

Autopoiesis¹ of a journey

by Frederick D. Bunsen

21 December, 2001 Cluj, Romania

Abstract: A combination of applied systems theory and dynamic observation illustrates how a professional painter-artist deals with the creation of yet undetermined states, i.e. developing a painting, or daring a journey into the unknown.



1999 by FD Bunsen
50 x 80 cm, tempera on canvas

"When do you go to Bulgaria", my colleagues asked, although I corrected them again and again they still didn't seem to get it. "It's Romania", I said, "and don't ask me how long I'll be there, or exactly what I'll be doing when I get there". No prescribed goals, no anticipated rewards, no security, and best of all, in the middle of an icy Winter and heaven knows, with people I don't even know - answers which met with little understanding of what might ever be gained from such an undertaking.

Romania, the "Terra Incognita" in the minds of many western Europeans, had become an obsession for me. My decision to go there depended neither on financial security nor on extrinsic goals: Or as the singer, Janis Joplin once put it, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to loose". A trip to Romania conjured the impression of an enticing, white, gesso canvas awaiting its first brush stroke.

Recently an article in the Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung caught my eye, suggesting that the artist could serve as a model to the industrialized world of deregulation: The artist traditionally takes high risks for the sake of creativity; if managers could learn from that example? I recall an exhibition opening where a businessman brazenly asked if I could survive on art, in other words, if I earned enough from selling art to support myself. In reply, I deliberated about taking more risks and reaching more goals through art, because the creativity in art systems was not structured on economics (the gentleman evaded further conversation).

I'm forever fascinated by how people interact with their environments, of how they act and react in day-to-day situations, seeing and surviving on what their systems and power of observation afford them. Sometime in life we've all been a foreigner in another country or were in an unknown situation, whose course we couldn't determine. Through self-induced alienation we can also place ourselves in the position of the so-called other, to appreciate how someone might perceive us - to see ourselves from the outside. Throughout our lives

we invariably oscillate from the standpoint of the outsider to that of the insider in trying to size up a situation from all sides. At any given moment the outsider notices what the insider doesn't see, and vice versa, and being aware of their differences establishes something new over and beyond the sum of both positions.

New to Cluj, Romania, the familiarity of my old home environment doesn't afford the knowledge (codes) necessary for deciphering my new setting, offering little consolation as such. Appreciation for a new language and overcoming the cultural barrier is only beginning, so for the time being I'm radically transferred to the extrinsic position of myself.

My ongoing experience in Cluj is like living inside a painting of sorts, much in the same way that a painting becomes a journey by its own emergence. Along that path I am alert to my behavior as I communicate with my environment, thereby channeling emerging developments. This is more essential for confronting a happenstance than having a prescribed goal with a proposed plan for reaching it.

Expecting to achieve a set goal is detrimental to the emergence of new ideas and strategies better suited for the creative process. That is, goals, rigidly prescribed and adhered to for the sake of prearranged rewards, would disqualify the possibility of budding solutions or make one blind to them. What matters personally is that I recognize how a flexible interaction with people and situations allows me to recursively generate the very network, which allowed for that interaction in the first place. These complex relationships also serve to understand the basis of communication as in e.g. a friendship, a picture, a job, or a love relationship. In the end, the observation of immanent activity about me, and its dynamic interrelation relays an ulterior sense of life.

The creativity involved in my own painting process is a case in point: I begin *painting* by creating a so-called *marked state* - that first brush-stroke or distinction on the empty space. This distinction serves as a departure point, painted as if I were certain that I knew what I was going to paint, all the while knowing that my action were anything but certain. The next brush stroke in relation to the first is really certain because I have a prior state on which I can then draw the next distinction, determining all the while if it makes a difference in the greater evolving sense of my picture.

Generating a surplus of color forms within the space of a picture allows the artist a greater degree of selection in his process of reduction (taking out what he doesn't need or what doesn't work). Although at first the quantity of forms increases (system complexity) the

artist can then choose from a larger pool of possibilities in creating form interaction and communicate art sense. Risk implies painting without knowing what is to be painted, maintaining the autopoietic system while continuously re-igniting the creativity process.

Drawing in particular is a process where an artist is momentarily "blinded" as to how his lines and surfaces might make sense from an outside perspective, yet almost simultaneously leave his creative position to eccentrically realize and guide that same activity from the outside. That distinction of being simultaneously inside and outside the system, in turn, guides and perpetuates the autopoiesis of the drawing. By submerging myself once again in the act of drawing, I maintain the conditions under which the autopoiesis of drawing was at first enabled.

Each successive experience on my so-called journey builds on the acknowledgement of previous experiences, to challenge the next unmarked state, in adapting to the constant reorganization of myself and/or my environment. Submerge yourself into something new and something new emerges!

Along the city streets of Cluj I noticed that local politicians have sought to boost patriotism by placing colorful Romanian flags every 20 meters of the way; Flags wherever one looks, flags dotting the whole city against the dismal gray of winter clouds and concrete as far as the eye can see. For the receptive observer it's also the open space of a three dimensional painting, where the blue-yellow-red tricots become the tone of voice amidst pastel grays. Over and beyond the aesthetics of a city panorama, I'm reminded of the freedom loving, independent spirit of the artist in the flags waving high above.³

Not just a designated mark on a map, Cluj has become a dynamic network - an artwork of interacting experiences within this space. On any particular day I might have made the acquaintance of e.g. a university president, a secretary, an art student, an orthodox priest, a taxi driver, a sales woman, a doctor, an art professor, a technician, or a waiter. In each case I strove to sensitize myself to how my internal constitution was responding and adapting to the new happenstance of these encounters, so as to notice a difference in the interaction of my world and the facing world. All in all, each encounter afforded a new distinction in the dynamically developing structure I now can personally relate to as Cluj.

Friendship, like risk, is also comparable to a journey, such that it can never be anticipated, only responded to along the way. Could an active friendship, or the outcome of a creative moment, or of creativity itself (!) ever be planned? Once the essentials of a relationship are

appreciated the observer guides emerging behavior patterns, which, then again, reproduce the dynamics necessary to reinforce those relationships. An operation, which incorporates observational abilities, not only determines the course of our behavior but also confirms the consequence of a particular influence, e.g. as having been effective or non-effective in the course of a dialog.

And yet, as I write these lines I realize that I am reflecting on past events from a distance of days, hours or even seconds, which before, were decided and acted upon quasi unconsciously within the immediate framework of the situations I was confronting.

Through descriptive writing I'm observing an observation of mine made at some time past, because I am no longer submerged in the actual process of the event that I'm now describing. In this moment I'm see myself outside that framework, and reflect how I had once been taken up in that sphere of involvement.

To speak *historically* of life's journey would be to overly emphasis the *cause and effect* along a singular chain of events, or perhaps linger in its nostalgia. I prefer instead to act in the sphere of a journey forever emerging, or fail as an artist.

1. Francisco J. Valera, *Principles of Biological Autonomy*,: Elsevier (North Holland) p. 13: "An autopoietic system is organized (defined as a unity) as a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of components that produces the components that a) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and b) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in the space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network".

2. Frederick D. Bunsen, professional artist, and systems theorist, has resided in Stuttgart, Germany since 1974. His painting was formidably influenced by American and European abstraction expressionism. From 1986 to 1998 an ongoing friendship and co-operation with the late systems theoretic, Niklas Luhmann precipitated new concepts of form and differentiation in his art (among other, joint publication in 1990 "Unbeobachtbare Welt", Haux Publishing Company, Bielefeld, Germany). Various teaching assignments include Community College Herrenberg, and Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany). His work is represented by BPM Gallery in Lazarea, Romania. Bunsen is presently teaching art systems theory at the University of Art and Design in Cluj, Romania.

3. The Cluj system of higher education has graduated more of its populace in the arts than anywhere else I've known. Thus, most people that I have met here govern a variety of paradigms, in losing little time towards a heated discussion on the subject.