

*The Collective Gaze –  
Notes from the Land of the Independents*

*A mash-up conversation\* between  
Răzvan Anton and Mihai Iepure-Górski*

**Răzvan Anton** is a visual artist, born in 1980, in Cluj (Romania). He studied at the *University of Art and Design Cluj* (BA Printmaking) and *Camberwell College of Arts* London (MA Drawing). He is teaching at the *University of Art and Design Cluj* and is part of the *Paintbrush Factory* artist collective. He has been involved in the digital archiving of the *Minerva Press Image Archive* from Cluj. And he was an artist in residence at the *House by the Synagogue* Mediaș in the project *Absence as Heritage* within *TRACES (Transmitting Contentious Cultural Heritages with the Arts)* between 2016-2018. In November 2018 he was a *tranzit/erste* artist in residence at the *MuseumsQuartier* Vienna. Since 2019 he is a board-member and has been co-curating the visual arts program of the *Paintbrush Factory* (Fabrica de Pensule Cluj) alongside Mihai Iepure-Górski.<sup>1</sup>

**Mihai Iepure-Górski** is a visual artist, born in Alba-Iulia, Romania. He is an Arts Academy graduate that currently resides in Cluj-Napoca and works in a variety of mediums trying hard to not fall for their charms. Some recent shows include solos at *Sandwich Gallery* in Bucharest and *Baril Gallery* in Cluj-Napoca, group shows participations like the 1st edition of *Art Encounters*, Timisoara, *Survival Kit 4 Festival*, Riga and *European Travellers - Art from Cluj* today, *Műcsarnok*, Budapest. He has been a *tranzit/erste* artist in residence in 2018, has participated in the 2nd edition of the *Mobile Biennale* and was

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\* A dialogue willingly assumed in a fluid format to underscore the shared thoughts rather than their individual ownership.

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(long ago) among the recipients of the Open Calls of *Salonul de Proiecte*, Bucharest. As of recent (2019), he took matters into his own hands and started writing projects and curating as part of the *Paintbrush Factory* collective from Cluj (Fabrica de Pensule) alongside Răzvan Anton.<sup>2</sup>



Photo credits Kispál Attila.

*All is well, all is outside of time. And you tend to forget, you forget that you have to start over every year. That's why it's irrelevant, whatever I'd say now, I really have no reason to complain, do I?*

*It's a matter of fiction, everything that's going on here doesn't really exist. It's not sustainable, it's not real and it actually might do more harm than good... that such space even exists or that it ever existed. It leaves the impression that things are possible... that such things are real, that we are able to achieve them... no, we aren't. There is nothing that makes it possible for us to be able to achieve such things since there aren't any conditions for us to even be. It's a matter of... some coincidence... Some people, like in a game of pick and choose, took us and put us here and let us deal with it... and we had no choice but to do our best and make something out of it.*

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*Let's give it a shot, right? Still it's not, it really isn't real, this space was never real and once we step out and lock that gate, it will all disappear as if it never existed.*<sup>3</sup>

In 2019, both of us took charge of the curatorial strategy for visual arts in *Fabrica de Pensule*.<sup>4</sup> We started off with a project we considered necessary in order to move on and that was to have a look at other cultural independent projects from across the country. After that trip we ended up with eight testimonies that we presented in an exhibition format during the 10year anniversary of *Fabrica de Pensule*.

2019 was the year when *Fabrica* moved out of its space and we were confronted with a project associated with a building that was no longer our roof. The rising rental prices and the schism of our community posed a mortal danger to our organization and the future of our projects. By that time, many of the organizations of *Fabrica* had already left. The scandal of the community split had pushed away many of its members while others were reluctant to join. Only a few years before, many artists and cultural organizations were eager to have their names associated with what had become the brand of *Fabrica de Pensule*. But in 2019, that brand became another sign of a failed community project and, subsequently, it was something to be avoided, especially by the organizations who believed that their commercial interests would be affected.

Wondering if maybe what pushed us here is exactly that state of affairs – the shock of the *Fabrica* rupture – touched by the feeling of loss, despair, faced with the disappearance of something that seemed important, representative, you feel motivated-demotivated. You start to ask yourself if

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<sup>3</sup> Raluca Voinea (tranzit.ro / Bucharest), "The Collective Gaze: Samples of Something that Concerns Us All," interview by Răzvan Anton and Mihai Iepure-Górski, *Fabrica de Pensule*, 2019, video, 14:28.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXx5kmTpwSg&list=PLc5Qchyvnr0hmOkFJ0oX5AMYm7f96Q7I4&index=1>.

<sup>4</sup> Independent contemporary art space, *Fabrica de Pensule* is the first large post-industrial space converted into a cultural space in Romania (2009), internationally recognized for the visual arts and performing arts programs. In 2019, the community lost its space due to a new conversion carried out by the owners, this time becoming the headquarters for IT companies. For more <http://fabricadepensule.ro/>.

maybe that even was what you thought it was. And we do that, on the one hand trying to decipher and understand that which we are losing, whether it belonged to us and we to it, whether it was some form of a community or simply a set of people and things with converging interests and shared spaces. We want to find out if what happened to us is isolated or symptomatic for the whole land. And then we look around, we see projects that have survived and have managed to build for themselves or within their respective community an identity, program, coherent, cohesive, critical (why not?). Maybe this too is a pretext for us to answer questions we have about ourselves, for ourselves. What happened here, what people, typologies, programs collided and caused this rupture that seems to define our culture and ourselves (so well)?

We believed, and I guess we still do, that Romania's cultural independent organizations were the ones driving most of the public cultural agenda of the country. And we also believed as we do now that public institutions are simply not assuming their public role, for different reasons, including the severe underfinancing of the sector and the lack of transparent mechanisms in attracting competent managers and cultural specialists.

*Of course, the expectations, because they are connected to local cultural history, the expectations are not grand, but they give the measure of who we are and, as they exist and have existed, they give something to tie our present actions to. For me, at least, studying all the practices starting from the '50s until now – and, in fact, the hard thing is not the case study research, because we do that, but this is not the hard issue –, the burden is to set up a theoretical framework that explains a certain type of cultural behaviour in a local space. This is the hard thing, and in the end this can also be an explanation for why Romanian art history has this minus. There isn't a history of art of the Romanian context.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Alina Șerban (Institute of the Present / Bucharest), "The Collective Gaze: Samples of Something that Concerns Us All," interview by Răzvan Anton and Mihai Iepure-Górski, Fabrica de Pensule, 2019, video, 15:59.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtOdtlw\\_7tA&list=PLc5Qchyvnr0hmOkFJ0oX5AMYm7f96Q714&index=5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtOdtlw_7tA&list=PLc5Qchyvnr0hmOkFJ0oX5AMYm7f96Q714&index=5)

We are not claiming to have found out exactly what is going on, still, we believe that by taking note of these (quite few) projects and people from various places around the country, projects and people we consider to be referential, representative, important, we get a pretty good picture.

What took us out of the calm of our studios (!), and by that I mean an 8h/day job for me that takes me to places I would never go to willingly, that pushes me into serving, well, the corporatists, and you, stuck in an uncomfortable teaching chair at the art university, who, in itself is a subject for another long conversation, which shall not take place here (now), so what got us out there?

Yes, my work at school (I have been working at the University of Art and Design Cluj since 2010) is another motivation behind this journey. It is striking to see how little attention is given to these initiatives in our art schools. It's almost like living in a parallel universe. And so, most of the discourse is taken by remnants of some old pedagogical programmes and an unfazed fascination for the art market.

Why did this idea ever pop into our heads that we need (want) to find out WHAT is happening with this artistic environment of ours that seems to be right back where it started after some period of time in a cyclical course that seems never ending? The '90s, 2000s, 2010s, 2020s are all the same. Things seem to be going right back there, with every change of (political) season we seem to have to start over, nothing solid takes shape, nothing goes beyond the borders of precarity. Oh, maybe those new capitalists that have managed to take the helm of the present with their selfishly built Private (with a capital P) constructs. As they remain Nameless, maybe they will end up Pointless. Then again, the Present belongs to those who have achieved it and appropriated it. That's clear. Clearer and clearer. It's not justified, or fair, but what to do?

*If we look at what is happening now in the local scene and if we go back 20 years ago, in the '90s, we would notice that the needs and problems are somewhat the same. This is why, for me at least, it was extremely important, or what motivates me in what I do is to get to some answers that have their basis in a type of reaction adapted to the local context that the artist was witnessing at the moment. That is, if the present context would have pondered on what happened, say, in the '90s-2000s, things would have probably been constituted, coagulated, and structured quite differently.*

*What motivates me is the backlash against the “we don’t, we cannot, we don’t have what they have, we want what’s elsewhere”. I think this type of mentality and of raising the issue only does us harm. To aspire to something built and born from entirely different needs and to adapt them to something that calls for a whole different type of reaction is the wrong approach.<sup>6</sup>*

When we started activating as ‘curators’ for *Fabrica*, we did it thinking that we needed to offer some kind of alternative to the missing programmes from our public institutions. Again, this is not something new. This has been the main motivation for many other independent initiatives in Romania. But I guess we also wanted to have a look at the art field as a place that had become almost entirely engulfed in this market discourse. And we all know that this is a consequence of absent institutions. It’s very difficult to find strong and independent curators or critics, who didn’t have to compromise their agenda in order to pursue their work or research. And yes, we wanted to talk especially to the ones who didn’t compromise their programme or initial motivation.

It is a very difficult time for most of the independent cultural organizations in Romania now and we see this ever-growing gap between research initiatives being pursued by independent organizations versus ‘research’ in public institutions. Things already looked bad in 2019 and I think, now, they are a lot worse.

*This is the worst time to be talking about art... contemporary art, that’s what we are about, isn’t it? Projects that... try to make sense, to make sense of what’s going on around us. Things were never right, but now it’s worse than ever... because now it is as clear as ever that no... that we are a minority and so few, everyday fewer... that we have absolutely no influence in the real world, none whatsoever... that someone pays us to pretend that we have something to do here.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Şerban, interview.

<sup>7</sup> Voinea, interview.

Sometimes you hear or see these (local) people talk about biennials, festivals, projects, artists from different areas of the land (country) and you get the impression that something is being done, that things are moving. As you (unfortunately, and you say to yourself – why did I have to do it?) take a closer look, you start to see how what we have here is nothing but - isolationism in some shape of marketable entities, a method already tried over and over again in the last 30 years. It's not only useless, but it becomes toxic since it counts for depleting the resources that could have been otherwise used in building the (non-existent) critical discourse; one that could produce the institutional/public level changes we need. Maybe a form of survival, still the equivalent of revolutionary (political) discourse consumed in private clubs, by philosophers, without political commitment – and you realise (somehow in this paradoxical calming and assuring way) that you weren't wrong that everything is wrong and that you were right about that. We are still facing this wasteland of a place where nothing seems to grow.

*Well, with the soil it's like that, things grow annually or perennially. Annually or biannually, whatever it's called... or perennially and here in Bucharest it seems to me that there are very few perennial things that can grow. Whatever we are planting now lasts a season, as long as we are funded by AFCN (National Cultural Fund Administration) or wherever people can get funding from, and then we need to start all over again. If we managed to keep some seeds from the last harvest, things might be a bit easier this time around, if not, we really need to start over again every single time. From everything we planted, very little will grow bigger, more beautiful, more solid, stronger, more productive.<sup>8</sup>*

This place has no contemporary art museums, anywhere, none. And if we talk about that (National Contemporary Art) Museum, it's quite clear to me that such institution cannot really function in a building like the House of Parliament and it definitely cannot function when right next to (THAT) building, you have the center of Romanian Orthodoxy in the shape of a (most) massive cathedral (maybe the actual cultural public project as it is

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<sup>8</sup> Voinea, interview.

publicly financed). Beyond such irreconcilable occurrences, there are those physical walls that surround the house that make it virtually impossible for such a space to function as an open platform for contemporary art and culture, critical discourse and such. This Museum deserves to be (ERASED) out of History... Yes, I said it.

In the (almost) complete absence of a platform for contemporary art, one (and by one I mean these INDEPENDENTS) starts to fill the gaps, stitch the holes, fill the holes in this ever sinking..., an impossible endeavour. Taking upon one's self the role of what should be but are not, nowhere, public institutions, while acting in private manner with an assumed collective goal and purpose. The curious case of the Independents of our Culture. And AFCN (state sponsored) sponsors this balance act just enough... sustaining life so to speak (comatose, but alive).

*If you ask us what our purpose is, what we want to achieve, or what we are looking for through our events, the exhibitions held at Magma, the answer is that we want to influence society in our own way. We want to influence the community that lives here, that is, to try to create a more open, more cooperative society, this would be our ideal. I state this, because, on the one hand, the Magma Contemporary Art Space represents a protective "bubble", where all topics can be approached and discussed, and all opinions expressed, almost "without any repercussions". Since Magma can provide a safe space for such activities. At the same time, I think that if the events or exhibitions give the creators and the public the opportunity to approach or bring to light certain energies, or taboo subjects that will then be discussed, dissected and analyzed, then the creation and functioning of the Space, as well as its use as a social valve that sometimes opens and releases the accumulated tension – whether good or bad – is already an important step in the right direction.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Kispál Attila (MAGMA / Sf.Gheorghe), "The Collective Gaze: Samples of Something that Concerns Us All," interview by Răzvan Anton and Mihai Iepure-Górski, Fabrica de Pensule, 2019, video, 29:08.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1J00q8-Ht4&list=PLc5Qchynr0hmOkFJ0oX5AMYm7f96Q7I4&index=4>.



There is a civic attitude behind this effort of setting the records straight about recent artistic history and this is something that cannot wait any longer. This is something that will affect the entire cultural environment especially in a context where commercial initiatives or market speculators are directly interested in hijacking the historic narrative.

*Since the beginning I had some principles or some things I was looking for with ODD: to work and have international relevance, to have a political position, to have a hybrid practice, and to have an educational or pedagogical dimension. This is what I started from and it seems to me that now, after a while, coming back to these things, I understand them even better than I did at first. I think initially I was much more connected to the art world and I had more trust in what the art world could be, and I think I was making a direct connection between art and the art world. Now I would say I see the two as, on the one hand, a practice, and, on the other, an ecosystem of financial and symbolic speculation, and it's a world I don't want to be connected to and I don't want ODD to support or promote it.<sup>10</sup>*

Faced with such public institutional freeze, one has the tendency to look for alternative solutions or try to find ways of dealing with matters elsewhere. Maybe the best alternative though is no alternative. Instead of building (indie) para structures, usually underfinanced and underpowered, something proven to be inefficient in the attempt of bringing real change, focusing on putting and maintaining pressure on the public sector and demanding change might be the actual way to go. While some of these alternative projects and spaces have been extremely important in the recent past and in defining the local artistic climate, they have not managed to bring about change in a structural way and have mostly remained isolated.

I have the impression that even though this is quite an obvious thing to do, a more militant pose hasn't been tried, at least not on a larger scale. And it

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<sup>10</sup> Cristina Bogdan (ODD / Bucharest), "The Collective Gaze: Samples of Something that Concerns Us All," interview by Răzvan Anton and Mihai Iepure-Górski, Fabrica de Pensule, 2019, video, 17:00.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiDPG0VjLTU&list=PLc5Qchyvnr0hmOkFJ0oX5AMYm7f96Q7I4&index=3>.

should be. We are in grave need of a strong public sector with (finally) representative institutions, one that would reopen these structures to its beneficiaries, the Local Scene, the Audience, the Community. On the other hand, the local scene seems to have lost its critical eye and muted its critical voice. This lack of real critical voices of the public space results in a significant lack of art scene regulation; those PR-type published texts just feed the abject activity/actions of those who act for the benefit of small/obscure groups, private entities and so on. Change is needed here too.

For some of these cultural entities it was not primarily about contemporary art, but about civic activity and public criticism. There was no aesthetic or artistic programme without a civic stance. And this is something that has remained unchanged in their work.

*Regarding the more conceptual motivation I would briefly say that the main ideas would be closer to the arts on the one hand, and more socially engaged on the other one, because Tranzit House was, from the beginning, a social project that wanted to oppose isolationism by all possible means. And as an artistic project, which was still connected to the political situation, it was meant to offer an alternative model to the conventional, monumental art that was present at the time. And I'm also an anthropologist and I can't ignore looking at things from this perspective as well, which would symbolically translate as occupying territories, like putting statues, all kinds of monuments everywhere, taking over territories politically and symbolically. I'm not sure if it's clear enough but I hope so, that the Tranzit project is supposed to be seen as going into oncoming traffic and that's why it's called Tranzit House because, this is how I see our mission, we act like traffic police directing the flow, as you come, you do your work, move on and leave room for others. And it's also connected to this idea that the media we prefer the most are the ephemeral ones like film, video installations, performance, performative arts in general, things that take the space, also symbolically, only for a given time and then, they make space for other people and events.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Csilla Könczei (Tranzit House / Cluj), "The Collective Gaze: Samples of Something that Concerns Us All," interview by Răzvan Anton and Mihai Iepure-Górski, Fabrica de Pensule, 2019, video, 16:32.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NN3aaniPd0g&list=PLc5Qchyvnr0hmOkFJ0oX5AM Ym7f96Q7I4&index=6>.

It's clear by now that, by themselves, even the most capable alternative (private) entities, cannot bring the changes we need. Some sort of collective pose needs to grow and some sort of coalition has to develop for pressure to rise and for the public sector to finally give in and push for reform. The right to bring about such changes resides not in an individual or single organisation (that would again mean monopoly). Collective solutions demand collective actions. The ongoing state of resignation or complacency in private forms of success or profit is not just ineffective, but it makes matters worse as it wastes, exhausts local resources.

There's also a strong need to redefine terms like public or private and the differences between the two, as locally a significant number of organisations seems to move freely between the two with no responsibility or justification. What makes an institution an institution, how does it behave and who or what does it even respond to?

Reanalysing what we have, what we are, what would be considered to be local recent (art) history, letting go of some of the so-called values that we are stuck with. It takes courage to do, but it is necessary. It might be painful to finally accept the fact we haven't moved anywhere from the 90s as we are still there, blocked in a state of confusion, waiting for some outside force to come and bring us redemption, show us the way, clear the ground. That won't be happening (clear by now). As difficult as it is, we have to accept it, to be able to finally find some sort of resolution with the past, by ourselves.

All this sounds oddly political, doesn't it? Might sound militant even, but I do believe in some sort of collectively driven redemption. With our Frontline – which consists of some of these individuals and organisations we interviewed a couple of years ago, and maybe a few others – weakened, debilitated, what we need to do, and it's about time, is to fill the ranks and join the collective pose, (finally) demanding real change.

