

This revolution will not be branded

Interview Simona Nastac* – Matei Bejenaru

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Matei Bejenaru resists easy classification: he works with video, photography and situational art. Alongside his art practice, he is the founder and director of Periferic Biennial in Iasi (Romania) and a lecturer at the Arts University in Iasi.

In 2002, Matei Bejenaru brought together members of Gypsies communities from Brno (Czech Republic) and Iasi at Offspace Gallery in Vienna for the project *Salut/Ave Bachtalo*; for the Tirana Biennial 2003, he installed a public water-pipe ("cesme") to be used freely by the inhabitants; and in 2006 he created a travel guide with information for Romanians seeking to work illegally in the UK, containing photos, maps of routes and terminals, and instructions for traveling in a container or acquiring a National Insurance number. *Travelling Guide* was shown in the context of the exhibition *The Irresistible Force*, curated by Ben Borthwick and Kerryn Greenberg at Level 2 Gallery, Tate Modern in 2007. Two weeks before the exhibition, Bejenaru had gathered 250 members of the Romanian community in the UK in front of Tate Modern. Documented through a short video, the action reflected on the dramatic changes in Romanian society since the overthrow of the Communist state in 1989.

These projects define his art as a strategy of resistance to the dominant political and economic order. In other words, the essence of Bejenaru's practice is criticism: the artist is concerned with the positioning of thought and practice within today's social reality, and with investigating the processes and structures that control it. His revolution is one that will not be branded, since, as Terry Eagleton expresses, the locus of art in late monopoly capitalism is "neither decorative irrelevance nor indispensable ideology, neither structural nor superfluous, but a properly marginal presence, marking the border where that society both encounters and exiles its own disabling absences." (Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, Verso, London 1984)

Simona Nastac: What is your background and what is the force that has driven you to art and to socially-engaged practice?

Matei Bejenaru: In the 1980s, as many young Romanians, I was studying engineering and practiced it for two years in a communist factory. I had an interest in art at that time, mainly in painting; and, probably, my experience as a young engineer in the factory became later the "source" for my socially-engaged practice. As a student, I was protected from the hard life of most Romanians in the last years of communism, but, in 1988, after graduating from the polytechnic university, I was confronted with real life. I learned a lot from the workers I collaborated with. In the 1990s, I resigned from being an engineer and I started to study art in Iasi, Romania.

S.N.: Given this background, how far have political issues played themselves out in your work? Is the periphery a necessary condition for your determination to be aware of global politics?

M.B.: At the beginning no, but, gradually, when my artistic practice became more articulated, my projects started to talk about sensible political issues. Very simply said, I have a special

interest in the way globalisation is "affecting" my country. It is not easy to touch upon themes as work or workers' condition in a post-communist society which is experiencing a period of primitive accumulation of capital.

In my opinion, you can be aware of global politics wherever you live. Living in the periphery is like being near a big stadium and not being able to enter because you don't have tickets. You hear the "rumor" of the crowd inside, you can even buy a cheap ice cream at one of the entrance doors. In the meantime, you can organise your own football match close to the "big stadium" and, if you play well, the spectators of the "big match" could look at you and learn "new dribbling" or tricks...

S.N.: The project *Impreuna/Together* you did in early September at Tate Modern stemmed from the situation of the Romanian diaspora in the UK since Romania joined the EU. Tell me more about this. Do you think your project has changed something? What is, in your opinion, the effectivity of art activism today?

M.B.: I don't consider myself an activist. I am an artist who creates poetic situations based on social and political issues. *Impreuna/Together* is the continuation of the *Travelling Guide* project from 2005, where I drew attention upon the situation of Romanian illegal workers in the UK and the incredible risks they took to cross frontiers prior to Romania joining the EU. After 2007, they no longer needed a visa to come to the UK. *Impreuna/Together* investigates the way the Romanian community in the UK sees itself today. I was very surprised to see how many people participated in my project at Tate Modern. Most of them came because they wanted to express their identity in a country where they have a negative image. I think a project like this cannot really change anything, the golden times of the historical vanguards are gone for almost a century, but it can create awareness about a sensible topic. And it was good to see how media reacted.

S.N.: How important is the question of identity politics in your work? Projects such as *Impreuna/Together* and *Salut/Ave Bachtalo* you did in Brno in 2002 have been both concerned with geography of ethnic identity, exoticism and diversity. Is their inherent criticism addressing the intolerant homogeneity of mainstream culture?

M.B.: *Salut/Ave Bachtalo* was a project dealing with the Roma population and it was done in Brno, Czech Republic, Iasi, Romania and Vienna. I organised a meeting at Offspace Gallery in Vienna, between a gipsy man from Brno and another from Romania. At that time, Austria was run by an extremely conservative coalition including the xenophobic party of Jörg Heider. The project was about the marginalisation and stigmatisation of gipsy people.

S.N.: What are your forthcoming projects and how do you intend to develop your practice? Will you maintain a relation of presentation between work and audience as in *Impreuna/Together*, or you will seek to transgress it as in the project in Tirana?

M.B.: I will continue to investigate issues related to traumatised communities, such as identity, work and justice. For example, music is a bond which can develop sociability and I think the choir is a very powerful and emotional form which unites people. Also, I want to go beyond the aesthetic dimension and to include a participatory one. The water post I installed in Tirana in 2003 enhanced the functionality of the project by offering free water to the inhabitants during the time of the Biennial.

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