

“WHEN THERE IS A TRAUMA IN SOCIETY, THE ARTIST NEEDS TO WORK WITH HIS BODY, WHICH BECOMES THE WITNESS OF HIS SUFFERING”

INTERVIEW WITH MATEI BEJENARU

Matei Bejenaru (b. 1963, Suceava) is visual artist and professor who lives and works in Iași. In his recent projects, through photography, video and performance, he investigates the politics of representation in social photography and documentary film, interdisciplinary methods for generating hybrid artistic projects, which import language elements from other media such as music, performative theatre or poetry. He is founder and artistic director of Periferic Contemporary Art Biennial in Iași (1997-2008). He is founding member of Vector Association in Iași, which president he was from 2001 to 2011. From 2003 to 2007 he was artistic director of Vector Gallery in Iași and around the same time he initiated and managed the social culture project cARTier, realized together with his colleagues from Vector Association. He is founder and director of the Contemporary Photography Centre in Iași (2015), which organizes the Contemporary Photography Biennial Camera Plus.

R.V.: When did you do your first performance and how did you get to become conscious of what performance represents as an art medium different to other you have worked with or not?

Let me remember. I believe my first artistically aware performance was in 1994. It was called *Alexander the Good*, like the name of the neighbourhood in Iași where I was living at that time. This happened in December 1994. I had moved to that neighbourhood with my family – my wife and our little girl – a year before. It was a worker’s neighbourhood, during the time people would get on the dole massively, starting with ‘93, ‘94, and I would see many unemployed people gathering in groups around the blocks of flats and talking. The phenomenon of going back to the countryside had already began, because these workers, initially, would come from the villages, they had studied in trade schools and they would be hired in factories during communist times, in the 1970s and 1980s. This thing touched me, because I was coming from a working class background, too. Before studying at the Arts University in the 1990s, I had worked for a few years as a trainee engineer in a factory in Suceava. I interacted with people, I had very interesting relationships and now, after more than 30 years, I realised this fact also influenced my artistic

thinking, because it was an important part in my life. This working class world had started disappearing in the '90s. People had very difficult lives. A year before I had noticed many of them coming with pork meat in plastic bags, because they were slicing animals in the country side, at their parents' house and then, in the city, women would make sausages and prepare the meat in kitchens, and the men would smoke the meat among the blocks of flats. I was touched by this fact, I said to myself "Smoking meat is the symbol of this world". The smoke houses they would build were as if coming straight from a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. My social consciousness made me do something artistic that had to do with that revolting state of the things. I realised the Romanian industry was falling apart and a large part of the Romanian society was very fragile and these people were on the edge of despair, they had no income. So this was the socio-political context in the mid-'90s. And I made a performance with smoke houses. Back then I had an intuition-based relationship with life, I had no theoretical references, I wasn't interacting with artists, save for my colleagues in Iași, the artistic world at that time was very isolated. We, in Iași, even moreso. But a life intuition manifested and I told myself I would not do something ironic, catchy, to work with people and laugh at them when they are turning their backs, like "look at the stupid things happening there"! I mean, somewhere, to have an engagement, an ethical relation with the subject. This things still haunt me today. Sure, maybe in a more complex perspective. For the performance I got hold of some barrels as smoke houses, I installed them on an empty lot between two buildings, I researched with people how to smoke meat and I gave people, for free, the possibility to use them. A few people used the smoke houses and I have a video recording and a few photos from back then. This was my first performance.

R.V.: But was it announced to the artistic world?

No, foremost it was a performance I did for the community around that place, which I was part of.

R.V.: Your neighbours, maybe.

Not necessarily neighbours, but also people from the neighbourhood. But I didn't invite any of the artists, there wasn't an artistic community. Back then I was a late Arts student, it was my second time in University, and I made that performance because I felt the need to work there, to leave something behind, to leave something in that space and the discussions I had with the people have been interesting. It was there that I met someone who, eventually, sold me a camera. And it was a lesson, it was very difficult, I would do all these things with emotion, with fear, with consumed energy. We were all very poor back then, we weren't riding in cabs, let alone rent a van to carry barrels to make a performance. It was complicated, but it doesn't matter how difficult it was, the important thing is I did it.

R.V.: Basically it was your initiative and it wasn't framed in any artistic context or of any other kind.

It wasn't... I was a student at Fine Arts in Iași, the Painting section, unsatisfied with the context, and I had a kind of rebellion, I was doing things for myself, I was experimenting, somehow. I knew things from *ARTA*¹ magazine, I would often go to the German Library where I would browse catalogues and watch VHS tapes.

R.V.: But did you have in school any kind of information in this direction?

No, none whatsoever. It was just traditional painting, that's it.

R.V.: And did you have any other colleagues who were going towards a more experimental direction?

I don't want to toot my own horn and say I was the only one in Iași. I believe there were other colleagues, too. I managed back then, in the mid-'90s, to make some connections with artists outside Iași, first in Bucharest and then in Arad. In Bucharest I met Dan Perjovschi, he was working back then at the Ministry of Culture and he has been a really nice guy to me, we understood each other, it was a kind of solidarity, and he was an artist who had visibility anyway, he was well known already then, I knew him from *ARTA* magazine, from the Youth-exhibition in Baia Mare, in 1988. Dan had made a logo of that exhibition, a capital A and instead of the horizontal line he drew an eye, and I liked it, and I remembered his name. I've met artists in Bucharest at the Soros Centre*. Then I met Judit Angel², she was a museographer in Arad and invited me to some interesting exhibitions.

R.V.: What happened in your life right after finishing the University?

Well, I kept living precariously.

R.V.: Was painting something temporary or did you continue to paint?

No, I applied to art school out of passion, because I was an engineer. I always liked drawing, I wasn't encouraged by my family to study art, my father wanted

-
1. Magazine of the Artists Union, it was from 1954 to 1993 the most important publication on contemporary art in Romania. It ceased its publication from 1993 to 2010 (with a brief comeback in 2000-2001) and in 2010 it was launched in the new formula, also with an online presence since 2014.
 2. Judit Angel worked as museographer at the Art Museum in Arad in the 90s, where she tried to reflect upon the condition of the institution, for example in the exhibition *The Museum Complex* (1996). She curated the Romanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1999 and worked as curator from 1998 to 2013 at Mücsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest. Currently she is the director of tranzit.sk.

me to become an engineer, so I did, and I painted with great passion, I had all kinds of visions in my head.

R.V.: Do you still have those paintings?

Yes, I have them in my studio. Lots of drawings. I had all kinds of intense feelings about painting, my relation with landscape and with nature, with the object, I was interested back then in metaphysical painting, Giorgio Morandi, for a time. I was, however, a young student and I was, I'd say, self-taught. I was speaking foreign languages and I would often go to the French Institute. It had a library, some periodicals, I was reading *ArtPress*, for example, and *KUNSTFORUM* at the German Library which had, in '93-'94, VHS tapes from Documenta. I was researching as much as possible. It was difficult from a material point of view. I was married, our little girl had already started to go to school in '95, my wife was a primary school teacher, then afterwards she applied for a contest and was hired as an assistant at the University.

R.V.: Did you start to participate in exhibitions?

I was participating in all kinds of exhibitions, in Iași, in Bucharest at Atelier 35 and in Arad, after that I even went abroad, after '96. Yes, it was a group of young artists, some still active, others were lost. In fact, I was very happy to exhibit alongside artists such as Teodor Graur, Dan Perjovschi, Sorin Vreme, Antik, Dan Mihaltianu, who were 10-15 years older than me. Many of them I knew from ARTA magazine. I have a friendly relationship with everyone I knew back then, one that I keep to this moment, after 25 years.

It was a very difficult time, after graduating from University, because I had no income, life was tough and I had to do something, and what did I do? I also painted churches. Out of need, not because a higher voice would answer my knocks on the window. I made frescos, I shovelled, I earned some money, I prepared students for the University admission. I would show young people how to draw, because you still had the type of admission exam with many candidates, something gone after 2000. You still had competition and you needed to have drawing qualifications and you had to study in private.

From the beginning of the University I started to take photos, at first I would document all kinds of things, after that I became aware of the function of photography and the video camera. I made videos. I made them on VHS tapes, now they are digitised, I made some ten films in the 90s. When I would get hold of a video camera, I would make a film and edit any way I could. Something very interesting happened, because doing all kinds of performances, somehow I was more and more drawn into performance.

R.V.: Did you also perform for the camera?

For the camera, for the public, I've made fairly many things. I had started to perform in my University studio by myself or for my colleagues, I was working in my apartment, in front of the camera. I have all the documentation on film rolls, I am happy they are not destroyed and maybe, sometime, someone will have a look over them, I don't know. It depends on what will happen to me, now and in the future. If nothing significant happens, they will not be relevant.

During those times, two very important things had become clear to me. One, I understood that if I wanted to live in Iași without getting hired by a typography, because you didn't have the advertising industry³ back then, the only possibility would be the educational system. Hence I was a tutor for two or three years. Wherever I was teaching arts I would instill photography terms, too. So I got to teach photography at the Arts University and outside of classes I would make art photos or photo reproductions of paintings, I was good at catching their colours. Surely, in that whole craziness, as I was doing these performances, an interesting coincidence happened. In Iași, around '95-'96, a new director came to the French Institute, a French communist, his name is Benoît Vitse, theatre director. He was a very interesting guy and I developed a friendship with him. He kept telling me: "look, you have here the French Institute, here you can do whatever you like", and I made some performances and I suggested, "Benoît, let's make a performance event, a festival." Together with a colleague of mine, Vlad Horodincă, a really interesting guy who would have been a great artist if he kept up with art, we decided to make a performance festival named Periferic*, with the support of the French Institute, because that was the house of Europe and everyone could come there and see what performance is about.

R.V.: So this was in '96...

We had the talk at the end of '96 and in the spring of '97 we had the first edition of the festival.

R.V.: But did you know about Zona*, did you participate?

I knew the festival in Timișoara, I hadn't been there, during that time I wasn't invited, but I had found out about it from visual arts broadcasts at TVR⁴ made by Ruxandra Garofeanu. ARTA magazine was an information source for me back then and, especially after the revolution, they had themed dossiers, about Beuys, about installations, about performativity, and it's how I found out about artists and art critics. I had heard about AnnART* festival, initiated by Imre Baász and continued by Gusztáv Útő* with his ex-wife, Kónya Réka. I was very attracted to it, it seemed

3. After 2000 a lot of Arts University graduates would get jobs in advertising, mostly as graphic designers or photographers.

4. The National Television.

like a very cosmopolitan thing, now I'd have a different comment about the artistic quality and the message, but back then I was considering it important for people to go back to nature and perform in a ritualistic manner.

Many art students would participate in StudFest in Timișoara, a democratic event, where everyone would do as they please, but it was a place wherein all the frustration felt by young people in a country with no prospects would come out of their heads through art. It's how I understood the reasons we do performance and work with our bodies, that it's a societal trauma and the artist needs to work with his body, which becomes the witness of his suffering. Some would make performance to commemorate the people who died during the Revolution, they would light candles in bread, pour wine on them, as with church rituals. But things hadn't clarified yet, we had no artistic insight, but even then I realised that, in fact, we weren't doing anything else but reproduce artistic models that had already been exhausted in the West, in the '60s. I was talking to a colleague, we can't burn stages, performance is an artistic emancipation stage, learning that documentation is an art work in itself. To me, doing performance in the '90s was a way of knowing myself, after a few years I stopped performing in front of a public.

In '97 I participated in the yearly exhibition of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art*. It was an exhibition at the Călnic castle, Maria Rus Bojan⁵ was the curator, Irina Cios was the director of the Bucharest centre. I went to a preliminary visit at the place to do field research, understand the context in order to produce something. I stayed there for a few days and I saw good things and not so good things and I understood all kinds of structures of power and influence. And I believe I was again talking about that knowledge of life and curiosity to experiment. The general tendency was to make video art, new media, that is what the Soros Centre meant for me: it was the emancipation through new technologies – individualism, competition and technology. That was, how do I say it, it's what I read, or it's how I understand now what was happening back then. The tendency was to ask for a video projector, take a camera, make a video on the monitor, it was such an attractive surface. It was there that I thought that the exhibition was about the Germans who left, and about the memory of the place, of the castle, as told by the Romanians living there.

And in the end I made a social performative project, the second after the one with the smoke houses. I stayed in Călnic a few days and I talked to people, I wasn't even aware that it was called social art. When I followed the institutional path it didn't work. At the Mayor's office, nothing, in school, nothing, in the end people told me: "go to the priest, he has a different kind of authority and he will help you." I went to church on a Sunday, after the sermon the priest singled me out and told the people: "look, this young man is an art teacher in Iași, he's someone who wants to do something artistic about your community and so please talk to him and if he

5. Currently based in Amsterdam, Maria Rus Bojan was, from 1994 to 1999, curator at the Art Museum in Cluj and, from 1999 to 2003, director of Sindan Cultural Foundation (Bucharest/ Cluj).

wants to take a picture of you, do agree.” And all the old ladies started to stand in line to have their pictures taken, all of them. So I photographed all of them. Then, some old men invited me in their homes and told me stories about the Germans, very interesting stories.

R.V.: How did the work take shape in the exhibition?

The castle had a circular wall where I mounted large size photographs with the portraits of the people in the village. But this entire unseen part of the action is what fed me, what was interesting to me. Around that time I made the first edition of *Periferic* in Iași and received a prize from the Soros Centre.

R.V.: With the festival?

Yes, it was a prize of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art handed to me by Victor Rebengiuc, whom I hold in respect.

R.V.: Was that what convinced you to continue with the festival?

Yes, in a way, to continue to make things move in Iași, too, to fight this complex that things are happening in visual arts only in cities from Transylvania and Bucharest, and nothing happens in Iași.

R.V.: Did you name it?

Yes. I gave it the name *Periferic*, it's easy to pronounce, it sounds good in most languages and speaks about our marginal artistic condition. The festival continued in '98, also at the French Institute, I had invited important Romanian artists, many series of performances, and the '99 edition garnered an international dimension. The performance part was at the French Institute, and we made exhibitions with site-specific installations of Eastern-European artists. Things started being complicated. I was happy to do it, but it was infernal work. I believe I would still have the physical strength to do it, but I wouldn't have the nerves, not the naivety I had then. For the 1999 *Periferic*, apart from the support of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art, we received funding from ProHelvetia, which had just installed an office in Romania. And I still remember, I received the money and I went to Iași with a plastic bag full of money, on the train. I would have the money at my place, in the bag, and I would remove 500000, or whatever value money had back then, I would buy something and at night I would organise bills and receipts. Gabriela Tudor, the director of ProHelvetia, suggested I should set up an institution so that I can have a stamp and a bank account.

R.V.: But the first *Periferic* edition was only with performance. Only in '99

included other media, too. It was out of a need also to create a context where you lived and where you worked, and it came also from this personal practice with the performance medium and understanding it as something very direct and immediate.

Yes, because local artists were participating, too, and interacting with the guests would motivate them to continue working in Iași.

R.V.: Trying to explain why there have been, in Romania in the 1990s, three performance festivals plus CarbonART* in Chișinău, the Republic of Moldova, it's clear that, on one side, I think we had this tradition to work with the body, unmediated.

We were frightful, we didn't take our clothes off, we didn't have the guts, and there weren't many women artists. Much later, after 2000, you would have young women artists doing performance. But I believe it was also a trauma, after 1990 a lot of performance festivals happened in Eastern Europe. It was a very interesting solidarity among artists, it was a joy being together. I had a lot of respect about the artists one generation ahead of us. Back then we were young graduates, they were about 40, I respected what they did in the 80s. I tried to make (Alexandru) Antik tell me about what he did in Sibiu in 1986⁶, but he's not such a great storyteller and so I did not get much from him. We made art with this idea of an intellectual solidarity, there was no talk about having success, no galleries in sight before 2000 and there was no likelihood of having a dialogue with the artistic world outside Romania.

One exception was Kristine Stiles*, an influential art critic whom I met in Chișinău in 1998, at the festival *Gioconda's Smile**. I made an endurance performance which was very important for me at that time, because I started working more conceptually. In this performance, named *Speaking*, I would read for about four hours without breaks and without drinking water, all the words in a small Romanian language dictionary. It was a comment on the Moldovan language, Romanian language, about my identity, my father coming from a Ukrainian-Bessarabian family. It wasn't easy. All kinds of artists would come and bring me water, vodka, wine, especially the Russians, who weren't into it, because they thought I was a Romanian nationalist. I was aware that I was working with the physical limits of my body, I was a reading machine, an automaton. You know who came and sat next to me? Kristine Stiles. I noticed a lady next to me and I wasn't looking at her, I was minding my own business, my breathing technique, otherwise you can't make it, I was in a kind of trance, my mind was working in a different way. At the end, Kristine took my hand and told me it's the strongest performance, she enjoyed it a lot and afterwards we talked and she told me to continue, she encouraged me. After that she came to Iași to see Periferic.

R.V.: This preoccupation for language and vocabulary can also be found in other works of yours.

6. A famous performance by Antik, *The dream has not perished*, interrupted by the secret police.

Afterwards I continued, I still do, but in another direction. I was interested in language, I made that performance in 1998 out of intuition, but then I bought Kristine Stiles' book, *Out of Actions*, which I read and started to find out about artists. Owing to Periferic I met artists and discovered the international network of performance artists who would help and promote each other.

R.V.: Who would only do performance...

Only performance. It's how I met the Scot Rody Hunter, and Irma Optimist, a mathematician from Finland, very smart and very original. It's how I met the Polish Arthur Tajber. In 2001, Irma invited me to a performance festival in Vaasa, where I met Maria Cosmes from Barcelona, who invited me to a festival she was organising. I understood that performance is being developed in places where there are conflicts, traumas, or where society is not settled.

After 1999, Periferic had started to grow, next to the performative dimension we also gained the international exhibition one. We had founded the Vector Association⁷ in Iași in 2001 and we wanted to do, in Romania, beautifully installed exhibitions, in white cubes. With straight cables, rectangular video projections, details like that.

R.V.: How did you get from this performance where you worked with your own body to the so-called delegated performance*.

It was a self-analysis process. I didn't like myself. I always had this impression of being an arrogant guy, stuck-up, full of himself, and I said OK, I need to get out of the performance. Me, as performer. I need to do something else, organise some things, but I need to get out of the spotlight. And it was a moment, I had started to hear and read something about relational aesthetics, about all immaterial interactions. And in fact, what I had done in the neighbourhood, with the smoke houses, I said, that is relational art. I had been to Austria, I had bought this book of Bourriaud's, *Relational Aesthetics*, I think I found it in French, and I was so impressed with how simple it is, because that book is so light and it's clearly written, like Wittgenstein's Tractatus, a few words, but dense ideas. And as far as I could understand, I realised this social dimension of my performances.

I had started, also, to study immigration, the situation of the Romanian workers in Europe. Somewhere, I oriented towards a social practice, and I have been doing this for the past ten years.

R.V.: I was thinking of your series of performances with choirs.

7. vector> Association was founded in 2001, initially as a support-institution of Periferic project, then initiating other projects too. It was constituted by artists, philosophers, sociologists, etc. After the closing of Periferic Biennial, vector> went through several restructuring stages, currently it continues to occasionally organize different projects.

That came about later, I had thought the project in 2007 and of course, thanks to you I was able to break the ice and realize its first interpretation⁸. I had tried many times to do it, but my artistic status wasn't so strong as to be able to find institutions willing to grant more complex resources. I was invited, for example, at a performance festival in Israel, pretty well known, *Blurr*. I told the director, Sergio Edelsztein, a very interesting guy managing an art centre in Tel Aviv, that "I want to go to a kibbutz, spend a few days there, and do a performance about this communitarian utopia". I was interested in choral music, because it unites people, I wanted to re-interpret some songs from kibbutzim. Sergio found some singers, the problem was they requested 2000 dollars, money which we couldn't get. One year later, the director of Salzburger Kunstverein, Hemma Schmutz, wanted to do the project, but who in Austria is singing for very little money? Again I started working on the project and I said that, in fact, these projects are difficult to do and I need to work and fight for them and if I lost one time, two times, it doesn't mean I need to quit, at some point I need to shield myself, be motivated, refine and in the end maybe I can make it. This happened in 2010, thanks to you, when you invited me to the *Knot* project. I'm glad you broke the ice... things started moving afterwards.

R.V.: Was this an awareness of the fact that performance is becoming a much more elaborated and expensive medium than it was?

Clearly, it was no longer this individual expression, you'd make a ritual and that's it. I was interested in a more conceptual performance, interdisciplinary, based on research. After 2003 I had started to travel, to be part of all kinds of symposia, to meet people who inspired me to read and find out about things. It was then that I started to see the big exhibitions – Documenta in 2002, Venice Biennale in 2005 and 2007... Afterwards, I collaborated with many artists that I learned from. I got to a performance form based on an elaborate process that also had this research dimension. In the choral project *Songs for a better future* it was clearly a research of a context that I would extract from, a basis of ideas I would use, together with a professional musician, to conceive a musical piece which would talk about the vision of a future. The future was interesting to me back then, I believed a better world is possible.

R.V.: You no longer believe that?

8. *Songs for A Better Future* had its first manifestation in October 2010, in a space of Fabrica Club in Bucharest, performed by Madrigal Choir, on a score composed by Dan Buciu, with Emanuel Pecingine as conductor. The musical score was based on proletcult coral music from the 50s-60s. The event was realized with the international project *The Knot. Linking the Existing with the Imaginary*, curated by Markus Bader, Oliver Baurhenn, Kuba Szreder and Raluca Voinea. http://knotland.net/index.php?id=13&L=3&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=783&cHash=a573e8bc1fe203b7ba952f1c104fef06

I do, but my optimist version of the future now is reduced to the hope of not having a war.

Yes, so this was the project which was developed along many years.

R.V.: How many choral performances have there been?

About six. And I could go on, but I don't think I can bring anything new. I made the last performance in Timișoara, at Art Encounters, in 2015, where I worked with the composer Gabriel Mălăncioiu and with a choir of inmates from the penitentiary.

R.V.: Do you think it has depleted or you're not attracted any longer because it is becoming mannerist or...?

Here is the problem, because, in fact, with this project, *Songs for a better future*, I tried to construct a work method, like an equation with clear points that I needed to address. It had newness, obviously, it's not about the music, music could have been at the highest professional level or at an amateur level. I was interested in the choral format as a bond between people. At the same time, I realised I was repeating myself, even if I am to go tomorrow to China, I would still repeat something and so I stopped. Of course, I asked myself and I have my doubts with how serious this kind of research is and where is the inflection point where you translate some conclusions, this alchemy of transformation from one language to another, what's happening there? Is it only intuition?

R.V.: So, in fact, the problem is not the repetition of the method and the work process and the concept, but the fact that you adapt it to contexts you do not handle, where you are uncomfortable in.

Yes, and always there is not enough time and you are forced to work speculatively and sooner or later you realise you can't go on in this way indefinitely. The project, as a final work, is a video installation with documentation of the choral performances. I got to show it in two or three contexts, at the Brukenthal Museum, on two channels, at tranzit.ro/ Iași on three and at MNAC with five and it's over. There were six performances, one I am very dissatisfied with, I was dominated, unfortunately, by a musician who asserted a style that I could not control at that moment. But what can I say, I believe it was an important moment, because it had a lot to do with social practice, with human interaction, I always interacted with the choir people, and with people from worlds different than mine.

R.V.: Do you think it is more difficult to work in Romania than someplace else?

Like I said before, I worked in Timișoara with the composer Gabriel Mălăncioiu and it was a beautiful project. I love music and I'm learning to listen to it, I have

friends who are musicians. With Gabriel I worked on a musical piece called *Ode to matter*, because in Timișoara I wanted to talk about materialism and inmates. It's not just about the music. Because the inmates couldn't sing, the composer thought of rhythms and a director would give them the entries and the cadenza. At some point, during the performance, the inmates are emitting a very strong and emotional sound, it's the biological power of our bodies. Even the feeblest individual has an unsuspected strength to emit a sound which, maybe, he will never emit again in his life, because he is not aware of the strength of his body. So I thought together with the composer that discharge coming from out of their bodies that were arranged in space a certain way, on a street in the old centre of Timișoara. It was good for them to come out of the prison, but for me there was this ethical issue of organisation. And it was a powerful moment, when the families of the prisoners showed up. Of course I want, it would be hypocritical to say otherwise, curators to come and see and appreciate the performance I thought of for half a year and I worked on for three months with these people, with the composers and the musicians. Some saw it, some appreciated it, others maybe didn't, but the families of the inmates came and, you know, at the end of the performance, I saw it immediately, they rushed towards them. The art public didn't give too much importance to this fact. But those families didn't come for the performance, they came for their relatives in detention which they could see for a few minutes thanks to the situation I created. I said I had created a grain of freedom for these people and their families. I wasn't allowed to interact with them, I wasn't allowed to buy them a Coke, I wasn't allowed to touch them, the relationship was very strict, even though I felt I could communicate with them. And it had this humanist dimension which is very important to me. In all the choral performances I wanted the people to be dressed in a simple way, not opulent, not egotistic, precisely to show this utopian form of humanism, which we can hope to build in the future.

R.V.: And so now, basically, you are back to working with yourself, but also through someone else's filter.

Yes, after *Gioconda's Smile*, I became aware of the performativity of speech. Things have evolved three years later when I received a KulturKontakt grant in Austria and I stayed there for half a year. It was pleasant to live in Vienna at that moment. And I was invited by a curator, Jeanette Pacher, who was working with ORF Kultur, the Austrian cultural radio, to have a project in her weekly show named *Kunstradio*, where artists were invited to produce sound art, radio art. It was during the elections in 2002, when the far right party FPÖ of Jörg Haider, was gaining territory. There was this huge debate in Austria with this thing and I was stunned by their statements, I believed the world is positive and bright after the fall of the Communism and capitalists and the former communists are becoming friends, they're having sex all the time and everything is happiness and democracy is eternal and people are free and we believe in everyone and we are equal. Really? Look where it got us. And I

wanted to make a sound project based on the performativity of speech which would reflect the special political situation from Austria at that time. They invited me over, I made a performance there, I had a live part and a recorded one, a piece which was edited there, we worked on it. For the live part I asked the organisers to buy the three most important political newspapers, newspapers were still ruling back then. From each paper I selected the political article on the front page and I read it live on radio in a performative, atypical way. I developed reading algorithms which would deconstruct the text through reading, following my logic, the texts became nonsensical. It was an onomatopoeic reading where I would select, for example, the succession of vowels, aa aa aaa aaaa, but when you read for ten minutes live it has a sound form which they liked. Then I made a sound piece, you can listen to it, the link is on my website.

I was interested in reading and I continued doing poetic reading, considering poetry is outside the spirit of our time, when people need to be pragmatic and I said, OK. Starting with 2010, I started coming back to performative formulas where I am in front of people and I read poetic texts, the context is very important, the relationship you have with sound. At the Athens Biennial three years ago, I worked with a Greek actor and a jazz drummer and I read the poems of Yannis Stigas, an engaged poet. In all this madness happening in Greece he wrote a kind of poetry speaking about freedom and solitude, it doesn't explicitly reflect the street protests, it is very distilled. This I learned, that you can be very engaged and social without saying it explicitly in your art. I think I'm a social artist, rather than political, I think I have an empathy for the losers, I want to empathise with the downtrodden, so I empathised with the working class, with what was left of the Romanian village, with engineers, who are also losers, if you don't have industry, you have no engineers. And I learned this thing by listening to music and reading, for example, I listened to music composed by politically engaged composers, leftists, in general, like Cornelius Cardew, a British composer, or Luigi Nono, a very important Italian composer. They were all Marxists, communists, from the 50s-60s, with all the modern music emancipation and they wrote very important things. For Nono, political engagement was manifested in the experiments he did in the musical language.

In my case I got to the conclusion that you don't necessarily need to say "Workers of the world, unite!", you could make it more nuanced through experimental formulas. The fact that I'm bringing musical form on the territory of conceptual art is my big commitment. As a teacher I need to know many things, but for me, as an artist, I try to choose references which have depth and need to tell me something. What I read about Luigi Nono was important to me and that's why, reciting poetry was for me a political form. But I don't read love poetry. Poems about language, about existence, about crisis, about agony, maybe, and I feel very good when I do those things, I read in Iași and I gained some experience. It's the same way I perform doing photography in the dark room, looking for the materiality and the poetics of this medium. It's also a form a performativity. But this is another story, for another interview.

R.V.: So in your case, as it is with other artists we have discussed with, we can talk about not only a certain performance, we are also talking about a practice which has a performative side.

Of course, my artistic practice has this performative dimension, which I understand in many ways. For example, I have made performance in my mind which only I know and which I feed upon when I'm doing something in public. I've had life situations, meeting with people which have been very emotional, very strong, and which, due to circumstances, didn't transform in an artistic form exposed to the public in the shop window of art. They have existed only in my head and they are important to me because they gave me confidence about what I'm doing artistically.



50, performance and photo installation, Călnic Castle, 1997



Vorbind 1 / Speaking 1, performance, Chişinău, 1998



Vorbind 2 / Speaking 2, performance, Łódź (Poland), 2001



Alexander the Good, performance, 1994



Speaking 3, ORF Kunstradio Vienna, 2002



Songs for a better future, video installation, MNAC, 2015