

Liliana Basarab interviewed by Mihaela Varzari

September, 2013 (for the 1:1 publication, <http://atelier35.eu>)

I would like to introduce Liliana Basarab, who is a very dear friend and artist. Liliana Basarab is currently based in Bucharest, but began her career in Iași, at the beginning of 2000. Her conceptual practice has been developing over the last 10 years and she uses a variety of media including performance, sculpture, drawing, video etc.

In her series of works, titled monuments-for-concepts, (2007 – 2010) Liliana's ongoing interest in social realities has led her work with such eternal notions as beauty and truth. With her characteristic playfulness, these works become public examinations into how the recent socio-political changes affect the way we view ourselves.

It is certain that every age systematically reconstructs its own value system. And indeed is now the era and not geographical location which differentiates the possible changes. In a society promoting individualism and not an individual belief system, it is no wonder that our aspirations and dreams turn out to be the same. Liliana's monuments-for-concepts trigger the collective perspective as well as the individual account on values we operate with on a daily basis. If autonomy begins with the challenge of an inherited set of values, then having such a grandiose object, as a sculpture of the winner can only create the illusion of achievement.

MV: The series of works monuments-for-concepts was chosen to be part of the project 1:1, hosted by atelier35 in Bucharest during 5 Sep – 5 Oct 2013 based on its rich human experience, registered throughout the 4 residencies, which took place over a period of 4 years, between 2007 and 2010. What drove you to work with such persistence? Were you involved with these, so called, temporary communities, as you referred to in a personal conversation. And also how do you relate this type of practice to the time spent as an art student in Iași.

LB: I would consider my practice more of a counter reaction to the Romanian education system, which focuses on studio technique specializations. I think that it was 10 years ago, when I decided that I had no interest in being a studio artist and wanted to make socially engaged art and deal with issue which had not even been mentioned by my teachers at the university. At the moment I am not so hard to judge my art university years, I accept the past being glad that I could benefit from a free education. I am trying to assimilate what I have learnt and move on.

MV: This is what I wanted to point out. Having established that the Romanian educational system taught you traditional artistic crafting, how did you get involved in social art 10 years ago? What forced you, inspired you to adopt your current position?

LB: I wasn't aware of this terminology at the time but instinctively I realized that technicality wasn't enough. I never understood why we were required to paint still life with clay pots, when in my life I was surrounded by clay pots? Without knowing 10 years ago what participatory art was, I have simply reached the conclusion that the artist shouldn't be behind closed doors in a studio, alone with her creation. The artist's position needs to be shared, actually the status of the artist, whether it is considered privileged or not, also needs to be shared and with it implicitly the responsibility. The artist is not the only person who creates and signs anymore.

MV: **Let's hope that no one in Iași deals with clay pots in that way. Could you mention a specific moment in time which caused the shift between the classic academic education and the position you are occupying now?**

LB: No. At the beginning, as to say, there was the performance of *Beauty Mark* in 2001, work which became very important to me and dealt with visibility. The participants were asked to wear a beauty mark on their faces, as a sign of distinction meant to make one aware of their presence.

I documented the performance, which was then exhibited in a group show at the Public Bath in Iași. I knew then that I wanted to do something simple. I had seen a performance by the artist Dan Perjovschi, when he was shaking hands with the people passing in the street. Later on I had found out that it took place in Tel Aviv, in 1997 during the Performance Festival Blurr.

MV: **I remember that, when he was saying *Have a nice day*.**

LB: Yes. I started thinking how I could involve community in my work. 12 years ago, these notions, were still confusing (still are) but I was convinced that technique based execution wasn't sufficient. Even though a part of my works is being produced in the studio by employing animation, video, sculpture and drawing, the majority of my work body requires participants in order to be realised.

MV: **I would like to go back to what you just said about the Beauty Mark project. Why was it important to work with the concept of visibility? Is it still on your mind?**

LB: Beauty Mark is a code of beauty, a mechanism which unleashes different ways of personal perception. It is in relation to what I have just mentioned, the wish to counteract the isolation imposed by the studio, to go out in the street, to interact, to communicate. It was important to change the classical dynamic between audience and practitioner. The participants were chosen randomly, more precisely it happened they were passing by, they represented the context at that moment in time.

MV: **Having looked carefully at your projects involving participants, I have identified in an article I wrote 2 years ago, that you employ an anthropological mode of inquiry, based on the fact that you are investigating universal concepts, such as normality in various geographical areas. The question is what determines how you use this or that concept.**

LB: The choice of the concept, apart from the first project, when the concepts were selected beforehand, is a very important part within the production process and it emerges as the result of identifying the economic and political context of a given geographical area. The last project, the one I did in Dayton, US in 2010, the challenge has arisen while analysing that region and implicitly my effort to understand my own position as an outsider and how I could express it. The participants' selection was made in a very personalised and intuitive way and I was pleasantly surprised to find when speaking to the locals, that the participants were actually representative for Dayton. It wasn't my intention to represent all the social classes, for example or ages.

MV: **Therefore you become the first person to judge the participants by their physical aspect and you accept being subjected to the visual canons in use at large. How did you end up using the concept of acceptability in Dayton?**

LB: The concept reflected directly the tight competition promoted in the US. Dayton, on the other hand, didn't seem that competitive. For example, there were good artists who weren't afraid to share the secrets of their 'jobs'. Dayton is a city known for its inventions, the Wright Brothers are from there and they invented the airplane. It seems that in Dayton one can live under the impression that one can be lesser and it is still fine. Making reference to another concept now, the one of normality, it is becoming important based on its extensive media usage.

MV: **The eagerness for supreme titles gives rise to different opinions. There are Romanian specialists who say that Aurel Vlaicu was the first man who flew the first ever built airplane in the world. How lucky we are not to have to establish scientific truths, as we would have been in difficulty now. Let's go back to the moment when say the idea or the concept of normality held a big interest for you. Where did it happen?**

LB: In Rahova, Bucharest. The normality accepted by some can be completely different from somebody else's normality. At the same time it also represents the status of normality Romania aspires to reach, an expression often used. While working on this project, Gay Parade was taking place in Bucharest and during the same period there some street posters featuring The Normal Family showing mother, father and the baby, a restrictive framing of a the notion of a family.

MV: **The societal cell which needs reproducing itself.**

LB: Yes. No deviation from the normal is permitted. By employing this concept I tried to open discussion about what normality could mean.

MV: **This topic on culturally imposed or informed values, which also change with every decade, marks the transition to the next question I prepared for you. I am referring again to monuments-for-concepts which documents the transition from communism to capitalism. What role do you attribute to the countries from the east part of Europe, within the**

defamation of capitalism? And when I make this distinction I am referring to our rich experience which particularizes us. I would like to introduce the example of Sanja Ivekovic, an artist from ex-Yugoslavia, whose feminist art is enriched or is distinct because of its social interests. How do the artists from the Eastern part of Europe profit from this experience and how is it reflected in your artistic discourse? It is not my intention to make a fixation out of the differences between eastern and western artists.

LB: I don't think I understand your question very well, therefore my reply comes with another question: what could come after capitalism? I understand the critical positioning vis-à-vis the current political discourse but things are not as simple. Signs like "No More Capitalism" are too simplistic and I don't know what could prepare us for what would come afterwards. My artistic practice is not strictly political and I don't identify myself with this area of research or activism. If my art can be interpreted as marking the transition between communism and capitalism then I have nothing against it. I don't know. Do you think so?

MV: My question was directed at revealing your relationship to Romania's past and whether it becomes relevant to you as an artist.

LB: I think that it is important if we take into account the transition from a collective based society to an individual values promoting one. I try in my practice to project this abrupt rupture of values and its implications.

MV: The four residencies finalized with the winners' sculptures exhibited in the public space. What is the importance of this gesture?

LB: For me it is important to subvert the way in which, traditionally public sculptures featuring hero like figures, occupied the public space. In my work I follow a different production process but the result, at first is the same, a classical sculpture, a bust.

MV: Your interest in reclaiming the public space seems close to the practice of other artists from Romania. The generation you are part, to mention just a few, namely Anca Benera and the artistic duo Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor.

LB: I am glad you are saying this because I appreciate their practices a lot.

MV: You bring in the public space, your interest in representation, which offers your practice a personal note so valuable to you. How do you understand your relationship to representation?

LB: My interest is manifested through representing certain concepts in different formats, as it happened in the case of the beauty concept being represented through postcards. This type of work does not focus on what I represent but on the methodology I use, plus the mechanisms employed for negotiating each work individually, namely the process developed to reach the

final representation. Each concept becomes important as it represents the context and it is as important as the process used to reach the final stage. If I were to have realised “Normality” in the United States, the result would have been very different. My works talk about representation but more importantly about how each concept is differently ‘implemented’ and each stage involves a narrow down of the project, leading towards the final result.

MV: We are therefore referring to a representation mediated through the negotiation with the participants, which becomes quite a strong element within these works. Representation is attacked frontally but laterally, ushered by the participants becoming co-authors and avatars at the same time, which suspends their identities in order to offer them an instrument of reflection. How do you see the participatory art being changed since 2000, when you started acting on the artistic scene?

LB: I think that participatory art starts being trendy and sexy (and I mean it in a derogative way). I can say that it started being requested by some of the curators of institutions and this put an emphasis on the medium (technique) again and not on the concept, a relatively damaging aspect, I could say.
