

The “Periferic” project – a new beginning

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Looking back at almost five years from the first edition and trying to make an analysis as lucid as possible of the “Periferic” festival, I can declare that its rise and development in Iasi has, at least for those involved in its organization, a “therapeutic” value against provincialism. The “Periferic” project is utopian, as it wants to “reproduce” projects of the metropolis and to legitimate itself within the contemporary art’s global system of validation and hierarchic differentiation. At the same time, it is however realistic, as it galvanizes local artistic life connecting it to the open circuit of ideas and as it strives to achieve an independent artistic substructure meant to assure the communication with a public that needs to be formed and afterwards consistently informed.

Two categories of premises made possible the rise of the “Periferic” in Iasi. The first one is related to the local historic and cultural context, while the second has in view the situation of the Romanian visual arts in the first half of the '90s. I will try to analyze each one separately, with the mention that the historical aspects appeal especially to the foreign readers.

Looking back to the past

With a population of almost 400 000 inhabitants, the city of Iasi is the ancient capital of the Romanian historical province Moldavia, whose Eastern region is constituted by the Moldavian Republic (1), descending from the former Soviet Union. At the half of the XIXth century, the local elites played an essential part in the setting up of the Romanian modern state, achieved through the unification of the principalities Moldavia and Walachia in 1859, as well as in the gaining of Romania’s independence from under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire in 1877. These elites have also been, during the same period, the main actors of the Romanian prevalently literary cultural stage. After these historical moments, according as Bucharest, the new Romanian capital, was acquiring more and more economical, political and cultural importance, the city of Iasi lost the start of the industrial development and implicitly that of modernization, becoming marginal and submitted to an endless “haemorrhage” of values in favour of the capital, which allotted the resources and the opportunities. Taking into consideration these historical facts, corroborated with the heritage of 50 years of communism, the situation of the local culture in the first years after the fall of communism was characterized by academic traditionalism, isolation and addiction to the past.

Looked upon from another angle, the city of Iasi remains nevertheless an important centre of the Romanian orthodoxy, welcoming once a year almost one million pilgrims on the occasion of the celebration of Saint Parascheva; moreover, an unwritten law makes that the Metropolitan Bishop of Moldavia, who lives in Iasi, should be the one appointed to become the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The existence of so many layers of culture and history justifies my saying that this city, Romania’s second university centre, has an important cultural potential, which is, unfortunately, insufficiently used. The future local cultural context depends eventually on the way in which the young generation of intellectuals will know how to administrate the relationship between the local identity and the new ideas of the open world by adopting the contemporary forms of expression (in the case of the

“Periferic”, we should say the use of the “English of visual arts”). Everything is nice and dandy in the world of ideas, but we also need money... I promise to talk about it a little later. A few exhibitions that took place around the middle of the '90s had an impact upon the stage of Romanian contemporary art, and I believe that they have been an important premise for the rise of the “Periferic”.

The “Ex Oriente Lux” exhibition of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art, organized in November 1993 in Bucharest, was the first video event and unfortunately the last of such proportions in Romania. The curator, Calin Dan, has succeeded, together with three foreign consultants (Keiko Sei, Geert Lovink and Egon Bunne), in rallying the interest and the creative resources of the most important Romanian contemporary artists of the moment towards electronic art. At three years distance from the “Romanian revolution broadcasted on the air”, the Romanian artists expressed in their video installations their own mythologies recorded on video tape, the giant power of manipulation of the mass media. A symptomatic fact for the Romanian post-communist cultural context, the exhibition and the symposium organized on that occasion and to which participated important names from the area of media arts criticism (Woody Wasulka, Margaret Morse, Kathy Rae Huffman) took place on the cleared premises of the Dalles Hall, considered until not long ago “the pearl of the Romanian exhibition spaces”. From the darkness of the exhibition space came through to the visitors the video screens with their miraculous power of showing us something different from what we used to watch in the broadcasts of the national television, subdued - now as always - to the political power.

A year later, the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art organized on the premises of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant the exhibition “010101...”. The same curator, Calin Dan, tested the capacity of the participating artists of leaving a “trace” in social environments that are marginal or atypical in relation to the area of visual arts. The entire documentation of the artistic projects has been processed in a multimedia application that could be watched on several computers ingeniously installed as to form a circular temple with wooden columns. Close by inside the exhibition there were also slide projections and some objects that had a symbolical value within the framework of the artistic projects. Calin Dan wrote in the catalogue that what made a difference in the context of that particular exhibition was: “a) the attempt to achieve a new approach of the social environment, b) the abolishment of the physical distance between the artist as an individual and his/her audience, previously conceived as an abstraction, c) the implementation of another language for the communication between the artist and the public, d) the emphasizing of the potential of which the artistic world disposes for giving a better utilization to the electronic world – now facing the danger of being controlled by political and economical structures”. “01010101...” was the first exhibition of multimedia art in Romania and, beside the “Ex Oriente Lux”, had an essential impact upon the new generation of artists, to which I belonged too at that time, encouraging the use of the photograph, of the video camera and of the computer in artistic projects.

On the occasion of her exhibitions organized in Arad, the art critic Judit Angel put in discussion the conceptual relationship between the artistic object (project) and the space (context), as well as the new types of visual and ideational significances presupposed by this “bi-univocal correspondence”. In the catalogue of the exhibition Inter(n) that took place in 1995, and which was mainly made up of artistic interventions in public spaces, Judit Angel spoke about the city as a “visual and textual network” and about its routes as “the routes of the language’s circulation”. The act of the artistic intervention was rather “an interpolation, a gesture of transgression, which cuts across the network’s connections in order to re-knot

them some other way or to suggest to the viewers the alternative of some different combinations". After the vagrant-artists have "conquered" the city, they were invited a year later to rethink their relationship with the art museum on the occasion of the exhibition "The complex of museums". The conceptual approach and the professionalism demonstrated in administering a contemporary art manifestation were an impulse and a model for the exhibitions we have later organized in Iasi.

Performance art was the artistic genre chosen for the first two editions of the "Periferic", mainly because this is a genre that is "consumed in the real time" and because it is still "marginal" and "cheap" for the Romanian artist. Another explanation regarding the "proliferation" of the performance art in the '90s is offered by the artists' need to respond to the rapid and deep political and social changes that took place in post-communist Romania. Ileana Pintilie, organiser of the performance festival Zone, which takes place in Timisoara, wrote in the "Zone 3" catalogue that before 1989 "in the context of Romanian art, extremely affected by a long personal political dictatorship, performance art had meant for a few artists a form of evasion by means of which they have been able to elude the ideological pressure". After the fall of the communism, "performance art became also an alternative to the traditional genres and a means for achieving a direct communication with the public".

The "Periferic" Festival at the end of a cycle

From its first edition, which took place in 1997, the "Periferic" festival constantly "collected" artistic projects that put forward the cultural relationship "margin-centre". At the beginning, even the chosen artistic genres, especially the performance, were peripheral in the local context, the event's only "central" element being the space of the French Cultural Centre in Iasi. Which were the factors that encouraged every year the development of this manifestation? Maybe the organizers' motivation - a group of young visual artists who were to form later the "Vector" association - to go beyond the provincial condition imposed by the local environment, maybe the local cultural potential I mentioned earlier and which led, along the way, to the creation of an intellectual solidarity between the local young artists, writers and philosophers and maybe "the capital of goodwill" coming from the other Romanian artists and critics. In fact, we have all understood that the world of the visual artists is a small one within a culture in which literature and writers occupy a prevalent position. We have also become aware of the fact that Romanian contemporary art will develop outside the stiff system of official art and that the symposiums, the round tables and the workshops will help students create and analyse contemporary art in the absence of its systematic study within the Romanian artistic educational system.

During these five editions, we have invited the most part of the acknowledged Romanian artists, who exhibited beside the students selected following several project contests. As for the contact with foreign artists and curators, although they have been more and more numerous - having compact exhibitions in the last two editions ("Girls Show" - female artists from the Czech Republic, curator Radek Vana; "Interferences" - French artists from the Marne region, curator Matei Bejenaru), it still remains difficult to make and maintain connections with professional institutions from abroad (galleries, museums, art centres, publications, etc.). Of course, not only the important names circulating in the international system of contemporary art participated in the "Periferic", a "plug-in" with these or with the institutions representing them being impossible to achieve at this point; still, it is interesting that foreign artists, some of them emerging artists or others who have accepted the condition of not joining into the system, came with a different experience and vision. As I was writing in

a previous catalogue, “when the Romanian society will achieve a radiography that would be closer to that of a modern country, the international interest (the cultural one included) will grow and the opportunities will increase proportionally”. Another important factor in achieving this “plug-in” is the development of an independent Romanian substructure (galleries, foundations, art centres, etc.), an important process that has been initiated lately.

I consider that the quantitative development of the “Periferic” (more artists, more exhibition spaces...) was an accepted strategy, which brought both advantages and disadvantages. As the launching of a new satellite and its placing on the orbit requires a great amount of energy, the same thing happened to our festival. In order to make it noticeable especially within the local context, we had to exhibit as many different works as possible, their novelty being as important as their artistic value. The greatest success was the revealing of the space of the Turkish Bath in Iasi by organizing within the framework of the festival several site-specific exhibitions (“Steam”, “Dry-Wet” and “Stories”). The monumentality, the architectural project, the pictorial aspect of the interior spaces make out of the Turkish Bath an excellent location for a future Contemporary Art Centre; we have to “fight” for the fulfilment of this dream with the local officials.

Up to this moment, the “Periferic” festival has been financed with money coming from outside the city of Iasi (the CIAC Bucharest, Pro Helvetia, the Ministry of Culture, the Embassy of Holland) and I am perfectly aware of the fact that, on medium term, the only chance to keep it going is to involve local finances. Unfortunately, the Moldavian region and implicitly the city of Iasi is the least economically developed area in Romania, therefore the local resources and opportunities are very limited and the access to them presupposes a very careful “lobby” at the level of the local politicians and business men, for whom contemporary art is too marginal to arouse any interest. Nevertheless, the “Periferic”, by its international dimension, has the advantage of drawing attention to the city of Iasi, inclusively to its tourist values and to the potential of foreign investments.

At this moment, after having succeeded in “placing the satellite on the orbit”, I can conclude that, after having earned its place within the Romanian context by imposing contemporary art in a traditionalist local environment but with a cultural potential, after having formed an interested public and having created a cohesion between the local visual artists and the young writers and philosophers, the development strategy of the “Periferic” must orient itself towards the administration of the local identity with a view to winning international visibility. This was also the reason why the fifth edition of the festival became the first edition of the “Periferic” International Biennial of Contemporary Art.

Local players – global players

For almost a year now, once a month, on Sundays, I have been going shopping together with my family to a great shopping mall situated outside the city of Iasi. Every time I enjoy watching my fellow townsmen (more and more every time, despite the relative poverty) choose their products, marvelling in front of the never emptied displays, discovering the pleasure of shopping. From the moment you enter, a sensor with photoelectric cell 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 presents. 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 world that upholds its own culture? What kind of identity can retain the traditional, folkloric, insufficiently modernized cultures? The philosopher Aurel Codoban wrote in his book "The postmodernism – philosophical openings"(3) that "under the sign of the unlimited communication, of the total translatability, post-modern culture globalises. In relation to the colonisation and the missionary activity of modernity, it was possible to see in this globalisation the recovery form, a form of interpretation and translation, of assimilation and intercultural communication".

The analysis of art's international system, as part of the contemporary substructure of culture, as well as of its main actors, the artists, was the principal theme of the 2001 "Periferic" Biennial Exhibition, whose title was "Local players – global players". The ideological fundamentals and the conditions of the artistic production, aspects of the multicultural representations, the competition for winning international visibility, the mechanisms of allocating the resources, the building of the local cultural identity within the context of the globalisation process were some of the ideas discussed during the symposium organized at the French Cultural Centre in which participated, under Magda Cârneli's moderation, Romanian and foreign artists, critics, philosophers and sociologists. In the workshop that took place at the Goethe Centre in Iasi, Calin Dan introduced to the students a few websites and some ideas regarding electronic art, and at the French Centre Cécile le Talec presented several personal projects that involved sound in video art. Moreover, within the same workshop have been analysed video films with a historical theme created by the Dutch artist Ron Sluik.

Beside the habitual by now performance session taking place at the French Cultural Centre, the Biennial Exhibition also hosted two exhibitions of contemporary art. The first one, entitled "Stories", was organized at the Turkish Bath and collected personal stories told by artists through means of films and video installations, site-specific interventions and performances. The concept also imposed the narrative characteristic of most works, dominated by personal mythologies. In the exhibition "Stories", the video or projection screens and the darkness were the solution used for artistically dominating the powerful and seductive space of the Turkish Bath. The relationship with the architecture was important in all the temporary exhibitions (no longer than three days) organized here. As the critic Germano Celant (4) said, "there is a tendency of emphasizing the ephemeral character of an artistic event by denying the functions of art and architecture. This attitude encourages a culture that thrives on display, in a process without an end or a purpose beyond itself". I believe that most projects that took place inside the Turkish Bath have been visually and ideationally related to this particular space.

The second exhibition, "Intersections", was organized at the Palace of Culture in Iasi and represented a selection of several French artists coming from the Marne region. I noticed in relation to the works of the French artists, although they were made in different environments, a certain constancy of the preoccupations regarding the stylistic refinement. Moreover, during the conversations with them, I realized that we had many things in common in what the relationship between province and capital was concerned.

The 2001 "Periferic", as project that strove to force the place's limits of acceptance, reached the heights of its quantitative development on a horizontal line; the great number of artists – from students to "global players" – and the small budget made the works have limited "dimensions". At the future editions the number of guests will be limited, yet we hope to be able to offer them greater possibilities of achieving their projects (preliminary visits of documentation, a greater budget for the materials, work assistants, etc.). I must also

mention that the team of organizers within the “Vector” association gained enough experience so as on the occasion of the future edition, that of 2003, the organizational machinery should be competitive in a professional context.

Looking to the future

I strongly believe that the rise of some new curators capable of initiating challenges in the field of art exhibitions of the value of those mentioned at the beginning of this article would have great chances of galvanizing and offering a professional dimension to the Romanian contemporary art stage. It would be a possibility of influencing and attracting those artistic discourses that prove coherence and attitude, which are necessary attributes for their validation. It is a symptomatic fact that two of the important curators (Calin Dan and Judit Angel) no longer activate within the Romanian space, and that other two young curators introduced around the middle of the '90s are not active at the present (Erwin Kessler and Horia Avram). Being a curator in the Romanian context is an activity that implies unsuspected difficulties, from obtaining and administrating resources all the way to physically organizing the exhibitions and working with the artists. There are very few who fully realize the effort involved in seeing an event through, therefore the compensations are also limited. I hope that in the future at least some of the responsibilities will be taken over by the new cultural managers, giving thus to the curators more time to “fight” with ideas and to read the important books (in English).

And because nomadism is a rather frequently circulated concept and because the nomad biennials, artists and curators are more and more often encountered, I cannot help wondering whether inviting a foreign curator for the 2003 “Periferic” Biennial Exhibition, capable of bringing a new perception upon our artistic context in comparison with the international one, would not be a solution for achieving the long expected up-grade?

Notes:

1. The Moldavian Republic is a former republic that has declared its independence from Moscow after the failure of the putsch against Gorbachev in August 1991. Part of the Romanian state, it had been annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. At the present, the weight of the Romanian population is of 65%.
2. The exhibition “The Complex of Museums”, curator Judit Angel, was organized within the Art Museum in Arad, having guests from Romania and Austria.
3. “The post-modernism – philosophical openings”, coordinator Aurel Codoban, Dacia publishing house, Cluj-Napoca, 1995, page 97.
4. “Thinking about exhibitions”, Routledge, London & New York, 1996, page 372