

Success in the Expanded Field.

Reflections on “Girls with Ideas [Boys and Painting]” Project

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Abstract: This article presents and reflects upon an art project that took place in 2016 at Lateral ArtSpace and the Common Space at Fabrica de Pensule (Paintbrush Factory) in Cluj-Napoca, and ODD, Bucharest, Romania, followed by the issue of a publication, organised by English artist Giles Eldridge and Romanian artist Delia Popa, and the Bucharest based Arts Education organisation ArtCrowd .

The description of the project is followed by an overview of notions of artistic success in different cities, and the perceived differing dynamics of the art worlds of Cluj, Bucharest and London, ending with the authors` personal conclusions on the possible discussions engendered by the project.

Keywords: collaboration, art market, gender, cities, fine art approach.

Methodology - A Fine Art Approach

Throughout the project we used the methodology of fine art. By this we mean an authentic space of speculation, where failure, dead ends, non-conclusion, questioning, are both permitted and essential. We propose this system as a way to expound a variety of inter-dependant topics rather than a singular polemic.

This method can lead to a number of conclusions that are also co-dependant and thus potentially describing the scenario with appropriateness. In Fine Art proper this is the process and progress of studio activity through to the space of exhibition. A number of subjects can be brought into play without a singular trajectory. A curator would then choose individual works or commission new works for a public display.

“As opposed to a journalist, scientist, intellectual or activist, society authorises the artist (and maybe this is what it expects of her) to pose axioms without having



to prove them.” (Francis Alys, A Story of Deception, Wiels 2010, our translation from French)

“Fete cu idei [băieți și picturi]” exhibition, roundtables and publication

The starting point for this project considered the difference between Bucharest and Cluj in terms of art practice not in a qualitative sense but from the simplified understanding that in Cluj there is an art centre (Fabrica de Pensule/The Paintbrush Factory) and a recent reputation for painting and in Bucharest there is no singular defining characteristic. In Cluj there are internationally known names of young artists whilst in Bucharest it is the older generation that is better known. What, if any, is the significance, for artists, of these differing identities? What is the status of art practice in each city and how does gender play out in each in terms of its identity? What follows from the project publication published in Bucharest in November 2016.

The Project

The title of the project, Fete cu idei[Băieți și picturi]/Girls with Ideas [Boys and Painting] references two previous museum shows: *Bad Girls* at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, SoHo, New York City, 1994 and *Good Girls*, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, 2013.

Originating from an initial idea by the English born visual artist Giles Eldridge, now living in Bucharest, and developed through an on-going conversation with the Romanian visual artist, Delia Popa, from Bucharest, this project was intended to present some vital aspects of contemporary art practice as they are being played out in two of Romania’s leading contemporary art scenes, Cluj and Bucharest.

It was an exercise in considering the persona and identity of individual artists alongside that of the two cities. It can be considered as an artistic dialogue rather than having a final curatorial outcome.

Broadly speaking, the differences could be characterised as follows: In Cluj there appears to have been a well lauded recent history of predominantly male painters, based at Fabrica de Pensule acquiring international acclaim and commercial success, whereas Bucharest lacks any such label, being made up of multiple and disparate art spaces and many artists.

However, we have observed that in Bucharest there is a distinctive feature of women art practitioners, which includes artists, curators, gallerists, cultural managers and art writers.

Alongside this recognition the project also presents itself as an opportunity to create awareness about the diversity of art in Cluj.

The project has taken the form of an exhibition in Cluj of 5 female artists from Bucharest followed by a round table discussion in the same city, which in turn was followed by a round table conversation in Bucharest and arriving at this publication. It brings to the surface pertinent subjects around ideas about art in this part of southern Europe today.

The Exhibition

In June 2016 an exhibition of 5 visual artists living in Bucharest was held at Lateral ArtSpace, The Paintbrush Factory, Cluj.

The intention of the exhibition in Cluj was to reflect the multiplicity of approaches that seems intrinsic to the capital city: typically not studio based and involved in a wide range of art practices that are trans-disciplinary and fluid such as painting, drawing, photography, performance, dance and collaborations, all largely taking place outside of a commercial framework. The roles these artists take include those of curators, cultural managers and educators. All participating artists have either made new works or transformed an already existing work for this exhibition.

The Publication

The publication was a hybrid: part exhibition catalogue, part conversation, part art work, intended to stimulate ongoing discourse. (...) The texts published within it were excerpts from the two round table discussions. They were edited to give an indication of the nature of live debate and illustrate the breadth of topics raised. Whilst it did not attempt to present a singular argument or thesis it did bring to the surface key issues, in an aphoristic style as in (Emil) Cioran and (Roland) Barthes - dialogical fragments of information.

Art in different cities

The interesting thing that happened after the exhibition *Fete cu idei [băieți și picturi]/Girls with ideas, boys and painting* of Bucharest artists in Cluj and the following round table discussions was that a number of other topics came to the surface, such that it became clear to me that a single conclusion or polemic was not desirable but that I wanted to continue the threads of thoughts that had arisen from conversations at various levels.

The very term conversation was what interested me in this project in the first place. As bell hooks beautifully enounced: *“Conversation is always about giving. Genuine conversation is about the sharing of power and knowledge; it is fundamentally a cooperative enterprise”* and *“conversation as a mode of interaction calls us to open our mind.”* (hooks bell, Teaching Critical Thinking, 2010, pg. 45)

The project was never going to be about a political solution to a supposed problem yet the material that has been spoken about contains some politics for sure. The issue of gender being the most prominent political aspect but one can consider the notion of success in similar terms too.

I have been accused of casting a colonial eye over the scenario but it stands as a matter of fact that the international commercial success of artists in Cluj largely concerns male painters. Is this simply tired old patriarchal history being played out again or does it say something about the nature of the city of Cluj? The same question goes for the existence of Fabrica de Pensule, is this related to what Cluj is, historically and does the lack of such a place in Bucharest indicate a different scenario there?

Then there is the question regarding the merits of these differing structures in each city; what does it mean for an artist to be in a smaller centripetal structure as opposed to a larger more disparate and fragmented city? Ultimately it would seem obvious that there are pros and cons to each situation but that somehow it appears important to me to acknowledge that the nature of each place plays a big part in determining what is possible within each and that talking about this feature is vital to an understanding of one's work and potential as an artist.

I love Bucharest. As Bucharest artist Vlad Nanca stated: *“Bucharest (is) the city we all love to hate”*. Bucharest is the place of culture, traffic, cats, dogs, Mega Image, rude waiters, activism, feminism, men who dont shake hands with women, cold, heat, extreme heat, air conditioning, friendship, betrayal, boredom.

I studied at the National University of Arts Bucharest. There I learned a bit about art, philosophy and anthropology, how to draw and paint, but I also learned that almost all professors had a beard, no female painter has taught in the Painting Department, and that the Artists Union U.A.P. was run by the same people (men) as the school.

Beyond the lack of feeling that I belonged to this group, I also felt a sense of stagnation, in the department and in the art scene of Bucharest. As I was leaving for London, to find movement and more knowledge, the art scene was starting to move here as well. (Popa Delia, Solidarity

Making it Happen, Artleaks Gazette-August 2015, pg. 81) (c.f. Vlad Nancă description at the end)

So what if I compare these two examples with another city? The obvious reference point here is London, since it is where I lived for 18 years. Art in the British capital could be seen or presented in a multitude of ways; seemingly simultaneously connected yet disparate and discreet in such a way as to posit several possible histories: London as a commercial hub and art market headquarters, scores of very sharp-end galleries e.g. Hauser and Wirth, Gagosian and White Cube etc. and a multi-layered array of other *for profit* outfits and non-commercial artist-run spaces. In terms of artists there are plenty of home-grown participants but the feel in London is international due to the extensive gallery scene and events such as the Frieze art fair as well as to the large number resident foreign practitioners.

London is also marked by the huge number of artists; in the thousands by even the most conservative estimates. "As argued by the economist Hans Abbing (2002) and the art critic Robert Hughes (1990), we are dealing with an inflation of the number of artists educated in universities and specialized institutions. Hughes says that the consequences of this inflation are unemployment at the base of the artistic pyramid and an exaggerated system of stars at the peak of the pyramid, the system promoting stars while leaving 90% of the artists on the verge of subsistence. The paradox of art producers' poverty includes the powerful institutional growth (Hughes, 1990)." (in Popa Delia, "Arts Management in Contemporary Art in Romania", PhD, unpublished thesis, 2014, pg. 51)

Another art identity for London is art education, which is also now sold as an international commodity; annual fees for EU students are currently around €11,000 and €23,000 for other international students [current Goldsmiths' fees BA Fine Art] In addition to these aspects is the rise of the freelance and institutional curator as auteur. Courses in curating being taught at the same institutions as Fine Art leading to an *old school tie* network after graduation. In fact the art colleges form networks of artists to such an extent that not going to these schools, especially at postgraduate level, means that it is very difficult to progress within the London art scene.

All this being in dramatic contrast to what happens in either Cluj or Bucharest in terms of a commercialised art education system, art market or the sheer numbers of artists, in spite of the four art centres of Romania, Cluj, Bucharest, Timișoara and Iași, that are based on their art universities, and where professors at the Cluj art school were vital to the establishment of Adrian Ghenie, Mircea Cantor, Ciprian Mureșan etc. We can actually assume that the "Cluj school", as described

by the art press in the past decade, would not have happened without their support of "talented" boys; that, on the other hand, did not happen to that degree in Bucharest.

The Art Market/ Notions of Success

So in these ways the identity of art in London should be understood as multi-faceted rather than just within the commercial field. Each aspect is in fact required and contributes to the financial sphere.

All aspects are connected from the complex of art spaces to the status of Art education institutions and influential art museums of differing sizes; Tate, Serpentine Gallery, Whitechapel Gallery, and Camden Arts Centre etc. These museum spaces work in direct curatorial proximity to the commercial art space. The artist elevated by the museum space is further promoted and produced within the commercial sphere, in turn only artists with this financial stamp of approval will be shown in other contemporary art museums. This blatant scenario is a sort of taboo, maybe because it is so obvious. The point here is that it has nothing to do with the attitude and intellect of art practice.

"The relationship between art and money is untouchable or sacrosanct, the first being seen either as a luxury good, or as a source of experience, as an informational good, and as a transmitter of ideas. Art is also seen as a product that creates a "positive" addiction. The problem Iain Robertson observes is that there is a certain monopoly that decides the value of these goods and limits the access to information, which in turn creates an elite of this mechanism, leading eventually to a very high value of some art products. The author then describes the structure of the art market as not being global, but international, and operating in certain centres, and counting on the wealth created by bankers"¹.

There are many agencies that then determine market success and society's notion of value. The public see the exhibitions and are told what to look at whereas the artist knows what goes on behind the scenes as well. We need to talk about this more because it sits in opposition to ideas and discourse proper, on the one hand there is commercial "theatre" on the other is authentic intellectual art activity. It is not a case of choosing one over the other but of being clear for ourselves what the relationship means for the individual artist. There is not simply one notion of success. It is a situation of relationships not simply "The Art World" as one entity.

Three possible examples in that sense could be the three B-s, the three older women artists

¹ Delia Popa, "Arts Management in Contemporary Art in Romania", PhD, unpublished thesis, 2014, pg. 55

that became *Artists* after being "discovered" by important art institution well into their involvement in their respective art scenes, Louise Bourgeois, Geta Brătescu, and Phyllida Barlow. The Guardian recently called Phyllida Barlow, the artist who represents Britain at The Venice Biennale 2017: "An Artistic Outsider who has finally come inside", while she had been working as an artist and teaching at the Slade School of Art in London since the 60's.

In London an art pyramid is formed that exists in any market based art centre, with the most commercially successful galleries and artists at the top and various bands of other artists below with a large slab at the base keeping the whole thing upright or maybe a better analogy would be that of a ship with literally thousands of artists required to maintain the ballast.

The de facto function of these artists is to maintain an atmosphere and environment; to populate areas of London to keep the creative feel of the place and to work in galleries, museums and art schools to appropriately maintain the institutional integrity of each. In this sense it could be argued that it is artists themselves that present the image of London as a world capital of art. From the point of view of the individual artist this is both appealing and difficult; to gain membership of this club requires involvement at an academic and social level. The usual privilege of the white middle class man is often usurped by the exoticism of the newcomer, such as the women artists I have mentioned above. Anything that can be considered novel is also seen as saleable due to rarity or difference and the idea of being the first to attend a point in history, such as seeing Luc Tuymans's first show or being an early purchaser of a Ghenie.

If one considers success to be outside of a commercial or international framework is one taking a political stand against such realms?

A feminist discourse could describe this comparative situation of cities in terms of sexuality or desire. London, could be seen as gendered male, due to the image it presents, it could be considered centralised with the notion of a singular combination of commercial and cultural success and international acclaim based on the large numbers of artists, high prices paid and numbers of visitors to art galleries most notably the Tate. Cluj could be seen as admiring that model and achieving select elements of it while Bucharest would be seen as outside that schema but in a potentially multivalent and productive way, not fettered by a strong history or concerned about current competition. Thus it could be said that London is fixed, Cluj is desiring and Bucharest is fluid and open but that these perceptions could change with a different attitude to the notion of success. For the individual artist there are positive and negative aspects to each scenario. The key

issue, it seems to me, centres on one's notion of success. What criteria is used to define this?

Is it instrumental to the pyramidal system that all artists hope to become a well-paid, admired superstar, both financially and in terms of prestige? Again, this can change and expand if we think in broader terms about the idea of success.

Maybe it is the possibility to ignore the notion of success entirely that would be the most desirable position? One participant at the Bucharest roundtable, artist and curator Simona Vilău expressed an opinion in that direction:

*"The artist shouldn't go in the studio and think "I want to make a successful piece of art". This is so stupid! (...) to have to make, to create, to produce a successful piece of art - this is so counter-productive, it creates depression, anxiety, and failure in the end. It's too complicated, but sometimes, even in school, students are trained to be successful, which is not the point, in my opinion, we have to work on evolving the level of the system"*².

Conclusions

Art is a *sensational* thing, experiencing and speaking with all the senses and in differing languages. It is a sad moment when this is reduced to the market. This is where both Cluj and Bucharest can operate; being not entirely divorced from the market they both retain enough of a distance so as to form differing atmospheres.**

What if there was a deferring distance between the reception of the work of art and the art market? What if the market was just the "consume by", and "it may contain traces of nuts" correspondent of the food market?

My notion of success would be a place where an artist can be an artist without the pressure of money or status. In other words, London then operates at a commercial level not an art level; it is more concerned with the maintenance and culture of a structure rather than the methodology of art that would question and toy with these cultural values. I think success starts in the studio, and further it is a case of understanding this array of dynamics and positioning oneself within it at a social level. I see success as being located in many different spaces and the problem arises if the market is seen as **the** place of success, as opposed to a place of success. Success in the expanded field - one of multiplicity, not of singularity.

² Delia Popa and Giles Eldridge, *Fete cu Idei [Băieți cu Picturi]* (Bucharest: ArtCrowd Association, 2016, p. 41).

Notes

*Vlad Nancă is a Bucharest based artist, instrumental in establishing a young contemporary art scene there in early 2000, www.vladnanca.com

**Art Safari Art Fair, Artmark & a few other auction houses starting to emerge in Bucharest and Artists' Union (UAP) strongly influence artists' lives in terms of studios, exhibition spaces, and more recently the re-emergence of Arta Magazine.

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