# D Media Association

## Real Fictions:
## Reflections on Future Worlds in Four Parts

www.dmedia.ro

## Objectives of the project

The immediate aim of Real Fictions was to produce and distribute 4 video documentaries. The videos were a collaborative effort between 3 professional video artists/theorists from the non-governmental organization D Media and 8 volunteers between the ages of 15-20 from the city of Cluj.

The concrete objectives of the project were:
1 to help participants acquire skills in digital video;
2 to help participants acquire confidence about voicing their interests & making decisions about the content, production, and budget of the videos;
3 to learn something for ourselves about how to work with people with different interests and background than our own;
4 to start a conversation on some sensitive subjects: nationalism, the lack of an open source ethos, the problems of current art institutions;
5 to expose art audiences to something usually not viewed as "art" and provoke them to rethink how they usually conceive of artworks and the social relevance of art.

## Social context

A general apathy among young people towards political participation is prevalent in many post-socialist countries, but extremely alarming in Romania. This is best understood not only as a leftover of the historical baggage of Ceausescu's regime, but in terms of today's widespread belief that the political sphere remains a dictatorial game of elites. In this context people feel completely disinterested in the spectacle of politics and accept that they have no power to change things, or they cast their eyes towards a powerful leader who promises to save them.

The mayor of Cluj for the past 3 terms (he lost the last election) was a member of the extreme-right wing nationalist party, PRM. In the presidential election of 2000, a candidate of the PRM party with very strong anti-Hungarian and anti-semitic opinions got more than 30 percent of the national vote. His largest group of supporters were under the age of 25.

On the most general level, the Real Fictions project sought to counter the apathy among

young people who feel dependent on someone more "expert" to do things for them; it tried to spread a sense of empowerment through the idea that it is possible for the participants to "do it themselves" – not only in terms of producing their own video, but also when it comes to shaping their lives according to their own interests.

## Project description

Three members of D Media worked with 8 volunteers to produce 4 videos about various social and cultural problems in Romania: the recent rise of nationalism and xenophobia, the absence of an understanding of open source culture and its implications, and the structural inadequacies of institutions of contemporary art. The theme of the fourth video was left entirely open to the decision of the volunteers, and they chose to focus on tricolor images depicting the nationalist obsessions in Cluj. D Media members traveled with the volunteers to film on location and worked together with them on the montage.

The finished works are:
- "Folklore" (32 min, DVD, 2004). Documentary about present day nationalism in Romania and its ties to Ceausescu's regime. Interviews filmed in Cluj and Budapest were mixed with newsreel footage from the state archives. In Romanian and Hungarian with English subtitles.

- "Paint it Romanian" (11 min, DVD, 2004). Animated, rhythmic montage composed of hundreds of still photographs of tricolor objects reflecting the nationalist obsession in Cluj, mixed with reflective texts and experimental music. Romanian and English versions.

- "Open" (15 min, DVD, 2004). Interviews with theorists, programmers and new media centers about the political, economic & social implications of the Free/Open Source Software movement. Filmed at the Transhackmeeting in Croatia. In English with Romanian subtitles.

- "Beyond the Scene" (40 min, DVD, 2005). Interviews with young artists about the struggle to make a living, the role of art in mass culture, the importance of independent, artist-run spaces, and the inadequacy of public institutions promoting contemporary art in Romania. Filmed in Bucharest, Cluj, Timisoara and Iasi. In Romanian with English subtitles.

We targeted two different audiences:
1. through public presentations at galleries and art spaces, we wanted to provoke artists into rethinking the meaning of art and its social relevance;

2. through public presentations at high-schools and universities we targeted students in the same age group as the participants, for whom we hoped the idea that anyone can make their own video as well as the content of the works would have a provocative and contagious effect.

## Methodologies

Our methodology in relation to the participating volunteers was to include them as equals in the project rather than as our students to whom we gave lessons. We tried to avoid as much as possible to tell our collaborators what we wanted to achieve, but instead proceeded by posing questions which they had to answer:

1. what should we ask in the interviews, how can we connect together these sequence of images, etc. This methodology reflected not only our approach in producing the videos, but was also part of the background principle of the entire project.

2. namely, that it is necessary for people to refuse passivity and to actively participate and take responsiblility for their social environment in a constructive way.

## Interaction with partners (communities, public or private institutions, others) and Financing - fundraising strategies

Our interactions with other NGOs, social activists, artists and independent art spaces were very good, and many offered important support for the project. On the other hand, our interactions with public institutions, like the municipal council of Cluj and the Student's Cultural Center - which initially gave us the studio space to work, but then changed their mind, so that we lost the production space halfway through the project - was less than ideal. And although we had some initial promises for broadcasts from local television, the finished works were turned down. The one exception was a national television station in the republic of Moldova, but rather than broadcast the videos they asked us to make another video that explained video activism and included excerpts from the project. We believe that the problem, at least in part, was the critical overtones of some of the works. The documentary on nationalism pointed to a widespread xenophobia in Romania and cast a critical light upon some of the major literary and cultural heroes of Romanian history. The documentary on contemporary art criticized the way publicly funded art institutions function in Romania.

The major source of funding for the project was a grant from the European Cultural Foundation and, secondly, the help and contributions we received from other NGOs and independent art spaces which provided us with working space, exhibition and presentation space, help with equipment and publicity. Our requests for financing that were sent to international organizations with Romanian country offices (and Romanian evaluation boards), national foundations and the city council of Cluj were turned down.

On principle, we did not want to ask commercial companies/private industries for financial support.

## Critical points and applied solutions

After a public call for participation, we had many more volunteers than we expected. Because we felt bad about selecting some people and excluding others, we continued to

have the follow-up meetings with a group that was too large. Eventually some lost inter-est, and the group became smaller.

When we started filming, we had 8 committed participants; when we started work-ing on the montage (after the summer break of the school year), only 5 remained actively involved. We asked all the participants to fill questionnaires to see what some of the problems of the project were. Some felt that the group at the beginning was too large; others felt that the project in its different phases was too spread out and took too long; and some answered that there were too many different topics, which divided people's attention.

## Evaluation of the project - conclusions

Our main methods of evaluation were questionnaires which participants filled out, a series of discussions between D Media members about the expectations and results of the project, and the feedback we received from audiences during public presentations.

1. From the participant questionnaires, we concluded that the project was divided into too many different themes and that it might have been more effective to focus on one theme with multiple videos along the same issues. We also didn't fully take into account the different motivations of the participants: some wanted mainly to learn how to use the technologies, and others applied because they were mostly inter-ested in traveling with us on location, and they didn't return to the project for the montage phase. The committed group that stayed with the project until the end was smaller than we expected and it might have been better to be more restrictive in our selection at the beginning. The timing was also a bit of a miscalculation on our part, and it was not the best idea to divide the project with the summer vaca-tion in between.

2. From the discussions within the D Media group, we concluded that our strengths are our collaborations with similar groups and NGOs, and our weakness has been our ineffective collaborations with public institutions and the media – so that this is where we need to focus on developing better tactics in the future, without, however, com-promising our message. We also realized that we focused too much on the produc-tion of the videos and the collaboration with the volunteers and not enough on plan-ning the distribution phase.

3. From the audience reactions we concluded that it is more important to focus not on art audiences and other NGOs who already have a similar orientation to our own, but to concentrate on educational institutions. The best discussions (and often the most heated debates) were in high schools and universities rather than in art spaces. In the future we think it important to seek a wider (non-artistic and non-NGO) audience and to work on improving collaborations with the mass media, even though this might be the most difficult and the most frustrating goal to achieve.