

Romania: ARTISTS in/on/for CONTEXT

“Since context was lacking we have invented one: we have created the vehicle in order to advance faster...”

Published in Policies for Culture Online Journal, winter issue 2003

The text below is the result of a series of interviews with four Romanian young artists coming from four different areas (cinema, dance, theatre and visual arts) and active in what could be called the independent sector. They are not necessarily representative for the Romanian artistic sector; we have interviewed them precisely due to their presence in the public arena and their involvement in managerial or policy activities. The text below presents (attempting to slightly compare and interlink) the opinions expressed by Matei Bejenaru (visual artist; initiator and manager of the Periferic Biennale (former Festival) in Iași; manager of the Vector Association), Teodora Herghelegiu (theatre director, initiator of the independent company Teatrul Inexistent), Cristian Mungiu (film director) and Manuel Pelmuș (dancer and choreographer).

by Oana Radu & Ștefania Ferchedău, ECUMEST, Bucharest

Background: Reflecting on the context

What is the current situation in your field? How do you perceive the public policies addressing it and the policy making process? Which should be, in your opinion, the role of the different public authorities and bodies? Which is your role? These were some of the questions asked and all four interviewees had a strong and well-articulated opinion about it, pointing out in all cases to the lack of long term strategy of the decisions makers (and particularly the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs) and to a lack of transparency of decision making and of communication with the artistic sector. Most of them had very concrete proposals for the improvement of the situation:

There is no film industry in Romania and it can't be due to the economical conditions. The filmmakers should make films and the cultural state organisms should encourage those having a concrete result. Since we can't be profitable in Romania with filmmaking, the reasonable strategy for the moment should be one to encourage films as art products. If well done, such films could at the same time please some of the Romanian public and the foreign audience and festivals. We, as a group of filmmakers that got in contact with cinema industries all over Europe, have a strategy regarding what should be done to put the things on the right track. But unless the will to put these ideas into practice exists, there is little to do.

In this context, the National Centre for Cinematography needs to have clear short term and long term strategies both regarding the kind of films to be financed and the measures to be taken to enhance the number of screens, viewers, and the quality of the film presentations. The parliamentary committees for culture should promote the set of laws needed to encourage the private investment in filmmaking. Local authorities should at least encourage the private initiatives to create local cultural events.

There is a need to have a plan in everything, including the cultural domains and I would sleep better if I knew that somebody has a drawing on a wall someplace knowing exactly how much to invest and with what results in each and every cultural manifestation. But I am afraid there is no general strategy or at least the results are not yet clear. I don't mean that the State should control this, even encouraging NGO's to take responsibility of this field would be the sign of a coherent policy.

The problem is that the structures to take decisions in cultural domains are too much connected to politics. The people in charge to implement the cultural policy – as much as it is – are not cultural managers but people in position during the reign of a specific party

having to respect more the policy of their group of influence than a coherent long term cultural policy. The decision making process is not transparent and nobody feels guilty for this.

Cristian Mungiu

"In Romania, the transparency of decision-making is of a total opacity", argued Teodora Herghelegiu as well, which thus explains her more "warrior-like" attitude towards central authorities:

"One can generally point to a considerable confusion within the ministry's policy, as well as to a deconstruction of values systems, which is very cruel and affects the artists. The lack of reaction to the theatre problems, of both public institutions and civil society, is equally serious. I'm not referring to the media coverage of our performances, as in this respect the press reaction has always been surprisingly rich and constant. Unfortunately, these reactions remain without an impact on those holding the decision power.

As a simple theatre director, my position with regard to the ministry's policy is a warlike one – on professional level certainly. The war carried as an independent director involves two things. On the one hand, I'm proving something through what I produce as an artist, and in this sense, the freedom of expression and the quality of the product go together, while at the same time I'm enjoying the private initiatives which come to my support: for instance, the possibility to perform in unconventional venues, which already have a public of their own. On the other hand, in projects involving the system, I'm trying to counteract and to diminish the administrative malfunctions. This situation tends to consume the energy of the artists and to create false priorities. All I can say is that I hope I've succeeded in waking up the administrative monster, at least for a few seconds... In our country inertia and indolence are still immense...

With regard to the ministry, one must overcome stupidity and indifference; they are ignoring and sabotaging us by adopting an attitude of plain disdain. Any kind of collaboration attempt is refused and/or treated with contempt. This is what generates our protests, but even then they are answered with the same attitude.

Teodora Herghelegiu

The same indifference towards the independent sector and the lack of a coherent long term cultural policy of the authorities were pointed out by Manuel Pelmuş as well as the main and recurrent problems, with considerable long term effects for the Romanian artistic scene, which on the contrary needs first and foremost continuity and consistence.

Ideally, I would see the relation with the ministry (of culture) as a partnership; there should be a long term cultural policy for the dance sector or for the contemporary arts in general, which should recognize and take into consideration what's is happening (because, at this point, we are at a certain level, we have surpassed several stages), which should understand and answer to the specific needs we have. Goodwill is of course needed for that.

The above is however not done because of indolence and lack of interest. Only if you scream, bawl out, howl, you can get something; and this is very frustrating. Why is that other people, as Theorem¹ members, can recognize and promote talents and projects from Romania? The Balkan Dance Platform² was one of the smallest and the least supported initiatives, but it has very much attracted attention at international level. Nobody within the

¹ THEOREM Association brings together about twenty European theatres and festivals with the common goal of promoting the work of young Eastern European artists. Additional info at www.asso-theorem.com.

² Biannual itinerant platform of the Balkan contemporary dance, initiated by Project DCM Foundation (Bucharest) and Red House Center for Culture and Debate (Sofia), which has already had two editions – Sofia 2001; Bucharest 2003.

ministry is interested in that there is an internationally recognized movement, in which money were invested. Certainly, one has to mention this first proposal of the ministry on the designation of a dance counsellor. A counsellor might be a step further in having a dialogue with somebody.

Which are the needs you have referred to at the beginning?

The first step in this respect – made by this position recently created of a dance counsellor for the minister – should be followed by several other things: a special venue for dance and a coherent law project for the independent sector. This law should first of all provide for a dedicated budget for companies and independent artists, which everywhere in Europe are benefiting of public support. And there is not contradiction in that – one doesn't lose its independent status if receiving public money. Secondly, there should also be a committee or board, with clear criteria in granting subventions, where one can submit dance projects. Last but not least, this system must be a long term one; not with personal and inconstant solutions.

Some people, seeing the projects we made and the attention enjoyed by the Romanian independent dance at international level starting with 2001, consider that “these people found their way out; they manage very well just as it is”. However, all these achievements were due to the fact that there are people who, in spite of the difficulties, have not given in and obstinately wanted to be artists. Those who believe we have managed no matter how are wrong. I believe that the lack of a coherent and consistent cultural policy has long term effects – there is a material and informational precariousness strongly reflected in what happens at artistic level; there is no continuity and because of that a huge potential is lost: many talented artists can't progress the way they should and could, many are leaving the country, many are giving up because they can't go on. And then there are other responsibilities as well – that this creation could also be presented to a Romanian audience. Contemporary arts, which have an impact and can lead to change, should be presented, and this is not happening. Talking about a long term development, I also hope we could finally advance to more complex discussions, on what we are doing and proposing at artistic level, and not refer again and again to the same problems we are faced with.

Manuel Pelmuş

Developing a context: “Since context was lacking we have invented one: we have created the vehicle in order to advance faster...”

Having the above as a background – which is the case for almost all artistic fields and, with variations, for most of the countries in the region –, the main challenge for the artists was to create a context in which to develop their artistic projects, "the vehicle" for advancing, as Matei Bejenaru put it. They thus had to go beyond their artistic activities and involve into managerial or policy-related ones, in view of creating the framework and the instruments for the expression of their creativity. What "context" means and how artists have contributed to its development is well described by Matei Bejenaru, whose main drive was the development of a local scene, which had eventually also strong national and international outcomes and relevance.

At the beginning I've done only artistic activities, but I have realized that an artist needs a context. The lack of a context, of a local scene, made me associate by mid '90s with other artists in order to organize together an exhibition. And we have learned and progressed step by step.

What does it mean that there was no context with regard to contemporary art?

The context means alternatives; the creativity cannot be organized from the centre and diversity and opposition must exist. There must be galleries, publications that should analyse and reflect upon the artistic proposals, there must be a well-formed public. The

lack of a context meant the lack of an infrastructure designed to promote contemporary art. Well, all these are words I use now; at that point I was not aware of and was not articulating as such all these things.

Contemporary art is only a small part of what culture means and it has developed especially after 1990. I believe that during communist years in Romania there have been several shy attempts, and it could have not been differently given the context. Moreover, the city of Iași, which is a big one, the second university centre in Romania, was, at the beginning of the 90's, disconnected from the tendencies in contemporary art, was isolated and provincial. I have realized that there was an important potential, represented mostly by students and young intellectuals.

At the beginning, we have come together, as I was saying, only to organize an exhibition; then Periferic Festival, turned in 2003 into the Periferic Biennale, was developed. "Periferic" is though just the most visible and known activity; but there have been developed a multitude of other projects, which have ensured an absolutely necessary continuity. In 2000 the Vector Association was established in order to provide an institutional frame for the development of these projects. Thus, many exhibitions were set up; articles were published in the local and central press. Now we have a gallery; we have collaborations with a group of young writers from Iași gathered under "Club 8". We have started since recently to work with young philosophers from Iași, who are conceptualising and theoritizing what we are doing. Lately we have also started to collaborate with a series of sociologists, in the framework of several recent projects in the field of public art and art in the public space, which are contributing to the development of a social dimension of culture. We have also initiated a project for the setting up of a Contemporary Art Cultural Centre within the Turkish Bath, a 150-year-old monument, a long term project which is now in development together with several partners.

At the beginning we didn't think about the accomplishment of all these activities; as we were working, we became aware of their necessity and of the concrete way in which we should and could have responded to these needs. At this point we can say that we have contributed to the development of a local scene; we can assert that a public has developed and its level of information has increased, which is highly important; ultimately, we have launched a process, which is now growing and extending...

Matei Bejenaru

What role for artists in policy-making? "Generate logical solutions coming from the problems that we know better than anybody"

If indeed all interviewees joined Cristian Mungiu in identifying the main reason for the artists' involvement in policy-making, this question gave room to different attitudes towards when and how participation should occur.

Normally artists should consume their energy to create and society should have special people trained to be professionals in "cultural policies". I don't find it difficult to place myself in this picture as long as it doesn't overpass my competence. What we are trying to do is to generate logical solutions coming from the problems that we know better than anybody. It is just that I feel we sometimes lose too much time and energy to do somebody else's job.

How did your involvement function in practice?

When the law on cinema was under discussion in 2002, some professionals expressed several opinions and even generated some changes in the text of law. My feeling is that we were considered too young to be asked an opinion. From what I know, the professionals that insisted to make a comment during that debate were not asked by somebody, they found out what was going on and tried to determine reasonable changes

due to their specific fields of interest. Companies working foreign productions in Romania managed to reduce the amount of the tax to be given for the support of the local cinematography, for example. I feel that it was also our mistake not to have created an independent filmmakers association in time in order to be considered before decision taking. After the public protest in April this year³ we generated an exchange of opinions with the NCC and the parliamentary committees, and also made public the issues to be considered before the change of the law on cinema. Still, the concrete proposals we made to the NCC never got an answer and nobody consulted us before the adoption in June of a new act in this area, of which we found out when it was published.

There was an influence of the media consecutive to our protest but I doubt the changes were in a significant measure a consequence of these pressures. There are major financial interests and groups of people having interests connected to the business that influenced decisively the changes and the protest we made served just as a perfect cover.

Cristian Mungiu

We don't have now the time and the energy to get involved in influencing, for instance, the way public money are distributed. We are artists, not cultural bureaucrats, who, since context was lacking, have invented one: we have created the vehicle in order to advance faster.

The dialogue with a decision maker is though much more difficult, as our field is still marginal; it is very hard to tell them you are making installations or performances and then expect that they understand, because it does not fit in the traditional type of artistic creation. We have gained power and visibility in front of the local authorities and the ministry with our projects of urban development, of art in the public space, projects involving a social component, in which they are interested. We have launched, for instance, a pilot project entitled "Quarter" (dedicated to the reconditioning of blocks' facades or to organizing events within the town's quarters), which brings in the forefront the social dimension of culture that contributes to the development of relational aesthetics, and finally of a community awareness.

I believe however that we have something to say and I think we are doing it through our activities.

Matei Bejenaru

Manuel Pelmuş provided the most "involved" and "activist" opinion, estimating that it is important for artists to always reflect on the context, to have a statement and opinion and to assume it:

Even in the countries where the situation is more favourable, there are artists involved in public actions, which are signing public letters carrying a strong political component, which provide a constructive criticism. In our context it is even more needed to get involved; of course, we are not substituting those working in public institutions – they are probably competent if they were employed. However, precisely due to the existing situation, we must get involved as much as we can, we have to draw attention to the it, to make our point, to participate in debates. The openness to reflect on the context, to be open to react and to have a long term perspective is essential. This was the case of our protest in

³ The referred protest of the group of young filmmakers started in April 2003, following the press release of the results of the annual call for film project proposals by the National Centre for Cinematography (NCC). In a public letter, which generated a wide public debate, the filmmakers were questioning the correctness of the activity and decisions made by the Consultative Committee, the organism in charge with the selection of film projects submitted (which was later dissolved without yet another expert body replacing it). The open letter was followed by a set of proposals addressed and submitted to the NCC, which referred to: an analysis of the efficiency of investments made in film projects through NCC; establishment of the criteria and procedures of selection of these projects.

April this year, when we were invited by the French Institute in Bucharest to dance in an event co-organized by the Romanian Ministry of Culture on the occasion of the visit of the French minister of culture in Bucharest. We did not want just to use this opportunity and perform as if everything was all right; we have therefore stood up for something in what was a civilized protest. This is important in my opinion: artists should have and assume a position. It is true that some people have seen our protest as an irreverence, callousness and lamentation. Nevertheless, protests are everywhere ways to react when it comes to a limit situation in order to draw the attention to it.

I believe that, in general, within the Romanian society there is a strong inertia as far as civic participation is concerned and that people are not very much willing to ask themselves this kind of questions, including within the cultural sector. There are aware areas and people, while to others reaction and involvement are completely lacking. I don't think that one should take for granted that, in time, the situation will improve by itself. Maybe we are not able to propose the best solutions either, but it is important to keep trying. I believe that these attempts have results and that, if there are artists which are talented, competent, informed and capable of reflection, and if improvements are made in the field of cultural policies and the general climate, then there are real chances to have better and better artists and more and more meaningful artistic proposals.

Manuel Pelmuș

Cooperation within the artistic community. Can one speak of solidarity?

How would you describe the co-operation within the art sector? Are artists of different branches ready to co-operate and speak with one united voice when fighting for their common interests? Is there such a thing as professional solidarity between artists?

These questions gave the opportunity for the most diverse opinions. To start with, Manuel Pelmuș' radiography of the existing solidarity inside the independent dance sector in Romania, connected to the above-mentioned need for developing a context in which to create:

I believe that the Romanian dance sector has discovered a kind of solidarity; maybe we were accused of being "a gang", but it came from those who are but obstructing us and who do not understand that there are affinities among us and that each of us, individually, is benefiting more. I think that artists from the Romanian independent dance field have gone beyond their pride and understood they have a common interest; they are responsible and work well together. Obviously, the test of solidarity will come when funds and other resources to distribute will be available; then one will see if there will still be any availability to react.

How have you come to this kind of solidarity?

Because there are people open to communicate, to support one another, and who have something to say on the artistic level as well – there was a mixture of all these. I have discovered a similar situation in Portugal as well, after '90 – a kind of solidarity, which led to the fact that Portugal gave some of the most interesting choreographers. But they have achieved this by having the ministry as a partner, which provided long term support to many different institutions and projects, thus leading to a great impact on artistic level, as well as in bringing social awareness, in raising questions. It was something very dynamic.

If I look around in Romania, it seems to me that we are closer to the young film directors. They represent a more active and more aware sector, more ready to act and react for the community interest (including in artistic terms). As for dance, I would not hesitate to say that there is a movement which brought together a series of individuals coming from rather diverse generations.

What has propelled this coagulation of energies? To what extent was it more an artistic cohesion or was it rather a reaction to the difficult problems of your field?

I think it was a combination between an artistic choice and a reality characterised by chronic deficiencies, which led to reaction and to the need to define a position and to create a framework for our projects. There existed, of course, artistic affinities and the will to do something different. We therefore had to get out, or stay out, of the few traditional existing structures, which were not representative for us, and to create ourselves the frame and the structures in which we could create. I believe that this way of functioning was more adjusted to us; and there is nothing unusual in this. Ultimately, everything depends and is built up on the basis of individual initiatives. Cosmin Manolescu, for instance, was a propeller in organizing festivals, platforms, workshops, residences; he has done very much for the dance sector. It is also true that, because of the reasons previously invoked and, as compared to the efforts, the reaction and the impact were small.

Manuel Pelmuş

Cristian Mungiu believes less in such solidarity existing, but stresses nevertheless the need for developing associations and platforms in view of more effectively addressing the decision makers:

I don't feel there is cooperation within the art sector. I can't appreciate if people from different branches could co-operate to sustain their common interest but I greatly doubt this. There is no single common interest not even within the same branch. Therefore it is difficult to unite so many people to have a common point of view, especially considering the variety of problems from each branch and the huge amount of artistic pride of the creative people. Still, in private talks artists from several fields tend to regret especially the lack of communication between them. Hopefully they will step further in the future and find the means to communicate more.

As far as the cinema field is concerned, I feel that it was our mistake not to have created an independent filmmakers association in time in order to be considered before decision taking... We are now in the process of coagulating the group of protesters and several other professionals into an association that could intervene in the future before the decision making. We made a set of concrete proposals and we are now waiting to discuss and negotiate them with the NCC and The Ministry of Culture. It would have been better to have such an organism before the promulgation of the law but we can't change this now and we focus on what remains to be done from now on.

Cristian Mungiu

The same situation and different reasons for it are also put forward by the other interviewees:

Connected to the parliamentary committees for culture there should be functioning councils formed of representatives of artists coming from each field, which could be consulted and perhaps even have the right to vote, because otherwise I don't think they could impose their viewpoints. But something like this is very unlikely to be achieved, as artists are crushed by professional pride and identifying a representative for each field which would please everyone is a very hard task. Even the "independents" are rather separated, each taking care of his/her personal projects. It is very difficult to get involved into an action that consumes the time dedicated to creativity.

Teodora Herghelegiu

This question provided also the ground for a more general perspective on the need for diversity and plurality inside the artistic arena:

There have been several attempts to create associations or platforms of the artists, but these have not lead to anything. I think this is due to the fact that there are only few opportunities

and therefore a fierce competition. In the meanwhile, new opportunities have been created, like the Museum of Contemporary Art. It's important for it to exist; but there is also a risk for it to become an "aspirator", the only voice, the only organism creating hierarchies. I do not believe it could happen since there are also other centres with tradition in the field, with a developed local scene; but they must be supported and encouraged as well, in a general decentralisation drive.

A platform for the interests of artists and curators in front of public funders could of course be setup. However, I personally believe in and try to work as much as I can with private companies, since it is easier, more effective and professional. And we have indeed managed to attract their support.

Matei Bejenaru

To end with, a comment of Teodora Herghelegiu on the development of the independent theatre sector yet relevant for the general context:

At the beginning, I refer to 1998-2000, the projects were more frequent and there was a complicity, a common and united reaction to what was happening at that point. The effervescence was the result of a force; it was really a movement, which in the meantime has faded. Teatrul Act, the first private theatre in Romania, had the role of propulsion, of a locomotive, which also launched a concept and coherent articulation of this cause – the independent theatre.

Artists are now living a kind of mercenariat. I think one can speak of a change in the social context following the 2000 elections. New projects have are more rare now... In the fading of the solidarity of that period, our age may count as well; we began to have other priorities, other responsibilities, a family, means of subsistence, etc.

I often ask myself though what might wake up Romanians. I believe that in our country, even more than in other Balkan countries, cowardice, indifference and incapacity to be united are exacerbated. I am disappointed by the lack of reaction of the civil society. There are people who are coming to our performances, who are enjoying them, but never defending us. We should set up a program of awaking the Romanian people using the cultural weapon. I believe in a kind of Che Guevara type of attitude, of course, in the sense of the idealist revolutionarism. I remember a phrase from one of his letters: "... and, most of all, you should suffer for all injustice done to any man in this world – this is the most beautiful thing at a revolutionary." And in our country there is a lot of injustice, and furthermore, we are lacking an ideal. It is a real plague; the very notion of ideal is lost, and the lack of reference points and models seems to me already very dangerous at generations under 30 years.

Teodora Herghelegiu

Yet artists can play a key role in providing the much-needed models and reference points, be it in a critical manner; the more so if provided a favourable context.
