purely aesthetical merits but has not been able to thoroughly alter the dominating conception. This has created an expanded gap between the increasing cynicism on the behalf of the artists “misunderstood” in a wider community and the process of spectacularisation of the public space in developed societies which does not need any longer the definition of what art is in order to pursue the need to aestheticise the everyday life. It was the collapse of the Soviet empire that once again put highly on the agenda the question of the ideology of such eastetisation and spectacularisation which in

developed Western societies was crucial for constructing collective identity especially since the 1960s. The quintessential marker of transition from Soviet-type societies to liberal ones has become the illusory fulfillment of consumerist-aesthetical desires of citizens “liberated” from infamous deficiency of economical and political liberties manifested in everyday life of the Soviet bloc in its grayness, uniformity, cultural isolation, struggle for basic needs, etc. Consumption prevailed as a dream-form among the “liberated” Eastern Europeans in as much as it had been fetishised itself (devoid of any social relations, emptied of labour) and ideologically presented by obligatory practices/rituals of shopping. The shopping malls appeared as the sublimation of the promise of the fulfilment of these consumerist-aesthetical desires. This is how Matei Bejenaru (in the introductory text to the *Periferic Biennial* in Iasi in 2001 which he initiated and curated) describes his impressions and considerations regarding the role of the big shopping mall outside of his home town:

Every time I enjoy watching my fellow townsmen (more and more every time despite the relative poverty) choose their products, marveling in front of the never emptied displays, discovering the pleasure of shopping. From the moment you enter, a sensor with photoelectric call orders, especially for you, the automatic opening of the doors, pseudo-gates of heaven, and you feel a strange surrogate of mystical emotion, subconsciously amplified in front of the “altar-stands”. The chocolate bars I used to buy in Belgium a few years ago for my little girl have “migrated” to the local stores, taking away from me the pleasure of giving these delicatessens as present. Could it be possible that all these products, together with the movies, the TV shows, the fashions and models should be the “witnesses” of a global material that upholds its own culture? What kind of identity can retain the traditional, folkloric, insufficiently modernized cultures?²

The social tension in post-Soviet societies, especially in those systematically impoverished by preposterous dictatorships (like Romania), created a bi-polar community of those who are either “integrated” or “apocalyptic” (to refer to the famous post-modernist distinction by Umberto Eco). The first genuinely or cynically embrace neo-liberalism and the “new world order” and attempt to secure their own slice of a promised prosperity, whilst the others stick to firm, spiteful and very often totally atavistic refusal to believe in any sense of progress, but in the same time fully believing in different conspiracy theories through which they perceive global relations. Yet, the two sides are not as sharply distinguished as one may expect, because the both positions fundamentally profess the sense of “inevitability” of current economical and political processes, regardless of this being a vision of heaven or a vision of hell. For the “integrated” the existence of the pre-modern and folkloric Other is a crucial rationale for embracing any manifestation which will get one society out from the realm of this Other; and for those who are “apocalyptic” any manifestation of this “getaway” is yet another proof of the fatal destruction of traditional values and norms. What both position prevent is an active and critical participation in social issues.

The city of Iasi, as many other places in economically held-back regions, gravitates between two equally aloof identities, between the world of mystified past (preserved in the public space of existing churches, monuments, eating habits, paraphernalia sold on flea markets...) and the world of promised future exemplified by the mentioned shopping-mall. Both identities do not enable a subject to emancipate or to take responsibility for the state of the present, yet both are dominating over the present. So the everyday life in the present gets obscured and unanalysed. Let us take for example Bejenaru’s project called *Enlarged clothing* (2004/5) presented at the “Situating Self” exhibition in Belgrade and Helsinki. Contemporary Iasi, regardless of how geographically peripheral it is, participates at least in one way in global economic currents. It is one of those cities known for a whole network of sweat-shops in which cheap labour force manufactures certain commodities which are labelled, packed and distributed through multi-national corporations and eventually sold in many shopping malls of the world including the town in which they were produced. It is the simple calculation which includes peripheral places in this world-wide distribution by exploiting economical differences in order to create profit from the aggravated cultural sameness of global brands. Bejenaru, with his background in mathematics,

made this calculation more complicated. He calculated the difference between the price of a certain commodity (say, a sport sweater) produced in a workshop in Iasi which appears on the global market under a certain label, and the hypothetical price of the same garment if it was produced by the labour force in the EU. Then, he made an order at one of the clothing manufacturers in Iasi to produce selected items enlarged according to the calculated ratio. The result is in many aspects problematic. First of all, the enlarged garments do not have any use-value, but only display-value which associates them both with the position of art (which may be associated both with Kant's and Benjamin's notions) and with the position of branded commodities in shopping-malls which are beyond reach of most consumers yet the objects of their curious aesthetic contemplation.³ This work utilizes the basic tactic of spectacularization, which is enlargement, and affects us with some learned associations with Surrealism or Pop-art. The exhibited garments may appear in the scope of a mere formal repetition and will immediately pose the question of the "purpose" of such a gesture. What is Bejenaru counting on here is this initial "access" into this work seen in the field of vision configured by an art gallery. So the question of purpose is either immediately ruled out by some semi-interested and swift glance, or transferred to some other space, the space of production. It is a simple and sincere strategy: when one goes behind the aesthetic dimension, when one is not gratified simply by cherishing this appeal, the question of "how" something was produced serves as a primary initiation into the "world of art". This is when Bejenaru's project starts mediating: the "surrealist" art object is not fetishized any longer (i.e. not any longer devoid of conditions of its production) and we are transferred in the reality of factory work and the reality of economic relations.

However, Bejenaru's projects are not about being critical in the traditional sense of the word, although the previously mentioned one contributes in critical elaboration of economic exploitation and un-even distribution of wealth. His projects may be even interpreted as showing certain disillusionment with the critical potential of art if this criticism remains in the domain of symbolic representation. This is where the sense of purpose is being questioned. For his project *Mehr Chancen fur unsere Jugend* (2002), Bejenaru tries to grasp the sense of purpose of existing opportunities given to artists – notably artist from societies which lack infrastructure for supporting art production and channeling artistic communication – by some foundations such is the Austrian KulturKontakt who offers artists' residencies and financial support. Instead of using his grant for "making representations", Bejenaru decided to invite five young artists from his home town to spend some time in Vienna, to alter the context of their living and working experience, and claimed that "their visit, their professional experiences, their new inspirations, all our time spent together here in Vienna, represent my art project". This project is about caring and solidarity, but it is also framed by an ironic comment upon the cynicism of proverbially shallow gestures of caring and solidarity in political campaigning and in public sphere in general. The project is presented in the gallery which contains a relation between the reproduced billboard of the political campaign for the right-wing Austrian chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel (under the slogan *Mehr Chancen fur unsere Jugend* and the image of Schüssel showing "the way" to a group of smiling, blooming and very "straight-looking" youngsters); and a tennis-table commonly used in Romania as a simple means of relaxation, as a cheap leisure pursuit. The world demarcated by beautified political promises of better life full of opportunities and actual conditions of disillusioned pursuit of pastime characteristic when a sense of social purpose is out of reach, create a *mise en scène* for this simple attempt to be of some use for the others. It is not about the lulling effects of criticality which is fixated upon the object of criticism (inasmuch as it fundamentally fetishizes this object), but about finding real ways, real chances, real purposes, however modest they may seem.

Or, there is a similar project, *Salut /Ave Bachtalo* (2002), which involves members of Gypsies communities from Brno (Czech Republic) and Iasi brought together by Bejenaru in the Offspace Gallery in Vienna. Art show was here an "institutionalized" reason for giving an opportunity to members of those communities to travel, cross borders and get to know each other without usual restrictions imposed especially on them. Like young artists in the previous project, Gypsies can afford neither to be "integrated" nor "apocalyptic"; rather, they have to set up alternative paths.

Gypsies are treated as unwanted social surplus by both of the “mainstream” social options, ignored or despised, malign tumor on the “healthy bodies” of both future progress and past values. This project is not about raising this issue yet once again, but about methods of connecting, of bringing together communities separated by political borders, about a sense of dignity in sharing identities. And art is here not a critical-representational tool, but the available practical convention through which some concrete example of social intervention can be articulated.

Finally, these and other projects, however socially engaged they are, preserve a very personal concern for the “mysteries” of forging connections and relations spoken from the position of cultural periphery. This personal level may be set on a very small scale, like with one Bejenaru’s project in which he tries to find certain Časlav, the Serbian man whom he met once at a market in Romania in 1980s (still under Ceausescu) and who was, if I am not mistaken, the first foreigner he ever met. Bejenaru lost contact with Časlav (apparently their mail correspondence was undelivered) and recently attempted to trace him just by trying to reconstruct features of his face from memory and by knowing his name and the name of his home town. The investigation turned out to be successful and Časlav’s and Matei’s reunion was recorded for an exhibition in Serbia. Or, this personal level may be articulated through establishing empathetic references to disturbing historical occurrences with which one may personally feel for. This is the case with the four hours performance *Speaking 4* (2001) in front of the Poznanski Factory in Lodz, when Bejenaru read without the pause the names of 4412 Polish officers assassinated by NKVD in Katyn Forest in 1941. For everyone raised in the East Bloc, this was the references omitted from history and an act of simply knowing about it was an act of civil defiance.

Another “speaking project” (in which Bejenaru shows his allegiance with practices of analytical conceptualism) is even more curious. The project is entitled *Sauna Speaking* (2002) and it was the performance in the Finish town of Vaasa where Bejenaru built a make-shift sauna (out of found materials and scraps), placed it in the public space and invited citizens to use it. In the sauna, Bejenaru was reading names of 10.000 inhabitants of the town of Nykarleby, close to Vaasa, where the local community built a contemporary art school. Apart from being the act of individual generosity, which links this project to the Tirana project discussed at the beginning of this text, this work appears as *homage* to people of Nykarleby, the town on the periphery with which Bejenaru establishes empathetic relation. But there is some irony here: whilst in Tirana Bejenaru constructed something that is lacking in the public space (water-pipe), in Vaasa he is offering something similar but different, he is offering his humble attempt to provide an “outsider’s” respect for the habits of the “natives”. This work may be quite open for different interpretations, it is not fixed, yet most broadly it is about acknowledging the condition of periphery and its potentials.

“The essential cultural activity takes place nowadays at the periphery” claims Marius Babias.⁴ And the question is how peripheries connect with each other without the mediation of the “centre”? How do we think artistic self-organization and mobility outside of hierarchical institutional confinements, outside the authority of the decaying centre, outside of the governing mechanism of developed capitalism, and outside the ethnographic impulse with its double edge of curiosity and colonialism, of direct experience and structural thinking, of observation/description and understanding/interpretation? In our culture everything may become an object of ethnographic inquiry: it is not only moving “between cultures”, but a “perpetual displacement” of the object of inquiry in which specificities, localities and situations are less and less distinct. The useful concept here may be the concept of “participant observation”, which we borrow from James Clifford. This concept “encompasses a relay between an empathetic engagement with a particular situation and/or event (experience) and the assessment of its meaning and significance within a broader context (interpretation)”.⁵ It is the stress on the former which has recently been of much more ethnographic and artistic interest, but here instead of

either we may stress the word “relay” in order to express a concern for activating dynamism between a motivated and a situated position. Bejenaru is an artist who is determined to energetically and systematically address issues of activating, connecting and empowering cultural potentials of the periphery, wherever it may be located.

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Notes:

¹ The statement is by Santiago Garcia Navarro, in “New Voices in Curating” (collated by J. Hoffmann and M. Gioni), *Flash Art International*, no. 222, January/February, 2002.

² Matei Bejenaru, “The Periferic Project – a new beginning”, *[Periferic:5]*, Iasi, 2001, p. 123-124.

³ The work of Walter Benjamin implied that “the key to the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodity-on-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to the fore. Everything desirable, from sex to social status, could be transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display that held the crowd enthralled even when personal possession was far beyond their reach”. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 1991, p. 52

⁴ Marius Babias, “Into the centre of periphery”, *[Periferic:5]*, Iasi, 2001, p. 132.

⁵ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988, pp. 34-41. For a discussion see: «Miwon Kwon, Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee», in Alex Coles (ed.), *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, Black Dog Publishing, 2004, pp. 74-91.