

TRANSFORMING NARRATIVES: REACTION, CONTEXT AND THE EMERGING (IM)-POSSIBILITIES OF SOCIAL DISCOURSE ON ART IN CLUJ-NAPOCA¹

MIKI BRANIȘTE²

ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to comprehend the register of existence and the developing of social art practices and discourses in Cluj-Napoca, citing the example of the contemporary art space The Paintbrush Factory, established in 2009. Analysing the operation mode/modus operandi of artists, curators, and cultural agents of Cluj-Napoca, I study the creative pattern based on reaction as a response to the undergoing changes within the socio-political environment of the city as well as those on a global scale. The wider expansion of the urban regeneration theory, that attributes an economic growth factor to culture (based on the existence of creative industries), persuades the local authorities to create a new narrative of a Cluj-Napoca based on the image of a creative city. The Paintbrush Factory is precisely the success story – with a grassroots background, and international standing – that Cluj-Napoca Town Hall needed to legitimise its new development project that sought to put the city on Europe’s map. This ambition of the authorities is reflected in the application for the title of European Cultural Capital 2021. The story of the Paintbrush Factory mirrors this precise transformation of the city, which sees the industrial production being replaced by symbolic production. During this process factories are literally replaced by IT firms and adjacent services, while The Paintbrush Factory that had benefited from a long-term rental of a factory space is eventually displaced in this massive gentrification course of the city.

Keywords: social art and discourse, reaction, Paintbrush Factory, creative city, gentrification

Introduction³

This paper came to being due to my attempt - as a cultural worker and a young researcher - to comprehend the fundamentals of the structural framework I have been experiencing through my work along with my colleagues of the

¹ Translated from Romanian by Árpád Czirják.

² Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University. Cultural manager and curator for performing arts at ColectivA Association and The Paintbrush Factory Cluj-Napoca, miki@colectiva.ro.

³ I wish to thank Oana Mateescu and Árpád Czirják for their helpful discussions and comments.

Paintbrush Factory Federation, in our endeavour to disseminate (and to multiply) a vision on art and culture as vectors of social development in Cluj-Napoca. The article reflects on the conditions that rendered artistic grassroots practices achievable [of the Federation], and the liaison that later ensued with the local authorities in a bid to institutionalize a practiced artistic discourse, that of socially conscious or socially engaged art. My aim is to analyse this very dynamic in relation with the urban regeneration approach that Cluj-Napoca has recently been seeing. Through the lenses of this approach, The Paintbrush Factory has been considered an active participant in the developmental roadmap of the city, but has been displaced in the outcome of this very development, namely the gentrification of Cluj-Napoca.

By way of contextualizing the driven by culture-led development narrative, I seek to identify the ways through which social art creators and cultural workers can retain their relevance on a cultural landscape marked by a profound shift, that of the transition from drawing value from the social dimension of art and culture to that of exploiting the economic gains that derive from them.

In this sense, I will make use of auto-ethnographic research tools, linking them up with theoretical references on par with interpreting documents, reports and strategy pieces, interviews and personal discussions to inform my inquiry. The article will aim to analyse the conditions of existence and development of the social artistic discourse in Cluj-Napoca. I will then place this discourse in the broader context of the progressive aspirations of the local administration pressured to sustain the impression of the magnet city⁴, that looks competitive and attractive both nationwide and internationally.

The period I am discussing in this article spans from 2009 to 2019, and it reflects the political-economic factors that have created a favourable landscape in Cluj-Napoca to galvanize several cultural and art groups with freelance artists and cultural workers. These people have laid the foundations of the Paintbrush Factory Federation, a relatively large organization in comparison with similar independently run art projects throughout the country. The creation of a federation type mega-structure represented those involved and fostered a particular image of the independent culture-scene in Cluj-Napoca. The Paintbrush Factory Federation had even succeeded at a certain point to instil an accurately conceived direction upon the dimension of social art and culture in the development-plans of the city. This cultural platform had managed to raise a critical mass, and to temporarily impose a social discourse on art in the city's public awareness. I am using the verb "to impose" fully foursquare, because at that time Cluj-Napoca public

⁴ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/448771499322731333/pdf/116400-Romanian-Revised-Public-Magnet-Cities-Migration-and-Commuting-in-Romania-ro.pdf>
last accessed on 28.11.2019.

opinion was reluctant to question social issues, and was largely neutral towards counterbalancing the “cultural” themes with those deemed “social” in the public discourse.

Crystalizing by com-pos(ition)ing the social art discourse

With this chapter title in mind I suggest the apparition of several actors, who each on their own or by converging in groups have contributed at the com-pos(ition)ing of the social discourse on art in Cluj-Napoca. Up until 2009 this path has been paved by the representatives of organisations such as the likes of Tranzit House (formed in 1997), Idea. art+society Magazine (established in 1999 and initially printed under the name Balkon), Protokoll Gallery (2000-2007), Mindbomb Group (2000-2009), AltArt Foundation (formed in 1998), Duo van der Mixt (2003-2006) etc. Picturing art through its social and emancipatory dimensions is often likened to left-wing politics, although some of the groups mentioned earlier have had closer affinities to the centre-right (Mindbomb, Duo van der Mixt). All these initiatives had commonly sought to foster critical thinking, to spark public reaction to what was happening locally and nationwide, to grow awareness around citizens’ rights, to re-claiming public space, or voicing the need for tolerance etc. The social vision on art and culture had not been reclaimed earlier than 2009 by the cultural actors associated with left-wing intellectual groups exclusively. It has gathered actors who all shared an interest in the civic emancipation of the people of Cluj-Napoca, Romanians and Hungarians alike, who may not have had an articulate ideological conception at that time. However, these groups had an aversion towards a social discourse, that was constantly submerged to the clichés of the public space attributed to the communist era.

To have a better grasp of the context these independent initiatives surfaced, we need to observe the political scene of those years overshadowed by a nationalist agenda epitomized by the persona of the mayor Gheorghe Funar (1992-2004⁵) and also by the socio-economic environment scarred by a difficult passage to the free market⁶. Most of the manifestos and actions of those mentioned above were thus meant to express the disagreement with the policies of Gheorghe Funar. They also constituted a vivid reaction to the local nationalism, the prospect of ethnic segregation, the privatization of public

⁵ Ghe. Funar was a member of the National Unity Party of Romanians and after having being expelled he joined The Greater Romania Party.

⁶ The privatization of factories was followed by layoffs, and a rough process of professional reintegration.

space, at isolating the city in tune with the local nationalist politics, or at the inability of the Art and Design University at the time to intervene and cater to students' needs (Laura Panait, 2012)⁷.

Moreover, some of them (the publishing house *Idea* and the *Idea. art+society Magazine*) have felt the need to position themselves as Eastern-European artists and theorists and to define themselves through a balanced intellectual relationship with Western-Europe. They were creating artistic, reflexive and theoretical content, and were familiar with new artistic networks, with diverse cultural contexts. They wished to contribute to a local perception on the national and Cluj-Napoca art-scene, that could also be available for the West to see⁸. Being aware of the prospect of self-colonization of the local artistic discourse with that of the Western discourse, they have attempted to endorse the local discourse production that was connected to current debates, while evidently including the Western ones as well.

Consequently, the driving force behind the actions of these artist groups, critical thinkers and cultural figures seems to be the reaction towards the local and European contexts. The access to the broader European realm was largely mediated by the presence of very vibrant foreign cultural centres for the cited period in Cluj-Napoca⁹. These in turn have encouraged the networking of Cluj-Napoca-based artists and provided a source of recognition to the cultural scenery in the absence of other public valid means of recognition from local or national authorities.

These initiatives have managed to rally around them youths that have perceived the emancipatory stakes of the projects they had attended. It is safe to say that they have achieved to shape a generation of artists, curators, theorists, cultural workers, anthropologists, architects etc. that emerged through the contact with the artistic and discursive content created in Cluj-Napoca and elsewhere. I am personally representative of that generation, the very first events I have seen as a student being accommodated by the *Tranzit House*. In retrospect, I can tell that I have been inspired by ideas and concerns of those that have shaped the course of my informal intellectual formation, without being aware at the time of the political stances this formation implied, but fully resonating with the need to spur critical thinking. A significant part that was to be the artistic community of the *Paintbrush Factory* had encountered a reference point, if not their mentors among these cultural and social figures.

⁷ http://www.e-cart.ro/longapril/3/ro/3/08_laura%20panait/Laura-Panait-LA3-ro.pdf, last accessed on 6.09.2019.

⁸ The Journal *Idea. art+society* has pages with content translated in English.

⁹ French Cultural Centre, renamed French Institute and German Cultural Centre also renamed Goethe Zentrum.

Influenced by the working style of those first actors of the artistic and civic independent scene, the emergence of the Paintbrush Factory demonstrates the revival of a reactive creation-pattern. As such these artistic actions are highlighted by the expressions: protest, transformation, cultural diversity, anti-nationalism, reclaiming public space etc., all these strongly tied to the socio-political and economical background of the city. One of the examples that portrays this mood was the performance 'Construction site – Union Square' by the group Mindbomb in 2005, made prior to a public debate that the Town Hall organized over the fate of Union Square, which is the main square of the city. The press-release/manifesto of the group¹⁰ tells us that the members of Mindbomb have placed a billboard in front of the Union Square that has seen in 1994 the re-initiation of an archaeological dig with ancient roman artefacts, that lasted until 2008. During this time the Union Square was partially used, and the archaeological dig has been transformed into a symbol of decaying Romanian-Hungarian community relations, (the artefacts served to legitimate the local nationalist politics aimed at the Hungarian community). The site was used as a means for weakening the attachment locals had towards their city that now had a partially maimed historical centre. Moreover, preserving the archaeological dig throughout that period had made the Union Square unusable for public gatherings, rallies, or cultural events. Here we have a conclusive quote from their manifesto:

The last fifteen years has seen the public space of Cluj-Napoca subjected to outrageous interventions. The changing administrations have treated it is a site of power display, and have reshaped it [the public space] to resemble this power-game. Street names have been arbitrarily changed, often for the sake of an exclusionary nationalist agenda, urban traditions and collective memory has been ignored, statues have been randomly relocated and replaced - often distastefully - by new ones. Almost every possible site has been 'painted in a Romanian style' - trash bins, benches, poles, and sidewalks. Holes have been dug that never were filled up again. By and large parts of our space that belongs to all of us have been taken away inch by inch.

Consequently, we see that forms and artistic, grassroots, and social practices are in a strong connection with the local environment. They pop up as a mode of reaction at social, economic or political causes. The relation of context and socially committed artistic work implies a causality relation among them. The topics of the local environment will end up curating even the local artistic production: the group Duo van der Mixt for example appears as a reaction to

¹⁰ <https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-ro-0502/msg00037.html>,
last accessed on 20.11.2019.

the nationalist politics of the mayor. Their project called “tricolor extravaganza” (Mihnea Mircan) reflects on the outrageous interruptions to symbolically mark the urban space through the excessive use of Romanian flags and by painting urban furniture or the trash bins using the three colours of the Romanian flag¹¹.

In the Romanian decades of transition and post-transition artistic forms seem to substitute civic grassroots expressions in the absence of a dynamic civil society. The examples mentioned earlier demonstrate that one of the major resources to draw inspiration from remained the local environment, and for that generation, reaction as such morphed into a work method.

The Great Recession – the trigger for solidarity building

The generation of artists, cultural workers and curators that were to follow found new affirmation prospects in a different Cluj-Napoca that was being laxer, but most of all craving for development with the arrival of Emil Boc at the Town Hall in 2004¹². By this time Traian Băsescu is elected president, and during the pre-EU integration process major funds are soaked up bringing an upgrade in the living standards and a shift in the consumption behaviour of Romanians¹³. 2007 sees Romania adhere to the European Union, that began a massive wave of migration to other member states, due to the unique market, and the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people. Between 2004-2009 real estate prices soared in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca, the square meter reaching 1.280 EUR in Cluj-Napoca, with the average wage at 290 EUR/month¹⁴.

The effects of the Great Recession started to bite by 2009, and the lack of cash hit a major part of the Romanian economy, that will result in a downturn of real estate value. This downturn enables a large group of artists, gallery owners and cultural workers to take over the spaces of the emptied Paintbrush Factory that ran under the name Perom S.A. The buildings are located in the dormant Mărăști neighbourhood, on the semi-periphery, among apartment buildings, houses and abandoned light-industrial areas. The factory had ceased production

¹¹ <http://www.2020.ro/resources/files/dvdm.htm> last accessed on 15.11.2019.

¹² The mayor represented the Liberal Democratic Party situated on the centre-right of the political spectrum.

¹³ Many citizens manage to obtain a bank loan to buy housing property meaning that the financial terms have eased and the incomes had stabilized compared to the previous years of transition.

¹⁴ <https://www.zf.ro/infografice/evolutia-salariului-mediu-net-din-1990-pana-in-prezent-sursa-ins-8881950>, last accessed on 6.09.2019.

in 2006, after China extended on the Romanian market selling significantly cheaper paintbrushes. The present manager of Perom S.A., Mircea Filip, had planned to invest in the refurbishing of post-industrial¹⁵ spaces to convert them into offices aiming the corporate clients that began to settle in Cluj-Napoca. The ascent of the crisis however stops him short of his plan and he agrees to sublet the remainder spaces of the building totalling 2500 m² square meters to this group that was to establish the future Federation of Paintbrush Factory¹⁶.

Some of us were aware of the fact that through our sheer presence, the physical space that we now inhabited went through a transformation because of the socio-economic changes. The industrial production at the factory was replaced with that of art production after four years of shutting down (Hurducaș, 2016).¹⁷ We also had our sensibilities with regards to the laid-off workers of this factory – and towards other workers with the same fate – in our attempt to understand how the varied stages of the political and economic transition had affected their lives¹⁸. At that time, we couldn't have imagined that our symbolic production will eventually be replaced by the IT industry in the same way. Lately this industry had usurped the rhetoric of the public realm, while emerging as the new pillar of local economic development.

The period of the Great Recession provided a fertile ground for the occurrence of dis-regarded topics by the political environment and the local, national or international media. These are topics that could have not been prevented from being addressed, as they spurred the highly visible Occupy movement, or the rally protests taking place in the United States and several countries in Europe. The new topics represented a plethora of social inequalities with abundant aspects such as: the issue of housing, the access to free university education, the privatization of medical services, the position of the citizen pressed to 'make ends meet', and generally the loss of access and deprivation of some basic social services. While all this was happening to regular citizens, the banks and financial institutions causing this crisis received aid from the states. This fuelled social indignation and oriented the interest of youths and citizens of all ages towards the increased deprivation of some social categories.

¹⁵ The building was finalized in 1982, and the paintbrush production lasted until 2005.

¹⁶ The founding organizations were: AltArt Foundation, GroundFloor Group Association, Arta Capoiera Association, Sabot Association, Artlink Association/Colectiv A, Grupa Mică Association, and Art-hoc Association.

¹⁷ <https://fabricadepensule.ro/hotspotart/media/publicatii/iulia-hurducas-reconstructia-fabricii-de-pensule-in-fabrica-de-pensule/>, last accessed on 10.09.2019.

¹⁸ Alt Art Foundation produced a performance in 2009 that showed the workers of the Paintbrush Factory on a video recording. The performance was presented during the Temps D'Images Festival.

Reaction! And what's next?

Following 2009 the core themes of artists and active organizations in the cultural environment of Cluj-Napoca draw from the un-mediated grip on the local realities, but are doubled by topics that have grown globally familiar. This was made possible by the information access mediated by the Internet, as well as the belonging to international cultural networks. An assembling factor for a part of the Paintbrush Factory community was the engagement for social art and civic involvement. This artistic approach had brought us in the forefront of reclaiming public spaces, warning on the effects of economic migration, campaigning for social change through art, warning on cyanide mining in Roșia Montană, and later supporting the rights of LGBTQ communities. For those preoccupied with the aforementioned issues, togetherness and solidarity were paramount to bolster their message in the most varied and far-reaching mediums as possible. The group was fragmented and not everybody was eager to act on the topics we have mentioned. Moreover, there was no unanimous orientation in the broader community in addressing them. Nonetheless, the messages that rolled out were coherent and systematic in their nature, and this made them become the distinctive brand¹⁹ of the Paintbrush Factory and to indirectly bolster the visibility for the social artistic discourse. Another reason why this discourse was considered identical with the image of the Factory could be that some members of the federation did not have a public discourse (in any artistic direction), but instead hesitated between staying neutral and focusing on their private artistic needs. For those who were in the executive board and have been setting up the artistic course of this space it was paramount that this project positioned itself critically versus the social, economic and political environment in the country. Individually, there wasn't anything compulsory and each co-habitant artist had the right to their own vision or ideas. Yet as a visible group in the cultural landscape we have decided to adopt a critical tone against abuse and social inequalities²⁰ generated as a consequence of state or corporate representatives' actions.

Coming back to reaction as a constitutive element of the *modus operandi* for social art in Cluj-Napoca, I aim further on to interpret the conceptual genealogy of the term and to connect it to the local art scene. Jean Starobinski,

¹⁹ The internal documents of the Paintbrush Factory reveal that the federation aimed to become an open space for debate on the relevant themes for Romanian society and for the city and to get involved in the strategic projects of the city and in (re)phrasing public policies.

²⁰ On 15 December 2010 the inhabitants of the Coastei street were evicted, and more than 200 persons were forcibly relocated next to the landfill of the city - Pata Rât. A number of members of the federation have joined the group of intellectuals in the academia to condemn the abuse of the local authorities. Pata Rât has 1500 inhabitants, 70 % of them being of ethnic Roma origin.

in *Action and reaction. The life and adventure of a couple* (1999) identifies in irritation a preparedness for reaction. Citing authors such as Jaspers, Starobinski sees reaction as a conceptual instrument of the intelligentsia facing the unknown of the human condition. Jaspers binds reaction to action, the first element representing the object of action itself:

It would be mistaken to set in opposition the active and the reactive element, to imagine the possibility of a perfect creativity that would express itself without an object, and likewise it is a misconception to assume that "reactivity is the fundamental feature of life" (Jaspers *apud* Starobinski, 1999: 208).

Benjamin Constant via Starobinski (1999) defines reaction as a universal law reigning over the institutions, and institutions often require major transformations, sometimes achievable only through revolutions. A separate definition comes from Nietzsche (Nietzsche *apud* Starobinski, 1999), who asserts that reaction is a basic condition to the existence of artistic criticism as it creates an opposition with a prior element.

The prior element in the scope of my study is represented by the troubling themes of the local environment that contribute to the inception of artworks. Considering this relationship with that which is prior, we see reaction not as an isolated element but always secondary depending on something else. This occurred opposition – in the absence of a critical mass of artists and social art creators – will marginalize such an attitude in relation to the larger cultural scene. Staying in the underground will define a limited access to resources and this will have a major impact on the way in which social art and its discursive shapes would be visible in the public space. This pattern of creation that has as its underlying element the reaction to the environment will inevitably position itself as being dependent of its cause, in an ongoing struggle that fuels creativity. We might even contend that we are captives of the cause as constraints, and "helplessness makes people push for a change" (Dia Da Costa, 2016).

Reaction is used by the local art environment as a working tool that calls on the need to grow awareness and implement civic action for social change. I would give as an example the artistic programme and column of the 2012 edition Temps d'Images²¹ festival that ran under the catch phrase "A(r)tivate yourself!" (*Artivează-te!*). It taunted the audience to aim their attention at the changes in society and to act in the available framework for them as citizens. In hindsight of the ten editions of the Temps d'Images festival – that I have collectively conceived and organized with the Colectiv A group at the Paintbrush Factory and beyond – I have noticed that the programme and the themes

²¹ <http://tempsdimages.ro/editions/t di-2012/despre/editorial/> (Accessed on 20.11.2019).

addressed were based on the very same reactivity pattern. It exposed us as organizers, artists and the audience to a permanent overdrive when faced with decisions and changes that eventually affected us directly or indirectly, locally or globally. Reaction as such tends to harbour a defensive feature, the preparation for self-defence or, as Starobinski would put it, we position by opposing (1999). Reaction as such is a signal of a beginning, the expression itself has a transitive aspect that positions it in relation to that which predates it (Starobinski, 1999). Could this transitive element be paralleled to a promise of change that the reaction has as its final intent? The promise will fulfil itself only through action, where the latter requires a pro-active approach. Reactivity is an inevitable mode but yet insufficient for social art to evolve and become a reference to the cultural scene and expand to the public space. The timeliness of reaction makes it useful in a *hic et nunc* context. Here it may advance temporary solutions, but the mantra of this *modus operandi* leads us to the operational limits and fewer battles won, although our expectations are to secure the symbolic war in the discursive public space. The conditions of work and existence in the independent cultural space are subject to temporariness and short-term planning: “the temporariness of financing facilitates and even encourages the *ad hoc* reaction as a form of intervention” (Mateescu, 2019²²). However, for the sake of a broader visibility and the adherence of the audience it is required that social art and the discourse it disseminates surpasses the stage of reactivity and moves on from action to the stage of projection and anticipation.

A projective moment was precisely the founding of the Paintbrush Factory Federation, although we may well observe that we took the path of our predecessors and the methodology is identical to theirs: the reaction to the social-political environment. This pattern of creation based on reaction is a thread of the presence of the Paintbrush Factory in the consciousness of its audience and of the attempt to solidify the appearance it wished to deliver. Nevertheless, an intuitive attempt to get past this method was precisely to amass more representatives of social artistic practices, artists and cultural workers alike. Being together in large numbers, sharing the same spaces, and initiating a mutual program has created what we call a critical mass. Our projects were intrinsically reactions to the glocal socio-political circumstances; however, they have garnered a new symbolic dimension. This had rendered our actions robust and visible in the public space (compared to the individual actions of our separate organizations) and propelled us towards becoming a unignorable force. This federalization of the organizations and artists of Cluj-Napoca had clearly amounted in my view to the transition from reaction to action through tactics of solidarity.

²² Extracts from private talks with the anthropologist Oana Mateescu.

The outcomes of the projects by federation members, brought together, have instituted a new work-logic, which was to become the programme logic. The programme is not merely a juxtaposition of projects but aims to convey a single message replicated under varied forms of artistic expression. As time passed the social dimension of art had seamlessly become the vector of the Paintbrush Factory Federation programme. This was so unique that it raised the attention of many national and international visual and performative art curators. Taking the ownership of this artistic direction by some of the more outspoken members of the federation had unlocked novel networking opportunities with art spaces that had a similar platform and views on artistic development. Slowly the national and international media gains interest in exploring the creativity of these artists and cultural workers. With the co-habitation of art forms and the way in which the Paintbrush Factory got organized it became a trailblazer for contemporary arts in Romania. The ability to run a federative community had drawn admiration from afar as other artistic groups in the country had related themselves to us as a model of solidarity.

In 2011 a new project is initiated, The People's School of Contemporary Art²³, and 2013 sees the release of the contemporary art platform "tranzit.ro" in Romania with an office in Cluj-Napoca ran by Attila Tordai, an experienced curator and contributor to the *Idea. art+society Magazine*, as well as the originator of the Protokoll Gallery. These two projects had assumed a left-leaning artistic and intellectual ideology in their platforms. Taking advantage of the national and international appraisals over the combined efforts to create such a space, the socially engaged discourse becomes a blueprint of the Paintbrush Factory. This influences the audience and other young cultural actors such as the Varoterem Project, Reciproca Association, or the Reactor for Creation and Experimentation Association. The dominant artistic discourse between 2009 and 2015 in the independent scene seemed to point to an art and culture that can contribute to the emancipation of the local citizens, in the sense in which J. Rancière sees "the dislocation of the contact line between those who act and those who look, between individuals and members of one collective body" (2008: 27). The cultural dynamics of Cluj-Napoca has been profoundly influenced by the agents mentioned earlier on. Together with others they got involved individually and collectively in the creation of a vision on the social role of art. They have taken responsibility of a shared mission: that of contributing to the understanding of the contemporary world and to foster an engaged and reactive audience.

²³ The People's School of Contemporary Art had functioned as an artistic educational programme between 2011-2012.

Tactical schemes for institutionalization

The success that we have mentioned had contributed to a new prospect of the Paintbrush Factory: although legally an NGO, the outside world has seen us as an institution outright. From within we knew well that we were not a proper institution although many had wished we became one, for different reasons. Looking at the variety of the activities and the diversity of artistic approaches, their frequency in numbers and the quality of the work they sustained, we could even compare ourselves to international institutions. But when it came to the financial background and that of human resources that effectively contributes to the evolution of the federation we could not even come close due to the lack of funding. Fully dependent on the annual AFCN²⁴ grants, local and Norwegian grants, the Federation has had one full time employee, and following the public success two more persons were hired as part-timers. Everybody else who contributed to the project and vision of the Factory, such as the Directors Board of Council (5 to 7 persons) and the president were/are all volunteers. The extensive programme running during the entire existence of the Paintbrush Factory up to the present had been achieved (through self-exploitation) with the energy and engagement of people who had been underpaid. The space had managed to exist due to the internal motivation of those who worked for the collective project. This was the life-line of the federation with artistic activities, professional training, advocacy, cultural mediation and lots of emotional work to preserve the ties with all members.

We were performing the role of a strong institution but we were neither financially secure nor could we claim the safety of benefiting from an infrastructure where we could carry out our future activities. In 2013 there was an art auction in Paris²⁵ with works donated by some of the artists of the Paintbrush Factory that had a surprizing result. The purpose of the auction was to keep our activities going and for us to grow as an independent art space in a time when public funding was seriously affected by the economic crises. There were lengthy negotiations on the ways in which the earnings should be used. Some of the members wanted the stability of the collective project and organisational robustness that implied the provision of financial support to the employees/co-workers of the federation who could raise more funding in the future. Another part of the community proposed dividing up

²⁴ The Administration of National Cultural Fund, the main financial supporter of the independent scene in Romania.

²⁵ We are referring here at the second auction that followed the success of the first one (2012), that had served to address the basic needs of the members and the completion of the lobby-bar-library project on the 1st floor of the Paintbrush Factory.

these earnings among the members with pressing private problems (paying up overdue rent, setting up production costs for new work etc.) We have strived to find a consensus concerning the imperative of financial stability that would have been the run-up to the institutionalization of the project. However, the broader community of the Paintbrush Factory had decided by vote that the collective stability of the umbrella organization is less important than the individual well-being. The ones that were committed to a long-term outlook on the evolution of the Paintbrush Factory had not managed to defend the case for choosing the project sustainability. Having applied the principle of participative democracy and that of horizontality as a federative model, the majority of votes eventually prevailed.

This marks the end of the romantic era at the Paintbrush Factory. The members whose interior drive was the accomplishment of a representative project for an extended group of artists, organizations and a lively cultural vitality of the city had now been disenchanted. Through the existence of this space they have visualized an endeavour to create a community based on the principles of solidarity and redistribution of resources and not a launchpad for their own professional achievements while participating in the project.

A success story – a tool to legitimate the new urban politics

The international media had contributed to the myth-like perception: The Paintbrush Factory is depicted as one of the reasons that Cluj-Napoca is designated as one of the future cities featured in the publication *Art Cities of the Future 21st-Century Avant-Gardes*²⁶. This is the defining moment that raises the interest of Cluj-Napoca Town Hall towards our activities and invites some members of the federation to join varied projects that they had initiated. At that time, the local administration was in the quest for a new identity for Cluj-Napoca to eventually deliver a city brand. The AltArt Foundation (member of Paintbrush Factory) proposes in 2010²⁷ to the Town Hall the prospect to apply for the title of European Cultural Capital for 2021. They accepted and later, with the return of the mayor Emil Boc²⁸, they had assembled a team in charge of the application project, made up of professionals of the independent cultural

²⁶ I cite here an article related to the publication: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/art-cities-of-the-future_n_3949998 (Accessed on 22.09.2019).

²⁷ The mayor at that time was Sorin Apostu (2008-2012), later prosecuted for corruption in office in 2014, and freed in 2016.

²⁸ Emil Boc has been Romania's PM between 2008-2012, and his government collapsed due to anti-austerity protests during January-February 2012.

sector and members of the local administration. They were backed by most local cultural institutions (public, independent, and private), the university, businesses and the political environment. The project was endorsed politically as well, resulting in a cross-party consensus rarely seen before. Cluj-Napoca Town Hall was convinced that this project was an adequate way to transform the image of the city. The administration was eager to solidify the image of an attractive and competitive city eyeing the business environment by scoring titles that had European recognition (and rejoiced later with the title of European Youth Capital in 2015). Cluj-Napoca joins the pattern of the post-industrial town that is eager to establish a new narrative to rid itself from a haunting past failure of economical anonymity and cultural provincialism. As the majority of industrial platforms shut down, the production will need to be relocated²⁹. Cluj-Napoca gradually moves on from industrial production to symbolic production, in our case that of artistic production, as Sharon Zukin points out articulately:

...from factory towns to postmodern cities, as both material and symbolic constructions. As I continued to think about cities, I began to think of their economies as based increasingly on symbolic production (1996: ix).

The Paintbrush Factory turns into the local success story that the Town Hall needed in order to deploy the image of the new Cluj-Napoca³⁰. The international high profile of our project and the professional attitude of two of our important members of the Board, Rarița Zbranca and István Szakáts, got them invited to carry out two strategic projects for the city. Consequently, the name of the Paintbrush Factory will be correlated with these initiatives: the preparation of the project Cluj-Napoca - European Cultural Capital in 2021 and the Cultural Strategy of the city. The two bore with them the commitment to art and culture as agents of social development and have suggested programmes to improve the artistic environment by stimulating inter and trans-sectoral cooperation among independent cultural actors and public institutions; they have promoted formats and frameworks that would enable the co-creation of artistic events by the audience and the artists. The pair have also been interested to develop the active participation of the audience during the cultural act and in the idea of embracing the city's social development through culture³¹. The

²⁹ Cluj-Napoca is defined in the local strategy as a city based on services: <https://primariaCluj-Napocanapoca.ro/strategia-de-dezvoltare-a-municipiului-Cluj-Napoca-napoca-2014-2020/> (Accessed on 10.10.2019).

³⁰ Starting with 2015 it becomes a primary project for of the local funds (among other beneficiaries).

³¹ https://www.capitalaculturala2021.ro/Files/dosare/Cluj-Napoca%20napoca/Cluj-Napoca-Napoca%202021_Application%20form%20ECoC_english%20version.pdf (Accessed on 10.10.2019).

needs of the private, public and independent cultural scene (financial stability, the inclusion in a planned strategy and thus long-term thinking) and the municipality's need of affirmation on the national and international scene had given momentum for the opening of a new stage of the cultural and social life of Cluj-Napoca.

The Town Hall has approved this vision on art following lengthy negotiations. In the run-up preparations for the application, the project contributors were cautioned that the word 'social' had too frequently appeared in the texts in the detriment of the word 'culture'. They were asked to rephrase the wording to soften the left-wing ideological stance that sticks out in the discourse³². Thus the first differences appear in the approaches: the recipient applicant - the Town Hall - has a centre-right political orientation but the discourse of those who formulated the concept for the application was anchored in the social vision on art, revealing their left-leaning orientation.

The pair had feverishly worked to draft the local cultural strategy of the city for the period 2014-2020, this being a compulsory phase in submitting the candidacy application to the authorities of the European Union (2015). The strategy aims to establish sustainable development for the independent and public cultural environment with the objective to support the completion of the candidacy application. To underline this, the strategy names a range of priorities like: "the necessity of a new approach to culture, as a facilitator of social transformation".³³ This priority registers itself in the generic concept of the city's strategy - that of the *quality of life*.

The seductiveness of the creative city

In the strategy plan of the city, the concept of progress is marked by the presence of culture:

Cluj-Napoca will be a reference in itself for Europe due to its dynamic, vibrant cultural life, that fosters initiatives and experimenting. Culture will represent a cross-sectoral factor in assembling the community, by acting as a vehicle of social transformation and urban regeneration.³⁴

³² Interview with István Szakáts, one of the advocates and thinkers of the concept for Cluj-Napoca - European Capital of culture 2021.

³³ The Development Strategy of Cluj-Napoca, pp. 214, Cultural Strategy, <https://storage.primariaCluj-Napocanapoca.ro/userfiles/files/strategia2015.pdf>, (Accessed on 28.11.2019).

³⁴ <https://storage.primariacluj-napoca.ro/userfiles/files/strategia2015.pdf>, (Accessed on 28.11.2019).

Influenced by some experts who have embraced the theories of Richard Florida on urban regeneration, Cluj-Napoca Town Hall adopts the idea that culture and creativity have the potential to contribute to urban development and economic upturn (2012). Florida also introduces the term “creative class”, embodied by the young professionals who can contribute to local economic progress through their presence. The creative class is the new middle-class made up of artists, creatives, accountants, professors, hairstylists etc, people who usually don’t do manual work. Luring and retaining them in the cities, as well as creating the context for their growth seem to be the main success of urban regeneration policies (Florida, 2012).

Entrepreneurship, and the level of partnership creation, is displayed in this city’s strategy as a local resource that contributes to the quality of local democracy. Putting this to value could boost the creative and innovative profile of the city as unparalleled throughout the region. Two new distinct features of the strategy are highlighted: on one hand the innovative, creative, competitive city (local economic development, competitiveness, tourism, IT), and on the other hand the local culture and identity (revealed by the historical identity, culture, European values). I want to signal here the pairing of entrepreneurship, as an expression of economic development, with democracy, a political concept. Entrepreneurship represents a pillar for the local administration, endorsing it under varied forms, and naming it as a necessity for the progress of our urban laboratory. The cultural strategy itself foresees the creation of tax-related facilities for cultural entrepreneurship and the creative industries.

Creativity and entrepreneurship are cited as the new strengths of Cluj-Napoca compared with the competitors:

We are speaking of a sophisticated city, with economy and services based on intelligence, entrepreneurship, and creativity, with high ranking prosperity, with a vibrant university community and a variety of choices for inhabitants regarding their living standards. In a nutshell we are talking about a community that draws by prosperity and high living standards a sophisticated and entrepreneurial human resource, a creative city.³⁵

For whom did the authorities want Cluj-Napoca to appeal? Who are the recipients of the new city brand? Investors, tourists, future inhabitants, the local political elite? The developing direction of the city approved by the Town Hall - included in the development strategy - is that of raising the living standards of the inhabitants of a “smart” and creative city with an emphasis on urban and cultural innovation. The municipality designates the type of inhabitants it desires, and provides aid and amenities for those who drive the ‘magnetism’ of the

³⁵ Idem, 33.

city: IT companies, banking services etc., and cultural entrepreneurs also, as long as they set up high-profile events to cater for citizens' need of entertainment. Interpreting this preference, we see how the appearance and the cultural menu of the city reflect what and who should be visible in the city (Zukin, 1996).

With the exclusive attention channelled on the significance of the creative class of Cluj-Napoca, the city tends to become representative for this privileged category of inhabitants. In other terms we are witnessing in Cluj-Napoca the phenomenon of "the Creative Class becoming the dominant class in society", as Florida puts it (2012: xxi). Examining the outcomes of strategies on urban regeneration politics that spawned from Florida's theory, Angela McRobbie concludes: "More ordinary workers whose ambitions do not coincide with this ideal are as faded out of the picture as those who are vulnerable or 'truly disadvantaged'" (2016: 140). Cluj-Napoca matches this insight, while the city is known for the inefficiencies of its social inclusion politics. Among the examples that demonstrate it is a 2017 decision (following the petition of the Desire Foundation) of the College Board of the National Council to Combat Discrimination, that the local public administration has discriminative criteria regarding the allotment of social housing³⁶. Another author, Jamie Peck, denounces the "formula of Doctor Richard Florida" revealing that:

entrenched problems like structural unemployment, residential inequality, working poverty, and racialized exclusion are barely even addressed by this form of cappuccino urban politics (Peck, 2007)³⁷.

In his reading, creative strategies are artificially crafted to co-exist with these problems, but not to solve them (Peck, 2007). One of the consequences of the creative cities' strategies is the rise in social inequalities, Florida himself acknowledging the shortcomings of his theory: "It's not just a vicious cycle but an unsustainable one — economically, politically, and morally" (2013)³⁸.

This city's strategy destined to support the new brand built around the success of cultural engagement and the IT industry adds to the new perceptions of Cluj-Napoca that blends in the trends of the optimist narrative of urban poles driven by the creative economy. The application for the title of European Cultural Capital was the midterm project that implemented and reasserted the new profile of Cluj-Napoca as a creative and socially inclusive city. The Paintbrush Factory was one of the pillars of this project at the time of the application.

³⁶ <http://casisocialeacum.ro/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CARAMIDA-Nr1-web.pdf>, (Accessed on 29.11.2019).

³⁷ <https://www.eurozine.com/the-creativity-fix/>, (Accessed on 29.11.2019).

³⁸ <https://www.citylab.com/life/2013/01/more-losers-winners-americas-new-economic-geography/4465/>, (Accessed on 29.11.2019).

Looking back with the needed disengagement and accepting the painful fact that I was also part of the dynamic, I will assert that the Paintbrush Factory has embodied the transformation of the City. It incarnates the expression of the way in which a new type of production replaces an older one. The new narrative was meant to lure investments that would regenerate the urban industrial areas, by making space for those who are seen as the new industrialists, the creatives (Oana Năsui, 2017). By using the example of the local success story of the Factory, as it gained the trust of a larger public for creativity etc., the Town Hall managed to rally the acceptance of the new city profile by the city's inhabitants.

A tense moment ensued between the local authorities and István Szakáts – who was member of the team that conceptualized the application – when the Cluj-Napoca *feuille de route* for the visit of the European jury was mapped before they ruled if Cluj-Napoca or Timișoara would win the European title³⁹. Szakáts had created a cultural programme called Jivipen within the application that would bring more visibility to the Roma community from Pata Rât, and would open up the Cluj-Napoca community towards our fellow Roma neighbours. The Town Hall had taken Pata Rât off the list of locations that were supposed to be visited. It had difficulties to accept that the area and its inhabitants are a meaningful part of the life of the city that the jury was about to assess. After lengthy and tough negotiations, the authorities gave in and the jury made a short visit. This approach demonstrates that accepting social inclusion as a matter of the city's strategy⁴⁰ and that of the candidacy application too, was integrated more in written form (specific requirements for the application from the EU) than being embraced in reality. The cited situation reminds us of how Matt Lassiter via Peck describes these attitudes: “ignoring social problems of segregation and poverty, and instead try to transform the image rather than the reality ...” (2007).

Conclusions

The two mentioned documents that received contributions from Paintbrush Factory's members⁴¹ outline their effort to instil a social vision of art in the city's strategic documents and as such to exert an influence on the

³⁹ Interview with István Szakáts.

⁴⁰ Excerpt from the Strategy: “Cluj-Napoca will be a city that fosters the principles of inclusion and socio-territorial cohesion securing the participation of vulnerable groups on the decision-making process related to priorities of development.”

⁴¹ Amongst other colleagues who were mentioned, the following persons contributed also: Corina Bucea (Cultural Strategy), Diana Marincu and Miki Braniște (Cluj-Napoca - European Capital of Culture).

cultural policies, as well as to institutionalize the social discourse on art in Cluj-Napoca. Although this vision was embraced by the Local Council as it approved the documents, it was to be performed merely in discourse but not in practice. Their contribution at the attempt to impose in strategic documents culture/art as a trigger for creating social context (István Szakáts, 2019) is gradually watered down by the global-scale imposition of the vision of the “creative economy”. Culture is glorified for the ability to generate income and to participate in the economical race of cities (through creative industries, especially IT) whereas the social dimension comes secondary at best (depending on the cultural policies that are implemented). Art and culture are transformed in pretences to create economical contexts or to put this in Peck’s words: “art and culture are discursively commodified, as productive assets and positive externalities of creative capitalism...” (2007).

This ability of culture to generate income was tested out by the Cluj-Napoca Town Hall with the occurrence of sizeable events and festivals like the European Youth Capital (2015), and later the Untold Festival, or with the Cluj-Napoca Days, organized by the local authorities etc. Starting with 2015 there is a strong growth of cultural events that alters the city vibe, and changes also the profile of the visible organizations and the promoted cultural content on display. The investment in the communication and marketing of these events outweighs the importance of the artistic and social content, whereas events with a tighter communication budget are virtually invisible. The interest towards entertainment grows more and more evident, and large events begin to use public spaces to attract increasing numbers of audiences. A few examples of new festivals and fairs that use culture as a vehicle to stimulate consumption are Untold Festival⁴², Street Food Festival, the Christmas Fair etc.

The initiative to institutionalize both the Paintbrush Factory and the social art discourse had failed, and in the meantime other actors have emerged as important cultural players. The Paintbrush Factory loses ground also because an internal conflict broke out leading to the split of the federation in 2016. This led to the establishment of a second federation that assembled exclusively visual artists and gallery owners. They have eventually relocated to another industrial space in 2017. Taking advantage of the split, the manager of Perom S.A. begins to remodel the factory spaces implementing his initial plan to develop office spaces for IT companies. Once the redeveloping plan begins at the Factory, a second wave of fragmentation will follow suit, and the critical mass that converged before began to fade considerably. The transformation of the Paintbrush Factory spaces in offices to let for IT firms blends in the generic trend of massive real-estate developments with city’s gentrification. H. Barbusse street

⁴² <https://untold.com/>.

itself, where the original Paintbrush Factory is located, is going through a constant transformation, that will soon have three major office buildings leading to spiking prices and hindered traffic in that area. Our rent and expenses used to cost 5.8 Euros/sqr. meter all taxes included, but the new tenants - the IT firms - pay 10 Euros/sqr. meter for the rent only. These sums surpass the budget of an NGO or a midsize institution in Cluj-Napoca. In 2018 when several firms moved in the new building on H. Barbusse, the Town Hall has introduced a new bus line to the area. Our requests for a bus service during cultural events have been refused repeatedly. The phenomenon of gentrification that has started out in the city's centre has now extended to areas which ten years ago we would have called "peripheries". As a result, it is impossible in the present to rent a similar sized post-industrial building, as the majority are sold and are being refurbished as offices or apartment buildings.

I would conclude that a series of circumstances led to the dissipation of the social art discourse in Cluj-Napoca: the inability to achieve the institutionalisation of the Paintbrush Factory Federation, its diminishing influence as a powerhouse of the local and national artistic discourse, the closure of the Temps D'Images festival due to lack of resources that would enable its growth, the disengagement and abandonment of the measures that were indicated in the strategy, the ideological ambiguity as well as the entrepreneurial stance on the programme of the Cluj-Napoca - European Cultural Capital (project inherited now by Cluj-Napoca Cultural Centre⁴³). The present cultural environment pushes this discourse back to an insular condition rife only in some micro-communities of Cluj-Napoca that overlap each other, and accordingly it remains isolated as a public discourse. It needs a fertile environment to multiply and revive itself, but most of all it needs to be embraced and developed by a new generation of artists, producers, cultural managers, curators. A new fertile environment will certainly not emerge from a project-base financing, as these too are shrouded in uncertainty⁴⁴; and neither will it be welcome with arms wide open by the authorities.

Fulfilling the strategy of the creative city that is ceaselessly competitive (Peck, 2007) squeezes out fresh defensive reactions though (Mateescu, 2019)⁴⁵. I believe that the quest needs to be accomplished by the emerging artists, curators and cultural workers. The critical mass needs to be rebuilt

⁴³ The Cultural Centre is a new cultural agency meant to pursue the plans of the Cluj-Napoca - European Capital of Culture 2021 Association, which had set itself the goal to accomplish a significant share of the ECOC candidacy application project.

⁴⁴ Note the downsizing of the number of projects that had been selected for funding by AFCN in June, due to national budget cuts.

⁴⁵ Extracts from private talks with the anthropologist Oana Mateescu.

with new and old agents, taking notice of the prior experiences of the Paintbrush Factory, while looking out for the current changes and the anticipation of future shifts in circumstances. This background of collective problems that local cultural agents experience could create the opening-up needed to reassemble communities that embrace the social artistic discourse, and to eventually reinstate it in the public space of Cluj-Napoca.

Facing the gentrification of the city, the Town Hall's imposition of temporariness on the use of cultural spaces when a long-time use is needed⁴⁶, as well as the transformation of culture into a political and economic instrument – the cultural actors find themselves in a one way out situation, that is to fight or flight.

REFERENCES

- Da Costa, Dia (2016). *Politicizing creative economy: activism and a hunger called theater*. University of Illinois Press.
- Florida, Richard (2012). *The rise of the creative class*. Basic Books.
- Florida, Richard (2013). *More losers than winners in America's New Economic Geography*. Citylab. <https://www.citylab.com/>; (29.11.2019).
- Hurducas, Iulia (2016). *Reconstrucția fabricii de pensule în Fabrica de Pensule*, [The Reconstruction of the Paintbrush Factory in The Paintbrush Factory]. <https://fabricadepensule.ro/hotspotart/media/publicatii/>; (10.09.2019).
- Huffpost (2017). *Here Are The 12 Cities That Will Shake Up The Art World In The 21st Century*. <https://www.huffpost.com/>; (22.09.2019).
- Jean, Starobinski (1999). *Action et réaction: Vie et aventures d'un couple*. Editions du Seuil.
- McRobbie, Angela (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Polity Press.
- Mircan, Mihnea. *History defeated. The art of Duo van der Mixt*. <http://www.2020.ro/>; (15.11.2019).
- Panait, Laura (2012). *Grupul Mindbomb [Mindbomb Group]*. <http://www.e-cart.ro/longapril/3/>; (06.09.2019).
- Peck, Jamie (2007). The creativity fix. *Eurozine*. <https://www.eurozine.com/>; (29.11.2019).
- Năsui, Oana (2017) (Edt). *Noii industriași, creativii*, [The New industrialists, the creatives]. Postmodernism Museum.

⁴⁶ Refill project: https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/iap_Cluj-Napoca_eng.pdf, (Accessed on 26.09.2019).

- Ranci re, Jacques (2008). *Le spectateur  mancip *. La Fabrique  ditions.
- Vincze Eniko, Zamfir George (2017). Locuinte publice: raspuns la criza locuirii [Public housing: answer to the housing crisis]. *Caramida*. <http://casisocialeacum.ro>; (29.11.2019).
- Ziarul Financiar (11.01.2012). *Infografice - Evoluția salariului mediu net din 1990 p n   n prezent* [Infographics - The Evolution of Net Average Salary from 1990 to the Present]. <https://www.zf.ro> ; (06.09.2019).
- Zukin, Sharon (1996). *The cultures of cities*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Documents

- Nettime.org - Online Info on Contemporary art projects Archive, Temps d'Images Festival - online Archive.
- Banca Mondial  (2017), Orașe Magnet, Migrație și navetism  n Rom nia, [Magnet Cities, Migration and Commuting in Romania].
- Primaria Cluj Napoca (2015), Strategia de dezvoltare a municipiului Cluj Napoca, 2014-2020, [Cluj-Napoca City Hall, Municipal Development Strategy, 2014-2020].
- Cluj Capital of Culture 2021 Association (2016), Application form ECoC.