

## About art and the ways we look at the world

by h.arta group

Why do we learn the things we learn? How do we relate to them personally? How do they change us? Is knowledge a process or a product? What is the purpose of school, beyond the transmissions of an abstract knowledge? What are the behaviours that are encouraged in school? How are power relations translated through the education process? How can we overcome the fact that knowledge is just a symbol of the power that you can use in order to compete with the others and not a practical tool for finding a common ground with the ones around you in order to construct a less suffocating reality?

Thinking about all these questions we wrote *About art and the ways we look at the world*, a model for a schoolbook, a result of our practice as schoolteachers but also as artists interested in strategies of learning. *About art and the ways we look at the world* is an outcome of our wish to find ways of learning and teaching that would bypass the single perspective that is presented most of the time as the only “Truth”. We wanted to write a schoolbook that would teach young people (and ourselves) to use art as a tool for understanding and changing things in our real lives.

The book’s seven chapters are structured around the different purposes that art can serve: 1. speak about our lives, make us recognize ourselves in it (everyday life); 2. induce dialog and sociability (collaborative projects); 3. reconsider the notions we take for granted, question the culture we usually consider immutable and sheltered from any doubt (institutional critique); 4. help us accept/understand those around us (multiculturalism); 5. change our viewing angle, make us aware that there are many positions from which to know a thing and that there is no transcendental and atemporal truth (feminism); 6. attract attention on problems, give a voice to the excluded ones (political art); 7. effectively solve problems in society (art for social change).

The book is used (by us and by others who need it) in different informal situations of non-hierarchical teaching and learning. Also, besides its practical purposes, the book wishes to be a model for a way of knowledge production that takes into consideration the everyday life, the body and the emotions, that is an outcome of collaborations and sharing, and that is in a constant process of transformation and re-consideration.

There are 3 different layers in the structure of this text:

1. Each section of the text starts with a quotation from the text of the schoolbook *About art and the ways we look at the world*. The sections of this text have the same names as the chapters of the schoolbook. For each of the chapters of the schoolbook, we chose a story from the context of our country, a story that is linked to the ideas developed in the chapter. We chose to find a correspondent to each chapter coming from our social, political and personal contexts in order to emphasize the main motivation that we had when we decided to write a schoolbook about art. The present curricula for art education in Romania consists exclusively of topics that are constructing art as a completely “autonomous” realm, hovering above reality. Having the experience of teaching year after year about topics such as “the composition”, “the colour contrasts”, “point, line, surface”, etc, we really needed to find ways of explaining about art as a potential tool for interpreting reality, for

breaking the monolith of the dominant ideologies and finding more spaces opened for each of us.

2. This is a text written collectively and the second layer of it refers to the fact that we want to make the process of its writing transparent. This is why the voice that is narrating is sometimes of a person and sometimes of a group. This text that we are passing from one to another, trying to speak together and to harmonize our voices, is an example for the ways in which we are negotiating between ourselves the possibilities to say “we”.

3. The third layer of this text refers to the constant problems and dangers involved in the act of trying to explain a local situation and to make it understandable to another context. How to choose what is more generally relevant? What is the point of reference against which you are making these choices? How to avoid the danger of presenting your situation as an exception that can be used once more to reinforce the rhetoric of “normalization”?

### **1. Introduction. How do we attain knowledge?**

Naturally, if we think about these principles about the autonomy of reason, about objective truth and progress through scientific discovery, we can conclude that they are right. Reason, science, progress, individual freedom, emancipation, all these beautiful words can build the image of a world we long to live in, of a utopia we might want to make real. But the questions arising from here are: Is the world such a transparent and clear place and can we truly master it with our minds? Then, who decides what is rational and what isn't? What are to do those whose lives and experiences do not match the universal Truth? Is rational knowledge the only possible means for knowledge? What happens with the multiplicity of the world, with all those slices of existence these ideas banish into penumbra and silence?<sup>1</sup>

In the year 1999, following a decision of the Ministry of Education, there were written five alternative schoolbooks for the discipline Romanian History. These schoolbooks presenting a relativised and non-canonical view on history (both because of the mere fact that through their existence it was declared that there can be five different versions of the history of the Romanians and also because of their content) were the reason for a long and passionate debate in the mass media and, even more, they were on the agenda of one meeting of the Deputy Chamber from the Romanian Parliament. The school curricula for the final high school grade, curricula on which these schoolbooks were based, was emphasising for the first time subjects that were ignored and considered to be non-relevant until that point, subjects such as: everyday life in different periods, the histories of Jews in Romania, the integration politics for the different minorities from the territory of our country, etc. Also the recent history of Romania, following the events of 1989 was an important part of these schoolbooks. The ways in which the historical events were presented in these schoolbooks were concentrating less on a chronological display of facts and personalities and more on a approach of history through the fragmented stories of everyday life, mentalities and institutions, this being an effective strategy of tempering the nationalistic tones from the teaching of the national history. With all the ideological problems and lacks of these manuals (and with all the contentious political circumstances that led to the writing of them), still they were an important step in stating that history is a tool of

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<sup>1</sup> All the mottoes are quotations from the text of the schoolbook we have written, *About art and the ways we look at the world*, published in *Periferic 7/ Social processes catalogue*, 2006, Ed Polirom, Iasi, Revolver, Berlin, edited by Marius Babias and Angelika Nollert.

[www.aboutartandthewayswelookattheworld.blogspot.com](http://www.aboutartandthewayswelookattheworld.blogspot.com)

constructing our everyday realities and an important way of changing a nationalist and positivist perspective on history through the practice of teaching and learning. Also the language and images of these books (especially of one of them, the most contested one<sup>2</sup>) were different from the usual high tone of appraisal of “our heroes”, and were trying to have a more relaxed voice. The students that were to read these schoolbooks would have found out primarily that there isn’t such a thing like one History but a multitude of rewritings of it, a myriad of meanings that are attributed to the events retrospectively and which are reconstructing history and nation over and over. The reactions to the apparition of these schoolbooks were vehement, involving different levels of society and taking different forms, like mass media debates, discussions in the academic circles, statements given by politicians and finally the discussions in the Parliament. These discussions revolved around, on one hand the need for a more contemporary approach in education (also sometimes with the undertone of the European integration) and on the other hand around the nationalistic indignation that “our History” and “our heroes” are taken in deride (the latter stance being the more frequent). The whole matter was discussed in the Parliament on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 1999, when 58 members of the Deputy Chamber signed a motion against the curricula for the Romanian history. The motion was finally voted down but this motion was the pretext for a broad discussion about history being or not a construction and about the right to educate our children outside the rhetoric of the “tradition”, “patriotism”, “national pride”, etc, being legitimate or not.

This happened a while ago, of course, and now it is a taken for granted fact that for every discipline teachers can choose between different schoolbooks (although there are not big differences between the viewing angles from which the facts are presented in these different schoolbooks). But although everybody (teachers, students, parents) is used now to the fact that history, same as any other discipline, can be thought in different ways, still the topics that were brought up in the Parliament and the mass-media debate are very relevant for Romanian context. This discussion about the nature of History was a way of revealing the two main official positions regarding education: on the one hand the nationalistic pride and on the other the eagerness to fulfil the conditions requested for the European integration. These two dominant positions: nationalism vs. unquestioned acceptance of the legitimacy of the European regulations regarding education, are still here till today.

## **2. About ordinary life**

The way we understand the term "personal" eludes dialogue and analysis, a thing that can be summarized in the phrase "It's personal". To say about something that it is personal does not only mean to say that that particular thing is private, but also to declare it as not relevant in the broader sense, as not political, and to say, as a consequence, that our personal lives don't say anything, either, about the political and the social. Also, in the same manner, it is assumed that there is a separation between art and life and, the same as the private realm, art is autonomous from the larger field of economics and politics.

I didn’t end up studying in an art high school due to a long time wish to learn how to paint; I didn’t use to be a “great talent”. It just happened that because of the stress and restlessness that the soon to come high school admission exam was making me

experience, I was feeling a great urge to paint. I was painting even in my night dreams. It was an urge I never felt before and that I never again experienced so intensely. It wasn't anything personal in the subject I wanted to paint. I just wanted to do a picture of something beautiful, of something that I knew that everybody would say it is beautiful: a sunset on a beach. But I wanted to paint this image differently from what I learned in school, to use oil on canvas instead of watercolours on paper. I copied the sunset from one of the stamps from my brother's collection, but the materials and the technique were something I invented, using what I found in the house. It was something between kitchen and house painting.

My mum was surprised by my newly discovered skill (same as I was actually). This is when it was settled that I got talent and this is when I decided to enrol at the art high school, which was never an option before.

During high school I learned very fast to be ashamed of the former proof of my talent, so I threw away the sunset canvas at some point. It was too personal. Cubism and then abstractionism guided my talent during high school. Later, in art academy, important was what happened before conceptual art, materism and gestual painting being the most present in my mind, and I never rehabilitated that sunset painting again.

This is what I try to do now. It is true that maybe the sunflower cooking oil that I mixed with the house painting pigments would have been wet even till this day and most probably the painting would have smelled like kitchen, but this is how it smelled back then, when I painted it, too.

A sunset with the marks of all my limitations, more powerful than many other memories and more important than many other wishes.

### **3. About dialogue and sociability**

The role of art is no longer to shape imaginary or utopian realities, but rather to find ways of being or action models within the existing reality.

We met the members of C.A.R.E. Centre<sup>3</sup> in the summer of 2007 and we saw them discussing from equal positions, teachers and students, debating with the same seriousness (and wonderful humour) subjects relating to care and attention to the others, non-discrimination, tolerance, future hopes, personal feelings and expectations. We saw Roxana Marin, the initiator of the centre, acting according to her ideas about education, that should be informal, without hierarchies, going beyond the school curricula and enfolding the personal lives of the ones involved in its process, based on real communication and friendship. Roxana reading and commenting the poems her students write, taking trips with them trough the country, encouraging them (and also their parents) to take part in civic actions, getting involved and helping them in their personal problems, sending them long emails with her New Year's resolutions or with her favourite poems, having with them long discussions about love stories and politics and the importance of getting involved and trying to change the unfair things around, discussions from which everybody learns equally.

The work that Roxana and her students are doing at the centre, the methods of discussing topics relating to queer, gender, political awareness, etc, all these in the frame of keeping the centre as autonomous as possible and resisting the neo-liberal

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<sup>3</sup> The Center for Action and Responsibility in Education (CARE) operates on the premises of the National Bilingual College George Coșbuc in Bucharest. [www.care.cosbucbilingv.ro](http://www.care.cosbucbilingv.ro)

logic, which is permeating the educational context, such as most aspects of life, is an important and rare example of self-reflexive, anti-authoritarian education. What are the possibilities to use words such as “dialog”, “communication”, “personal involvement” and to keep their unaltered meaning and power, without risking an impression of empty rhetoric? Is it possible, though, to explain the importance of an alternative model such as C.A.R.E. Centre without referring to the problems of an educational system that is now in a process of transformation from the obsolete models constructed during the totalitarian regime to the unreflective acceptance of the neo-liberal models?

#### **4. About (art) institutions**

Given the fact that, generally, worldly things are transient and that, oftentimes, life is precarious, we have the tendency to expect art, in compensation, to be stable and unchanging. But at the same time there are things we appreciate precisely because they are transient, whose beauty and ability to move us comes precisely from the fact that they are ephemeral, such as sunsets, and snow, and a stranger glimpsed fleetingly on the street. Therefore, why shouldn't we allow art to be as alive and changing as our lives? [...] Moreover, if we consider art as being outside ethical principles, we can no longer expect it to have an impact on society, to change anything.

The following story should be an illustration for the institutional critique chapter from the schoolbook, chapter that refers solely to the art institutions and their impact on the ways in which we regard art as something “neutral” and without any potential for social change. But we discussed and we decided that we want instead to talk about a different example of “institutional critique”, an energy-giving example for the power that lies in each and every one of us.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 2006, Emil Moise, activist and school teacher in the town of Buzău directed a petition (signed by 23 other members of the civil society) to the National Council Against Discrimination, petition requesting the removal of religious symbols from the classrooms in the public schools. The petition stated that the presence of these religious symbols (present on the walls of most of the classrooms in Romanian schools) are discriminatory in two different ways. On the one hand their presence is a discrimination against the atheist students or the ones having a different religion than orthodox and on the other hand these icons that are implicitly transmitting the ideas undermining women, ideas perpetuated by the institution of the Orthodox Church, are discriminatory against the female students. The petition approved by the National Council Against Discrimination but ignored by the Ministry of Education (the icons are still there, above the teacher's desks, in most of Romanian classrooms) had the important role of getting into a public discussion the idea that religion can be a source of discrimination of girls and women, in a country in which the Orthodox Church is a powerful institution and in which 86 % of the population considers that religion should be confessionally taught in public schools <sup>4</sup>.

Is it possible to explain the feeling of helplessness that is such a usual state of mind for many people, in the present Romania when the power of common people to change their circumstances and control their lives seem to constantly decrease? When one ideology was replaced by another without any significant change in the sense of individual freedom or happiness? Emil Moise's importance as a regular person who has the energy and the courage to imagine possible changes is even more relevant in a

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<sup>4</sup> Gallup 2003 Institute for Public Policies Bucharest, *Intolerance, discrimination and authoritarianism in the public opinion*.

context that is so often rendered inactive by the disappointing transformations it experienced.

## 5. About those who are different, about the others, about us

Since each individual can comprehend a limited range of human capacities and emotions and grasps only a part of the totality of human existence, people need other cultures to help them understand themselves better, expand their intellectual and moral horizon, save them from narcissism and from the obvious temptation to absolutise themselves.

I remember that a few years ago, during Romania's way to "normality", I was trying to find out the reasons why everything went so wrong in my country. What I was most often finding during these periods of reading about Romania and our recent history was not an analysis of the problems from the present, but the continuous projection of these problems on some past "extreme times". These "extreme times" were always designating the communist regime; the role of Romania in the holocaust was rarely mentioned.

Of course that you can call the communist period in Romania an "extreme time". Through the unofficial hierarchies the power took over all the ideals of the Left and instead of equality we've got forced uniformity, instead of acceptance of diversity we've got oppressed personality, silenced minorities, difference considered as deviation, we've got fear, lack of imagination and lack of courage. But still, communist times were not the only "extreme times" in our recent history.

Only in November 2004 it was officially admitted the Romanian role in the Holocaust, as a conclusion of the *Final report of the International Commission for the Study of Holocaust in Romania* [6], report according to which in Romanian territories, in the period 1941-1944, died between 280.000 and 380.000 Jews and around 11.000 Roma, all these being the result of a politics based on "a long tradition of antisemitism among political and intellectual Romanian elite". But this traumatic racist past is most of the times hidden behind the horrors of the communist regime, as a convenient method for the reiteration of the conservative values, for presenting the present capitalism as a logical continuation of a "golden age" past in which communism was just an unfortunate break.

Reading about my country's history I understood at some point that a time of "normality" never existed, that a string of injustices, taking different forms, accompanied each period in history, and that to be aware of their existence and to react to them is a constant need for all of us.

This summer, we met a group of people organizing cultural activities dedicated to social change, promoting models of self-organization and freethinking. With some of them we became good friends.

In one rainy day of November [7] we joined this group in the streets early in the morning. Police, television crews, hurried passers by watching us. Later that evening, reports of the march on almost every big television channel. "All different, all equal!" "We will not tolerate the intolerance!" "Our country is the whole world!" "No one is illegal!" "See the person, not the color!"

The days before we joined them working, planning the march, painting the banners, preparing texts with explanations about discrimination, explanations containing lots of examples from the specific context of Romania. Most of the people from the group were doing these things in their free time, after work or school, believing that "change" it's not an empty word used by politicians or just a symbol, thinking that the

construction of reality is the responsibility of each of us and that all of us should act being conscious of this... and I felt proud that I was walking along with them.

## **6. About women, the feminine, feminism**

[...] human creation and everything that is human – mind, spirit, history, language, art – is defined by opposition to chaos, nature, the instinctual, to everything that is associated with the feminine. On the basis of this primary opposition all the others are formulated: culture/nature, order/chaos, activity/passivity, intelligence/affectivity, rational/instinctive, (the feminine being always linked to the second term). The stereotypes associated to femininity construct it as the negative, ephemeral, dependent, passive, non-political, non-social pole.

If I think about my mother, the above dichotomies lose any relevance. With a higher education than my father's, I could say that she had all the "masculine" qualities: balance, sense of responsibility, intelligence. She was always active and brave and she had a strength (mental as well as physical) that many times amassed me. But I must admit that she was passive too. She was passive when she ignored her own superiority, choosing in this way to transmit further the same stereotypes about what it means to be a woman.

"The girls" or "the girls from h.arta", this is how many times people refer to us as a group. I like the sound of both these names. The first refers to us as a group of three friends working together, while the latter addresses us three as a group of women working together and being friends as well. I like these names because they have the power of a statement. They state about the fact that a friendship between three women can be a way for getting the time and the space to become aware of and to analyse our wishes and hopes and to find out together what are the means to make them real. Our friendship is a constant negotiation during which we are continuously constructing from fragments a common ethic that we are trying to apply in our lives in order to establish a connection with the reality around. We are raising together the strength of being aware of the unfair things around us, of the manifestations of racism, homophobia, of the indifference toward nature and animal rights, of the social inequalities. Finding out more about the realities around we find out more things about ourselves. And we do this together.

I have chosen to write about us three in relation to the chapter about feminism from the schoolbook because we think that friendship, taken from the private sphere of the everyday life and displayed in a public context is an act of resistance, an act through which we can avoid the danger of being alone, of being caught in discussions in which no one cares to talk about the things that really matter.

## **7. About power, criticism and dialogue**

Who establishes values? Why do we need ideals? When and how does art act in the sense of finding a space where people can be free?

There are opposing attitudes towards the public space in Romania. On the one hand, there is an almost complete indifference toward the public space, toward the common properties, these being privatised easily, without much resistance from the part of the civil society. Parks are replaced by shopping malls or churches and the facades of many buildings (public institutions or apartment buildings) are becoming the support for huge publicity billboards speaking about a life in which you

feel “incredibly young”, “special” and most of all “free to choose the best for yourself”. (Fortunately there are people choosing the best for themselves when they decide to cut a hole in the commercial mesh covering their window, so that they can have unfiltered light in their rooms).

But also, on the other hand, present Romania is a very sensitive country when it comes to whom is populating its public space. When LGBT rights are concerned, the Christian moral is immediately brought into discussion and the public space stops to be an indifferent topic.

“Death to the gays” was written with black paint on many buildings in the centre of Bucharest, last summer. People in the busy Bucharest streets were passing by these graffities with indifference. A few days later the word “death” was crossed over and replaced by the word “rights” written in red paint, so that the sentence you could read now was “Rights to the gays”. Than something happened. People were not indifferent anymore. The owners of the buildings (most of them shops and bank headquarters) asked their employees to clean up the mess. Some of them needed a few hours to scrap down the letters, for others, it was easier, they just needed some paint and everything was the same as before. Of course you cannot tell what was considered to be the filth, the word “death” or the word “rights”. But still, it became visible that the general indifference can be challenged and even if the gesture of erasing the graffities was not an assumed one, still it led to a very concrete result.

## **8. About the way we are shaped and the way we shape the world**

The institutions and social structures running the society seem to be based on the principles of domination, competition, selfishness and definitely not on caring for others. But what if things can be seen from another perspective?

Between 2-4 of April 2008, one of the NATO summits took place in Bucharest. We were in Bucharest, watching how the city was changed for the time of the summit and how all the appearances of democracy and freedom of expression were suspended for the purpose of insuring an image of a Romania where everybody agrees without question with the “values” promoted by NATO. The city was cleansed of everything that may interfere with this image. Attempts at peaceful protests were countered with police violence.

In September 2007, we were part of a project called Spațiul Public Bucuresti | Public Art Bucharest 2007, project in the frame of which we conceived and organized the events of a Project Space. Some of the people with whom we worked at Project Space were also involved in organizing a program of cultural events in reaction to the NATO summit in Bucharest. During the anti NATO protests in Bucharest and also after our return to our city, Timișoara, we realized that we were under the observation of the secret police even since September when we were working at the Project Space. Our phones were/are listened to, we were followed on the street (and our followers didn’t even hide) and our laptops were tempered with so that all the information on them could be accessed.

Having freedom of expression and the right to privacy seemed to be one of the biggest differences between the period before 1989 and the times we are living now. One of the main critiques of Romanian communism is related to the constant surveillance by the secret police. With the occasion of the NATO summit the surveillance of phones and of Internet activity became official and legal. Anyone involved at no matter what level in any sort of protest, no matter how discreet, was under the observation of the

secret police. Now, when in our country any idea of the left is so righteously condemned as "totalitarian" and "communist" with the purpose to reinforce even more capitalism as the only possible alternative, the constant surveillance is still part of the everyday life.

Beyond these gloomy images of the shrinking space, of the space for expression and critique disappearing under more or less obvious forms of pressure and harassment, there are also images of hope. People questioning capitalism and the racist, patriarchal heteronormative spaces it produces, are constantly trying to shape a more inclusive, a larger public space.

In the structure of this text, which repeats the structure of the schoolbook *About art and the ways we look at the world*, we referred to subjects such as: "ways of changing a nationalist and positivist perspective on history through the practice of teaching and learning", "too personal?", "self-reflexive, anti-authoritarian education", "the energy and the courage to imagine possible changes", "the construction of reality is the responsibility of each of us", "friendship, taken from the private sphere of the everyday life and displayed in a public context is an act of resistance", "general indifference can be challenged", "people questioning capitalism and the racist, patriarchal heteronormative spaces it produces". We did this having in mind our experiences (as students and as teachers) of an education system that constantly states that everyday life has no connection with the knowledge production. We have written the schoolbook out of the need to relate the knowledge that is transmitted in school to the immediate reality, to relate the knowledge to its potentiality of creating social change.

This is the reason why we considered that the best way to reflect over the schoolbook *About art and the ways we look at the world* and to explain our ideas about education would be through different stories from our everyday context. This is the reason for which we chose to write this text like a scrapbook, containing our memories and feelings and portraits of friends and people we appreciate, to take a snapshot of us at this point, trying to construct a more suitable place of our own.