

"Desire is WAR"

The Contemporary Art Gallery of the Brukenthal National Museum - July 7 – 31, 2011

Artists: Apparatus 22 (RO), Muhammad Ali (PK), Ștefan Botez (RO/CH), Katja-Lee Eliad (RO/IL), Farid Fairuz (LB/RO), Mikhail Karikis (GR/UK), Matts Leiderstram (SE), Matmos (US), MEN (US), Ioana Nemeș (RO), Gyarfás Olah (RO), Karol Radziszewski (PL), Emily Roydson (SE/US), Ryan Trecartin (US).
Curators: Anca Mihuleț and Dragos Olea (RO)

The project *Desire is WAR* was born from the discussions Dragos Olea and I started at the end of 2010. What was initially supposed to be *just another show about gay culture* was transformed into a statement-exhibition, with an explosive display that described different formulations of desire towards same sex individuals – from battling one's self, to the failure of separation, to accepting one's identity or to the power of a sincere confession.

Despite the obvious advancements in the process of secularization and negotiation of identity in the Romanian society, sexual morality remains under the heavy domination of religion, of exaggerated discourse, and of facile mythologies. Even though the degree of tolerance towards sexual minorities has increased recently, understanding, respect, and real political acceptance of such minorities are far from being widespread.

Katja Eliad debated the issue of sexual minorities with Roxana Dobrin, editor at Ginger Group: *Desire is WAR is a beginning. The subject of homosexuality is vast, moving, deep and truly beautiful just because it is so multiple. These days, I was reading a phrase in a book: «de la fréquence assidue des lisières dépend l'entrée dans les métamorphoses». (Yannick Haenel, Cercle) – entering metamorphoses depends on the assiduous attendance of the edges. For me, being gay means exactly this: remaining open to metamorphoses. Belonging to a minority means being permanently «à la lisière». It is a chance to see and to feel things differently, and when you can communicate and share these things, then you didn't live for nothing... I personally enjoy the state of desire, and I think it is more likely a state of openness rather than of war. Wishing, to wish can even be the step before giving. It is superb.*

In a rather hostile context, *Desire is WAR* is a form of cultural activism that aims to provoke a debate around a certain kind of desire that quite often ignites intense bitter conflicts, even "wars" within families, groups of friends, neighbours, at school, at work or at home: the yearning for same sex persons.

Departing from the activist dimension of artistic actions, Smaranda Șchiopu, also an editor at Ginger Group discussed with Mihai Mihalcea about the path he and his alter-ego Farid Fairuz have chosen.

All I do is act according to the values in which I believe, trying to find different forms of action. What I do sometimes resembles activism, but there is always another dominant layer of the action, a performative side or, in any case, an artistic dimension. I wouldn't say that I am necessary an activist, although I believe that we lack this attitude. I still haven't seen something hardcore in this direction, any proposal that would shake up spirits. Almost all actions are calm, decent, reasonable. There are so many problems, intolerance, masked racism, and discrimination that we need forms of expression that are bolder, and less lukewarm. Unfortunately, the world is so sedated and numb that is difficult to find ways of really short-circuiting stereotypes. Everything seems to perfectly integrate in the generalized spectacle, in this supreme performance in which we live, Mihai Mihalcea said.

The exhibition attempts to go beyond the perception of queer culture as mere liberalization of emotions or threat to the social and political establishment. The works within the exhibition's discourse are focused on a wide array of issues related to desire for same-sex persons: desire as source of inspiration, the struggle for rights to public representation and expression for the LGBT community and analysis of public rhetoric around civil rights, re-contextualisation of heterosexual icons in queer perspective, "spectacular" aura of queerness and associated mythologies, dilemmas and confusion caused by the self-acceptance of asexual orientations that are so often socially blamed, nostalgia, the narrative possibilities presented by juxtaposition of "normal" life with the "other", virtue and sin, compromise and guilt, the power of seduction, queerness as means of aesthetic expression etc. Asked by Smaranda Şchiopu how he had handled his "moment" of a serious intimacy within the exhibition, Ştefan Botez responded: *My project that starts from a failed love affair, represented the beginning of a trilogy I have developed during this year at HEAD (Head haute école d'Art et de design Genève, CH), three projects that talk about intimacy and public space. But „Mi-e dor de tine” (“I Miss You”) talks about broader issues. About losing landmarks once one arrives in a new space, about the visual appropriation of that space. The post-its were dedicated to “him”, but in the end they were dedicated to anyone, and that is the reasoning for the postcard format. I am thinking that the less interesting aspect of the project is the fact that it is based on the end of a relation between two boys.*

Apart from this aspect, I had never had a problem with the fact I like guys. I do have a problem with the term <<homosexual>>, it is a term invented out of economical and political criteria, in order to define something that is actually not there. But we have always liked to invent, put tags and categorize, so we were in a desperate need of this term. The same thing can be stated about the term <<gay>>. And the unconscious repetition of a term, introducing and coagulating it in language will transform into reality something that is normally not there.

In an interview realized this summer, Anna Battista, editor and cultural journalist activating in Great Britain and in Italy, was asking me how we selected the works in the exhibition and how do they function in the conceptual economy of the exhibition.

Dragoș Olea and I tried to extend the horizons of the initial approach as much as possible; therefore, we have combined different media with strong concepts like memory or identity, with emphasis on sensations, vision and imagination. There are several visual artists featured in the show – Muhammad Ali, Ștefan Botez, Katja-Lee Eliad, Matts Leiderstram, Ioana Nemeș, Karol Radziszewski, Emily Roydson and Ryan Trecartin, several musicians – Mikhail Karikis, Matmos and MEN, an artist - choreographer – free thinker – Farid Fairuz, and two fashion theoreticians – the collective Apparatus 22 and designer Olah Gyrfas. But even if they represent distinct parts of the artistic environment, all the listed artists were also working with music, in the same manner the musicians were using art related concepts to support their world of sounds. What we created was a sensitive universe where anything was possible – none of the works was displayed in a classical manner – lyrics written with permanent markers on white tables, tones of duct tape sabotaging the architecture of the space, pictures that left no wall between the represented subject and the viewer, confetti and party-ware spread all over the gallery. In this deconstructed environment, the works themselves were cerebral, and technical; the music from Matmos, or the confessions of Katja Eliad were signaling the gravity of the discussed topic: queer identity and queer art vs. the world.

On the other hand, Anna Battista was interested in the way artists tackle the theme of desire in the exhibited works. *For the artists presented in our project, desire is a pretext. Desire is usually a hidden condition of our existence. The traditional educational system teaches us to reject inner desire and fantasies because they can ruin the balance of our lives. In fact, desire itself is the marker of a new beginning; desire talks about the courage of accepting who you are, understanding the others, and going beyond the margins of the self. It is quite an important challenge, and only few people accept this, because handling desire can be really messy sometimes. There are different forms of desire captured in the Desire is WAR exhibition – desire for self-acceptance in the case of Ioana, sexual desire in the case of Karol or Ali, and desire for clarity and confrontation in the case of Ryan, I was explaining to Anna.*

Dragoș Olea spoke to Anna Battista about the social substrate and the responsibility of the exhibition *Desire is WAR*, in matters of visuality and sound: *The intention was to have both a personal and a social ground in the exhibition. Sometimes the works were having a kind of restless criticality: like the day we selected from Ioana Nemeș's "Monthly Evaluations" series, the video of Ryan Trecartin criticizing the American society's lack of empathy or the Apparatus 22 statement on the ambivalent*

policies of corporations towards the queer community; there were some vaguely sexual works like the pictures of Karol Radziszewski, the drawings of Olah Gyarfas, or Matt's Leiderstram's slide projection of cruising places.

Music was particularly emphasized within the show as we are interested in its potential to act as a tool of mass communication of both radical ideas and genuine emotions on queer desire. This approach stemmed from the historical connection between queer community, visual arts, and music. Numerous musicians have been using pop, dance or rock music together with cultural and historical references in order to wave political critique; in a different spectrum, real personal stories inspired by the desire for same sex individuals have been inserted into a milieu that was resistant to it, thus succeeding to get across a message that otherwise would have had less impact. During his interview with Anna Battista, Dragoş Olea also added: *For us, music was a subversive way to talk with a larger category of people that then would discover also the other works. Anca and I are both music addicts and discussed a lot on the huge influence of music / sound in our life and at a point the idea of having music in the exhibition genuinely surfaced. We tried to avoid all the traps of the gay friendly pop music marketed by major labels, but focused on artists that were writing music truly relevant for the topic although not all the time with very direct link: from the highly charged emotional stories of Mikhail Karikis, to the hardcore political dance music of MEN or the entire album that electro innovators under MATMOS moniker wrote, inspired by queer personalities.*

The exhibition display, made in collaboration with architect Laura Paraschiv deconstructed a widespread cliché according to which urban queer culture is all about parties, promiscuity and glamorous lifestyle. The works were featured in a chaotic post-party set that decomposed the shiny surface, and created an absurd space that asked for attention. The beholder could seize the traces of an artificial happiness, but the real reasons could only be guessed. At first sight, those who entered the exhibition space might have felt menaced by the context, mainly because they expected to see a harsh presentation about queer identity. In the case of our exhibition, the viewers had to discover and relate to the works in a different manner. The exhibition was not only about what was visible, but it imposed direct experience, combined with fear and stepping out of the known existential perimeter.

NB. The full interviews with Ştefan Botez, Katja Eliad and Mihai Mihalcea can be read on <http://gingergroup.ro/>.