

## **Work, memory and a better future**

An interview with Matei Bejenaru by Raluca Voinea\*

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**Matei Bejenaru** is a visual artist who lives and works in Iasi. He is a founding member of the Vector Association in Iasi and manager of the Periferic Contemporary Art Biennial. In his projects from recent years, by using photography, video and performances, he analyzes how the ways of economical production, technological knowledge, the mentalities and the peoples' ways of life have changed in the former communist countries during the last two decades. The Romanian workers' immigration to the West has been analyzed in the artistic projects *Travel Guide* and *Maersk Dubai*, which have been presented in various international exhibitions such as the Tate Modern in London, 2007, or the Taipei Biennial, 2008.

**Raluca Voinea** - *You were telling me that your project Songs for a Better Future is dated a few years back, and it could only be realized this autumn. When and how was this project born and what has given your idea to work with a choir, with musical composition and basically to collaborate with professionals from a field you don't know so well?*

**Matei Bejenaru** - The idea of a choir performance appeared three years ago, when I was invited to participate at a performance festival called *Blurr*, in Tel Aviv, organized by curator Sergio Edelstein. As I was interested in performative practices, I discovered what an emotional power the choir music has and, in accordance also with my interest to produce artistic forms based on experiment and on the contradiction between form and content, I started to think to all sorts of choir performances which, besides the performative setting (venue, choreography, etc.) could include musical forms as carriers of an ideological message. My hosts in Tel Aviv did not have the financial resources to produce this project, so it remained in stand-by. It was only this year that the British curator Cylena Simonds, who liked the project, proposed me to present it at The Drawing Room and at Tate Modern in London. The project started to be much clearer after I started to work with the British musician Will Duta, who, based on my ideas and the discussions we had, will compose a few experimental choir pieces that we want to present in the above-mentioned venues. *Songs for a Better Future* is a modernist project that brings together experimental musical forms with an utopian message on the future. Will Duta takes starting points in the proletcultiste music of the 50s, glorifying the proletarian worker and, in my opinion, fetishizing him, and in the electronic music of the Kraftwerk group, fetishizing in its turn the technological progress and the corresponding lifestyles in the Western world.

**RV** - *Many of your projects have a performative character, but the effective moment when they take place is preceded by months, even years of preparation and research. Do you see your activity as a process, in which your personal involvement, the energy invested and the relationships you establish alongside this process are just as important as the final moment, or everything is only a preliminary work, which visibility in the final result is not important?*

**MB** - It is true that for many of my projects I prepare for longer time, as, no matter the way they are finalized and presented to the public, they are artistic processes for me, in which I create, document or comment on life situations. Some of them, due to unfavourable contexts, do not finalize, they only remain as projects in my mind. When as an artist you try to interact with the real world it gets very difficult, you are not protected by the artistic system. The majority of my projects have different components, some are visible, others are not, and the final work, even if it does not bring to surface all these aspects, I see it altogether as a process that encompasses all of them. For example, a couple of years ago, when I had a residency in Tourcoing France and I wanted to make a documentary video about an under-privileged neighbourhood which was inhabited mostly by Algerians, the most touching moments were not the ones depicted in the video, but my introductory meeting with a group of young fundamentalist Muslims, in a fitness club, who, of course did not allow me to film or record them. They were massive guys, dressed with those long shirts; they were wearing Puma or Nike sneakers and were doing all these apparatus exercises.

Their immense frustration and their refuse to integrate in the French society were released through the way in which they were “treating” their bodies. Some told me that when they were going to the supermarché with their family, French teenagers used to call them names like “Papa Noell!...” The discussion I had with them was the essence of the project, but this only took place for me, and your readers find out about it now. Nevertheless, it certainly influenced me in the way I did the video documentary in the end.

Therefore, undoubtedly the energy consumed in a project becomes part of it. I try to be honest and fair to the people I work with, and, as much as possible, not to be a hypocritical artist, who only takes the raw material from reality and takes refuge in the art world, living the sweet life of the “caviar left”. Victor Burgin once said in a conference that he does not believe in social art as long as the subjects of these artistic projects do not take any advantage from them. I often think about this perspective and I get to ask myself questions on the purpose of the art I produce.

**RV** - *Lately, you've grown more and more interested in the lives of immigrants (legal or not), of all kind of workers, of researchers in academic institutes. How do you relate to these people, how do you approach them and when do you make the decision that their stories should be transferred to an artistic language? Do you believe there are adequate artistic languages to narrate these stories, which are often anonymous and collective?*

**MB** - I myself come from an industrial milieu, I worked for a few years as an engineer during the communist times, an experience that has surely marked me. In the past 20 years I've seen our world changing fundamentally, both in good and in bad ways. Far from me to be a nostalgic for Ceausescu, still I think that in that time we did have an industrial development, which was wiped out in the 90s. Obviously, it was not a natural development in a communist dictatorship where everything was centralized, but we have accumulated a technological knowledge that, even if it was inferior to the Western one, could have been a solid basis for the development after 1989. In the beginning of the 90s I deluded myself thinking the industrial infrastructure in Romania would modernize through technological transfer from the West. This thing didn't happen due to the bad governance of the country and surely due to many external factors and circumstances. A country that does not produce technology is a second-hand country. I wonder what need could we have for engineers and researchers today, in the age of shopping malls and endless building of Orthodox churches? How interested are we in the fact that the evolutionary theory is contested in biology schoolbooks or that Physics, Chemistry and Biology are to be brought together as one single subject called Science, while Religion becomes a compulsory discipline?!

While I'm writing this text I look on my table and I see there is nothing manufactured in my country, from the screw and the bolt of the lamp to the white paper.

As for immigrants, many of the people I worked with in the factory left the country and maybe that's why I've started to have a special sensitivity to this subject, which is nothing else but our way of integrating ourselves in the globalized world: to produce anything in a Lohn-regime (from textiles to culture), to export cheap labour force and smart kids.

When I talk about these subjects, I use mostly experimental documentary means and objective photo-reportage, which I assimilate to a conceptual artistic practice.

**RV** - *Who inspires you in your photographic work? Can we speak today about a revival of the social photo-realism or this has never actually disappeared?*

**MB** - I don't think we can talk about a comeback of the photo-realism in Lewis Hines' or Walker Evans' way, but I can say a few things about my interest for the photographic practice. One first reason for this interest is that I also teach photography, so I have to know a few things. Another reason is the desire to document the process of labour, not only the lunch breaks, as many photographic projects have already done. I lead a simple and austere life in which I work most of the time. That's why I follow the subjects of labour, knowledge and human relationships in projects such as the recent one called *M3: Work [Muncă], Memory, Movement*. For me there must be a connection between the form used for documenting and the documented subject. When I document life situations connected to the working process, I only use analogue photography, trying to control all the stages of production. I want to mention that in the images I

produce I am not looking either for aesthetic nor journalistic impressiveness, but I try to objectively document a situation, in the same time reflecting on the medium of photography and what one can say with it.

I've gradually come to work with large-size cameras, 4 x5 and 8x10 inches, and I've started an odyssey of collecting all this dying technology. I've gone to countless places in Europe to buy a photo enlarger, a developer tank, a camera or some other darkroom equipment. This is another project, of gathering a top technology and bringing it to a country without technology...

**RV** - *What do you think is the responsibility of the artist in society?*

**MB** - This depends on the official function of art in that precise society. If this is mostly to legitimate the order of things, then the artist who wants acknowledgement and prestige must line up to those who march in the rhythm of this world. Thus his/her role is one of decorator and loudspeaker.

If art can mean more than that, and this only happens in a progressive society, then the artist is responsible with interpreting the truths, mediating conflicts and making a critique of the official versions of things. I don't believe an artist can change the world, but he/she can sensitize a lot of people against the rigid way of thinking and general alienation.

\*Raluca Voinea is an art critic and curator from Bucharest.