

## “DECEPTION” IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN CONTEMPORARY ART

**PhD Student Laura Partin**

**Prof. Jérôme Glicenstein**

Université Paris 8, École Doctorale Esthétique, Sciences et Technologies des Arts, France

### ABSTRACT

In a text from 2004, *Conceptual art, social psychology and deception*, Peter Goldie exposes an analogy between this method of “deception” adopted by social psychologists and the strategy of some contemporary artists (Santiago Sierra, *Space Closed by Corrugated Metal* and Leeds 13:13, *Going Places*).

Other art theorists who analyzed a very similar strategy in contemporary art are Anne Cauquelin (who used the term “décept” for a variety of practices provoking or betraying the audience in a certain aspect) or Maxence Alcalde, who associated the term “mètis” to tactics like artifice or fraud, distortion or deception, which imply confusing the opponent in a certain manner.

In this article, we are going to trace the artistic strategy of “deception” as approached by Peter Goldie, “décept” or “mètis” in the particular context of central and eastern European art in order to scrutinize its possible idiosyncrasies determined by the local socio-political environment. We are going to analyze some key “deceptive” works of contemporary art from this area from the last six decades so that we can identify which strategy is more prevalent: either “deception”, “décept” (which mean operating within the institutional context and “deceiving” the art audiences’ expectations) or “mètis” (which usually implies disguise and intervention in the immediate reality and at the same time turning around an unfavourable power relation). Another interesting idea would be to start apprehending whether the expectations of the art audiences are seemingly different in a socialist or post-socialist context or not, since the access to information about new movements in western art was limited for decades, at least in certain countries. And, as a consequence, the eventual necessity regarding a different kind of “deception” could become more evident.

***Keywords: Deception, mètis, participatory, contemporary, décept***

### INTRODUCTION

“Deception” is a term commonly used by social psychologists to describe a method that implies misinforming the participants about the nature of a study in order to obtain quantifiable results. For example, in Stanley Milgram’s study about obedience’s effect on personal conscience, participants were announced they would take part in an experiment about learning, as “teachers”. The “learners” were Milgram’s confederates and they were strapped to a chair with electrodes, so that the “teachers” could administer electric shocks when they

answered incorrectly. The “learner” answered erroneously on purpose. When the “teacher” was hesitating, the experimenter intervened and told them to continue. Using “deception”, Milgram could measure and analyse the results : all the participants continued until they arrived at 300 volts, while 65% reached 450 volts. The electric shocks were fake, but the “learners” were acting as if they were real, screaming and begging them to stop. The conclusion of the study, after its 18 variations, was that ordinary people are likely to obediently follow orders even if that would mean inflicting a lot of pain on another person, because the “agentic state” allows them to pass off the responsibility.[1]

In a text from 2004, *Conceptual art, social psychology and deception*, Peter Goldie exposes an analogy between this method of “deception” adopted by social psychologists and the strategy of some contemporary artists (his examples of “deception” in contemporary art are Santiago Sierra’s *Space Closed by Corrugated Metal* and a participatory performance by a group of art students from Leeds, Leeds 13:13, *Going Places*). In this article, he marks a difference between the perception of this strategy in the two fields from an ethical point of view – psychologists are very concerned by the insincerity it involves, while art theorists or artists don’t seem to be.[2] Both in the social psychology experiments and in the art projects Goldie mentions, the success depends on a “hoax” that must be very well planned in advance.”Deception” can stir intense negative feelings, which in the artistic context is regarded as a quality. When it comes to the necessity of using “deception” in psychology studies, Goldie cites The American Psychological Association’s *Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct*: “Psychologists do not conduct a study involving deception unless they have determined that the use of deceptive techniques is justified by the study’s significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and that effective non-deceptive alternative procedures are not feasible.”[3]

Another art theorist who analyzed a very similar strategy in contemporary art is Anne Cauquelin. She uses the French term “décept” for a range of approaches that subvert the expectations of the audience in a certain aspect: either provenience (common objects from the everyday life are regarded as non-artistic), intelligibility, uniqueness or capacity to transmit emotions. In Anne Cauquelin’s terms, habit is more malleable than belief. Habits can be transformed, perfected, educated, rectified, improved.[4] Beliefs don’t have any critical foundation and they are always looking for experiences that could give the impression of a stable exterior reality, by strengthening them. Beliefs only accept works that comply with expectations and with what they vaguely define as art. Anne Cauquelin expounds as well the concept of “doxa”, which is defined in subjective terms and influenced by one’s social circle, without taking the level of artistic education into consideration. Anne Cauquelin considers that there is always a propensity towards “disappointment” (in constant dissension with a fragile, volatile type of satisfaction) in the aesthetic experience. Nevertheless, she recognizes a potential to question our own

beliefs regarding art in order to allow them to evolve and ourselves to “act against obsessive fixations”. [5] The “doxa” is acting like a “filter between vague belief and opinion” [6] and it is constantly seeking art that meets its guidelines. When the aesthetic experience doesn’t meet its precepts, the phenomena of “décept” occurs, which means that expectations are betrayed.

Maxence Alcalde associates the term “mètis” to a broad range of artistic practices, from artifice to fraud, from distortion to deception, with the consistent aim of enticing turmoil in the consciousness of the oponent. “Ruse” and “mètis” are concepts originating from the ancient Greece. Détienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant are quoted by Alcalde, the two authors referring to the “mètis” in the context of handcraft or war, as a necessary strategy of humans who deal with hostile forces, too strong to be controlled in a direct, undisguised manner. Through “mètis” these forces can be used in order to defy them, by predicting the phases of encirclement and by twisting the course of action towards an unpredictable result. [7] In order to obtain an ideal “mètis”, one has to have the ability to perceive a reversible context in order to act with subtlety.

#### Tadeusz Kantor - *The Letter* (1967)

Kantor’s work gravitates towards the two world wars, the extermination of the Jewish population, the omnipresence of death, the process of memory and repression of the past, the cultural decline during communism after the Cold War, the firm Catholicism which prevailed in Polish society after the communist period. [8] The communist establishment, which approved only of socialist realism, quickly deemed him as a *persona non grata*. He was even expelled from the arts university. Kantor’s aspiration was to expand the definition of theatre, by surpassing its illusory character.

*The Letter*, Kantor’s happening from 1967 took place in the streets of Warsaw. Seven postmen in their uniforms were transporting a giant letter of 14x2m made of fabric, addressed to Gallery Foksal. The public was waiting in a room of the gallery that was painted in black. Other post officials who were placed on the way to the gallery were giving the public real-time information about the localization of the colossal letter through some speakers. After the recorded reaction of an unknown recipient was transmitted, personal letters were read out by the audience. At the end, the public destroyed the oversized letter, by cutting and tearing it, as described in the *Tadeusz Kantor* catalogue by Eustachi Kossakowski, edited by Heike Munder, published by Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, in Zurich in 2008. Just like *The Sea Concerto*, this happening is characterized by a neo-Dada vigor, in the sense that it sublimates the absurdity of the societal and political context of communism through a celebration of nonsense. Since it is placed in a gallery, we could associate *The Letter* with the notion of “deception” or “décept”, but even *The Sea Concerto* brings into play the expectations of the art audience, even if it happened on the sea shore. When the public is aware that they are taking part in an artistic event, that means they expect to see something, something intelligible, moving, unique and coherent (like Anne Cauquelin emphasized). So even *The Sea Concerto*’s strategy could rather be defined as a “deception” or

“décept” rather than a “mètis”. In *The Letter*, the simple act of challenging the members of the audience to expose themselves by reading out personal letters and in the meanwhile make them wait for a giant letter they are about to destroy is something that probably disrupted the expectations of the art public frequenting a gallery in the ‘60s in Warsaw. Also, the absurd action of carrying a giant letter in the streets should have been disconcerting for the non-artistic public in the urban space in communist times.

Tamas Szentjóby, Gábor Altorjay, Miklós Erdély – *Breakfast : In Memoriam Batu Khan* (1966)

Tamas Szentjóby is a Hungarian artist. In 1966 he was strongly influenced by experimental performances by Merce Cunningham and John Cage, that he attended in Poland, by happenings from the United States and Western Europe or by artists like Joseph Beuys or Allan Kaprow which he read about in some articles. Some weeks after *Breakfast : In Memoriam Batu Khan* (1966), Szentjóby and the other artists involved have received the book by Wolf Vostell, *Happening, Fluxus, Pop art, Nouveau réalisme* (1965) and thus realized they were part of a creative international movement.[9]

*Breakfast : In Memoriam Batu Khan* was the first happening in Hungary. It took place in a former torture chamber from the XV<sup>th</sup> century. The artists placed snail shells everywhere on the ground, on the chairs and they had burnt incense. They projected images of Playboy and they played Chris Connor – *Spring is Here* in the background. Everywhere the public stepped the snail shells would crack. On a table there was bread and milk and some chicken were walking around the room. The artists were planning to kill them and to cover the walls in blood handprints with the help of the audience. Because of a power cut they gave up on the idea but they threw newspaper balls at the audience, which responded the same way. Then the artists started throwing chicken towards the public. Some of the members of the public grabbed them and brought them home with them. The performers drank the milk and ate the bread, while socializing with the audience. Then they destroyed a wardrobe that they had brought on stage.[10] Darko Šimičić recalls that several members of the audience were infuriated by the agitation created when the artists threw the chicken at them. [11] Amy Bryzgel describes this series of events in her text *Performance in Eastern Europe since 1960*, while quoting some of Szentjoby’s impressions from 1966 on the happening as well: “at the edge of convention, the individual recognises his own position between the absurdity of the historical past and the possible happening-future.”[12]

In this case, from what Šimičić and Bryzgel evoke, the public’s expectations certainly seem puzzled by the atypical location, by the antagonistic, spontaneous and even violent aspect of the performance and by the lack of semiotic coherence. From Szentjoby’s description, it seems like the only context where the individual could affirm their free will. It was the first time the Hungarian art audience had contact with a live happening and if we would analyze the course of action taking into consideration Anne

Cauquelin's theories about "décept", the only thing the public could have appreciated about it would be the uniqueness of it (the originality) and the capacity to transmit intense emotions, even though they were negative emotions like fear, confusion, consternation, discomfort. In terms of intelligibility, the happening was chaotic and all the objects integrated by the artists were banal, mundane elements which the art public *a priori* defines as non-artistic (since the action took place in Hungary in 1966, when even artists were just starting to learn from western art theory or press about movements like pop art or new realism which integrated ordinary objects in the sphere of art). The "décept" marks here the way the public was forced to go beyond its spectator position and encouraged to react spontaneously.

Roman Ondak – *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003)

*Good Feelings in Good Times* by the slovakian artist Roman Ondak is an artificially created queue, performed for the first time outside the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne in 2003, re-enacted at Frieze Art Fair in 2004 and purchased by Tate. Ondak transposes a phenomenon that was typical for eastern European countries during the communist era – the queues formed in front of grocery stores very early in the morning – in the context of western institutions. The performers are acting as if something important is supposed to happen, as if they are waiting, checking their watches regularly. If they are asked about the event they are waiting for, they are not allowed to give details, but they are improvising and trying to sound realistic. They are telling other performers from time to time that they should respect the queue or that it should have begun one hour before (without mentioning what they are talking about). The same behaviours are repeated in three sections, 40 minutes each. In a conversation from 2004 with Evi Baniotopoulou the artist mentioned the work is illustrating our perception of time: "There is no description of the queue – it is about feelings, about desire and your decision to be in it, and I like this ambiguity of the queue in our society. Also, on your own you think about your time – what I call 'real time' – which has its own value; but when you go in the queue, you slow down and the time is different." [13] The public can imagine different scenarios. It can exist thanks to a promotion, a very important exhibition by a popular artist, a unique event that couldn't be missed. For sure the audience would be curious and intrigued. The chances would have been very low in 2003 for the public to guess that the queue at Kölnischer Kunstverein was a performance. But since then, the art public became familiarized with Roman Ondak's work and they could recognize it. In his work we are also dealing with "deception" or "décept" since Ondak also works in institutional contexts and deludes the public into believing there is a mysterious queue without disclosing where it leads just in order to verify if the public would join it even if the aim of their patient downtime is ambiguous or unknown. Probably more people from the public would have joined the queue if they knew it was a performance, if they didn't know where it leads, just in order to see what happens and how it ends.

Apparatus 22 - *Patterns of Aura 15° Synaesthesia* – narativity as a reverse simulacrum (2011)

Apparatus 22 is a collective of Romanian artists initiated by Erika Olea (n. 1982), Maris Farcas (n. 1977), Dragos Olea (n. 1979) and Ioana Nemes (1979, Bucharest-2011, New York) in 2011. Their works, mostly installations, sometimes performances or texts evaluate in a critical manner the world of fashion and the market economy. Their approach is interdisciplinary, always raising questions about authorship and copyright, labour force, politics, ecology, public space, the history of Eastern Europe etc.

*Patterns of Aura 15° Synaesthesia* was a performance which took place in September 2011 at Mak Nite – the Austrian Museum for Applied Arts/Contemporary Art. The event consisted of a fashion show which included all the formal elements (lights, a catwalk, music, smoke effects) but instead of the collection there was only a recorded discourse, diffused in the speakers, with acclamations and applause in the background. The narrator was indicating to the public certain visual details of the fictive show, but also some quasi-taboo mechanisms of fashion which are normally diluted by the illusory aura characterizing the entire phenomena: celebrity culture, the obsession for youth, gender issues, economic relations between consumer and worker in the context of globalization etc. The discourse was inspired by the experiences of certain members of the group who activated in the fashion world under the name Rozalb de Mura.[14] The work is described in this manner in a text by Apparatus 22, *Selection of Works*.

The absence of the actual collection is not only symbolic (suggesting that the ideals promoted by fashion are so frivolous, alienating and illusory they could just disappear behind the smoke effects and the evasive aura that surround them). It also allows the public to have an active role in imagining, envisioning and analyzing not only the fictive collection, but also the issues that are being addressed. The imagination and the critical sense of the spectator are apprized and stimulated. If the work would have been shown in the framework of a fashion show, it doubtlessly could have been a “mètis”. The expectations of the public would surely have been different and it could have used the power of the fashion industry to create such a strong reaction in the public and the media that it would have been comparable to Gianni Motti’s intervention at ONU or The Yes Men’s disguise as Dow Chemical representatives at BBC. But since it was shown in a contemporary art museum, it can be associated with “deception”. People don’t expect to see a fashion collection in an art museum, but in front of the catwalk, they should expect seeing it for a short while, until the narrator starts describing the invisible collection.

Schlomi Yaffe - *How I Changed My Ideology in Prague Market*

The video by Schlomi Yaffe (Jewish artist, born in Israel) *How I Changed My Ideology in Prague Market* is actually the documentation of a performance unfolding in the public space. The artist is walking through the Prague market dressed normally, in black, with a backpack. He buys some clothes and accessories (military pants, a camouflage t-shirt, an aviator jacket). Every time

he buys something new, he puts it on. He tries to shave his own head with an electric hair clipper without any success, so in the end he goes to a hairdresser. The video ends after he buys a knuckle duster and puts it on his hand.

Schlomi Yaffe shows us through this transformation process how quickly a performer (Yaffe) can become his character (neo-nazi Yaffe) and how clearly someone can manifest an ideological identity without carrying any specific symbols.

Harry Weeks takes notice of a double antagonism: between the performer and his character (the role is very short, the character is constantly incomplete and when he finally carries out his outfit the video ends, so he doesn't have the time to put himself in the character's skin) and between the participants and the performer (since the passers-by and the Asian sellers aren't aware of the performance but they become accomplices in his transformation into a nazi).[15]

The Asian immigrants selling Yaffe all the necessary elements for his disguise don't seem to realize this complicity or his process of transformation. They don't seem skeptical at all. The passers-by are also ignoring him. The antagonism is present rather in the alarming paradox that a presupposed neo-nazi could buy products like knuckle dusters in a market where all the sellers are Asian immigrants and they could arm their enemies without realizing it. In this case, the public who is "deceived" is not the second layer of public (the artistic one) but the participants in the market who are not aware of the performance they are taking part in. He's performing this role without making it obvious for them that he's insinuating himself in their reality as a performer, that there is an ideological transformation taking place and that they are accomplices in it. He's pretending to be an ordinary customer, until all the elements he's wearing are making it obvious that he "converted" into a neo-nazi. The sellers see the camera and apparently there's another person next to Yaffe filming everything, but they smile at the camera and they don't seem to be suspicious about it.

## CONCLUSION

Peter Goldie's "deception" or Anne Cauquelin's "décept" seem to be more common in Eastern and Central European contemporary art. It seems that in the 60's when the strategy of "décept" unobtrusively emerged in happenings in Poland and Hungary, it subverted mainly the public's propensity to dissociate the everyday object from the art sphere or the expectation to find meaning, intelligibility or coherence in an artistic event (since the happenings were vastly influenced by Fluxus artists, they were characterized by a neo-Dadaist absurdist spirit). Contemporary art practices like Ondak's or Yaffe's are very close to Goldie's concept of "deception" since the situations they are proposing are very similar to a hoax. In order to create certain metaphors for specific social or ideological behaviours, they are "deceiving" the audience by disguising them and integrating them in immediate reality. They are very close to Alcalde's "mètis", but the difference is they are not trying to dupe powerful forces (like Gianni Motti in *Pathfinders*). The aesthetic habits (in Anne Cauquelin's terms) of the Eastern

and Central European art public, which are more malleable than beliefs, began to be transformed, perfected, educated when the first happenings took place during the communist times in Poland and Hungary. The “doxa”, even if it is constantly seeking art that meets its guidelines, evolves over time, at least for individuals who constantly analyze their own beliefs and opinions about art. The “décept” lies in the refuse of meeting the precepts of the “doxa”, which means that expectations are challenged. When they are deliberately constantly challenged, it might mean that the artists are trying to pressure the public to distrust their own beliefs. The result could be a perpetual antagonistic, tense contact between the artist and the public or the participants, but it is also a sign of cultural anachronism and isolation that the artists were and are persistently trying to combat in post-socialist countries even since 1989. In order to offer the possibility to understand in a factual, non-speculative manner how/if the expectations of the audiences are indeed constantly challenged, the texts describing participatory art events need to start incorporating a rigorous objective documentation of the public’s reactions, not only quotes and narratives written by artists and their circle of acquaintances.

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