

Delia Popa interview by Iquads, October 2020 on ``Letters to a Young Gardener video``, 25 min. Romanian, German, English, 2020, in ``Europa Wonderland`` Exhibition, curated by Olivia Nițiș. Garrison Commend, Timișoara, Romania, organized by Contrasens Association, co-funded by AFCN

1. Tell us a little about your works at the exhibition in Timisoara.

It is a video work entitled "Letters to a Young Gardener" and refers to "Letters to a Young Artist" by Rainer Maria Rilke and many artists who later composed such tips for young artists. The film lasts 21 minutes, is spoken in English and German, with Romanian subtitles, from 2020 and in this film I recite letters received from various European and American institutions, where I applied for teaching positions or similar in the period 2018 - 2020. At the same time, I perform seasonal gardening tasks, between March and October, in my grandparents' garden and greenhouse, where my workshop is located, in a village near Bucharest. The letters are composted at the end and integrated into the logic of gardening: from product to waste on the ground to product, alluding to similarities between the activity of the gardener and that of the artist.

2. What was the starting point?

I think there were two or more starting points. I liked Olivia Nițiș's curatorial idea to discuss the "European dream" and the confrontation with its realities, and it matched perfectly with my attempts for over two years to get a job as a university teacher or museum pedagogue in different countries. Western. I extended the idea of "Europe as a Wonderland" to the wider West, respectively in the case of my applications, to the United States and the Germanic countries in Europe, because I studied in America and speak German. It remains a dream for many Romanians to emigrate to the West, to find better opportunities, to have a better contract with the state, and for some, to reinvent themselves in a foreign and mysterious environment. Maybe I don't need to add that my attempts have failed so far, so the main theme of the film is failure and what we can do about it.

4. How much did you work for this work / installation? What did you discover through the creative process?

I worked on this work for about eight months, just as much as I worked on my grandparents' garden and greenhouse this year. I would have started faster, about the beginning of March if it weren't for the pandemic, so to speak, I worked from April to October. I filmed scenes of reciting letters and working in the garden, as well as other interesting moments in the garden during these months, and my work was twofold: both as a gardener, concerned with how to plant and care for plants, and as an artist, concerned with filming angles and capturing the changes of the seasons on the video camera. The gardener in me was attentive to the present and the joy of seeing the changes in the garden every day, as well as the failures of some plants that did not bear fruit, although they were few :), and the artist was attentive to what remains for the future, for a potential public, which is the philosophy extractable from my experiences in this time and space. The place where I filmed is probably the most important for me, next to the house where I grew up in Bucharest, is the place where I went once every two weeks all my childhood, where my grandparents were waiting for us and where I discovered an alternative world to the city, a freer

and more cruel world at the same time. On my website you can see several projects that thematize this world from my perspective as a child and adult.

5. Speaking of the theme of the exhibition, how do you think the role of artists in society has changed? What is your position in this regard? To what extent must art respond to social problems, to reality?

I think that the most important role of artists is that of an autonomous, original person-even if this last word has lost some of its force - someone who is completely dedicated to her/his work, and who is able to state her/his own philosophy. Which also leaves room for artists involved in social issues (as I am in most works) and artists who choose to detach, to speak of situations less identifiable with the social or political.

6. What do you hope the people who go through this exhibition will be left with?

I hope the humor will be visible, and at the same time the seriousness of some statements that I make performatively, with the help of my body and my actions in front of the camera. My ideal audience for this exhibition is actually young artists. The work is even a "letter to a young artist", I think it has a pretty clear message, although with parallels in other areas, the obsessive and joyful repetition of your work is the basis of your success, and the basis of survival of failure. At the same time, the human as a natural animal, integrated in seasons and interactions with the earth and plants, is a sub-theme of the work.

7. What was hard, what was good and easy in the pandemic?

It was hard to convince other people to wear a mask, or to wear it properly, as we all already know. We had two other art and design education projects and the interaction with people regarding the rules of the pandemic was in many cases very difficult, especially because we worked with children and we had to be very careful.

8. What did you manage to create & work during this period? What themes inspired your isolation?

In addition to this work I made a series of prints with pandemic themes that seem to have been successful and resonated with people in the current situation, and I organized 4 summer schools, 3 with students near Bucharest and 1 with students who create games for students near Bucharest. So it was a very busy period and I didn't feel isolated. But I really miss the openings and meetings with artist friends.

9. How were the projects affected during this period? What were the signs of adaptation / re-adjustment to the new normal?

As I said, there were problems adapting to the new rules for the team members I worked with, but the fact that we managed to keep these summer schools (co-funded by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund AFCN) shows that everyone has adapted anyway and the children have been so more excited to participate in the summer schools and the visit to the MNAC (through the ArtCrowd Association project) as they missed school during the state of emergency.

10. From what you have observed: what are the effects of the pandemic, so far, in the cultural field? What are the survival solutions?

Many cultural organizations have lost their sources of income and are in a phase of collapse or stand-by. This is the case of independent theaters, independent dance and cultural education activities for children, such as ArtCrowd-Artists in Education, the association they lead and which lost contracts with museums in Bucharest that relied on the presence of schools within the national program that counts on students visiting museums. Fortunately, we have successfully applied for AFCN funding, but this is only a short-term solution. Survival solutions, as far as I can see, are even more work, even though we were overworked before ...

11. A scenario for the future: how will this pandemic change us? What will the new normal look like? How is the new normal for you and how do you adapt to it?

I don't want to make predictions, I think we will all adapt. I have adapted through work, as I have already said, and through the fact that I am very careful not to infect myself and not to infect those more vulnerable than me. Thus, as an artist, it is largely "business as usual", the future is uncertain and we follow inspiration.

By Alexandra Badicioiu Matei

Link to Iqads web interview in Romanian:

<https://www.iqads.ro/articol/52703/delia-popa-nu-m-am-opus-temei-destul-de-dificile-a-esecului-este-un-tabu-social>