COLLABORATIVE METHODS FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECTS – A PRACTICAL MODEL

Delia POPA[1]

Abstract

This article presents a workshop that took place in June 2010 at the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC), organized by the author, Delia Popa, and artist Ellen Rothenberg, Professor at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). The description of the workshop is followed by examples of workshop participants' responses to a questionnaire and by the author's personal conclusions on the possible effects of the workshop.

Keywords: collaborative methods, community building, international art presentations, American artists' collaborative proposals

Introduction

The combined workshop and lecture program "Chicago-Bucharest: A Conversation on Publics, Art and Collaboration" addressed to professionals from various disciplines was the result of an international cooperation between The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA, The National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, Romania, and the American Cultural Center of the American Embassy in Bucharest.[2] The National Museum of Contemporary Art, in its current location within the House of the People, hosted the program on June 29th-30th 2010.

Artist and Professor Ellen Rothenberg and I conceived the workshop in such a manner that it created a conceptual as well as a practical frame for exploration of the topic of collaborative interventions in Bucharest's public space. The target audience consisted of students and young professionals involved in the fields of humanities, art and/or public art intervention, who were interested in furthering their competencies with regard to team working, interdisciplinary collaboration, and basic project management skills.

---

[1] Delia Popa, www.deliapopa.com

[2] Thanks to these three institutions, it was possible to offer the program free of charge. The selection of participants was done on a "first come first served" basis, the applicants having to write to the Museum or to the author of this article with a brief description of their activities and interests.

The present article will describe the preliminary ideas that helped construct the workshop, its structure and process, as well as an evaluation of its impact from the perspective both of a number of participants and of the author of the article.

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Collaboration in Art

Artists are known to work alone, but in contemporary culture, especially at progressive higher education schools such as The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), collaboration is seen as a viable alternative that offers multiple perspectives on a given problem and allows several unique voices to contribute equally to the creation of an artwork. Art making becomes thus a democratic process.

In Chicago, there are several collectives who reject the idea of the artist as separate from society, and who use their diverse backgrounds to make interdisciplinary, collective works. As Daniel Tucker, the former editor of *AREAChicago Magazine*, states in his web article "Critical Culture in Chicago – Article #2: Groups and Spaces":

> *This city is indeed ripe with collaborative and social art and venues that facilitate its presentation and evolution. Without being able to pinpoint the source or motives for this, it is undoubtedly a virtue and a feature, which makes working here easier and more sustainable for those interested in cultivating an artistic practice, which can hope to transcend the logic of the commodity.* (Tucker, 2009)

At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago some classes are especially designed to be interdisciplinary. I, as a graduate student in the Painting Department, was allowed to take classes in virtually any department of the school, and between 2005 and 2007 I participated in classes of the Writing Department, Performance Department and Film & Video Department, among others.

Ellen Rothenberg was one of my professors in the Writing Department and we worked together on an exhibition while at the school. She teaches a class entitled "Text Off the Page", for writers and artists to find ways of making art with text and introducing it in public space. After my graduation and return to Bucharest, the two of us remained friends and shared an interest in collaboration and art in public space (= art in the street, not in a gallery).

Ellen Rothenberg is an artist whose public projects and installations are informed by social movements, politics, and history. Some of her interventions in Chicago's public space involve collaborations with community-leaders, with fellow artists, writers, performers and horticulturalists, as well as facilitating collaborations between other artists and writers:

> ***The Invisible Garden*** *was part of a citywide exhibition pairing twenty-four artists with gardens in Chicago's public parks. "The Invisible Garden" began with the question "What aren't we seeing, what surrounds us but remains invisible?" Reponses were solicited and collected via the web, and a selection of these text responses were made into banners, installed on scaffolding framing the statue of Ben(jamin) Franklin in Lincoln Park.(..)" The Invisible Garden" maps a social space, which includes skate boarders, running children, and pedestrians. Like Gustav Klucis' "Radio-Orator," "The Invisible Garden" becomes a point of broadcast of the political, social, and personal issues that question "what aren't we seeing, what surrounds us but remains invisible?"* (Rothenberg, 2004a, 2004b)

Her community project, "An American Garden", located in Chicago's Union Park, a low-income neighborhood undergoing rapid gentrification, connected local history with the inhabitants' current experiences of living in that neighborhood:

> *Using language as a directive for movement across the Park's landscape,* ***"An American Garden"*** *encircled trees, cut through a 150' prairie garden, and settled on park benches, mapping a complex cultural and social topography.* (Rothenberg, 1995-1996)

In this context the possibility of Ellen coming to Romania, and of her presenting some of the public art projects and performances made in the United States, became a relevant possibility for enriching the discussion on art's role in Bucharest's public space. Ellen expressed her interest in visiting Bucharest and meeting professionals and students involved in questioning the role of public space in the city. The idea of a workshop and lecture was born and SAIC, MNAC and The American Embassy in Bucharest supported the project.

Conceptual framework and methodological considerations

As feminist writer and teacher bell hooks[3] indicates in her recent book – *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*: "Negative conflict-based discussion almost always invites the mind to close, while conversation as a mode of interaction calls us to open our mind." (Hooks, 2010: 45) and "Conversation is always about giving. Genuine conversation is about the sharing of power and knowledge; it is fundamentally a cooperative enterprise" (ibid.).

This writer's thoughts on what a "fruitful" conversation might be were at the core of Ellen's and my yearlong interactions when planning the workshop.

---

[3] Writing her pseudonym without capitals is the decision of bell hooks.

The title of the program refers to Ellen's and my private, usually Skype-based conversations on the future workshop, to our conversations while in the middle of the workshop, and the conversations that can be created conceptually between cultural actors and activists in Chicago and cultural actors and activists in Bucharest. By "activists", I refer to people who believe in the possibility of social change and are, in some way, actively involved in this process.

A significant role in the structure and ideas presented and put in practice at the workshop stem also from my involvement, as a student, with the now defunct Chicago-based performance company, "Goat Island"[4]. Three of the former company's six members teach at SAIC and besides taking several of their individual classes (such as "Systems of Writing" with Matthew Goulish and "The Art of Collaboration" with Lin Hixson), I had the opportunity to participate in their then annual three-week long Summer School. As the company states on their website:

> *Each Summer School takes on a life of its own and this is driven by the specific people involved. The real work goes on between live people who come together to construct a series of agreements to work and communicate with each other in order to make art. The Goat Island Summer School involves moving into action, finding inspiration, and negotiating community.* (Goat Island Performance Company)

The workshop: process and structural stages

"Chicago-Bucharest: A Conversation on Publics, Art and Collaboration" could be called an "immersive"[5] or "introductory" workshop, as it lasted only two days, and at the same time aimed to open a discussion on these varied topics: collaboration and how it might be done practically, working across disciplines, and what can be learned from Chicago-based art collectives. Twenty-five participants attended the combined workshop and lecture program[6]. They came from fields such as: art, art criticism, curating, linguistics, architecture, psychology, psychotherapy and education. What follows is a description of the actual workshop stages, as they were structured for the two-day period, as well as some personal observations on the choice of these.

---

[4] "Goat Island" was founded in 1987 and ended its activity in 2009. Two of its founding members, Matthew Goulish and Lin Hixson founded the performance company "Every House Has a Door" in 2008. Goat Island's company members continue to collaborate with each other. For example, Matthew Goulish, Lin Hixson and Mark Jeffery co-teach in the current "Abandoned Practices" Summer School at SAIC.

[5] As one of the participants later called it. See under "Participant Questionnaires – What was gained from the workshop?"

[6] The lecture, held by Ellen Rothenberg on her work after the workshop, was intended to include a wider audience than the one at the workshop.

1. Collective reading

On the first day, participants were divided into groups of three or four from different disciplines. After getting acquainted with each other and attending a presentation of Ellen's and my own artwork, they received a list of "Collaborative Methods" by Goat Island Performance Company to read to each other, from their book *Small Acts of Repair – Performance, Ecology and Goat Island* (Bottoms and Goulish, 2007: 206). Here are some excerpts of these methods:

- *Find a structure in which every voice is heard. If you tend to speak a great deal, try to make sure you wait and listen occasionally. If you normally remain silent, try to speak now and then. Remember that having a voice need not always connote speaking. Sometimes a quality of attention can become a kind of voice.*
- *Work from people's strengths. Make sure everyone is challenged creatively. Allow the entire group to work from the strength of each individual. For example pretend everyone in the group is as good as the best dancer.*
- *Contribute a fragment rather than a complete idea. Through the group process, the ideas complete one another. (….)*
- *If you encounter problems during the process, try doing another activity together, such as taking a walk or drinking tea.* (ibid.)

From my experience of working with a group, I have observed that receiving some instructions before beginning an activity can make one more mindful and focused on the task at hand, even if that does not influence one's actual immediate behavior. Furthermore, by reading these instructions before beginning their conversations, the teams were invited to concentrate on the common goal of processing this particular information, allowing for a "we" to enter the space.

2. Brainstorming

The Workshop participants were then asked to make a list of ideas for issues they were interested in concerning Bucharest's public space. Everything anyone could think of was to be included, no idea was to be censored at this point. This might have included: an event, an action in public space, e.g. a performance, an information campaign (on ecology, minority rights, health, etc.), a festival, a video, a blog, a concert, etc.

The "trick" of writing down all ideas that any member could think of in the brainstorming session was meant to allow creativity to flow without being blocked either by the author of the idea herself or by other group members. The movement thus proposed was from the "ideal", or the impossible, towards the "real".

3. Sharing of initial ideas

One member of each group read aloud for everyone the ideas that surfaced in the initial discussion. Numerous ideas were written and Ellen suggested gathering and emailing them to all workshop participants for future reference. To give you some examples of these "un-judged" ideas:

- Stickers for cars parking on the sidewalk
- The "1 Day Without the Car" Festival
- Intervention: playing sounds from nature at big junctions in Bucharest
- Wounds in the city – Dâmboviţa Dam or the voids surrounding "Casa Poporului" – could be places of memory rather than places for "development"
- Working with the villas streets – each owner of a house could have a bench in front of the house (or a shading device/ water supply), inviting neighbours and passers-by to stop and take a moment on the street, and even get to know each other

4. Choosing one idea

The groups had to look at several aspects of their ideas and consider budget, feasibility and timeline. "Which idea is the most feasible?" Passionate discussions were born inside the groups, as each group had been given a separate room to develop their project idea; everyone was very involved in their common project discussion.

5. Home assignment

Participants were encouraged to continue thinking about their chosen project: "Research the chosen idea on the Internet. Find possible helpful materials, such as photographs or texts, to bring for the next day". As the day came to an end and ideas were still being born, we encouraged individuals to continue working at home and come back with more developed, though not completed, thoughts and objects.

6. Group physical movement

On the second day we had a slow start and we decided to begin with a movement exercise, to make our bodies (and minds) more active. We had included this exercise in our pre-made schedule but didn't exactly know where to place it. In my view, doing this small physical movement together helped people feel connected before working.

7. Conceptual writing

We then proceeded to an individual writing exercise, including the following guidelines:

1. *Consider the **actual community** in which you create work. It might be a community of one, of two, or of many. Begin writing by describing this community, its characteristics and activities. What is in this community that gives you support?*
2. *Consider an **imagined community** that supports you and your creative practice. Continue writing by describing this imagined community's characteristics and activities in detail.*
3. *Record a **dialogue** between yourself and an individual in the imagined community. An unexpected event happens.*
4. *Continue writing by describing this **unexpected event**.*
5. *Describe the **steps** you might take to **actualize the imagined** community from the actual community that you have now.* (Bottoms and Goulish, 2007: 212)

In "The Art of Collaboration" Class, at SAIC I found out that this writing assignment actually works to make you think about what you do have and what you would like to have. It forces you to organize your thoughts and see that there are things that you personally can do to improve your "actual community". As Jacques Derrida says in this "quote in a quote in a quote":

> *"A universal community" excluding no-one is a contradiction in terms; communities always have an inside and outside. That is why Derrida's comments on community (…) are always extremely guarded, on guard against the guard that communities station around themselves to watch out for the other… We might say that a "community" in deconstruction would always have to be what he calls "another community", **"an open quasi community"**, which is of course a community to come, and a "community without community"… One might even dream of a **community of dreamers who come together to dream of what is to come**."(John D. Caputo 1997:108, 124).* (Bottoms and Goulish, 2007: 212)

8. Chicago groups' presentation

Ellen had contacted several Chicago-based art collectives to gather materials they thought were relevant for our workshop and the final group selection included: HaHa, Spoke, Material Exchange and InCUBATE.

Haha is an established politically engaged group, about whom Daniel Tucker writes in the above mentioned article:

> *One key art group HAHA began in 1988, initiated by Wendy Jacob, John Ploof and Laurie Palmer. Their twenty year long practice shifted focus*

regularly from the highly local and public to whimsical works made for galleries and museums throughout Europe and the U.S. (...) Their approach to community, participation and pedagogy has had a strong influence on the local art scene. (Tucker, 2009)

*Founded in 2008, **Spoke** is a multifaceted artist-run organization comprised of six artist studios and an open space for public programming and projects. Since its inception, Spoke has been host to collaboration and exchange through the production of innovative events, performances, workshops, exhibitions and community-based projects.* (Spoke)

Material Exchange is a sculptor duo that often works with recycled materials, found objects and collaborations with non-artists. As they state on their home page:

The world is filled with things made for a specific purpose. When their purpose has been fulfilled, or their valued properties diminish, there is often some material remainder. Our projects attempt to extract or exploit that history. (Material Exchange)

InCUBATE (short for Institute for Community Understanding Between Art and The Everyday):

is a research group dedicated to exploring new approaches to arts administration and arts funding. We at InCUBATE act as curators, researchers and co-producers of artists projects. Our core organizational principle is to treat art administration as a creative practice. By doing so, we hope to generate and share a new vocabulary of practical solutions to the everyday problems of producing under-the-radar culture. Currently we do not have a physical location and we work together on an ongoing project basis. (InCUBATE)

9. Organizational aspects

Since the workshop was very limited by time restraints and as both Ellen and I were very much aware of time constraints existing in contemporary work situations, we decided to not only set time limits for each assignment, but to also include some basic Project Management principles in the group's work process: research, timetable, funding, risks and goal achievement. Each group was given writing materials and had to discuss these aspects and write 10 steps to project completion.

In addition, they had to include possible external problems that might happen on the way and the solutions to these problems. As one participant later wrote: "The structure of the workshop made us a little bit more practical in a shorter time period. It is known that the artist is 'visited' by the 'delaying concrete actions

syndrome'."(Chicago-Bucharest: A Conversation on Publics, Art and Collaboration, MNAC, June 29-30 2010, Questionnaire No. 2, Question No. 6)

10. Final presentations

Each group presented for 10 minutes. Each member of the group had to present and the time allotted was equal for each member. Most groups had 4 members, allowing for each of them to speak for almost 3 minutes.

At the end of each presentation the audience was invited to comment and give helpful response to the presenting group on how these project plans might be brought to fruition. The presenting group however had to refrain from responding to the comments, as the purpose was to receive feedback that would further the group's proposal. The audience was thus asked to mindfully assist the presenting group.

Ellen, as an experienced teacher, was in charge of mediating this process and of ensuring that the groups would keep to the time limits so that each person had the same opportunity in presenting.

The Project Proposals were: Monument to Stray Dogs, Abusing Public Space, Street Crossing Party and The Young City**:**

- **Monument to Stray Dogs** proposed to build a giant dog sculpture as a memento for their presence on the streets for the possible time when they will no longer be there. (Arnold Schlachter, Iulia Morcov, Laura Chifiriuc)
- **Abusing Public Space** proposed to decorate the huts of public guardians and spaces of security guards and offer a "hut tour guide" for tourists, addressing the issue of prevalence of public security in the city. (Delia Orman, Mirela Anghelache, Claudiu Cobilanschi, Stefan Botez, Katja Eliad)
- **Street Crossing Party** proposed several events at street crossings, which draw attention to the increasing loss of space for humans to the advantage of automobiles in Bucharest. (Cristina Crăciun, Florina Niţă, Sanda Watt, Radu, Marina Albu)
- **The Young City** proposed a platform that would mediate the collaboration of the city council and art students to bring contemporary art to Bucharest's public space. (Veda Popovici, Igor Mocanu, Teodora Gârbovan).

What was gained from the workshop? – Participant responses

Approximately one year after the workshop, we sent out a questionnaire to see if and how the workshop has influenced the participants' professional lives. Seven people out of the sixteen group members have replied so far. The 15 questions

referred to the structure of the workshop, the applicability of the models proposed, their suggestions for improving the workshop and their interests in possible future programs.

The responses received are very different indeed. To begin with the enthusiastic responses, written by people who state to have been visibly influenced by the workshop, I will quote here some of them:

One of the visual artists wrote:

> *Yes, I had the chance to apply the planning methods learned in this workshop, by writing a project. I haven't found collaborators yet to make it happen. I have worked on this type of public intervention projects before, but after the workshop things became clearer to me. After I saw the works of Delia and Ellen, I became a bit more optimistic with regard to the implementation of projects that involve local communities.* (Chicago-Bucharest: A Conversation on Publics, Art and Collaboration, MNAC, June 29-30 2010, Questionnaire No. 2, Question No. 7, Translation from Romanian by Delia Popa)

An art critic and curator stated, when asked what he would have done differently at the workshop: "I wouldn't change anything in the workshop, it was just good and correct."

Another person, a psychologist, wrote, also responding to Question No 7:

> *I tried to apply the things learned in organizing workshops on personal development, in which each bring their contribution. I had a much greater freedom of expression and worked more relaxed, adapting to changes and demands coming at us. I've seen that people become more creative when they are listened to with confidence and they know that their opinion about a topic will be considered.* (ibid., Questionnaire No. 1, Question No. 7)

Regarding the interdisciplinary, or rather the trans-disciplinary aspect of the workshop, another psychologist, who works with disabled people, thought: "The steps done in the workshop for the projects, brainstorming, are good to follow in any campaign for helping people with problems, social assistance." (ibid., Questionnaire No. 3, Question No. 11)

A linguistics student stated: "I think this workshop has contributed to the way I interact with people today. It helped me be able to better interact with people from different fields." (ibid., Questionnaire No. 6, Question No. 6, Translation from Romanian by Delia Popa), and when asked if she has already applied some principles: "Not specifically, but it did open my appetite for contemporary art, and

since then I haven't missed many exhibitions I can go to, I read contemporary art magazines (Artpress)". (ibid., Question No. 7, Translation from Romanian by Delia Popa)

To end with the more critical responses received so far, I will quote another visual artist answering Question No 11:

> *I probably would have made it 2 days longer – a week workshop if not 2 weeks even – felt more time was needed – ideas were thrown at us and very little time to really metabolize them – immersion type workshop – for the methods of collaboration to really be understood, digested and carried on further.* (ibid., Questionnaire No. 5, Question No. 11)

Finally, when considering the applicability of the Chicago art collectives models in the Bucharest and Romanian cultural context, the same linguistics student mentioned above writes: "The idea of involvement in a community is something very 'American', and, although I admire it in theory, in Romania it would not have much success in the eyes of the public and besides it would have too small an effect to change anything" (ibid., Questionnaire No. 6, Question No. 9, Translation from Romanian by Delia Popa) and: "I would have preferred it to be more centered on realizable, realistic initiatives." (ibid., Questionnaire No. 6, Question No. 11, Translation from Romanian by Delia Popa)

Conclusions

Feminist writer and teacher bell hooks writes in the already quoted *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* book:

> *Envisioning a future of global peace and justice, we must all realize that collaboration is the practice that will most effectively enable everyone to dialogue together, to create a new language of community and mutual partnership.* (Hooks, 2010: 41)

Although this might sound like an over-optimistic, "unrealistic" statement, especially when compared to our participant's prediction on change in Romania, the book it appears in is called *Teaching Critical Thinking – Practical Wisdom*, which implies to me that critical thinking, teaching, collaboration and having a vision of peace and justice are all somehow connected. This discussion is vast, indeed, and by all means the answers are not to be found quickly.

I am however confident that our small attempt at proposing "conversations" and "collaborations" in a way that might be innovative for this particular context, will have some consequences. For one, it opened Ellen's interest in Romania and a new conversation on organizing a similar event next year began between the two of us.

I also dare think the conversations between participants started at the workshop continue to develop in some fashion in the work they do and in the collaborations they might engage in in the future.

The discussion around public space and collaboration in Bucharest is very much alive and I personally am interested in further developing theoretical and practical discourse on the appropriation of collaborative initiatives and of beginning unique collective enterprises. I would be happy to receive thoughts and ideas from the readers of this article.

References and bibliography

Bottoms, S. and Goulish, M. (eds). 2007. *Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology and Goat Island*. London and New York: Routledge.
"Every House Has A Door". <http://www.everyhousehasadoor.org>
"Goat Island Performance Company". <www.goatislandperformance.org/home.htm>
Hooks, B. 2010. *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. London and New York: Routledge.
"Incubate". <www.incubate-chicago.org>
"Material Exchange". <www.material-exchange.org>
"Photographs of workshop". <http://deliapopa.com/section/192448_Publics_Art_and_Collaboration_Workshop.html>,
<http://www.ellenrothenberg.com/chicago-bucharest.html>
Rothenberg, E. 2004a. "'Invisible Garden' Project".
<http://www.ellenrothenberg.com/invisible-garden-about.html>
Rothenberg, E. 2004b. "'Invisible Garden' Project".
<http://www.invisiblegardenchicago.com>
Rothenberg, E. 1995-1996. "'An American Garden' Project".
<http://www.ellenrothenberg.com/an-american-garden-about.html>
"Spoke". <http://www.spokechicago.blogspot.com>
Tucker, D. 2009. "The Miscellaneous Projects of Daniel Tucker. Critical Culture in Chicago – Article #2: Groups and Spaces". <http://miscprojects.com/2009/01/21/chicago-art-series-article-2-on-groups-and-spaces>

APPENDIX

PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your profession? What fields do you work in?

2. How did you find out about the workshop?

3. What made you come?

4. How useful did you find it in terms of your professional development?

Extremely Useful	Very Useful	Useful	Mildly Useful	Somewhat Useful	Not at all

5. How useful did you find it in terms of your personal development?

Extremely Useful	Very Useful	Useful	Mildly Useful	Somewhat Useful	Not at all

6. How did the structure of the workshop (time frames, group discussions, reading etc) influence you, if at all? Did it change the group dynamics? In what way?

7. Have you already applied some of the things learned/ proposed at the workshop in your personal or professional life? If yes, could you please write a short example?

8. Is interdisciplinary practice (e.g. working with people from other fields) something you include in your work or would like to include? Can you please write a short example?

9. How did the work of Chicago collectives and work made with communities affect or inspire you? Do you think you could work with a collective here in Bucharest? If yes, what type of collective work? If no, please explain briefly.

10. Are you still in touch with the group you worked in at the workshop? Have you continued to work on the projects you initiated at the workshop, what forms have these taken? If not, would you like to develop the project proposal further? What would you require for that purpose?

11. What would you personally have done differently at the workshop? How could it have helped you more professionally or personally?

12. Would you like to participate in further programs such as this? Do you think it should be done at MNAC again, if not, what other type of venue (place)?

13. What categories of people would benefit from such programs in your opinion?
High School Students
Students
Young Professionals
Mid-Career Professionals
Pensioners
Other
All Categories

14. What are you most interested in?
Art in Public Space
Methods of Collaboration
Public Debates
Presentations with International Artists
Other (such as…)

15. What type of workshops would you like to attend in the future?
Thank you very much for your input. It will help develop more of these programs.

The author

Delia Popa is an independent visual artist based in Bucharest, who works with painting, video, installation and performance. She is committed to art as a catalyst for social transformation and critique, evaluating the possibilities of introducing current models for community in Romanian public life. Her screenings and exhibitions include: Raum für Projektion, General Public, Berlin (2011), The 5th Video Art Biennial, International Center for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv (2010), Traces: Contemporary Romanian Art, Ringling College of Art and Design, Sarasota, Florida (2008-09), Art 44/46, Chicago (2006), Offset, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest (2005).