

“A Humanism of Minorities”: ART AS A RESEARCH INTO IDENTITIES

GALERIA CLUJEST AND GÁBOR LALI’S COPPER WORKS

Cluj, the capital of Transylvania in Romania, is a long-standing academic centre in the heart of Europe. Nonetheless, where student dynamism cannot compensate for local authorities’ development, integration and cohesion policies, a new artistic space offers cross-cutting opportunities by making visible another source of wealth of the city: the rich artistic life, which has managed to maintain its dynamism and creativity without any form of institutional support for the last 20 years.

The Fabrica de Pensule, located in a former paintbrush factory, opened on 23 October 2009. It is a new collective and an independent cultural centre of production and distribution of contemporary art.

The space gathers 29 contemporary art spaces: artists’ studios, galleries and cultural organisations active in fields such as visual arts, contemporary dance and theatre.

Sebestyén György Székely, director of the Galeria Quadro (<http://www.galeriaquadro.ro/>) on one of Cluj-Napoca’s main streets, Napoca Street, set up a new art space in the Fabrica de Pensule.

The ClujEst “Visual Research Point” as he calls it, will allow the showing of works, urban and historical phenomena, with a more straightforward inquisitive and critical angle. “ClujEst” also refers to the very close “Cluj-Napoca Est” train station of which one can see the railways through the Fabrica de Pensule’s windows.

Since January 2007 Romania has been part of the European Union. In the EU and in South and Eastern European countries, which joined in since 2004 in particular, many issues remain to be addressed about minority exclusion, visibility and treatment.

The first to be thought of when asking the minority question in Romania is of course the Roma minority. This is not news, but is persistent.

Rightly so, Székely – himself part of the Hungarian minority, but willing to act in the wider Romanian and international frame – shows Lali’s (Gábor Lajos) copper works in an exhibition called *The Sparkling Gypsy Copper*.

Lali Gábor, is a gypsy who happens to be a star for his part with Lóri (Lóránd Boros) in *Bahrta!** (Good Luck! in Romany), a comic road movie fiction documentary, which came out in 2008 and was conceived as an “exploration of the modern realities of Eastern Europe” and globalisation throughout a series of episodes on a journey from Transylvania to Egypt through Vienna and back, where two Romanian friends respectively members of the Hungarian and Roma minorities act as peddlers.

The Sparkling Gypsy Copper features works remaking and simulating everyday life’s objects transposed full scale in copper, but which gain a gypsy “colour”. In an introduction to the exhibition, Sebestyén explains his relation to the objects as an art critic and a gallery director:

“I felt their charm for the first time a few years ago entering a violin-restorer’s shop. In the entrance hall, on the piano were a pair of shoes and a hat made of copper. Simple. The effect was indeed similar to that of Surrealist objects. They had the impact of everyday objects, but also the strangeness engendered by the loss of their function, conjuring up a playful if not mysterious presence, which somehow altered the space it occupied”.

Further, he comments:

“Lali’s objects can be read in terms of modern art practices, as they certainly resemble certain works of modern art, or may even be identical in appearance. Lali himself, however, doesn’t offer this kind of interpretation. He doesn’t join the club of modern art, theorizing his objects in such terms (...) His objects – bearing the positive, sunny shine which Gypsy copper work lends them – are not quite as innocent and playful as one would assume. They are not decorative pieces for “our” houses but are primarily expressions of Gypsy identity”.



INTERVIEW

A few days after the opening of the Fabrica de Pensule as an independent artistic and cultural centre, European Alternatives met Sebestyén Székely in Cluj. Here follows an interview of the director of the ClujEst Visual Research Point.

Can you introduce yourself? Where are you from? What is your training?

I'm an art historian from Cluj and also part of the Transylvanian Hungarian community. Art history is my basic field. I received my education in Cluj, Budapest, Florence and New York. After my studies in Art History, I started working at the Art Museum (<http://www.macluj.ro/>) in Cluj: this experience lasted six years. I then obtained a Fulbright scholarship to study for a year at the Institute of Fine Arts NYU (<http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/index.htm>) in New York.

After coming back to Cluj in 2007, I decided to become independent and in 2008, as a first step, together with local businessmen (Ambrus Ádám, Király István, Soó Zöld Balázs) I launched the Galeria Quadro, which is a place for modern and contemporary art. I organised exhibitions and auctions and involved myself in art publishing.

How did you come to art?

I have been interested in art as well as in history for a long time. I always felt a kind of amnesia in Romania: so many important things which happened remained never spoken nor analysed and their memory got lost. This made me sensitive to history and memory. This is an important aspect because I'm still a historian and I always want to understand where things do come from, what influences them. Especially in Eastern Europe or Romania where history and identities are very controversial subjects, I consider that the problem of memory and expression of the identity is of great importance. Generally speaking, I am interested in the dynamism of a phenomenon and working with art allows me to fulfil my concern for understanding the impetus at the origin of a phenomenon. This is at least how I see my work.

Can you give a brief account of the history of the set-up of the Fabrica de Pensule?

Around February this year some artists looked for a studio and found this space to rent. They started speaking about it to friends and then, as Cluj is not a big city, it spread and more and more artists, gallery owners, people working in theatrical arts and dance gradually began to occupy the space.

It is very important to say that there is an independent cultural life for approximately 15 to 20 years in Cluj. Various associations functioned in varied scattered spaces or even without space. It follows that such conditions did not allow them to have any or more visibility. It is hard to find good rentals in Cluj since they are expensive. As a result, no opportunity to be a bit more organised had presented itself until now. Therefore everybody was very enthusiastic about the project, which was suddenly allowing them to really be together and work together



Can you give a brief history and presentation of “ClujEst Visual Research Point” located in the Fabrica de Pensule?

First of all I took part in the meetings in the cafés where the project to set up the Fabrica de Pensule as an independent cultural centre gradually emerged.

I am the manager of the Galeria Quadro which is located in Cluj city centre. At the beginning I was thinking of making a contemporary section of this gallery in the Paintbrush Factory (Fabrica de Pensule). Then I thought of my interest in history and realised that there are a few galleries but no research, and that it would be interesting to make something to also study art and visual culture in this factory.

This shift from a mere new development and annex of Galeria Quadro to the idea of a “research space” was not conscious at the beginning actually. I wanted to carry out an exhibition with the gypsy artist, Gábor Lali. Organising the exhibition made me conscious of the fact that what is important to me was not whether these Gábor Lali’s

Sebestyén György SZÉKELY
The sparkling Gypsy copper –
On Lali Gábor’s objects

Looking at these sparkling copper objects – shoes, hats, violins – the art critic can take (at least) two approaches. One approach is the flat refusal of the purist, which acknowledges the beauty and the craftsmanship of these objects, but rejects them as not suitable subjects for art criticism. Another approach is that of the speculative critic, who resembles the type of curator who appropriates the art which he exhibits. This critic reaches for handy terms like “simulation” or “ready-made” and will soon whip up a nice little theory quoting analogies from the history of modern art and recent art practice.

The main reference won’t be to Duchamp but rather to those Dadaist and Surrealist pieces which recreate everyday objects in weird materials, thus alienating them from their initial function. This theory will be illustrated with the iron of Man Ray (*Cadeau*, 1921), or the tea cup of Meret Oppenheim (*Déjeuner en fourrure*, 1936) or – to draw a more contemporary parallel – the Sherrie Levine’s shiny closet (*Fountain. After Marcel Duchamp*, 1991). Levine’s shiny remakes will even help the critic to understand that the main process underlying Lali’s objects is that of the simulation►

copper objects are contemporary art or not, but the phenomenon these objects represent, which is, I believe, worthy to be studied and showed. Organising this exhibition made me conscious of what I am doing and of the fact it can be related to research into meaningful phenomena of visual culture.

I thus conceived and imagined this gallery as a “research station”: a place from where you can depart and set out for a journey of exploration into urban and artistic significance, sense of memory, identity and history, but also a place where you can arrive and wander around, allowing to show and see different aspects of our modern life with a speculative and hypothetical artistic approach.

However, I want to change a bit the way of calling it into “Visual research point”, because it is a modest enterprise.

How do you know the artist? How did you get to know him personally?

I met the artist at Insomnia Café. I knew about him because he played in this movie *Bahrtalo!* (2008, Lakatos Róbert) and I started to chat with him. He had a certain way to directly debate his gypsy identity that I thought that it would be interesting to do something about the Gypsies. And I started telling him about the copper objects I had seen once in a restorer’s studio (not knowing who made them, only that the author was a gypsy) and he said it was actually him who had made and who was still making these copper objects.

First when I was in that house three years ago, I just loved the objects, enjoyed them (note: see the box introducing *The Sparkling Gypsy Copper* exhibition). It was something very spontaneous at first, I just liked the guy too.

Only later the ideology came as a background of the objects and of the show because the context is so problematical that you do not actually need to be ideological: the context itself make it clear that there is an issue.

which has as its result the remake: he remakes and simulates the objects of everyday life. He refers to objects which everybody knows, but which gain a Gypsy “colour” (see the “oriental” forms, the “precious” stones, the decorative kunstwollen). He transposes all these full scale in copper. Aren’t these the remakes of his own environment? – the conceptualized critic might ask.

Yet I recommend simply looking at the objects themselves and retaining their immediacy. I felt their charm for the first time a few years ago entering a violin-restorer’s shop. In the entrance hall, on the piano were a pair of shoes and a hat made of copper. Simple. The effect was indeed similar to that of Surrealist objects. They had the impact of everyday objects, but also the strangeness engendered by the loss of their function, conjuring up a playful if not mysterious presence, which somehow altered the space it occupied.

I went through both approaches: that of refusal and that of speculation, and eventually arrived at a simple conclusion. Lali’s objects can be read in terms of modern art practices, as they certainly resemble certain works of modern art, or may even be identical in appearance. Lali himself, however, doesn’t offer this kind of interpretation. He doesn’t join the club of modern art, theorizing his objects in such terms.

As he says himself, the challenge for him is to make these objects as others could not. He is proud of his Gypsy craftsmanship, which he earns a living by, when he makes the tin-ware for roofs or pálinka distilling “installations”. He shows his craftsmanship for art’s sake (*l’art pour l’art*) in his copper objects.

The object which he “reproduces” is not found by chance (as with Duchamp), nor sought on purpose (Man Ray). It is consciously **chosen**, as Lali wants to express content with it. The shoes and the hat are expressions of identity. The violin and the pyramid are also bearers of his identity and origin. In this exhibition the circle is completed in the intimacy of objects connected to basic human needs – food and drink. He doesn’t alienate these objects from their function but rather reconnects them to a reality which thus gains a Gypsy colouring.

Lali Gábor presents the everyday man in his or her Gypsy tone. His objects – bearing the positive, sunny shine which Gypsy copper work lends them – are not quite as innocent and playful as one would assume. They are not decorative pieces for “our” houses but are primarily expressions of Gypsy identity. ►

When did the project start?

We started really working on the exhibition at the end of spring 2009.

Who influenced you? What influenced you?

I have a kind of sensitivity concerning minorities: I'm myself part of a minority (Hungarian). I got interested in the case of the gypsies because I think that somebody who is considered to be "minoritarian" has to be open with any minority. And actually, everybody is "minoritarian" and one should defend all the other minorities: I believe in a humanism of minorities. This kind of sensitivity probably made me open to do this exhibition but I did not realise that it would become more serious and would develop into another dimension, another meaning.

What do you mean that it became more serious?

By organizing the show – which I considered pretty easy – different approaches emerged, which made me conscious that it is not just a friendly action but it brings to light problems which are not really taken into account. Thus, there was a pressure on the side of art managers/organisers who were considering that it is not worthy to introduce "this kind" of objects in the galleries and that I should work with more serious matter.

Then, as I often met Lali, I noticed again and again (not that I was naïve before) that there are so many prejudices against

Gypsies expressed in numerous expressions of language while there are not too many expressions from the other side (the Gypsy side). This convinced me that it is really worthy to organise this show.

There was also an interesting aesthetic prejudice, which says that Gypsy art is equivalent to kitsch, and so once again, it cannot fit the fancy club of the contemporary art scene.

Would you have realised such a project anywhere?

This is a general thing! Of course it has to be adapted. It is something which is about this place and can have a message in many different places. The problem is not a problem only here and is addressing a general issue about minorities and how they are treated. Indeed, with regards to the question of aesthetic fastidiousness the problem is a very general one, and unfortunately it is also a good hideaway for the good bourgeoisie to not observe social problems.

Any object functions within a system of meaning in which it becomes relevant. Outside of this system it is just relative. Seen from the point of view of craftsmanship, Lali's objects are relative: they are merely more or less successfully crafted objects. But in a certain social and political context, of which Lali is aware these objects become relevant and gain credibility by their having been produced within the tradition of "ancestral" craftsmanship which is considered by both Gypsies and non-Gypsies alike as being specific for the Gypsy identity.

Lali is a figure in the cultural life of Cluj, but he is not part of that chic and fashionable world in which conceptual expressions are whispered over wine glasses. He is not a Basquoiat appropriated along with his "primitivism" by the glamorous world of art – as the environment to which he belongs is itself primitive and we would much rather be rid of it (and become poorer for it). He has become known for many as one of the main characters of the film "Bahrtalo!" – a kind of colourful documentary about the adventures of a Gypsy and a Hungarian from Transylvania. He didn't become a mere movie star however. He is a militant Gypsy, who gives free lessons in Romany language to anyone interested – in his "classroom" in the Insomnia Café in Cluj.

Once when I went to meet him he was just about to be thrown out of the courtyard where he was waiting for me. I actually had explained to the cleaner that "this gentleman is with me". This incident reminded me of the position which he has in this society, which likes to consider itself open and egalitarian.

In Europe and in a country where even the president can speak of a "stinking Gypsy woman" these sparkling, cheerful and positive objects are indeed relevant.



You wrote: “In Europe and in a country where even the president can speak of a “stinking Gypsy woman” these sparkling, cheerful and positive objects are indeed relevant”. Can you explain this a little bit more?

There is some art, which functions and directly or metaphorically refers to a certain social and political context. Gypsies (and Romanians) are pretty often badly painted in the European press. So, it is important to show other approaches too. Then, we, here inside, do not analyse enough our own problems.

Also, what I actually noticed as the impact of the show was again the “exotivism” of it: Media, radios, TVs and printed media were in a hurry to take interviews to Lali and to ask him to put the copper hat on and play the copper violin. But there were pretty rare reactions sensitive to the social background which we actually wanted to underline. I am afraid that many people interpreted this action as being funny in the same way as Gypsy violonists offer fun for white people in their restaurants. And this was definitely not our main interest.

What do you intend to do now and in the future?

In the next year I will work on a specific research argument, concerning the history and memory of the neighbourhood where the Paintbrush Factory is.

Then through this argument, I would like to speak about micro-communities, standardisation and globalisation.

This neighbourhood once used to be a flourishing small agricultural-urban community. Then it has been destroyed during communism to build “beautiful” concrete neighbourhoods for the workers of the new industry. And then again that industry was destroyed by capitalism and what remains of the agriculture of that agricultural-urban community has now again been destroyed nowadays.

Hence chronologically there were people that were considered as peasants for the city but their way of life has been destroyed by communist concrete buildings and then industrial

workers came and took the gardens of these people. Then again, in the last ten years, another aspect is very interesting because these people are considered as having good organic/bio products, which once were despised.

Therefore, this next exhibition will be connected with this problem trying to collect several and more visual evidences.

What I am doing there is not a local case study. I can see that there is an argument about the local community itself, but there is also a wider one, which is probably even more interesting about standardisation and globalisation: how has a neighbourhood disappeared during communism and now during capitalism. In fact: "how does identity just get lost or (hopefully if anything remained) get transformed and adapted to the new social-economical context" is the main question of this research.

So, it is a really complicated reality with many nuances. Identities transformed themselves all the time in this region and I think it is very telling for many problems of Eastern Europe, but not only. ■

Introduction and Interview by Véronique Foulon



*Links online about *Bahrtalo*:

<http://www.idfa.nl/en/festival/films/film.aspx?id=9e76717f-d9cd-4540-bd5f-cae88481e5ba>

<http://www.clevelandfilm.org/films/2009/bahrtalo-good-luck>

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