

INSIDE-OUT a project by Marcella Vanzo

Survey of an art/society project carried out at the Zakrila children's shelter in Borovtzi, Bulgaria, August 2003 - July 2004



Inside-Out is a project that aims to reintroduce room for individual space and choice within a total institution and to provide the basic means for constructing identity. The orphanage as a total institution leaves no room for individual choice, discovery or space. The space around the children is organized in order to deny individuality and foster control. Any hint of personality is removed from the dwelling space where even exposure to one's own image is completely excluded.

Borovtzi is a tiny village in the poorest rural area in Bulgaria. It is there that I spent two weeks in August 2003 at the Zakrila shelter on a volunteer art project with children. During the school year, 48 girls and boys between the ages of 7 and 19 live at Zakrila. They are mostly Roma orphans and go to the local elementary and high schools.

The director aims to provide children with work training, and to increase the number of children adopted or hosted by foster families. Children stay there up to two years, during which time alternative living arrangements are sought.

At Zakrila, the children live in a two-floor building. All the inside walls were grey and all the rooms are alike: poorly lit, with no curtains or furniture except beds and the occasional table. There were no mirrors in the building nor was it possible to lock any of the doors (including the bathroom). Sinks and showers leaked, toilets were often clogged and the hygienic conditions were very poor. Washing machines did not work and there was no dryer.

During the art project, we painted and played with the kids every day. Once, on a day trip, we took their pictures and gave them to them. They were both puzzled and ecstatic: most had never seen their own image before. These were the first they ever received.



After the summer project, as an artist, I felt the need to find a transversal modus operandi to impact an existing situation: an orphanage in Bulgaria, without being encapsulated in the rhetoric of humanitarian intervention in a post - communist country.

I realized I could intervene on three levels, each producing a set of functional relations.

- a) On a personal level: devising an art project for Zakrila.
- b) On an institutional level, asking for guidance from specialized professionals. I discussed the project with Chiara Strutti, an acquaintance who manages projects on social exclusion for the World Health Organisation.
- c) On a financial level, seeking sponsorship.

From Strutti I learned that the law favours the abolition of orphanages. In accordance with her instructions, I asked Zakrila's director specific questions in order to establish his attitude towards the current legislation, child-care and future goals. Strutti made it clear that the children do not consider the shelter as home, as I naively assumed. She stressed the importance of not making the place too beautiful or creating ties to be severed in two years, as the institution would be abolished. She also addressed the necessity of local guarantees of donated money and materials and their rightful use. Given these parameters, I prepared a project that contributed to the individual growth of children living in a shelter, to foster their self-esteem, by means of validating their identity and history and the creation of personalised creative spaces.



Inside Out entails a two-fold set of initiatives carried out by a person (me in Zakrila's case) who interacts directly with the children (and a photographer, as necessary), and variable interventions, based on local needs as exposed by the director. The total budget includes the above in addition to travel and room and board expenses for the person/s involved with the children.

- a. Children decide what colour to paint their rooms and common areas, an easy way to introduce the idea of change depending on their choice and will.
- b. After painting the walls, mirrors are installed in every room and bathroom, the most effective way to acquaint them with their persona within their daily routine.
- c. Pictures of the children are taken and each child receives a set number of portraits, as most don't have any.
- d. A corkboard is hung on each bed, for the children to put up drawings and photos, creating a personal zone for expression.
- e. In the case of Zakrila, basic furniture and accessories for bedrooms and bathrooms, a septic tank, plumbing and repair work are provided, as requested by the director.

The project is divided in three phases over a (variable) span of 4 months:

- 1) Presentation of the project, meeting staff and children, evaluation of local needs/requests, room colour decisions and definitive plan.
- 2) Assessment of rooms and common areas, photo sessions, purchase of furniture and accessories.
- 3) Photo distribution and evaluation of total refurbishment work.

As I was looking for a sponsor, I was introduced to an Italian businessman who produces machinery in Bulgaria. He immediately provided a very generous donation and put at our disposal his local representative. Sponsorship by a local firm proved to be a fundamental feature of the project, since local companies can easily provide (at no cost) translations, administrative, bureaucratic and financial services as well as the local guarantees cited before. Mr. Keremichev, our sponsor's representative, came on every trip to Zakrila with me, took great care of all relevant matters and devised the best ways to direct our energies. His continuous interest makes guarantee processes very efficient without being intrusive.

The preliminary phase started with my e-mail correspondence with the director in September 2003. By December, under Strutti's supervision, we checked that all conditions were viable for the project and that the director's request was ready. By March 2004 I found the sponsor and put Mr. Keremichev in touch with the director to discuss his request and devise a plan. I went to Zakrila three times.



1) April 2004

Meeting children and staff, presentation of the project, opening of a dedicated bank account from the firm for the director for easy access to donated money, photo sessions, plan for wall colours, purchase of paint.

Highlights: in order to overcome some children's shyness, instead of taking pictures on a set, I asked them to take me to their favourite spot, which made them very happy.

One night two children escaped in order to find us at the village hotel where we stayed.

We took them for cake and drove them back. To avoid further flights, we reported it to the director. He told us that by law the shelter's doors cannot be locked. The next day he joined all children in a room and in front of us asked the two culprits what they did. They asked to be forgiven, we asked them not to do it again and brought cake for all kids. It did not happen again.

2) June 2004

Portrait distribution to children. Work assessment: furniture ordered, septic tank and repair work in progress as well as wall painting. Curtains, sheets and colour for external walls will arrive with Dutch donation. Photo session with children not present last time.

Highlights: the initial budget included money for workers to paint the walls, whereas I saw the kids do it. Since Strutti and I didn't want the children to be exploited, she suggested asking the director to give them an apprenticeship grant, consisting of a diploma and some money. It took a month's correspondence to convince the director, who was extremely reluctant to pay the children.

3) July 2004

General assessment of refurbishment work. Picnic and photo distribution. Meeting with director to decide compensation, depending on individual involvement. Children not yet responsible about spending it, would receive it in two installments. Party for awarding of diplomas and money to the kids, Italian sponsor present.

Highlights: the children were delighted with the make-over of their dormitory and money came not only came as a surprise, but proved an excellent educational device.

Local sponsorship and apprenticeship grant will be an integral part of this project in the future. Strutti will propose Inside Out as a model program for UN intervention in Serbia.

