

Edition #6 - The revision edition

Reactor, Cluj-Napoca, Romania – 23th of January 2024 – 3th of February 2024



The setting

Continuing their interest in realities of working in performing arts that differed from their own context, Mirte & Menzo decided to look to Eastern Europe as the location for the sixth edition of Other People, common ground. Through recommendations from people more knowledgeable on the various places for residencies in the east of Europe, they found Reactor in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Reactor is a theatre that was established in 2014 by Oana Mardare and Doru Taloş, giving space to independent and experimental theatre as opposed to the institutional and more conservative other theatres in the city.

“Reactor – a place for creative experiments is an energetic cultural centre in a city that is more and more open to alternative artistic experiences. Both a bubble in the middle of the city and a place deeply connected with it, Reactor comprises an independent theatre, an exhibition venue, and also a small library.” - from the Reactor website.

The people of Reactor had a good overview of the local experimental performing arts scene and were therefore able to connect us with three people working locally, who turned out to fit very well in the context of the project and were amazing to work with: Selma Dragos, Ioana Hogman and Oana Hodade. Selma, Ioana and Oana all live in or have a strong link to Cluj and knew Reactor from before.

Cluj is the second biggest city in Romania, with around 290.000 inhabitants or up to 450.000 inhabitants including the student population. In the city there is a strong feeling of transformation from something more traditional to a more global modern aesthetic. It is also very sensible that the city is subject to steady ongoing gentrification.

It was January. Temperatures were swinging around zero degrees Celsius, but despite Menzo's hope, the falling snow never really stayed longer than a day and never covered the whole city really white. The sunrise was around 7.45h and the sunset around 17.30h. The sunlight often entered the studio in the afternoon. The evening sun created a golden glance in the last hour of work, as we worked from 10.00h to 18.00h.

The studio in which we worked the whole week was above the theatre space where a group of people was working on the creation of a new theatre piece. As the studio was also the only access to the attic storage and a little dressing room, the crossings through the studio of the people working on the creation, became small instant performative moments.



Pleasure & Guilt

During this edition the themes of pleasure and guilt were very present, although often not explicitly talked about. The artistic practice is often opposed to the concept of 'a real job' as if being an artist is not really work. Both people from outside the art field

and artists themselves tend to question if the work of the artist is 'real work', which creates doubts in the validity of our own work.

Even though it is hard to define what makes work real, it seems to be connected to producing something that can be sold to or consumed by someone. In the case of performing arts, this someone is often an audience. This makes work that is not directly related to a finished product seem less like work. This is especially present when we get paid for the activities we do, but are not obligated to return this investment in the form of something graspable. It is exactly this phenomenon that we explore with Other People, common ground; the recurring feeling that if something feels like too much fun, and if an audience is not necessarily involved, we must be doing it for ourselves and it can't really be work. This experience of not working and the feeling of guilt connected to enjoying our day at work, without producing anything concrete, came back several times during our work together in Cluj. We often felt that what we were doing couldn't or shouldn't actually be called work even after having decided that it was.

At the same time, all participants felt that the work we did together, be it discussions, physical exercises or more playful explorations, did serve a purpose. It was nurturing and made space to reflect, exchange and recharge. We realised that sharing our practices meant more than sharing the practical ways in which our work comes into being. It also meant sharing our doubts and questions in regards to this work and life in general. We realised that the work cannot be discussed as something detached from the context it was made in. That context is both the personal life of the artist, the tradition and field of the artform and the society it takes place in.



The place of life in the work

How events in life have a direct impact or consequence on choices being made for work or career, was a topic that came up several times during this edition. For example, it felt specific to the context in which we worked in this edition that for the two first years of a child's life, there is no affordable system designed for parents being able to continue their work. This means that taking care of the child becomes a full-time necessity when becoming a parent and demands a total re-evaluation of their artistic practice.

What also came up in discussions, was how the values and perspectives of human beings can be conflicting between oneself and their context and creates a discrepancy between them. This for example becomes clear in the choices we make as freelancers in organising our work (payment, working time, how to structure human relations and roles in a project,...) and how these choices are made very differently in institutions.

The same goes for schools, both for children and in the arts, where certain values are the ground for educating and organising. During the discussions it became clear that these values conflicted with many of our own values. How you deal with this as a parent in relation to the school of your kids, as an artist in relation to your own education or the institutions you depend on or as a freelancer in relation to a societal system you work in, were topics very present in this edition.

These conflicts can lead to a discrepancy between oneself and the context. We discussed topics like violence and aggression, political work as in how to organise the working process in itself, pleasure and guilt (see above), education and perspectives on children. These topics are not necessarily connected to any practice, but are embedded in the life a practice is part of. They are related to values and beliefs. These values and beliefs are also the ground for the creation of art. Therefore, we realised that these discussions on life topics are very much part of the practice in itself.



The beauty of this edition was how these topics, as in life, were gliding from one to another, how there was space for the very personal into the more general and how it bounced back and forth, how rules were made from exchange in non-verbal play or wordily discussions, how fun and being touched emotionally weren't clearly differentiated. There was a flow, an openness and space for anything to happen, which created a pleasure in this week's work.



The project evolving

Edition #6 was the last edition for which we could utilise the grant we received from the Arts Council Norway in 2019 at the beginning of our collaboration. This made it both a natural and a necessary moment to reflect on the project so far and the ways in which we want to continue it. We felt the need to somehow break with the format we had installed over the past years. First of all because the amount of work involved in producing each edition (having to find places of residencies, other participants and often extra funding), started overshadowing the activities we felt the project actually was devised for. We also noticed that the methods we used started to feel restrictive, as if they were no longer the means but the ends, no longer the tools but the rules.

The first week was spent working with only Mirte & Menzo to discuss possible future scenarios for the project. The aim was to find a way of working that would allow us to continue the project for the next 15 years with more freedom and joy. We felt the need to reintroduce the playfulness we had in the first editions, but seemed to have lost along the way. To reassure this playfulness, we needed to deconstruct and analyse the project as it had become. What follows is a short summary of this deconstruction

and definition of the core of the project. An in depth look at our analysis is found in the document 'The future of Other People, common ground'.

We have decided to not plan a new edition at this moment but to keep working in the chat (started as Edition #3: The online edition) a couple of times a year. Besides this, whenever one of us feels the need to organise a next edition, we will let the other know and discuss what this need can lead to. The format of possible future editions is not fixed. It could be based on the editions as we have organised them up until now or it could be something completely different. As part of this transformation of the format, we invite the people that were part of earlier editions to take initiative in designing future editions.

To somehow facilitate preserving the dramaturgical intentions with which we have started this project, we have formulated six concepts that we believe are the core of this project. These being that:

1. Other People, common ground is a practice that is not linked to a production or a performance.
2. Other People, common ground is a long-term project and thus documentation is necessary.
3. Meeting and exchange is the central principle of the project.
4. Each edition has a certain duration.
5. There is a necessity of "the other" to be involved
6. Other People, common ground is a project that was initiated by and is thus intimately linked to Mirte & Menzo

An edition of Other People, common ground is an event independent of any production or product-oriented activity. It solely serves the wish of the organiser and participating colleagues to research and exchange on topics and activities related to practice, work as a (performing) artist or non-productivity.

As Other People, common ground takes place over the span of 20 years, documentation is a core element. Any edition that is organised therefore needs to be documented in one way or another. How the documentation happens and by what means, is free to decide and up for any imagination of the person organising the edition or people taking part in it. The only criteria is that the documentation should be shareable with the whole network of colleagues.

Other People, common ground can at its core only exist in exchange with others. In other words, it is never a solo-project. At least two people need to take part, for a new edition to take place. An edition can take place for a day or a few weeks, but any edition has a beginning and an end.

The involvement of "the other" is a crucial part of Other People, common ground. The other is someone or something who is not part of the usual. It can be people who are not usually working in that context, it can be another context or something else. By involving the other, an aspect of surprise, not being home is able to bring other thoughts and opinions into the project, which creates food for thought and reflection.

Finally, organising a new edition is a new link in the network of the project. Because the project originated from us, we want to be kept as part of this network and be involved somehow (and this can be interpreted in a broad way) with new editions.

Anyone who took part in one of the previous editions wishing to organise a new edition, can do so if they incorporate these concepts. If anyone feels inspired by Other People, common ground and wants to organise a similar practice without incorporating all of the concepts mentioned above, we welcome that as well.

The reason for the name of this Edition #6: The Revision edition, is a combination of the redefinition of the project as a whole, and our new, more broad understanding of the word practice as we described earlier. Edition #6 in many ways felt like the opening of a door, behind which many new paths can be found and made us look at our project anew. Hence, The Revision Edition.



Personal context

For Menzo, the residency at Reactor marked the end of a period during which he was mostly away from home. After years of looking for a place to call home, he has found it again in Amsterdam. Although he still enjoys travelling, the longing for a home he felt earlier, can now change to homesickness. Travelling can also be a very lonely thing.

Nevertheless Menzo enjoyed being in Cluj and was also very happy that he decided to make the journey there by train instead of flying. To combat the loneliness of travelling, Menzo spent many hours walking around and sitting in bars reading, which is not a bad way to spend time although he did sometimes feel very lost.

Mirte has spent the last year dealing with a range of emotions and events, and started the beginning of the year with a feeling of exhaustion and the need for rest. She spent the period between Christmas and New Year, thinking about how to organise life and work in a sustainable way, how to balance rest and input, how to balance free time and work, how to balance being at her home in Norway struggling with finding meaning being there, travelling and being with her family in Belgium. To re-evaluate what she enjoys in her work, how to deal with the overload of negative news coming through social media and others, and how and where to see her future, were the questions very present in the time around and during Edition #6. It felt therefore very meaningful to make Edition #6 happen and have met with our new colleagues in Cluj.

Credits

Colleagues: Ioana Hogman, Menzo Kircz, Mirte Bogaert, Oana Hodade; Selma Dragos.

Residency: Reactor Cluj

Many thanks to: Oana of Reactor giving us time and space and helping us organise, Selma for hosting Oana H., Aram for accepting that he had to be an adult every day until Selma got home, Selma's dog Moț for accepting the sacrifice of his walks so Selma could join us, Catalin for hanging out with Menzo, Ioana's mother and the parents of her daughters' friends for taking care of her daughter while Ioana was at work, Ioana's daughter for dealing with this situation so nicely & the people we are working with outside of this project for being flexible in their schedule.

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