

Contemporary Romanian Photography and Video Art after 1989:

Perspectives on a State of Unprotectedness

Corina Ilea

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By: **Corina Ilea**

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Dr. R. DeMont	
_____	External Examiner
Dr. M. Zryd	
_____	External to Program
Dr. A. Rowley	
_____	Examiner
Dr. L. Lerner	
_____	Examiner
Dr. J. Lamoureux	
_____	Thesis Supervisor
Dr. M. Langford	

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. J. Sloan, Graduate Program Director

August 24, 2012 \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. C. Wild, Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts

**ABSTRACT**

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Corina Ilea, PhD  
Concordia University, 2012

Romanian art has passed rapidly through several stages of definition, both internally and externally, as consequence of international exchange. In 1989 it emerged from protracted invisibility, as imposed by the ideological restrictions of the Communist dictatorship and sustained by the incomprehension of the West. Confinement conditioned the social and cultural Romanian past, with consequences not completely eradicated in the present. Works of video and photographic art, produced and exhibited after the fall of Communism, recuperate the past through mediated acts of memory and also represent the persistent consequences of Romania long-term unprotectedness, with a particular focus on immigration. Elaborating the specifics of the Romanian context, my study develops a theoretical framework for understanding the strategies through which social and cultural invisibilities surface in artistic representation. Through theoretical analysis and close formal readings of works by four contemporary Romanian artists – Matei Bejenaru (b. 1963), Irina Botea (b. 1970), Stefan Constantinescu (b. 1968), Ion Grigorescu (b. 1945) – my thesis explicates their representation of a traumatic past, unearthing the “noises” and conflicting messages of the critical encounter between history and memory, as these elements surface in visual and aural fields.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *VISIBILITY OF THE INTERVAL*

Under what regimes of visibility should contemporary Romanian art be defined? Within a globalized artistic context, this is a legitimate question to be posed of any nation's production. It becomes particularly pressing when art appears to be called upon to account for gaps in a country's cultural production, when it is seen to stage a repertoire of the now-visible exotic – the barbaric East, the totalitarian state, the post-Communist capitalist triumph – to illuminate the conditions of existence of a world was not quite of this world, that belonged to an ill-defined “out there.” Since 1989, Romanian art has been emerging from a state of invisibility both inside and outside the country. How has it been perceived? Measured in terms of art world success, the transition has been seamless, in part because the alterity of Romanian art – its long-term states of exception and containment – and that of Eastern Europe have been relegated culturally to defining nationalistic discourses by Western audiences and cultural institutions. The tendency has been to absorb them into the larger circuit of Western art production, by neutrally assimilating them, as a project of recuperation. Situating these art practices in this marginal position, within the limited reception of “alterity” and the “return of the repressed,” has made them both tolerable and safe. To leave them there would be to confine them in new forms of containment and invisibility.

During the Communist era (1945-1989), Romanian art was virtually unknown in the West. The Cold War allowed few channels of communication between the two socio-cultural spaces. Romania was considered to dwell at the margin, to represent the

unknown and the unseen, located and locked under the veil of Communism. This lack of knowledge shielded the West from the East. Besides the rare international Romanian art displays, its principal manifestations were propagandistic folkloric-national representations staged under the repressive regime of Nicolae Ceausescu (1965-1989), the “Singing of Romania” festivals. Andrei Ujica’s film *Autobiography of Ceausescu* (2010) reverberates with this Communist propaganda. One piece of appropriated footage is particularly relevant: during a visit in China, Ceausescu reacts emotionally to the show given in his honour, in which a Chinese singer performs in almost perfect Romanian a traditional song with praise lyrics: “Romania, Romania/ How I love you/ For I was raised on this land/I’ve grown to be a proud young man/ I longingly tell the world/And now I tell everyone/That you are the prettiest flower.” Ujica’s documentary was selected for the Cannes Film Festival and the New York Film Festival, placing this crude and grotesque episode before audiences attuned to Western cinematic art practices. Ujica’s presence on the international circuit followed a long list of film directors, the so-called “The Romanian New Wave,” whose works were shown in important film festivals around the world. Directors such as Cristi Puiu and Cristian Mungiu chose as their subject the realities of Communism and the decommunization period that followed the Revolution of 1989.

The “Singing of Romania” program, and its visual art equivalents, Social Realism, and Brutalist Communist architecture, were the paradigms of artistic production in Romania, with heavy censorship guaranteeing the invisibility of alternative art production. Outside the country, Romanian artists were little known. Whereas the cultural community in Romania before 1989 had only limited access to information about trends

in international artistic discourse, it is equally true and significant that Romanian artists were scarcely present within international exhibition venues. There were some manifestations that took place: in 1971, at Richard Damarco Gallery in Edinburgh, where Sigma Group exhibited documentary photography; and in 1977, with Constantin Flondor's exhibition in the Netherlands. The importance of these exhibitions can hardly be exaggerated. Inside Romania, only certain works could have been exhibited. Though these need not have been overtly propagandistic, they were prohibited from addressing "contemporary" social issues that might have contained traces of criticism of the governing system.

A dramatic emergence into visibility occurred after 1989, including nomadic artists associated with Romania outside its borders, such as André Cadere<sup>1</sup> and Daniel Spoerii<sup>2</sup> – and barely known inside the country. After 1989, there was a slow emergence of Romanian art in the international artistic scene, a process accelerated after 2000. This opening to the West, while perceived as natural, masks the intricate mechanisms of art visibility, which are embedded both in the specific realities of Romania and the expectations of the West. Artists found themselves included in important international exhibitions, and being acknowledged for the specificity of their subject matter and art production, as for example Dan Perjovschi's exhibition at MOMA, NY in 2007, Matei Bejenaru's exhibition at Tate Modern in 2007, Stefan Constantinescu's short movie *Troleibuzul 92* presented in New York, San Francisco and Stockholm, and Irina Botea's video installation at Jeu de Paume in 2009.

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<sup>1</sup> André Cadere (1934, Warsaw – 1978, Paris) is an artist born in Poland, who grew up in Romania and developed his artistic carrier in Europe, mostly in Paris, where he died in 1978. He is mostly known for his nomadic objects, Round Wooden Bars.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Spoerii (1930, Galati) was born in Romania, but lived most of his life in Switzerland. He is associated with "snare pictures" and Eat Art.

Continuous debate and reformulation have taken place in terms of artistic and exhibition strategies, challenging the stereotyped understanding of the Romanian art, and gradually drawing attention to its individual characteristics. While its emergence into visibility can be seen as part of a global trend, whether through decolonization or decommunization, my thesis focuses on the conditions of existence of the Romanian socio-cultural space. How should this art production be accounted for, as living and lived manifestation of a persistent specificity? Is the response situated between “European influenza” and “seductiveness” as strategies of visibility? I borrow these arresting terms from the titles of two exhibitions shown at Venice Biennial: “European Influenza” (2005), for which Daniel Knorr left the Romanian Pavilion completely empty; and “Seductiveness of the Interval” (2007), including works by Stefan Constantinescu, Ciprian Muresan, and Andrea Faciu, and subsequently recreated in its entirety at Renaissance Society Chicago (2010). These two examples are strong statements against locating Romanian art with respect to its quick assimilation within the West, instead advocating the necessity for a critical understanding of this production.

Contributing to the resurgence within a European discourse of Eastern European culture, conditioned by Western marketing and artistic strategies, and playing, sometimes ironically, the “seduction” card, Romanian contemporary art has passed through several stages of self-definition, acquiring and sustaining a more stable visibility, while gradually shedding some of its exoticism and glamour, representing the healing of the society, as well as its mutation into a diasporic and globalized phenomenon.

My thesis explores contemporary Romanian photography and video art produced and exhibited after 1989, after the Communist socio-political climate ceased to impose its

strict ideological constraints on the visual field. I analyze this cultural production having in view two main aspects: first, themes of containment as manifest and enforced during Communism; second, the long-term consequences of this socio-political system. The importance of my study derives in part from its approach and structure, as I show the leap of Romanian contemporary art into Western consciousness and global success in slow motion. My investigation and critical interpretation follow the same principles of close analysis and gradual emergence into the visible that I have found in artists' works. This is a counter-strategy to the glance and blink approach that characterizes mega art festivals and their reception in our day. Moreover, it responds to the artworks themselves, which sometimes require lengthy amounts of time to be fully experienced, viewed, and imagined, as is the case of Stefan Constantinescu's 540-minute video projection *Archive of Pain* (2000), which is accompanied by a 300-page book, displayed in an uncomfortable waiting room. My study not only describes the work, it borrows from some of its characteristics – copiousness, repetition, reexamination, orality – steering from visual analysis to the inclusion in a larger theoretical context and back again, a strategy similar to Irina Botea's re-enactments of history, always escaping categorization. These characteristics will inevitably disappear (or the artists will) as the novelty of Romanian contemporary art is replaced by the novelty of art from other parts of the world. My study is preserving the fragile output of this moment and asking, as the artists are often asking: What do you remember? How do you remember? What surfaces into the visual? What is lost in the process? And most poignantly, what did we gain?

The artists now asking these questions are active both inside Romania and abroad, addressing its social conditions from dual perspectives: on the one hand, from an internal

point of view characterized by the decommunization period, and on the other hand, from an external angle that takes into consideration a greater cultural distance. Until a few years ago, these artists benefited from very limited artistic visibility – in itself an indirect effect of a problematic social and cultural reality that continued to be perpetuated to various degrees even after the fall of Communism. They have recently broken through this condition of invisibility toward a greater presence in the international contemporary art world. The context of presentation for their work has been dramatically enlarged, no longer strictly confined to the social reality of Communism or of post-Communist societies.

While testifying to the specific conditions of decommunization as experienced and artistically produced in or about Romania, my analysis also has relevance for other socio-political practices and societies with similar traumatic experiences. My aim is to develop a broader understanding of Giorgio Agamben's notion of the "state of exception"<sup>3</sup> and its relevance for cultural production addressing sites of confinement. The "state of exception" is triggered by the sovereign decision to suspend the law, prompting a situation in which an offence that under normal conditions would have been reprimanded becomes part of the law. In Communist Romania, this abandonment of law generated a permanent threat of violence and abuse. Moreover, totalitarian regimes, as argued by Hannah Arendt, disrupt the "space of appearance," which "comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action."<sup>4</sup> During Communism, it was this condition that was obliterated by social and political ideologies that interrupted the normality of people's actions and gatherings through forced bans on their freedom

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<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

and which relegated non-ideological art production to public invisibility. Under the circumstances of bare life, the visual realm was confronted with the same constraints on freedom, most obviously in terms of restrictions regarding what was permitted to be represented, but also in less explicit ways that persist through decommunization. In the work of artists to be considered, re-interpretative cultural acts bring to the surface what were, during their formative years as artists, *visual invisibilities*. The reconsideration of the past through artistic products actualizes the potentiality of the space of appearance within the visual domain, by making conditions of human existence visible. The contemporary generation of artists carries the memory of the impossibility of representation into the representational realm. The now visible remembers the former invisibility.

Apart from the contemporary Romanian artists that I discuss in depth, my thesis refers to the larger artistic context of other contemporary global art practices that touch on similar topics (Raymond Depardon, France; Jens Haaning, Denmark; Carsten Holler, Belgium; Emily Jacir, Palestine/USA, Alfredo Jaar, Chile; Aernout Mik, The Netherlands; Tania Ostojic, Serbia). Important to this discussion are recent art exhibitions that reconsider post-socialist Central and Eastern European art, such as *Romanian Cultural Resolution*, exhibited at the Venice Biennial in 2011, *Gender Check: Feminity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* presented at MUMOK (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig), Vienna, and at Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Varşovia, 2010; *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe* (2010), shown at Centre Pompidou, Paris. Reference to other exhibitions completes the repositioning of Eastern European art as part of a broader context that defies nationalist

interpretations. These include *Over the Counter, The Phenomena of Post-socialist Economy in Contemporary Art* (2010); and the publication of *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* by the Irwin group. My study develops an understanding of these cultural manifestations through recourse to documents and archives from the Eastern Europe, and by including critical texts and analysis written from an Eastern perspective.

My investigation also takes into account the Romanian intellectual context and contemporary public debates that are sifting and re-questioning recent history. Informative in this respect are the art journals *Idea arts +society*, *Dilema Veche /The Old Dilemma*, *22 Journal* and *Observatorul Cultural/The Cultural Observer* as they demote the historical nationalist myths that were forcefully implanted during Communism and initiate critical discussions on the condition of post-Communism. These social, political, and artistic venues of dialogue continue to actively analyze, debate, and reshape public understanding of contemporary society, as it diverges from and bears the consequences of a recent Communist past.

Contemporary Romanian photography and video art is far from being encompassed within a singular hermeneutical paradigm. My attempt is not meant to define a national photographic practice, but rather to operate through a selection of artists who have explored themes of containment as manifested and enforced during Communism, but also who have focused on the consequences of this system after it ceased to exist as a biopolitical reality. Their photographic and video discourses do not only address a past and its social consequences, but also inform us about the conditions of working through the current transition period. The previous generation of artists active

under the Communist regime was compelled to obey strict representational and ideological rules or otherwise to address topics external to the surrounding social realities. Different from this situation, the contemporary artists whom I investigate in my thesis address the topic of confinement from a perspective that is, technically speaking, unrestrained by previous ideological constraints. But the fall of Communism did not mean a sudden complete breach in history without future consequences and social burdens. The decommunization that followed has also been marked by convulsions that consequently shaped perspectives on recent history.

#### *SUBVERSIONS AND RECONSIDERATIONS*

During the Communist regime, tools of visual communication, mainly propaganda photographs and television, served as powerful means of constructing a parallel reality to the conditions people were actually living in, presenting a so-called “documentation” without reliable correspondence to social and political realities. The Romanian National Television, magazines, journals and newspapers (*Scanteia/The Spark*, the official propaganda newspaper of the Communist Party, *Stiinta si Cultura/Science and Culture*, *Scanteia Tineretului/ Youth Spark*) made abundant use of this manipulative strategy in order to present the “successful” accomplishments of the people in power. The advertisements, surveyed by a party-controlled company, were carefully orchestrated to meet the requirements of a rigorous “scientific” presentation, as opposed to the luscious “capitalist imagery.” Images with the “beloved leader, Ceausescu” were hugely pervasive, presenting him in official visits throughout the country. A blatant visual masquerade was orchestrated, which was recognized by the Romanian population, but

could only be acknowledged in the private space. Conversely, in the public space, Romanian citizens had to assert their belief and faith in the image of fulfillment projected by the Party.

Official propaganda image production is not the only precedent to photographic practice after 1989. One should not imagine a total void within Romanian culture. Generations of artists shaped, defined, and reconfigured their approaches either in partial congruence with the international cultural practices or within a national framework. The end of the nineteenth century had been marked by the production of important photographic studios lead by Franz Duschek, Andreas Reiser, Franz Mandy or Carol Popp de Szathmari. The latter was also considered the world's first war photographer for his documentation of the Crimean War, a fact rarely acknowledged within established histories of photography. Photographic experiments after the 1960s and, more recently, contemporary photographic practice, have all shaped Romanian culture. However, Romanian photography has passed through several layers of invisibility, either internal or external. I am using the term "invisibility" within a two-fold perspective. On the one hand, invisibility is understood as a consequence of the non-functionality of the public social space due to censorship, distortion, and imposed representations. On the other hand, as a consequence of this socio-political situation, the "invisibility" of these subjects implies only partial integration, or interaction, with dominant contemporary European cultural production.

Before 1989, photographic practice hovered around experimentalism, due to both political but also cultural constraints, practicing what is sometimes called "resistance through culture," which was anchored in a metaphysical dimension. This cultural

paradigm was also supported by literature, which turned toward an oneiric and nostalgic recuperative dimension. Marked by a traditional perspective, based on a “pre-existent superior model,”<sup>5</sup> divided from society and its everyday concerns, photographic practice in Romania had produced specific manifestations, that were nevertheless influenced by limited information about the international artistic context. At the beginning of the 1960s important voices in Romanian art sometimes addressed ideas in the air of the “Western” world, in an attempt at visibility and emergence out of a certain state of isolation: here I refer to Paul Neagu, Geta Bratescu, Kinema-Ikon, and Sigma Group. They produced conceptual art from their local perspectives, sometimes touching on “neo-orthodoxism,” as a response and as a form of resistance to the problematic, ideological “re-shaping” of society. Their work expressed distrust toward an “accurate” reflection of society in a photographic form within the context of propagandistic manipulations of images. And even within the rules of censorship, meant to purify and eliminate potentially political disruptive visual elements, there were certain artistic manifestations that surfaced and questioned, through coded allusions, the Communist political system in power.

As argued by Irina Cios, artistic practice in photography was present during the Communist regime, even though less in terms of exhibitions supposedly “exclusively dedicated to this medium,”<sup>6</sup> such as the salons of the Amateur Photographers association. Photographic practice took the form of documenting actions and happenings – Paul Neagu, Theodor Graur, Alexandru Antik, Ion Grigorescu, artists activating both as

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<sup>5</sup> Cosmin Costinas, “Romanian Urban Pop’ in the Age of the World Reproduction of the Contemporary Art System,” in *Photography in Contemporary Art. Trends in Romania, After 1989*, (Unarte Publishing House: Bucharest, 2008), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Irina Cios, “Photography as an Artistic Experimental Environment in the Romanian Context after ’89,” in *Photography in Contemporary Art. Trends in Romania, After 1989*, (Unarte Publishing House: Bucharest, 2008), 23.

performers and photographers – or, in its experimental form, involving “either the technical level, the lighting register, or the display, as object, collage, installation – Stefan Berthalan, Wanda Mihuleac, Iosif Kiraly, Geta Bratescu.”<sup>7</sup> Ruxandra Balaci’s article, “Photography – a Proposed Chronology of an Experimental Chapter,” develops a chronology of the transformations that photography underwent in the period leading up to 1989: documentary photography; photography serving as a tool for painterly development as in the case of Horia Bernea or Sigma Group; experimental photography; photography recording happenings, performances; and, toward the 1980s, photography as part of mail art (Iosif Kiraly), with increasing conceptual preoccupations. Photography remained on rather a lower scale, in terms of artistic hierarchy, being mostly produced by artists who did not identify solely as photographers. At the same time it was faced with technical constraints: “small prints with a bad definition inherently make the technique look ‘modest,’ so it is enriched by intervention and by integration with other art forms.”<sup>8</sup> Galleries in Bucharest, Timisoara and Cluj hosted some of these experimental exhibitions – Schiller House, Studio 35 – but they were present also in smaller cultural centers, in Oradea or Sibiu. Toward the end of the 1980s, photographic exhibition practice was reflected in the journal *Arta/Art*, which in 1989 also published a series of theoretical articles written by Umberto Eco, Walter Benjamin, Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, and Jürgen Habermas. Within the memory of the Romanian art community, a very important event of the recovery period was the exhibition accompanied by a catalogue called *Experiment in Romanian Art after 1960*, which was published only in 1997. This

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>8</sup> Ruxandra Balaci, “Photography - a Proposed Chronology of an Experimental Chapter,” in the catalogue *Experiment in Romanian Art Since 1960*, (Bucharest: CSAC, 1997).

catalogue proved to be highly influential for the contemporary generation of Romanian photographers, though it was less acknowledged within an international context.

The visual realm was a domain almost completely confiscated by the authorities before 1989. Media tools were equated with propaganda, as skillful means of deception and manipulation, and therefore were assigned little artistic value. Calin Dan identifies this aspect of distrust as a key reason for the underdevelopment of media art in Romania during this period of time, as well as “the total control of the Communist government over all the means of expression, with a special concern for those subject to the technical reproduction.”<sup>9</sup> Certain cultural productions represented a means of resisting the Communist regime, but in a limited, highly coded manner. They manifested mainly in a marginal way in “underground” and “laboratory experiments,”<sup>10</sup> which, because of their ephemeral quality at odds with the stable heroic principles desired by Communism, were in their turn systematically censored. Video, as a form of documentation, was in its incipient phase and was used mainly as a way of testifying to and documenting the hidden from public experimental artistic productions. This is the case of the *House pARTy*, a series of meetings that took place in Scriba artists’ house in 1988, which was transformed into a meeting space for artists to present their works. The ownership of video cameras was restricted mostly to employees of the National Television and Secrete Service/Securitate members. In other words, media and video transmission was a domain almost exclusively assigned to surveillance mechanisms and structures. As Dan argues, the possession of technical facilities for Super 8 and 16mm film was extremely rare. He

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<sup>9</sup> Calin Dan, “The Aesthetics of Poverty” in *Experiment in Romanian Art After 1960*, (Bucharest: The Soros Centre for Contemporary Art, 1997), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Guta, “Riders on the Storm” – Performance Art in Romania Between 1986 and 1996,” in *Experiment in Romanian Art After 1960*, (Bucharest: The Soros Centre for Contemporary Art, 1997), 80.

mentions only three artists as basically the sole owners of such technical equipment: Constantin Flondor, Doru Tulcan and Ion Grigorescu. This scarcity was exacerbated by raw processing conditions and techniques manifested in what he calls an “aesthetics of poverty,” which was rather close to “films of the silent era,” characterized by “fuzziness, the flickering black-and-white images or crude colors.”<sup>11</sup> A few video experiments were produced by Kinema-Ikon with 35mm film in the 1980s in Arad, a city close to the Western border of Romania, and thus removed from Bucharest, the headquarters of Communist power. The few experimental films made during Communism are hardly documented in the absence of catalogues or archival material. However, even within this seemingly neutral approach, they were perceived as a threat to the stability of the sound themes of heroic Communism, as in the case of Ion Grigorescu’s experiments rooted in sexual symbolism, which led to a complete ban on his video and photographic practice toward the end of the 1980s.

The Revolution that began in December 1989 marked an important threshold in terms of the way information was transmitted toward the population. Television played an instrumental role in the development of events that led to the overthrowing of the Communist regime, even though this pivotal role is a rather controversial one. During the last decade of the Communist regime in Romania, only one television channel existed with only two hours a day of broadcasting time; this short program was named the “sandwich” because most of the time it began and ended with extensive “informative news” on Ceausescu’s activity and the Party’s. This news program changed little from day to day, since it was meant to function as a reiterative propaganda message, praising “the great accomplishments” of the beloved leader. The first days of the Revolution

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 102.

marked a radical transformation for the way information was conveyed. In Romania, the Revolution was broadcast live for the duration of the events, with few interruptions. From a blocked media channel, sending its propaganda message from the centre of power to the subjected citizens, it became in a matter of days a media channel taken over by the population, and the new power. Television screens were placed in front of the National Television headquarters so that people would be able to see and witness the images transmitted about the events they were participating in on the streets. This new access to their own representation in the form of images was a form of legitimization of their deeds and actions, the more so because, only a few days before, the visual realm had been completely orchestrated to convey Communist ideology. However, in spite of this heightened reality, the events of December are far from easily being deciphered or understood as simply an overthrowing of the Communist power by the masses in what was called a 'telerevolution.' In fact a new form of power took control of the visual in order to be legitimized, a situation that is artistically investigated by Irina Botea's *Auditions for a Revolution*.

#### *WORKING-THROUGH THE DECOMMUNIZATION OF ROMANIA*

Apart from changes in the social and political structure, the years after the Revolution witnessed a transformation in terms of photographic and video practice, due to increased access to the international artistic scenes and a mutation in the status of photography and visual arts within the local context. Photography began to acquire a more autonomous status, doubled also by institutional attempts to establish a visual identity. Video art started to be used by visual artists. Art programs in universities

included photography and later video in their curricula, and exhibitions focusing on photography started to make their way into art galleries. The beginning of the 1990s was marked by artists who had previously worked within this medium, as in the case of Iosif Kiraly, Geta Bratescu and Ion Grigorescu. They were complemented later on by a new generation of photographers who have been formed with access to, and active participation in the international art practice, generating important exhibitions both within Romania and abroad. These artists began to have regular exhibitions as part of the Month of Photography in Bratislava, exhibitions at Lausanne, Berlin, London, and in museums from Europe and North America. In Romania, GAD, a gallery dedicated exclusively to photography and photo-installations opened in 1993. Some of the important exhibitions displayed there were “Some Trends in Romanian Contemporary Photography,” as well as solo shows by Gheorghe Rasovszky, Dan Perjovschi and Lia Perjovschi. After 2000, several other art galleries opened, changing therefore the context of display and the accessibility of photography for the public. Galeria Noua/ The New Gallery founded in 2001 is especially important through its coherent curatorial program promoting contemporary photography. Other important spaces are HT003, hag, Meta Gallery, Salonul de Proiecte, Fabrica de Pensule, Laika Gallery, and Andreiana Mihail Gallery.

After 1989, media information was freely circulated and cultural practice overtly manifest, thus rendering obsolete previously hidden means of expression. Previously veiled and carefully coded political allusions could now be explicitly articulated and the openness toward the “new media” manifest powerfully. Whereas in the period immediately following the Revolution, video and television messages were perceived as having a “reality” value aimed at presenting the “truth,” this view was later transformed

into a more interrogative stance, questioning the ways events were being shaped, transmitted, and produced by media channels. Video art and photography became media that reflected the period of transition, documenting and questioning its incongruities and struggles, sometimes with ironic tonalities. After 1989, video art was taken up by artists from other art fields, or was embraced in conjunction with photography, as was the case with Ion Grigorescu, SubREAL and Geta Bratescu. Some important exhibitions took place at the beginning of the 1990s: *Ex Oriente Lux* exhibition (1993) presenting video works and video-installations and the exhibition *01010101...* (1994) centered on the investigation of media communication and electronically transmitted messages. More recently, video art has become an important aspect of Romanian culture, featured in galleries in Romania, as well as in international exhibitions. One such recent exhibition is *Transitland: Video from Central and Eastern Europe 1989 – 2009* (2009) comprising 100 video art works and marking twenty years since the fall of Communism.

The emergence of contemporary Romanian photography and video art within the space of international visibility was influenced by the participation in international institutional venues, mainly those of the biennials: Istanbul Biennial, Venice Biennial, Sao Paolo Biennial, and more recently Bucharest Biennial. At the same time a renewed interest in art from the former Communist countries, and more specifically from Eastern Europe, has played an important role, together with the appearance of new museums within Romania, along with twice the number of art galleries. However, the positioning of Romanian contemporary art within the paradigm of “art from the East” raises a series of problems, which question the legitimacy of such an approach, both in terms of exhibition strategies and understanding of the specificity of these art practices. In the

context of the case studies that I propose for investigation, the recognition that these artists have recently acquired is doubled by the nature of their work, which restores visibility to the social and biopolitical realities that have stood at the foundation of the previous cultural and social invisibility: the Communist regime.

#### *THE TRANSITION PERSPECTIVE*

The contemporary artists that I investigate have lived, on one hand, under the Communist regime for a period of time, and thus have a personal connection to and understanding of the restrictions that it presupposed. On the other hand they have produced their works since the fall of Communism, that is, within a cultural and social framework that has not been characterized by previous sovereign decisions and bans. Contemporary photographers and video artists who address forms of containment in their work are doing so in circumstances that are far from being restrictive or prohibiting. However, they experience a socio-cultural climate that is in a continuous negotiation with the recent past, with the history of Communism. The relationships they establish with the past are neither homogeneous, nor neutral, and they are shaped by conflicted debates, theoretical texts, other artistic practices, and continuous reinterpretation. Even though in the years immediately following the fall of Communism, a certain “silence” was felt in connection to the events before 1989, in recent years there has been an increasing tendency toward retrospection. The more so, since the transition years have not been free of social, political, and cultural consequences that have weighed heavily on the development of Romanian society.

The first stage of Romanians' period of recovery was the recreation of their space of appearance, which needed to be accessed in renewed visibility, since the conditions of existence from Communism remained subdued even after 1989. Operating within a different timeframe and socio-political context, this recovery is inherently abbreviated and mediated. Acts of memory play an important role in recuperating the past and transposing it into cultural products. Even when speaking about realities of a recent past or about present forms of containment perpetuated, for example, in the case of immigrants, the perspective is inevitably determined and conditioned by the present context. In the work of the Romanian photographers and videographers that I investigate, this context manifests in the form of a late transition period. Therefore they do not solely detach and represent forms of containment, but also address the transition and decommunization period.

My study addresses the work of four Romanian contemporary artists: Matei Bejenaru (Suceava, 1963), Stefan Constantinescu (Bucharest, 1968), Ion Grigorescu (Bucharest, 1945) and Irina Botea (Ploiesti, 1970). The case studies are considered within the theoretical categories that structure my investigation: *states of exception*, *alternate memories*, and *the unprotectedness of immigration*. In the case of Matei Bejenaru my analysis focuses on *Maersk Dubai* (2007) and *Travel Guide* (2005-2007), which reconsider the experience of immigration as a displacing process. The analysis of Stefan Constantinescu's *Archive of Pain* (2000) and *The Golden Age for Children* (2008) takes into account the workings of memory in recuperating the traumatic past. Ion Grigorescu's *Dialogue with Nicolae Ceausescu*, a work never exhibited until after 1989, addresses the censorship imposed on free speech during Communism. This work was re-enacted in

2007 in the video *Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceausescu*, looking at the present Romanian power system, based on a dialogue no less fraught with miscommunication. Irina Botea's video *Audition for a Revolution* (2006) investigates the problematic nature of the 1989 Romanian Revolution as an important symbol in Romanian society and the interferences that memory poses to establishing a certain truth-value.

I focus on specific works produced by these artists, providing at the same time the broader context of their artistic production and a theoretical framework. In this respect, the works of Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, Ariella Azoulay, Cathy Caruth, Marianne Hirsch, Michel Agier, Zygmunt Bauman and Paul Virilio prove to be extremely informative. Apart from their relevance to my scholarship, in terms of social and political framework, their thinking has been influential in shaping Romanian visual art practice, as a result of theoretical debates and analysis performed within the space of cultural magazines and journals. These cultural journals present art practices, but at the same time they are also constituted as a platforms for the discussion of Romanian social realities. Important in this respect is *Idea – arts + society* journal – through articles written by Ciprian Mihali, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, Claude Karnoouh, Bogdan Ghiu and Marius Babias – a journal that published important works of contemporary philosophy, social criticism and contemporary art theory.

Apart from these case studies that will be dealt with in depth, I will also refer to works by other Romanian artists who have approached the social realities of a country undergoing profound changes through photography and video works. Informative in this respect will be Pavel Braila (Chisinau, 1971) – *Shoes for Europe* (2002); Mircea Cantor (Oradea, 1977) – *Unpredictable Future* (2004), *Double Heads Matches* (2002-2003), and

*Holy Flowers* (2010); Alexandra Croitoru (Bucharest, 1975) – *Another Black Site* (2006); Calin Dan (Arad, 1955) – *Sample City* (2003); Daniel Knorr (Bucharest, 1968) – *European Influenza* (2005); Dan Perjovshi (Sibiu, 1961) – *Romania/Removing Romania* (1996-2003); Florin Tudor (1974) and Mona Vatamanu (1968) – *Vacaresti* (2003-2006), *Dust* (2005-2007), *The Trial* (2004-2005); and Andrei Ujica (Timisoara, 1951) – *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu* (2011), *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992).

In describing installations, I move about in Europe and the United States. Art galleries, national and international biennials, museums – Tate Museum in London, Jeu de Paume in Paris or MOMA in New York – represent today important venues of display for the Romanian photographic and video practice. Whereas a major exhibition underlying the Romanian contemporary photographic and video practice has yet to be organized, individually each of these artists has acquired an important status within the international art context. Therefore, from a perceived socially and geo-politically “invisibility,” they have managed to undermine this categorization. Their visibility is also due to a number of art critics and curators who have brought their works within an international context and who also contributed to the production of critical texts: Bogdan Ghiu, Mihnea Mircan, Magda Radu, Catalin Nae, Simona Nastac and Oana Tanase.

Their works have been critically discussed in a series of exhibition catalogues, journal articles or theoretical presentations and colloquiums and, more recently, in a collection of short essays presenting some of the most important contemporary Romanian photographers: *Photography in Contemporary Art: Trends in Romania, after 1989* and the catalogues for the exhibitions *The Romanian Cultural Revolution* (2011) and *Performing History* (2011). Especially important for Matei Bejenaru are the catalogues

published within the context of Periferic (Peripheric) Biennial, of which he was the curator. Moreover, a series of larger exhibitions have been produced, displaying the works of Romanian photographers and video artists in a social context. They have been accompanied by catalogues, including critical texts analyzing the curatorial concept and the works of the artists presented: *Social Cooking Romania*, presented at Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst in Berlin in 2007 and *Body and the East*, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, 1998. My study draws on existing available sources to build an account of Romanian photography and videography based on affinities. Mine is a thematic corpus that takes as a starting point a visual reconfiguration of a problematic recent history and its consequences for the realities of present day Romania. Since the photographic and video art corpus that I focus on in my study considers a reinterpretation of a social reality, it is extremely important to address the social and psychological realities that inform this visual production. In this context, my analysis develops a cross-border analysis, based also on other disciplines that have infused cultural practice, and more specifically in terms of social, political, psychological, and philosophical accounts.

#### *A CRITICAL CONTEXT*

My study recognizes the necessity of producing a body of critical analysis of Romanian contemporary photography and video practice. Whereas there are existing documents, journal articles, catalogue texts and curatorial statements that address these practices from a socio-political perspective, the literature so far represents an incomplete account of contemporary trends manifest in Romania and paralleled in global socio-political theory.

Agamben's work is a case in point as an investigation of extreme mechanisms of domination that has been extremely influential, extending significantly beyond philosophical debate to inform the understanding and sometimes even the production of art projects. In this respect, the edited collection *Documenta 12 Magazines*, affiliated with Documenta12 that took place in 2007, contains references and interpretations of contemporary art practices under the theme of "bare life," connecting manifestations by civic societies with cultural production, whether in terms of architecture, installation, or photographic practice. *Documenta 12 Magazines* constitutes an international collection of journals and magazines – 80 periodicals in 26 languages – that provided theoretical and critical texts investigating the manifestations of bare life in contemporary society (Leo Bersani, Klaus Ronnenberger, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, Jacques Rancière). *Idea – arts + society*, published in Cluj, Romania, and one of the most active magazines in the Romanian cultural context, has been part of this broad discussion, reinvestigating the "social turn" within contemporary art practice. Another important contribution – from the perspective of Agamben's thinking applied to cultural production – is represented by Ariella Azoulay's *The Civil Contract of Photography*, addressing Palestinian society and social justice from the point of view of photographic production and reception.

Far from being an isolated manifestation in the Romanian cultural production, the "social turn" has become a pervasive paradigm within a country that is experiencing a different biopolitical reality twenty years after the fall of Communism. Cinematic production is perhaps the best known manifestation of this trend. *The Romanian New Wave*, as it has been called by cinema critics and the general public (a term contested by the directors so categorized) represents a series of movies produced in recent years, either

confronting the social realities of a Communist Romania, or the long-term consequences produced by the political regime. Important in this respect are the movies *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* by Cristian Mungiu, winner of Palme D'Or in 2007, *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005) by Cristi Puiu, *California Dreamin* (2007) by Cristian Nemescu, *Police, Adjective* (2009) by Corneliu Porumboiu or *Tales from the Golden Age* (2009) by Cristian Mungiu.

Stemming from a radical dislocation in terms of their “space of appearance,” the re-located communities continuously negotiate their relationship with the extreme situation that triggered their displacement, socially, physically and in terms of fragmented recollections, mediated through memory and cultural representations. Legitimacy is therefore addressed in subversive ways, leading to an exposure of the heteroglossic voices that testify and shape social and cultural events. By analyzing photographic and video representations of individuals subject to the “state of exception,” the implications of the mutability paradigm involved in the crossing of borders, and the workings of memory in recalling traumatic events, my project intends to situate Romanian contemporary art within a larger theoretic and artistic discussions dealing with the recovery of a problematic recent history, fraught with contradiction, and whose consequences are far from being exhausted. Mirroring their cultural products, my study reformulates this social and cultural history and brings it, as mediated textual representation, into visibility.

## STATES OF EXCEPTION

My analysis of the forms of containment manifest in Romanian contemporary art is informed by Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "state of exception."<sup>12</sup> This is the suspension of law and disruption of social organization through the eviction from society of individuals who are deemed not fully to belong to the category of human beings. Hannah Arendt's notion of the "space of appearance"<sup>13</sup> also proves extremely important in understanding the potentiality of action and speech – a potential that fails to be actualized under a Communist power system – and the consequences of this failure for a large segment of present day Romanian society. Conditions of disruption and dislocation create closed social and political domains when they are imposed under a permanent totalitarianism poised on the "verge of catastrophe." These conditions of confinement limit both the means of representation and the duration of visibility. Through strategies of representation, works of art bring this invisibility into representation, though normally this can occur only after the ideological conditions that imposed the restrictions have ceased to function. This is the case of one of the two artists discussed here, Ion Grigorescu, whose art experiments during Communism, were mainly performed in secret, most exhibited only after 1989.

Agamben's notion of 'bare life' – characterizing the existence of subjects under the rule of sovereignty – frames my investigation of strategies of control under Communist rule. As developed in Agamben's theory, the power to decide the state of normality rests with the sovereign state. The rest is relegated to a 'state of exception,'

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<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

which is built around the paradox that the state does not need the law in order to construct another law. This law belongs to the species of exclusion, which is characterized by the fact that it preserves its relationship with the norm through the suspension of normal life. Exclusion takes on a double significance: to be both cast outside the law and abandoned by it.<sup>14</sup> These are the conditions brought out in excruciating detail by Stefan Constantinescu in his *Archive of Pain*, conditions experienced by prisoners of the Communist regime, but as I will argue here, the work is also a reflection of Communist-era Romanian society as whole, in which citizens deprived of their civil liberties lived as in a ‘camp.’

“Bare life,” as explained by Agamben, is sheltered by the camp, as a permanent state of exception: a zone of non-distinction between exception and rule, governing life and death. He considers the paradigm of the camp to be a fundamental structure of modern biopolitics. His examples are varied: the stadium in Bari in 1991, where Albanian illegal immigrants were gathered together by the police; the ‘zones d’attente’ in French international airports, sheltering those requiring political refuge; the outskirts of modern cities; and the territories of the former Yugoslavia. Communism, as developed and maintained in Romania between 1947 and 1989, can be considered such a state of exception, one that hosted different forms of camp, to various degree of confinement. Analyzing the conditions of Romanian Communism, historian Lucian Boia summarizes the situation: “Romania as a whole had changed into a vast prison.”<sup>15</sup>

The recovery and re-thinking of Romania’s Communist past through history, memory, and cultural production is a process of selection and consolidation. Such

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<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*. 28-29.

<sup>15</sup> Lucian Boia, “Communism, a Philosophy of Violence,” in eds. Stefan Constantinescu, Cristi Puiu, Arina Stoenescu, *Archive of Pain*, (Pioneer Press: Stockholm, 2000), 9.

accounts can never be comprehensive or exhaustive; all they can provide is a certain ordering of events and facts. For all the events that come to light, there are also large gaps, as well as stories left in the dark, hidden and not accounted for. Most of these sites of history will remain probably as such, unrevealed in the absence of cultural products that can revisit them imaginatively. They build up a world that has ceased to exist in material form, yet can be revitalized partially by certain stories and cultural transfigurations. During Communism, individual lives were generally considered a waste disposal site, easily sacrificed, without a trace. The citizens for whom the new social order was allegedly being built, were also subject to draconian political regulations imposed by the totalitarian regime. Their part in the history being constructed was as props and subjected bodies, even though they were inevitably the constructors of this history, though most of the time against their will. But waste, as Mary Douglas puts it, is not an inherent quality that objects and people share, but a designation assigned by human agency.<sup>16</sup> This previous historical “waste” is nowadays being given a story, a history, a representation, with the inevitable consequence that there will be gaps. Great amounts of knowledge and information, facts and people, will remain unknown. Stefan Constantinescu’s *Archive of Pain* and Ion Grigorescu’s art experiments during Communism exemplify the resurfacing, or return to the visual field, of actions and actors that were socially invisible during Communism. However, Communism and its specific condition of existence constitute only one manifestation of the paradigmatic ‘state of exception,’ which can be extended to a much larger contemporary bio-political reality. Works of art problematize this situation, enacting a crisis of representation, where the

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

invisible suddenly surfaces as cultural product, acquiring visibility through the reification of artworks.

**STEFAN CONSTANTINESCU: *ARCHIVE OF PAIN*, 2000**

*CONDITIONS OF VISIBILITY*

*Archive of Pain* was created by Stefan Constantinescu, together with director Cristi Puiu and graphic designer Arina Stoenescu. Consisting of a book and a video installation, the work presents twelve testimonies of people who were incarcerated during the Communist regime. These people include Miltiade Ionescu, physician, sentenced in 1951 to 15 years of hard labor for the “conspiracy against social order;” Anastasia Iorgulescu, sentenced in 1950 to hard labor for life for the “crime of conspiracy against the social order;” and Alex Constantinescu, student of Letters and Philosophy, sentenced in 1953 to sixteen years of hard labour. The list continues, with names, years served in prison – twelve personal tragedies – and bizarre charges, such as “dissemination of prohibited publications,” “terrorism,” “reeducation for founding a monarchist organization,” and “crime of concealment.” These stories will be elaborated below.

The opening of police files – transformation of tools of surveillance and control into public archives – has been an important phase of decommunization. At the time that this project was produced, however, the Securitate files were still closed for public analysis and debates and even to those people whose files captured their past – written accounts of their minutely monitored lives, in thousands of report pages recorded by Securitate representatives and by informants who could have been part of their close circle of friends and neighbours. Visibility and access to these histories of their lives was

abbreviated long after the fall of the Communist regime. Constantinescu's work leads this process, by no means yet complete in Romania, by bringing to visibility and aurality – through video-recorded oral histories of Communism and imprisonment some of the faces and voices that were kept hidden from society during the totalitarian regime. His is not strictly a documentary project, however, and it is interesting to compare his work with an earlier attempt to represent prison experience in Communist Romania. That was a television series created in 1997 by Lucia-Hossu Longin. Called *Memorial of Pain*, the series followed journalistic rules, featuring interviews, opinions and testimonies of former dissidents or descendants of those who had died behind bars. Constantinescu's project is different because it translates oral history into an artistic product, by retaining the gaps and errors in any and all accounts, effectively critiquing documentary pretensions to the representation of objective truths through testimony. This critique begins with the installation, which sets up a fiction, a theatre in which the visitor is invited to taste the conditions of imprisonment.

The project was exhibited in 2000 in Bucharest at Sala Dalles, a landmark of central Bucharest, hosting art exhibitions and periodic fairs, therefore attracting large crowds of people. It is accessed both by art goers and people who normally do not frequent galleries and art venues. By exhibiting his project at Sala Dalles, Constantinescu reached out to an extended audience, reformulating the “space of appearance” previously lost by these former political prisoners, inserting them not only in an art discourse, but in the larger one of the decommunizing Romanian society of the 2000s. The plain exhibition room hosted four containers, each presenting a continuous video projection. The visitor's first impressions would have come from sound – the voices of people recalling the trauma

of their incarceration in Communist prisons – and the visual encounter with the heavy structures that dominated the exhibition space. Massive, sturdy and severe, these containers were roughly built, with raw traces of the fabrication process, joints and imperfections clearly visible on the metal surface: neither smooth, nor shiny, they resembled prison cells whose roughness was threatening. There was rust eating up the surface of the metal in uneven patterns, nails and bolts sticking out. Visitors entered these stark modules, through narrow openings, lit only by the projection coming from the video interviews with former political prisoners. For the visitor, there was no alternative: one had to enter confining space in order to experience the projections. The darkness of the cells continued into the darkness of the video projection itself, with only the interviewed people's faces and voices animating the space. This project played on several cognitive levels: a full bodily immersion within the prison environment; dim light; a highly disciplined encounter with the victim; and the overflowing voice. These elements were supplemented by the experience of reading the book of critical perspectives and theoretical essays.

Several rows of basic white tables were arranged in pairs, resembling those normally found in administrative waiting rooms, where people are expected to fill out forms or possibly prison waiting rooms, functioning like a symbolic space of preparation preceding the entering the prison-like environment of the projection cells. They completed the severe and austere presentation in their accommodation of visitors who lingered to read the long book that accompanied the project.

Essays written by Lucian Boia and Tom Sandqvist are included in this book, also entitled *Archive of Pain*, that investigates the political and cultural scene of Communist

Romania. Sandqvist is a Swedish curator active within the Romanian contemporary scene and its visibility abroad. He curated *DadaEast* exhibition focusing on the Romanian modernist avant-garde, and collaborated with Constantinescu for several other art projects, *Dacia 1300: My Generation* (2003), among them. His perspective on Communist Romania adds a necessary critical dimension to the interpretation of this regime, complementing the perspective advanced by the Romanian historian Boia. Apart from textual information and essays, containing transcripts of the interviews and essays on Communism the book is constituted as a printed archive of images depicting propaganda photographs and advertising materials, as well as black and white photographs taken for Pressens Bild, Sweden. These images did not see the light of day in Romania, but circulated in Sweden. Constantinescu immigrated to Sweden as a young artist in 1997. He bridges thus two different perspectives on the Romanian Communism, not in the least as manifestation of his own doubled perspective on the recent past, influenced by the fact that this project was created after experiencing the cultural difference that the immigration process brings. Temporal distance is also a factor: a space of time since the fall of the regime, a necessary period for the act of storytelling to become possible, for the traumatic past to surface. Time is an important factor in this exhibition, both for the reception of the video projections, running 540 minutes, and for the inspection of the book, totalling 330 pages. It is therefore not a work that can be experienced through the speed-reading patterns of browsing through visual and narrative information. Such an attempt would be frustrating, for there is too much to take in.

The foreign photographers – Goran Arnbak, Kent Ostlund, Marton Zoltan, Bela Unger – captured a reality that for Romanians was absent from the visual field of

representation, yet pervading the visual field itself, within their daily reality. One such image depicts a militiaman, caught in the process of controlling identification documents of two pedestrians in a Bucharest park in 1987. One of these two people confronts the photographer's gaze, and by extension, the potential viewer's gaze. The situation is problematic for, however well intended, the presence of the camera functioned as an enhanced mechanism of surveillance and control, supplementing the everyday situation of observation by militia officers who had the power to stop anyone, at any time, as potential suspects disrupting the general order of Communism. For the subjects captured within the visual field of this photograph, this image could justifiably be feared as potential evidence for an offence yet unknown, which could be brought forward at a future moment. Being indexed through photography was a bad omen, raising suspicion. The militia had to give no reasons for their actions. Yet, the presence of the camera activated different visual fields. While it recorded the fearful gaze of the man depicted in the picture, which one can speculate stemmed from his fear and uncertainty about being photographed while being controlled, this image circulated outside Romania. It was presented in Sweden, and, twenty years after it was taken it became part of *Archive of Pain* book, exhibited in art galleries. Both uses activated and extended "the contract of photography,"<sup>17</sup> in Ariella Azoulay's terms, thus democratizing the view for Romanians as well and outside access to the Communist condition of noncitizens, people denied basic rights in a long-term state of unprotectedness.

According to Ariella Azoulay, while citizens are "entitled to the protection of a sovereign state,"<sup>18</sup> the category of noncitizen is not allowed the same rights and does not

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<sup>17</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

benefit from the protection offered by the state in functional times, nor in cases of disaster or states of exception, when rules normally in force are suspended. In all of these instances, governments have the power to rule over their subjects. The difference lies in the degree to which the governed are subject to protective and un-protective rules. “Their status as citizens or noncitizens is what characterizes the form of governance,” as Azoulay underlines.<sup>19</sup> Citizens and noncitizens alike are restrained under the prerogatives of power and of being governed. Reactions to an imposed state of exception are radically different in these two cases: when on the verge of catastrophe, citizens and noncitizens are not perceived in a homogeneous form. Whereas disaster normally propels the state as protective agency, offering shelter for its citizens, there are certain categories of population that are declared as outside the norm, as exceptions: “being temporary, noncitizens are eligible only for life-preserving treatment as bare life ... noncitizens may be considered temporary, but their situation is permanent – permanent on the verge of catastrophe.”<sup>20</sup> For people under the rule of Romanian Communism, being “on the verge of catastrophe” was a permanent, recurrent state, an entire population experiencing the status of “noncitizen.” Under these conditions, disaster and the response to it acquire different meanings and consequences. On one hand, in isolated cases of manifestations of disaster, the sense of urgency is preserved and actualized once the catastrophe is present, because this population is defined as such only temporarily. On the other hand, in the case of flawed citizenship, the noncitizen’s entire life is determined by a state of exception which, because it is not temporary, fails to be acknowledged as such and fails to prompt a reaction of urgency: “the disaster that strikes such groups is conceived as part

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 68.

of the routine, not as an exceptional event, and the situation is emptied of any dimension of urgency.”<sup>21</sup> Azoulay’s identification of dangers implied in a transfer of power from government toward sovereign power, which are developed in her study of the Middle East, might also be considered a near-accurate description of the situation of Communist Romania: “If every agent of governmental power could suspend the law as he or she saw fit, not only would the political order turn chaotic, but these agents themselves would be consistently at risk of prosecution.”<sup>22</sup> For Romanians “disaster,” in Azoulay’s terms, was a daily condition of their existence. The image shown in Constantinescu’s *Archive of Pain* testifies to this routine abnormality, disrupted only by the presence of the foreign photographer, by the act of being photographed, and consequently by a persistence of this state, as representation, years after the event itself occurred. Its reception was also radically transformed when it shifted into history, becoming visual evidence of the conditions of life experienced by these people and part of their emergence into visibility after a prolonged state of invisibility and lack of access to their own representations.

In terms of visual representations, photography is informative with regard to the differences of perception discussed above. “Photography has been employed within the framework of a new topography, which distinguishes between life zones and death zones.”<sup>23</sup> The violence performed on the excluded is more visible at the core of this exclusion, where they are perceived as external, rejected bodies still inhabiting a territory that has expelled them. The citizenry of photography and its possibility of dissemination allow noncitizens to be part of the larger contract of photography, to be citizens of the visual mode of representation: The important element in this equation is the agency of the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 72.

spectator, who shares and reconstructs the visual field and makes possible the dissemination and acknowledgment of the harm produced. Looking at, interpreting, and witnessing the suffering of others as present in photographs allows them to come to surface, to benefit, even though retrospectively, from rights previously denied.

The implications of these images and the realities they depicted were known to Romanians. They were visible to them, even when faces were joyful, and nothing in the visual field indicated their deep collective trauma. While Communist propaganda images strategically employed this type of “manufactured” reality, some of the photographs taken for the Swedish Pressen Build also recorded an apparently functional social reality. Given the similarity of these representations, captions were crucial to the underlining, for a foreign audience, of disjunctions between two degrees of knowledge. Captions brought visual evidence and the background information into confrontation. One such image presented in the book and spread across two pages depicts the construction of the House of People, one of the most important building projects advocated by Ceausescu, in a state of near completion. The building is in the background. In the foreground, a large group of workers/soldiers marches in an organized formation, smiles on their faces: a seemingly happy gathering of people. Less prominent, but with a presence felt heavily by those depicted in the photograph, is a militia officer, seen from the back, in a relaxed attitude, accompanying these workers. He is the only character in this image wearing a different type of hat and uniform, pointing to his function: controlling the soldiers, and simultaneously ensuring that all of them would fully obey the Communist precepts of not voicing any contradictory opinions toward the party and its ideology; this was all the more important since they were building the symbol of Communism par excellence, the

House of People. This image could have been taken anywhere, at any time. No threat is apparent, nor any hint of a deeper trauma, if this photograph is taken out of its context of production. The caption refers to some of these implications: “The huge palace, the House of People erected by Ceausescu in the heart of Bucharest conceals a terrible drama: the demolition of the oldest quarter of the capital, tens of thousands of people evacuated,”<sup>24</sup> a construction site experienced as a labour camp, where workers performed their duties without basic protection mechanism.

Under these circumstances, the photographs are not fully reliable as visual testimonies, because the perspective projected is lacunary and inherently restrictive. Georges Didi-Huberman discusses the insufficiency of the image when referring to trauma: images are incomplete by their representational nature and subject to conflicted reactions. On one hand, because what is expected of them exceeds their possibility of representation, asking for the “whole truth;” they share a constitutive inadequacy, since they fail to show everything that happened. On the other hand, with limited expectations, they are excluded from the historical field and included in the category of the document, relocating them therefore in rather neutral terms, which, as the author states, strips them of their “phenomenology, from their specificity, and from their very substance.”<sup>25</sup> In Didi-Huberman’s view, both acceptance and expectation render the images powerless and trigger inattention, bringing the events into the domain of relativity, “manufacturing its own unimaginable.”<sup>26</sup> Both ways are hypertrophic, which renders them the status of

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<sup>24</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, Cristi Puiu, Arina Stoenescu, eds., *Archive of Pain*, (Pioneer Press: Stockholm, 2000), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

icons and also the expectancy to function as “dissection,” a “document of horror.” The images that surface from sites of confinement are brought to light by acts of imagination:

*to imagine in spite of all*, which calls for a difficult ethics of the image: neither the invisible par excellence (the laziness of the aesthete), nor the icon of horror (the laziness of the believer), nor the mere document (the laziness of the learned). A simple image: inadequate but necessary, inexact but true. True of a paradoxical truth of course ... the image is the *eye of history*: its tenacious function of making visible. But also that it is in the eye of history: in the very local zone, in a moment of visual suspense, as the eye of the hurricane (let us remember that this central zone of the storm, capable of flat calm, “contains nonetheless enough clouds to make its interpretation difficult”).<sup>27</sup>

The persistence of the image in spite of everything is not a vain gesture, nor an aesthetic one, but rather a phenomenological one. It maintains the right to existence; it makes possible existence and the knowledge of existence in the outside world. It is the image that provides access to a reality otherwise hidden and confined to silence. Didi-Huberman argues against claims that the image discloses everything as a “call to hallucinate” and also against the opposite stance that advocates the nothingness, the “image without imagination.” The impurity that the image presupposes is the grain “necessary to knowledge, to memory and even to thought in general.”<sup>28</sup> And further on he argues that “the archival image is merely an object in my hands, an indecipherable and insignificant printing so long as I have not established the relation – the imaginative and speculative relation – between what I see here and what I know from elsewhere.”<sup>29</sup> The necessity of unfolding the dynamics of the image does not entail an exhaustive nature of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 112.

what is revealed, does not trigger the assumption that the image has the capacity of telling all: “this quasi observation, both lacunary and fragile in itself will become interpretation. Or ‘reading’ in Walter Benjamin’s sense, when all the elements of knowledge susceptible of being assembled by historical imagination – written documents, contemporary testimonies, other visual sources are convoked in a kind of montage.”<sup>30</sup> The image is completed by an act of imagination, which makes possible the time spent trying to decipher the image in connection with, or sometimes severed from other sources of information, which produces and shapes knowledge as such.

Constantinescu’s video installation and book – comprising this abbreviated image archive of Communism and critical interpretations – function with elements superimposed, dissociated, and partially joined, to produce, in the viewer’s imagination, a surfacing to visibility of Communist living conditions. This visual historical recuperation focuses on photographs depicting the Romanian urban structure and prominent elite figures before the advent of Communism; war time and its social consequence, both in terms of key meetings that change the course of historical actions, such as the discourse of King Michael in Parliament on December 1956, and the transformations that war brought to the society at large: some of these visual recordings could be considered similar to the Communist reality. Such an image preserved at The History Archive of the Romanian Academy Library depicts a large queue for bread in the 1940s. The caption stresses the connection with the situation experienced by Romanians under Communism, as well as the way propaganda used visual proof to underscore its own prowess compared with the recent past: “Despite the insistence of Communist propaganda on such picture, Romania’s food supplies were secure during the war. Ironically, such images would

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 114.

become commonplace in the 1980s, during the Ceausescu regime.”<sup>31</sup> Other photographs depict important leaders as they rise in importance during and following the Second World War; the demolition and removal of churches from the Bucharest urban structure; manifestations of “support” and “enthusiasm” for the rising party and its accomplishments; and Ceausescu’s official visits and meetings with world leaders. Important in this respect is the juxtaposition between image and text, both at a micro level, in terms of short captions providing some of the context of these images and at the larger level of the extensive articles included in the book and analyzing the Romanian Communist society. As Didi-Huberman underlines, “images jostle together making words suddenly appear... images and words collide making thought take place visually.”<sup>32</sup> History is not only recuperated, it is also created and constructed by the associations and relationships brought about by the artistic process.

#### *COMMUNIST STATE OF EXCEPTION*

Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the “state of exception” illuminates the power structures and mechanisms of Communism that lead to society’s submission to governmental institutions, in a state of unprotectedness. Agamben discusses the state of sovereignty as centered around a fundamental paradox: “the sovereign is at the same time outside and inside the juridical order.”<sup>33</sup> Situating governance beyond rules, the sovereign is entitled to the power to authorize the “state of exception,” “to suspend the order’s own validity.” The accent placed on the exception underlines the point that it is the *suspension*

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<sup>31</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *Archive of Pain*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 139.

<sup>33</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 15.

*of law* that validates and guarantees the law of sovereignty. The exception instantiated in the suspension of law is, as Agamben argues, a “kind of exclusion,” which, instead of separating itself from the law, remains bound to it: “the rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it.”<sup>34</sup>

When ideological regulations are exceeded through protest and contestation of laws in force, the sovereign state’s power system reacts by placing an interdiction on the threatening manifestation. Sovereignty then goes further by declaring exteriority (the interdiction) as the norm. But this mechanism of internalization is produced by a total suspension of the norm: “the exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule.”<sup>35</sup> The sovereign exception manifests at the threshold between the situation of fact and situation of right. It generates circumstances in which the offence that under normal conditions would have triggered a punishable reprimand becomes in itself part of the law in the form of exception: “inscribed as a presupposed exception in every rule that orders or forbids something ... is the pure and unsanctionable figure of the offense that, in the normal case, brings about the rule’s own transgression (the killing of a man not as natural violence, but as sovereign violence in the state of exception).”<sup>36</sup> An “inclusive exclusion” is given force of law, justifying disaster for the entire populations, in as much as under these conditions law “maintains itself in its own privation,” and applies “in no longer applying.”<sup>37</sup> The relation of exception signifies both “to be at mercy of” and “at one’s own will, freely,” conflating two meanings, to be

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 28.

“excluded” and “open to all.” “He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it, but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside become indistinguishable.”<sup>38</sup> The state of exception actualizes the potentiality that everything is possible. It has the power to reformulate the already accepted norm and thus to threaten it with extinction.

Communist controlling mechanisms targeted all aspects of social and communal life: forced labour, overtime work for meeting production quotas; selective admission to university based on political reasons; architectural rebuilding of the entire country, with *all* villages planned to be demolished and their inhabitants moved into serial block of flats; the demolition of churches or removal from public view; threats and incarceration for views against official ideology. Even giving birth was politically circumscribed by the infamous 1966 decree banning abortion. Politicization of life lay at the basis of the Communist totalitarian regime, attempting to control not only the working periods, but also the “after-work” life of their subjects: “for some time politics has already turned into biopolitics, in which the only real question to be decided was which form of organization would be best suited to the task of assuring the care, control and use of bare life.”<sup>39</sup> When describing the condition of *bare life*, Agamben takes into consideration the distinction between the politic and the biologic body. The biologic body exists under the protection and, as it is, suspension of law, only in as much as it becomes a political one. Simultaneously, the same rights are questioned, when the politic body becomes dominant, a situation seen not only in cases of totalitarian states, as Romania under Communism,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 122.

relegated to the past, but moreover, in subtler manifestations of the global political situation of the present. Agamben points to this paradigm manifesting in contemporary political world: Guantanamo and the United States security politics.

Being citizens of the country and subject to Communist rules, Romanians were expelled from protections normally given to citizens. This was a paradoxical situation. Following Hannah Arendt's arguments, Agamben stresses that the *Rights of Man* marks the transition of human being defined as natural corpus toward a political corpus, because by birth, the human being becomes a citizen, and therefore from the very beginning it is subject to sovereign rules and laws. The *Rights of Man*, supposed to protect human beings, become inapplicable to those who do not belong to the category of citizens of the state, who are expelled from the bosom of the state. Birth is not a right, though it is enforced by law, and the rights of the citizen are in effect the right to become the bearer of sovereignty. "Rights are attributed to man (or originate in him) solely to the extent that man is immediately vanishing ground of the citizen."<sup>40</sup>

The systems of repression during Communism were directed at society largely considered "the class enemy," with the intent of changing its values, coordinates, traditional beliefs and to make room for forcefully implemented new Communist ideology. All aspect of life were regulated by fear, as underlined in Lucian Boia's essay for *Archive of Pain*:

hundreds of thousands of people faced, one way or another, for longer or shorter periods of time, imprisonment, labor camps, deportation, and the Securitate's brutal, humiliating investigations. Death sentences were passed too ... The first victims of the repression were the members of the elite, for they represented the natural targets in the fight against the Romanian political and cultural traditions.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 128.

Political men, ministers and parliamentarians were thrown, almost without exception, into prison, clad in stripped uniform, humiliated and subjected to all kinds of privations. Many of them died in prison. A careless word, a joke, a banned book could lead straight to jail or ‘to the canal.’<sup>41</sup>

Boia’s essay on the violence of Communism is an extended analysis of the intricate mechanisms and social conditions that sustained this level of control, with the intent of eradicating the ‘old’ to bring in the ‘new’ through violence as guiding principle, in its physical form, but also at a more subtle level of historical awareness: “everything in Communism was violence. First of all violence was directed at history; the goal of the Communist doctrine was equal to an ‘exit from history’... A serious misunderstanding occurred: the imagined path was mistaken for an authentic, even ‘obligatory’ path of human evolution.”<sup>42</sup> Force, violence, and repression were pervasive controlling mechanisms, deployed in order to implement the doctrine, to purge the impure elements and finally to maintain it by force, free from foreign ideological contamination. The installation of Communism in Romania created a paradox, as Boia underlines, since the cultural and social structure of the country was centered on traditional values, and within intellectual and cultural communities there was an inclination toward Western models, predominantly French and German. To oppose this, Communism focused mainly on the construction of middle-class workers, and in the process, agriculture and private property were collectivized, an endeavour that was not successful in other countries, notably Poland and Hungary.<sup>43</sup> Industrialization took place at a large scale, with monumental building projects, such as the Danube-Black Sea Canal, where hundreds of political

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<sup>41</sup> Lucian Boia, “Communism, a Philosophy of Violence,” in *Archive of Pain*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

dissidents were sent to forced labour. The Canal project functioned not only on a grand ideological scale to underline the prowess of Communism (it changed the course of the Danube river), but mostly it “had a more significant repressive function: the canal works were labor camps and death camps. The more the canal pushed forward, the more the adversaries of the regime, employed as manpower, died.”<sup>44</sup> Instating an abusive situation that pervaded the societal structure of the country, the Communist regime in Romania transformed its citizens into subjects living under conditions of bare life – as understood by Agamben – life that can be sacrificed without punishment. Agamben pushes his analysis of the manifestations of ‘bare life’ toward an understanding of recent political realities as subscribed to biopolitics, which, following Foucault, defines the strategies of exclusion put into play by sovereign decisions. Biopolitics is understood in this context as “the growing inclusion of man’s natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power.”<sup>45</sup> Its extreme manifestation is the complete subjection of life to politics, as happened to political prisoners under Communism.

The video installation *Archive of Pain* provides an overview of the Communist regime, both in social and political terms, but also with respect to the impact of this system of manipulation on intellectuals. Under these conditions, the selection of the twelve people interviewed for this project is suggestive. They belonged to the intellectual class, having been sentenced for crimes against the regime, mainly for voicing thoughts at odds with the official statement of welfare and progress. The book includes transcripts of the interviews presented in the video installation, offering double access to these testimonies of the past: one that could be witnessed by visitors of the exhibition as

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>45</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 119.

presented in specific venues, and also as the prolongation of this installation, preserving these textual testimonies for future readers. These testimonies describe the “subversive activities during the first decades of the Communist regime in Romania,” methods of torture used in order to completely transform them in submissive bodies incapable of resistance i.e. further thoughts of diversion from the regime. The participants describe their lives in labor camps and political prisons, referring to Jilava, Sighet, Miercurea Ciuc, and Aiud, which were notorious for the hard living conditions and inhuman levels of violence inflicted on prisoners. When analyzing the ‘camp,’ Agamben discloses the juridical and political structure that allows for these actions to take place, identifying the paradigm of the camp as underlying the political structure of modern history. Whether camps can be traced back to Cuba in 1896 or to English concentration camps for Boers, they extended the specific status belonging to wartime: in the beginning the basis for an arrest was prevention, to restrain a potential dangerous element. Under camp conditions, “the state of exception ceases to be referred to as an external and provisional state of factual danger and comes to be confused with juridical rule itself.”<sup>46</sup> In cases of totalitarian regimes, the potentiality of the state of exception to become manifest and to have severe consequences on people’s lives of people was an actual threat, materialized on a daily basis. Invisible and intangible, this potentiality governed people’s lives and marked their choices, decisions and behaviors. Constantinescu’s book reconstructs these political and psychological conditions by reinforcing collective memory and challenging its distortions. The theoretical, historical, and cultural aspects of Communist Romania are investigated in articles by Boia, Cioroianu and Sandqvist, which trace the various phases of ideological implementation. Images taken by foreign photographers are presented along

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 168.

with photographs from the institutionalized archives or Romania, from the History Archive of the Romanian Academy Library and The National History Museum of Romania. From these national holdings come depictions of Romanian society before the advent of Communism, and its gradual transformation and immersion into this doctrine: delegates to the Communists Congresses in 1920; the emergence of war, as strategic game changer in the future ideological development of the country, depicting Soviet tanks in Bucharest in black and white faded official archive photographs; propaganda images for forced collectivization campaign, where groups of peasants march on the unpaved road of a village with banners, flags and large official portraits of Engels and Marx, leading the procession with folk musicians; propaganda pamphlets advocating an increased agricultural production; posters resembling Russian constructivist imagery with large titles announcing boisterously the new direction of the party: “By raising production we hasten and bring about peace;” and moreover “We are building socialism without the bourgeois and against it.”<sup>47</sup> Having different perspectives on the same subject is itself a radical shift from the single point perspective of Communist Romanian propaganda.

Against claims of “prosperity” and technological advancement, the Communist party eradicated all rivals to become the only functioning political party in Romania. Detention was commonly experienced, especially between 1947 and 1965. Adrian Cioroianu draws on different accounts claiming that the number of detained political people varied between 180,000 and 600,000, with tens of thousands dying in prison. Maps of detention sites mark the geographic surface of Romania as a trail of trauma – concentration camps where polluted elements of society were kept away from society. Cioroianu shows us a vast mechanism of coercion made up of “penitentiaries, forced labor

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<sup>47</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *Archive of Pain*, 26-27.

camps, deportation centers, transit or interrogation points, psychiatric asylums, and mass graves, witnesses of assassinations and summary executions.”<sup>48</sup>

Whereas Boia and Cioroianu bring a socio-political analysis of the destruction brought by Communism, Sandqvist introduces the cultural dimension of this fundamental transformation.<sup>49</sup> Within a context of delimitation and restriction imposed by Communism through fear, terror, and surveillance, Sandqvist provides a critical perspective that looks at Romanian recent history not only as a history of the victim, but also one where acceptance, obedience, lack of revolt and treason accompanied the institutional mass control: he points out that the Romanian Communist party was the largest in Eastern Europe at the time of the Revolution and Ceausescu’s execution.<sup>50</sup> He investigates the effect of Communism on the cultural sphere, targeted as a potentially destabilizing element, on the background of a society already gradually purged of impure ideological elements. Writers, intellectuals, and artists sought safety and opportunity by becoming party members, sometimes producing propaganda cultural products in exchange for the publication of their work. While the adhesion of some legitimized to a certain extent the Communist doctrine, other intellectuals fled the country (Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Panait Istrati). Romania had been the producer of important cultural movements and manifestations, starting from the avant-garde art and literature (Constantin Brancusi, Paul Celan, Eugen Ionescu, Tristan Tzara, Marcel, Jules and George Ianco and Victor Brauner). In the 1930s Bucharest University was the fifth largest in the world.<sup>51</sup> This intellectual environment was destroyed under Communism, culture being required to abide to the

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<sup>48</sup> Adrian Cioroianu, “Romanian Communism: the Faces of Repression,” in *Archive of Pain*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> Tom Sandqvist, “Archive of Pain, The Romanian Experience,” in *Archive of Pain*, 67-77.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

rules of Social Realism and its portrayal of heroic characters, avoiding any sign of decadence, which in modernism was displayed without restraint. Under Social Realism, workers and their accomplishments for the building of Socialism and the new man became the preferred subjects, and the Communist state's preferences were enforced.

The past addressed by Constantinescu is, as Tom Sandqvist points out, far from being revealed or thoroughly investigated, because the archives of Securitate were not open when *Archives of Pain* was produced.<sup>52</sup> The project brings to light “the inhuman suffering as a result of political repression and the hideous pain as a result not only of blind obedience, but also as a result of the faith, equally rigidly ‘honest’ as fanatical in the ‘gospel’ of Communism.”<sup>53</sup> A strategy of destruction made possible the distortion of tradition and cultural identity different from the new one proposed by Communism. Sandqvist provides a genealogy of this transformation. The long-term consequences of erasing the intellectual society can hardly be stressed: faculties of Humanities and departments of philosophy faculties were dissolved starting in 1948; professors were removed; philosophers' writings, Immanuel Kant's among them, were wiped out of textbooks; books were censored and taken out of libraries; universities were heavily politicized; class topics were politically regulated, with Socialism as mandatory course. This malformation was enhanced by “spiritual and material misery. Food was rationed, peasants were forced to hand their livestock to the party... imported goods were almost totally forbidden, street lighting in villages were almost totally extinguished ... fourteen towns were closed to anyone wishing to move into them, anyone with any foreign contacts

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<sup>52</sup> Access to these files is now improving though large portions remain closed.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

were forced to register them.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, “every public statement had to contain references to “our beloved leader, while Securitate saw to it that the system of informing functioned and prisoners already released were harassed with constantly repeated visits from both police and party officials”<sup>55</sup>

Sandqvist’s symptomatic description of the Communist regime can be found in different forms of expression in the political prisoners’ interviews made by Constantinescu, which recount the horrors of the regime while providing some protocols for the act of witnessing. As Miltiade Ionescu, one of those interviewed says: “we don’t want to jerk tears, arouse compassion, nor do we want to become dealers in horror. We, those who have been there, do not wish anything. We do not request, we do not claim. Not even to be believed. All we want is to be regarded as witnesses. That is all, testimony.”<sup>56</sup> Testimony diminishes the fear of oblivion that is part of their trauma, even though memories are not completely recalled, not completely possessed, and ultimately, not completely reliable. In part, this is due to the continuous missed encounter with the event that produced the trauma. As Ulrich Baer points out, trauma does not end their ordeal once its causes have stopped; victims “struggle to become witnesses to their own experience.”<sup>57</sup> Their struggle continues with the order of knowledge, the difficulty of testifying, and the crisis of representation.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Miltiade Ionescu, in *Archive of Pain*, 89.

<sup>57</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2002), 94.

*TESTIMONIES OF COMMUNIST PRISON*

A first brutal wave of incarceration in Romania took place between 1948 and 1965, when the ‘obsolete’ rule that had governed society had to set aside in order to build the ‘new man’ fully obedient to Communist dogma. Fear was deeply instilled in the population. The Securitate tentacles were widespread, functioning both in a physical manner and at the psychological level of general mass consciousness and awareness. Apart from a visible, embodied presence of Securitate representatives, another more subtle variety emerged: the belief (fear and suspicion) that anybody could be an informant, which ultimately functioned as an almost perfect embodiment of Foucault’s *Panopticon*:

a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. To achieve this, it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so.<sup>58</sup>

This visual surveillance, partly projected, partly real, is the “myth” identified by Boia as being at the root of Romanian submission: “in the end it was the myth of perfect surveillance rather than its actual existence that kept Romanians tame for so long ...

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<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-228.

many people were afraid not only to act but also to speak.”<sup>59</sup> This projected fear is reminiscent of Franz Kafka’s *Before the Law*, which provides for Agamben a good example of the way in which the sovereign ban is structured. The man in Kafka’s short story finds himself in the impossibility of opening the door even though it is unlocked and there are no strict prescriptions of the law: “The law affirms itself with the greatest force precisely at the point in which it no longer prescribes anything.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, this situation exemplifies that “the law applies to him in no longer applying and holds him in its ban in abandoning him outside itself”<sup>61</sup> and moreover, it underlines the core functionality of law: “For life under a law that is in force without signifying resembles life in the state of exception in which the most innocent gesture or the smallest forgetfulness can have most extreme consequences.”<sup>62</sup> Self-surveillance completed the deeds implemented by Communists, with long-term consequences, functioning as enhanced power forces not only at the macro levels of society, where institutions regulated people’s behaviour, but also at micro-communal level. Communities were infused with fear, suspicion, and mistrust.

Society’s bonds were erased during Communism, defying the common ground enacted by the space of appearance, in Hannah Arendt’s term, which gives cohesion to human actions and speech, and the more so in the case of political prisoners. The space of appearance is made possible “where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men ... make their appearance explicit.”<sup>63</sup> This situation remains a potentiality and its absence or denial is “to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking is the

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<sup>59</sup> Lucian Boia, *Archive of Pain*, 10.

<sup>60</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>63</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199.

same as appearance.”<sup>64</sup> The space of appearance is the original manifestation of the public realm and “it comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action.”<sup>65</sup> It is manifest through its actualization and it ceases to exist once actions stop being produced: “it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men – as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed – but with the disappearance or arrest of activities themselves.”<sup>66</sup> Since it is characterized by its potentiality, which needs to be actualized time and again in order for the space of appearance to manifest, it also suffers from a fundamental frailty. In the case of political communities’ disappearance, it is power that is lost and loses its meaning. Not being actualized, power ceases to give cohesion in the space of appearance: “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions, but to disclose realities and deeds are not used to violate and destroy, but to establish relations and create new realities.”<sup>67</sup> The co-habitation of people is the prerequisite of power and the materialization of its potentiality. Isolation by cutting off these relationships and the possibility of “being together” is a loss of agency. This is what happens to communities under the imposed coherence of totalitarian regimes: the loss of power through the loss of “being together.” Under these circumstances, words are meant to hide, actions are intended to block realities and to disrupt the existence of pluralities, which should be legitimizing the space of appearance. Where power – in the sense that Arendt gives it – disappears, the alternative is

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 200.

represented by force, as a tool to endanger and annihilate power, a system of ruling defined by tyranny which, alongside violence breeds the existence of powerless. Arendt talks about it in terms of an “array of impotent forces that spend themselves, often spectacularly and vehemently, but in utter futility,”<sup>68</sup> triggering an “impotence to which it condemns the rulers as well as the rules.” Arendt identifies tyranny as a radical form of isolation “of the tyrant from his subjects and the isolation of its subjects from each other through mutual fear and suspicion,”<sup>69</sup> contradicting the fundamentals of political organization, based on plurality. By denying the possibility of meeting, tyranny contains in its very existence and manifestations the roots of its own destruction, being founded on a radical isolation, which substitutes violence for power. Romanians held apart by Communism were also banished from the space of appearance by the denial of free speech, free movement, and basic human rights.

The existence of political prisons during Communism was an extreme form of erasing people’s agency and implementation of force by Securitate agents. However powerful the myth of Securitate, and its overarching powers, its reality was also undeniable. According to Tom Sandqvist, “calculations of how many people were politically imprisoned during the Romanian Communist era vary between 300,000 and one million,”<sup>70</sup> a statistic that differs from Boia’s account and which proves the divergent opinions and lack of full knowledge on the scale of oppression. The testimonies of those interviewed as part of the video installation *Archive of Pain* relate to the trauma of being imprisoned, but also to the patterned threat of Securitate and the potential re-incarceration

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 202

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Tom Sandqvist, “Thank you for This Wonderful Day,” in *Stefan Constantinescu*, exhibition catalogue, (Stockholm: Labyrinth Press, 2008), 6.

that followed them as a specter after release and for the rest of their lives. The interviews are likewise restrained to a patterned minimal décor. Against a completely dark background and frontally filmed, the interviewed tell their stories, without few additional elements of cinematographic construction and editing. The total running time of the video projections is 540 minutes. Nothing facilitates the viewing experience. Mirroring the testimonies, referring to acts of endurance, the viewing is long. There is no easy way out, no abridged version of the stories being told. The work becomes a challenge to witness and struggle with time: an act of endurance. The pace of former political prisoners' recollections follows the intricacies of thought, with lapses of memory, emotionally charged traumatic moments, pauses and re-immersions in the flow of the interviews, and as follows, in the flow of participating in a cultural act. Placing the viewer in the confined spaces of the dark containers and protracted interviews, Constantinescu employs a strategy of representation that, while appealing to the visual field, it involves a dimension of de-contextualization too. The black environment guides the viewer to focus on the spoken words, as testimonies struggling out of a dark past. They do not visualize the trauma of the prison terror, yet they recall it, by appealing to imagination, while insisting on the necessity of listening to these stories – this is their survival, their way into the present, from the trauma they endured. The book accompanying the work shows photographs that refer mostly to a larger social context that generated the existence of these coercive mechanisms of control and destruction. Representation remains “blacked out,” unless for the presence of words and faces of survivors. A suspension of context insistently refers back to the traumatic memory and the crisis of knowledge it triggers. Constantinescu reverses the obliteration that was performed on these people. He takes

them out from anonymity, from a statistical discourse accounting for large numbers of people being imprisoned. They become individualized through their specific stories, but most important, through the projection of their faces, as visual elements accompanying their testimonies, which inhabit the exhibition place for a long period of time.

In the case of Gavril Vatamaniuc, “non-commissioned gendarme officer, sentenced in 1956 to hard labour for life for “terrorism,” detention time started with a seemingly neutral call from Securitate who, “one night,” came to his home to take him for a short declaration, with the promise that he would return home soon. It was a fact already known that this ‘soon’ might take years or sometimes even a lifetime. A relative temporal dimension was acknowledged from the start: “I knew what it was to sign a declaration and then go back home after many, many years. Or never...”<sup>71</sup> He escaped, and was for a period of time on the run from Securitate, hiding in the mountains. The cracking of woods would have provided the necessarily information for Securitate officers to catch them: “we were careful not to break even a spider’s web ... When a stag walks by, it leaves traces ... while a man doesn’t leave ... any trace ... but the grass is bent in that direction.”<sup>72</sup> The initial moments of being subject to the arbitrariness of law are marked by a lack of knowledge. Aurora Ilie Dumitrescu, a student of philosophy, sentenced in “1952 to six years in prison for the crime of conspiracy against the social order”<sup>73</sup> recalls that “we were staring at one another in confusion, we didn’t know what they knew about us.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Gavril Vatamaniuc, *Archive of Pain*, 147.

<sup>72</sup> *Idem*, 148.

<sup>73</sup> Aurora Ilie Dumitrescu, *Archive of Pain*, 90.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

Other partisans had gradually been imprisoned and their freedom could only have been won by betrayal. To be freed could only mean that there had been some kind of exchange, an agreement between the prisoner and law enforcement representatives: freedom from prison was granted only to those willing to disclose the remaining “traitors” who voiced opinions against the regime. With the exception of such denunciations, language was forbidden; “One wasn’t allowed to speak. It was terrible!”<sup>75</sup> Not only information could not be passed from outside, communication was not allowed among prisoners themselves. Release from prison, return to family and friends, would have brought information at a price of information – turning in somebody else. Otherwise, they would be left completely in the dark regarding the fate of those in prison. Betrayal within prison was obtained through torture, or under the threat of destroying the victim’s family. As Paul Dumitrescu testifies, in Pitesti prison the promise and chance of remaining alive was offered to informants: “you were simply told that you were going to be killed unless you informed.”<sup>76</sup> It is not only the victim’s testimonies and their relatives that are surrounded by silence, but also of those who were forced to denounce, who could not resist the pressure. Complicity triggers silence and shame: “he didn’t tell me, and I did not insist, because I wanted to spare him that embarrassing moment, telling me he hadn’t withstood the pain and he had to tell where I was.”<sup>77</sup>

Within the walls of the cells, prisoners shared a paradoxical common world: “We were all humiliated, but it was our world. It was harder when eventually we got out of prison because many changes had occurred in the meantime.”<sup>78</sup> Leaving the prison would

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Dumitrescu, *Archive of Pain*, 104.

<sup>77</sup> Gavril Vatamaniuc, *Archive of Pain*, 149.

<sup>78</sup> Aurora Ilie Dumitrescu, *Archive of Pain*, 101.

not mean rehabilitation. They continued to be left at the margins of society. Pursuing university would have been almost impossible: “you had become an enemy of the Romanian people ... If they were squealers, thieves, crooks it was tantamount to being clever, smart.”<sup>79</sup> They were partially confined, even after their release from prison, to live among former inmates, because any contact with their former friends would have endangered them too. This imposed condition of prolonged isolation, determined politically as a continuous ban on their life and enhanced by the forced silence on the traumatic events they had experienced is redoubled by persistent consequence of trauma itself. Trauma triggers a radical discontinuity with the immediate social environment, and the more so in cases of chronic trauma, accompanied, as Judith Herman states, by “profound alterations in the self and in relationships,”<sup>80</sup> which, “call into question basic human relationships. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to other. They undermine the belief system that give meaning to human experience.”<sup>81</sup>

Release from prison was accompanied and conditioned by a signed declaration stating that no information would be further transmitted, thus eradicating the social support necessary for the healing of trauma and its integration in one’s life: “not to tell what I had experienced in prison. Not to make known such things. Not to tell anyone, mind you, the great secret of what they had done to me in jail.”<sup>82</sup> Eradication of speech, as ontological displacement, is an essential element identified by Arendt in the totalitarian regime’s destruction of the space of appearance. Within the factors that define

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Judith Herman, M.D, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 94.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>82</sup> Aurora Ilie Dumitrescu, *Archive of Pain*, 102.

the human condition, Arendt considers speech and action as fundamental, without which “man is dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.”<sup>83</sup> Disclosure and visibility of the agents who participate and generate action can be interrupted when human “togetherness is lost,” when action and speech become a means of achieving particular “objectives for their own side.” Words come to disclose nothing when they are forcefully obtained under prison conditions and when they are completely banned in the outside world. Under these circumstances, action too has only the capacity of disclosing the evidence, what is “plainly visible.” Moreover, one important element for action to become meaningful is the identification of its agent, the disclosure of the “who.” It is precisely this individualization that is lost when society is disrupted and its agents become the “unknown,” who can disappear through arbitrary gestures of “justice” serving to sustain the infallibility of the political system. Action and speech are not possible without the presence of others; they cannot happen in isolation: “to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act.”<sup>84</sup> The remembrance of the unknown partially restores the human dignity that had been lost. In the case of Constantinescu’s project, speech denied during Communist years takes a renewed form, as cultural gesture surfacing and mediating the unknown, the previous silence, re-actualizing the space of appearance within an artistic context.

From this work, the visitor learns that for the victims, violence was all-pervasive and marked by a confusion about time. Recalling the trauma of torture is translated into speech as moments of silence – recorded in the interview – which repeats the suspension of time and temporary numbness felt at when trauma occurred. Yet, because of the

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<sup>83</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 188.

extreme violence of those deeds, Vatamaniuc stresses that his testimony is the truth. Doubly wounded by doubt, he counters accusations that have been launched against him, that he augmented claims of violence and turned his imprisonment into a personal moment of suffering to be remembered and commemorated: “It is true because I have a lot to say about my life. I don’t need to add a thing.”<sup>85</sup> By not adding a ‘thing’ he follows the rules of trauma, of frozen memories: “I was stunned.” Even while professing truth, trauma survivors are doing so following the profound alterations of their belief system, since as Herman stresses, “people in captivity become adepts of the art of altered consciousness. Through the presence of dissociation, voluntary thought suppression, minimization and sometimes outright denial, they learn to alter an unbearable reality ... perhaps the best name for it is *doublethink*.”<sup>86</sup> Under these conditions, the affirmation of the truth-value of their testimony remains problematic, in spite of their attempt to be accurate and faithful to their memories of trauma.

Prisoners’ suffering did not cease once their detention period ended; it was prolonged after freedom in a variety of ways. Fears regarding those left home persisted and ethical issues were raised when they were suspected of collaborating with the regime, or when this might have resulted in precisely the freedom of the dear ones: “what are we going to do? Forgive them or not?” Lack of knowledge is perpetuated, as pointed out by Romeo Catuneanu, sentenced in 1949 to ten years in prison, followed by four years of house arrest in the Baragan plains for not divulging the crime of high treason.<sup>87</sup> “We’re not interested to know, we’re not making any investigations to find out what was happening.” Those left behind, family and friends were in their turn not allowed to

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<sup>85</sup> Gavril Vatamaniuc, *Archive of Pain*, 148.

<sup>86</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 87.

<sup>87</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *Archive of Pain*, 91.

continue their lives in normality, since they would bear the stigma of being connected to politically marked relatives. They too were banned from society as long as they would not deny, and therefore erase from their lives, those imprisoned – women would be called for example “the bandit’s wife.” Moreover, and sometimes for years, no news would surface from prison, making the fate of their spouses or relatives’ unknown. “The measure taken against political prisoners was to cut them off from the outer world. No visiting, no parcels, no postcards – nothing. We were people who had simply vanished from real life,”<sup>88</sup> testifies Romeo Catuneanu. They have already been excluded from the order of society; they were already evicted from their own decisional power. Utter loneliness, was the goal, as pointed out by Arendt:

While isolation concerns only the political realm of life, loneliness concerns human life as a whole. Totalitarian government, like all tyrannies, certainly could not exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities. But totalitarian domination as a form of government is new in that it is not content with this isolation and destroys private life as well. It bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.<sup>89</sup>

The visibility of an individual’s action and speech does not fall on a void, it occurs within an already existing network of relationships. For this reason, actions toward visibility are not fully accomplished, but pierced by “conflicting wills and intentions.”<sup>90</sup> The unique agent that sets events in motion is a nonexistent entity, despite what is claimed of dictators, as was Ceausescu’s case. Its existence comes, as Arendt underlines,

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<sup>88</sup> Romeo Catuneanu, *Archive of Pain*, 91.

<sup>89</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, The World Publishing Company, 1962), 475.

<sup>90</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.

from the “mental perplexity” that does not have a real correspondent. The author of events writes his or her individualization through fictional stories. Communism produced such “fictional stories” isolating and interrupting speech, action, and human beings to insert them in the wider, ideologically controlled “story” that the totalitarian regime enforced upon individuals. On the one hand, the stories officially produced functioned as history, coming to supplement and justify the interruption of normality through larger ideological visions; on the other hand, there were the unofficial stories of those subjected to arbitrary rules, most of them heard only after the space of appearance was restored, that is, only after the Revolution of 1989, when Ceausescu was executed.

Once action is inserted into the world, it produces an endless chain of reactions, by the fact that it happens between others, that it needs the presence of others, whom it influences and transforms. Moreover, “action always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across boundaries.”<sup>91</sup> While human affairs provoke a state of boundlessness by the chain of relationships they form, they are met at the level of institutions and territory boundaries with an attempt at enclosure in order to “protect and make possible its political existence.”<sup>92</sup> Yet, the bigger picture of actions and relationships is not perceived and fully grasped by actors, by participants. They attain a form of cohesion in the act of storytelling, when participants are no longer acting: thus the importance of reflecting on the past and the significance of cultural products attempting to reinterpret this past. At the same time, we must acknowledge the frailty of the regime of knowledge that they access. The testimonies/stories of these former prisoners reshape the past, giving it the coherence

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 191.

of a story, even though recalled through the veil of trauma and in front of the directorial presence of the artist, when they again *act* their trauma.

Those interviewed for this project testify that detention and interrogation generally took place in darkness; no light penetrated the cells – a darkness also experienced as part of *Archive of Pain* installation. When confronted with other inmates, supposedly to corroborate their statements, no eye contact was allowed, a full encounter was not possible: “He couldn’t see me, and I couldn’t see him, nor did I recognize his voice.”<sup>93</sup> Prison was a systematic breaking of cognitive abilities, a non-distinction between what is known and what is not. “So, what you can do in interrogation, what you can protect is what you know. What they know and what other people know, this is hard to protect.”<sup>94</sup> Securitate officers tried to force confessions not only regarding what happened and reasons behind actions, but also to obtain declarations in conformity with their own ideological prerequisites. Such false and misleading information might be used as evidence in trials, resulting in years of detention.

The atrocity of trauma is not necessarily remembered through descriptions of beating and torture, but through brief moments of relief, clearly identifiable with a particular place, a particular object. As Baer points out: “the difficulty of traumatic memory is not limited to its unavailability and resistance to representation ... traumatic memory can be characterized by the excessive retention of details that cannot be integrated into a nontraumatic memory or comprehension of the past.”<sup>95</sup> The simple fact of being allowed to stand on a bucket could be met with exclamations “oh, God, it’s so good here!” you can imagine what that man had gone through before getting there. But

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<sup>93</sup> Romeo Catuneanu, *Archive of Pain*, 92.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 80.

another tells him: “Well, there’s nothing you can do. This is life!” “Well if this is life, I wonder what death is like?”<sup>96</sup> Sometimes, the only way of escaping torture was to display symptoms of disease, epileptic fits and madness, and incoherent talking during sleep, therefore to play and fake a loss of consciousness: “And they gave me statements to write there, and I started to write poems, crazy stuff.”<sup>97</sup> “With seven, eight, twenty to beat you up and the rest ... Beating at some point became mere a luxury compared to other things.”<sup>98</sup>

Prisoners could be killed and tortured, conforming to the condition of *homo sacer*, as understood by Agamben. Whereas the existence of *homo sacer* implies that virtually everybody can function as a sovereign, the sovereign presupposes that virtually everybody can be a *homo sacer*. “Bare life” is bred by the existence of *homo sacer* within the state of exception induced by the sovereign. Within this understanding, *homo sacer* is subjected to bare life through political banishment by and from the sovereign. None of the acts of violence performed by Securitate on prisoners and potential transgressors of the Communist doctrine was considered to be outside the law; on the contrary, their acts of violence were enforcing the law, were making it possible. Acts forbidden under normal legislative order become acceptable and permitted in as much as they fail to be identified as illegal. The situation under Communism actualizes the paradox that “it is impossible to distinguish transgression of the law from execution of the law, such that what violates a rule and what conforms to it coincide without any reminder.”<sup>99</sup> The notion of *homo sacer*, as advanced by Agamben, implies that he could be sacrificed

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<sup>96</sup> Romeo Catuneanu, *Archive of Pain*, 98.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

without attracting the consequences of the law on the one who sacrifices him. *Homo sacer* and the sovereign share the same structural pattern; they represent the opposite poles of power and law. *Homo sacer* is exposed to an extreme and perpetual potential violence, as it can be killed in the community by anybody, and the killing will not be punished. This is the connection point between the sphere of action prompted by the condition of the *homo sacer* and that manifest in the sovereign exception. In both cases, law is suspended and manifests in this state of suspension, which makes way for the conditions of bare life.

The Securitate officers during Communism had the power to observe everything, to control everything and to punish everyone: “we, the Securitate, are powerful, we are big, we know everything, everywhere; now we must find out how honest you are.”<sup>100</sup> In short, Securitate were the official legitimizers of the field of knowledge and truth. The humiliation and annihilation of human beings was a goal in itself during the years spent in prison at the mercy of guardians: “This is what they attempted, to annihilate human willpower, anything ... to annihilate everything human. By trying to destroy us biologically, they thought they could destroy us psychologically. They didn’t...our lives did not count for them. We were only numbers, statistic figures,”<sup>101</sup> as Aurora Ilie Dumitrescu stressed in her interview.

Prisoners were not given explanations for their incarceration. The moment of imprisonment and the following interrogations were often perceived as missed encounters, marred by incertitude and confusion, as pointed out by Paul Dumitrescu: “I

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<sup>100</sup> Romeo Catuneanu, *Archive of Pain*, 98.

<sup>101</sup> Aurora Ilie Dumitrescu, *Archive of Pain*, 101.

didn't know then, I learned it much later."<sup>102</sup> Decisions regarding their sentence and trials were arbitrary and the reasons behind them remained obscure: "I realized something had intervened. I didn't know what." Their stories are assembled as a chain of events, with starting points, consequences and end moments only later, retrospectively and incompletely: "You never knew what would happen where you were taken to. You had no idea but you went..."<sup>103</sup> Recollections are inexact and lapses of memory are frequent in the process of recording their testimonies and memories in front of the camera: "sorry, I forgot to tell you," "I don't remember the date." Forgetting is part of the strategy of healing and survival, as Milan Kundera points out: "if someone could retain in his memory everything he had experienced, if he could at any time call up any fragment of his past, he would be nothing like human beings; neither his loves nor his friendships nor his angers nor his capacity to forgive or avenge would resemble ours."<sup>104</sup>

Torture, beating, and inflicted violence come to be acknowledged not when they happened, but later on: "Only then did I notice I was bloodied, I was bleeding from head to toes. I wasn't aware. I was stunned."<sup>105</sup> The moment of trauma is not possessed by those suffering it, no less the reasons behind violence inflicted on their bodies; only later on they gather some of the puzzle pieces that might offer some explanation for what happened. This reconstruction is experienced literally, in vivid recollections as repetitive re-experiences and re-lived moments: "I can see them as if it were yesterday."<sup>106</sup> The tortures they had suffered were "inhuman, unimaginable... something the mind can not comprehend. Those who are listening and watching now may think my imagination has

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<sup>102</sup> Paul Dumitrescu, *Archive of Pain*, 104.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 123.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>106</sup> Paul Dumitrescu, *Archive of Pain*, 104.

gone haywire, right? This is how it was. No one can understand this phenomenon, Pitesti, or ‘the Pitesti experiment,’ unless they went through that hell themselves.”<sup>107</sup> The same view of the lack of understanding regarding the “suffering of others”<sup>108</sup> is expressed by Miltiade Ionescu, physician, sentenced in 1951 to 15 years of hard labour: “No one can imagine unless he goes through it, words and notions are devoid of resonance and meaningfulness to convey ... That is not possible, not until you have experienced it, no, it is pointless.”<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Anastasia Iorgulescu’s recalling: “All human values have been trampled. Everything, everything, everything, this is unthinkable. Unthinkable.”<sup>110</sup>

The testimonies of those imprisoned in Romania under Communism underscore the listeners’ inability to imagine what really happened there and to understand fully the extent of evil that victims were subjected to. This belief echoes Georges Didi-Huberman’s thoughts about Nazi concentration and extermination camps, even though there are important differences between the two sets of conditions and human consequences. Didi-Huberman, following testimonies from the camps, asserts that the isolation from the outside world represented an increased pressure: yet testimonies from the unimaginable have given it a form for the outside world, they have rendered it into representation; thus they have made evil exist, and, to a certain extent, imaginable. Quoting Hannah Arendt, Didi-Huberman stresses the fact that what happened in the camps was impossible to conceive of, outside it. Not only was information scarce, but moreover, even when available and spread, it was hardly credible, it was not trusted as belonging to the domain of possibility: “to suffer, to survive, to tell and then not to be

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>108</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

<sup>109</sup> Miltiade Ionescu, *Archive of Pain*, 110.

<sup>110</sup> Anastasia Iorgulescu, *Archive of Pain*, 119.

believed because it is unimaginable.”<sup>111</sup> It functioned a machine of “disimagination,” which was doubled by a skilled “eloquence of the devil,” punctured with lies and mystifications. The obliteration was pursued at all levels, obliteration of the psyche, which also triggered an obliteration of the language manifested in the silence of the isolation and in the lies spread about. The camouflage of language functions as a symptom of a larger annihilation, that of human being. It needed the total destruction of the human being in the camp and moreover the disappearance of any remnants of the actions performed there.

#### *REIFICATION OF TRAUMATIC PAST*

In as much as the space of appearance keeps together man’s actions and speech, the human artifact allows for the remembrance of things past. For Arendt, *vita activa* can be understood according to three modes of thinking. The first one is labour, “enslaved by necessity,”<sup>112</sup> which produces “objects only incidentally and is primarily concerned with the means of its own reproduction,”<sup>113</sup> or, in other words, it produces consumer goods. The second one is work, connected to *homo faber*, who produces “human artifice,” or “use objects.” The products of work, as opposed to those of labour, are characterized by durability, “without which a world would not be possible at all,” making possible the “familiarity of this world.”<sup>114</sup> As distinct from both these categories, there are the products of action and speech that are not determined by the tangibility of work products; on the contrary, they “depend entirely upon human plurality, upon the constant presence

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<sup>111</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 20.

<sup>112</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 84.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

of others who can see and hear and therefore testify to their existence.”<sup>115</sup> Their impermanence requires instead reification in order to become tangible, in order to become worldly thing, products that constitute and build up a world and consequently in order to sustain the familiarity of the world “they must first be seen, heard and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were, into things.”<sup>116</sup> Action, and the “space of appearance” therefore generated are determined by their potentiality and intangibility. However, they can be destroyed, ruled out, or can disappear in the absence of the tangibility provided by reification. Arendt summarizes this transformation from intangibility into tangibility and reification as follows: “the whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and second, on the transformation of the intangible into tangibility of things.”<sup>117</sup> This is a paradox posed by the space of appearance, which needs to be actualized time and again in order to be manifest and moreover, which is survived and outlived by reified things, which continue to affect and exist even after the authors who have produced them and the actions they rely on ceased to exist. However, action is subject to a few pitfalls since, by being dependent on the presence of others and their interactions, it builds a world determined by plurality, and even though it has a definite beginning, it does not have a predictable end and, moreover, it is irreversible.

Arendt stresses the transfigurational capacity of art-making’s reification. Art works give stability to the world, inasmuch as they defy utilitarianism, understood as a

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

form of instrumentalization that “implies a degradation of all things into means.”<sup>118</sup> Works of art are characterized by a paradoxical “outstanding permanence:” “It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality ... has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read.”<sup>119</sup> The same plurality corroborated by “intense presence” – “the image is showing of the thing in its sameness” – is advanced by Jean-Luc Nancy in his understanding of the characteristics of the image as being “unbound.”<sup>120</sup> Art has the capacity not only of transforming, but of transfiguring the world, reversing the destructive course of nature which exhausts its manifestations when ‘all fire burn into ashes,’<sup>121</sup> and it does so through its world-opening capacity. However, the reification produced by the transition of thought into art work is manifest at the cost of “life” itself, a certain “deadness” occurs in this transfiguration which, nevertheless, can be restored through the encounter with the “living spirit,” with a “life willing to resurrect it.”<sup>122</sup> Art works represent the reification of action and speech as a necessary continuation and permanence assigned to the space of appearance that constitutes the public realm.

In the case of traumatic history, art objects bring to visibility the condition of people who have lived under the constraints of bare life. In the absence of reification, “the story they enact and tell would not survive at all.”<sup>123</sup> Trauma theory makes an even stronger case, arguing that the memory of trauma is a form of unexperienced event offered up for interpretation.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>120</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>121</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 168.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 173.

Belatedness manifest at the core of trauma prompts an understanding of history as a reflection on another place and time, through the presence of others: “the traumatic nature of history means that events are historical to the extent that they implicate others.”<sup>124</sup> Freudian theory and the understanding of trauma as a form of belatedness for others’ traumatic histories are relevant here. Symbols, as well as descriptions of pain and suffering emanating from others, function as a means of acknowledging, in a belated form, their histories. They allow us to acknowledge the condition of people living under states of exception. Moreover, they provide more general insight into the conditions of suffering inherent to human nature, as pointed out by Judith Butler: “Wherever there is the human, there is the inhuman; when we now proclaim as human some group of beings who have previously not been considered to be, in fact, human, we admit that the claim of ‘humanness’ is a shifting prerogative.”<sup>125</sup>

Trauma, as understood by Cathy Caruth implies not only “an effect of destruction, but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival” which involves a “legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience.”<sup>126</sup> Under these circumstances, survival means a continuous re-experiencing of the initial threat that failed to be experienced at the moment of its occurrence, a “confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat.”<sup>127</sup> Survival enacts, in a re-traumatizing way, the initial events. The act of testimony implies a certain degree of loneliness and isolation prompted by the burden of witnessing. At the same time, the act of witnessing escapes this solitude, because it is manifested for others, it implies the presence of others and

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>125</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 76.

<sup>126</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 58.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 62.

therefore occurs as breaking of silence that re-actualizes the potentiality of the space of appearance. “By virtue of the fact that the testimony is addressed to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality. A stance or a dimension beyond himself.”<sup>128</sup> This transfiguration, “beyond himself,” is produced by the act of testimony. In the case of Stefan Constantinescu’s *Archive of Pain*, witnesses may recall traumatic events at the end of their lives, when other traumas have occurred, as in Romeo Catuneanu’s case, who testified in front of the camera: “I am 86, and I come here. I come here because my people are here. The people alongside whom I suffered. And I have another fateful reason to come. My wife died a year ago, and I am all alone. And it’s hard. I guess this is the end of my story.”<sup>129</sup> He is “appointed” by the suffering of others to break the silence, but also by his own suffering. The “end of his story” continues repetitively to be experienced, alongside with all visitors entering the dark cells where the video projection is exhibited.

The reification of traumatic history is addressed – in spite of the “outstanding presence” that it prompts – in view of the belatedness and forgetting inherent to it. Moreover, encounters between participants in the act of representation are also made possible through the agency of imagination. Important in this respect is Didi-Huberman’s imperative: “In order to know, we must imagine for ourselves;” an ordeal of imagination, a plunging into what remained and will remain unknown unless the effort to excavate, bring it to light, and inevitably transform what is known to have happened, and what is still hidden. The act of imagining is perceived as “a response that we must offer, as a debt to the words and images that certain prisoners snatched, for us, from the harrowing Real

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>129</sup> Romeo Catuneanu, *Archive of Pain*, 93.

of their experience.”<sup>130</sup> The haunting legacy of the past is manifest in the act of looking and listening, of acknowledging what happened, even if the extent of the trauma remains forever distant and incomprehensible. Its legacy is perpetuated recollection, by naming; it carries on in the visual field, present “in spite of all.” The viewers perform the task of interpretation, which presupposes that they are prepared to “tear open what they think they know and to respond”<sup>131</sup> to the evidence offered in the image. As pointed out by Baer, the visual field manifests as a “struggle against time,”<sup>132</sup> a surfacing against oblivion. Traumatic events can become part of reality for a spectatorship that did not witness them, because they have been transfigured into art products, without necessary making claims for the exhaustive nature of what is revealed.

Discussing the proliferation of representations that surface in spite of constraints and bans, Didi-Huberman questions the unrepresentability of radical forms of evil, and following Arendt’s thought, he advocates the persistence of the inquiry exactly where thought falters. Against the unsayable, the incommunicable, he claims the thought turned anew. To maintain the unthinkable is to remain at a distance. Huberman takes the unthinkable and unrepresentable and places it in the order of the human being, in terms of the similar, of the fellow human, which does not mean a banalization of evil, but the recognition of the human nature and the possibility of its utter destruction. *Archive of Pain* gives voice and face to the unsayable and unthinkable, to the ultimate ban on thought. Under Romanian Communism, telling anyone about prison atrocities would have sent the teller back to prison, a renewed experience of exactly what was to be avoided through the act of testimony. Almost half a century later, these testimonies

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<sup>130</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 30.

<sup>131</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 115.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

become possible, the ban is lifted, and former political prisoners acquire a voice, a face, they are identifiable and become part of a complex mechanism of artistic and cultural transmission of memories. Imagination is prompted. Constantinescu's decision to present the harrowing experience of prisons with the barest cinematographic apparatus prompts the visitor to imagine what had happened. The survivors' words mostly refer to the unrepresentable and unimaginable. The spectator is left to imagine what the survivor does not or cannot say from his or her spoken words. Yet, an important element is radically changed: the possibility of testimony.

While testimonies surfacing in the twelve interviews of the video projection represent individual stories of trauma and suffering, with particularities pertaining to the Communism as happened in Romania, their experiences point to more than one isolated geo-political space, they refer to a trauma that affected millions of people. As Sandqvist underlines: "From the Bolshevik repression and the Stalinist mass murders, the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states, Tito in Yugoslavia, the Stasi persecution in East Germany, the 1956 Hungarian Rising and the Prague Spring in 1968, to the Chinese 'cultural revolution', the Khmer Rouge genocide, the misery of today's Cuba, the list's length is trumped only by the magnitude of repression."<sup>133</sup>

## ION GRIGORESCU

### *LIFTED BAN ON REPRESENTATION*

While *Archive of Pain* brings forward testimonies given after the fall of Communism, there were also instances in which this representational witnessing

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<sup>133</sup> Tom Sandqvist, "Thank you For a This Wonderful Day," in *Stefan Constantinescu*, 6.

happened during Communism. Until recently, these works have not been publicly available. Such was case of Ion Grigorescu's experimental photography, video works, and performances. Grigorescu developed an artistic practice during the Communist regime as an underground, unofficially recognized artist. Due to ideological restrictions, his works were subject to strict censorship, for their production and their dissemination. The artist recorded his own persona and the realities around him, without a large public audience in mind. Grigorescu's works, centering mostly on sexuality and the body as medium of artistic expression, pushed the limits of endurance; they carried political connotations by referring to the confinements of the enclosed space of his apartment as site of artistic creation, production and dissemination. As pointed out by Ami Barak – one of the curators of *Performing History* (2011) project presented at the Venice Biennale 2011, which included works by Grigorescu – his artistic work has a “constant reference of himself; his body, his persona, his vision, together with the strange occurrence of having been ‘embedded’ by the regime in his own apartment/workspace for a very long time.”<sup>134</sup> Without an audience, performativity operated under different conditions. His work was recorded not for a living audience witnessing his acts, but in front of the camera, in the seclusion of his own apartment, for a potential future audience. Grigorescu was introduced to the contemporary art scene after 1990 as one of the most important Romanian experimental artists.

Under conditions of trauma and obliteration from memory, the visual field has the ability “to curb the fiercest will to obliterate,”<sup>135</sup> even when it does not manage to pierce the veil of silence and censorship for long periods of time, and even when it surfaces only

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<sup>134</sup> Ami Barak, “Alessandro Cassin in Conversation with Ami Barak,” in *Performing History, Idea arts + society*, No. 38, special issue (2011), 15.

<sup>135</sup> George Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 23.

after conditions that imposed the visual order have ceased to manifest. The will to efface memory stemmed from the Communist totalitarian regime itself, but within the changes of socio-economical determinates post-1989, it was a trait of the decommunization period, which for an extended period of time did not profess a strong will to remember. During the first years following the Revolution and the fall of Communism, the past remained partially buried, rarely spoken about, much less reified in art products. It was ascribed to the “evil past,” and covered under a renewed silence at the level of the civic society and in terms of cultural manifestations.

It was not just the content of Grigorescu’s work that would have brought the authorities down on him, but his very approach to the medium. The degree of censorship and ideological constraints of Communism condemned artistic interference in photographic creation. Photography was supposed to reflect an “accurate” version of reality, to be a document faithfully transmitting the socialist reality, with heroic workers, happy families, and accomplishments of welfare. As elsewhere under the Soviet umbrella, the official style was Social Realism. Creating “non-political” art was seen by the Communist party as a major fault in an artist, as “a ‘devil-may-care attitude’ and ‘ideological indifference.’ The artist’s duty was to disseminate the Communist values.”<sup>136</sup> Boris Groys’s analysis of social realism is informative about countries that experienced this ideology, stressing the point that cultural studies should be taking into consideration the specific conditions they experienced: “a road from open and diverse markets toward utopian communities based on a common commitment to a certain radical project.”<sup>137</sup>

Instead of preserving the heritage of the past, these cultural trajectories disrupted it in the

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<sup>136</sup> Caterina Preda, ed., *Art and Politics in Postcommunism*, *Studia Politica*, special issue, vol. XI, No. 4, (2011), 649.

<sup>137</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power*, (Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), 154.

name of universality, community, rejecting diversity and difference. “Whereas the comodification is a mark of the artistic trends in western world, Communism abolished it in very concrete terms. The property was transferred into a collectivized property, without individual ownership. The tradition in its classical sense, as a continuation and legitimization across time is not completely accurate in these cases.”<sup>138</sup> Considering what these countries’ citizens had to confront after the fall of Communism, Groys asserts that the shift had less to do with a sudden opening and democracy that replaced the former closed ideological society, but with the economic necessities of the world they were entering. At the same time, the cultural identity that they tried to present, or felt they were expected to present on the international stage, was based on a broken tradition and a sense of cultural cohesion that had been radically disrupted during Communism. As Groys says, “this complex break with the historical past and the resultant erasure of cultural identity are as difficult to explain to the outside world as it is to describe the experience of war or prison to someone who has never been at war or prison.”<sup>139</sup>

During Communism, Grigorescu found oblique means of alluding to the political stance of the moment, as for example a collage containing black and white photographs and texts from 1971, *The Romanian Cultural Revolution*, one of them showing an invasion of insects on an old television screen. Small gestures, alternatives to official art, offered him a modality to critically engage with the politics of the time, while also distancing himself from them by not abiding with the doctrinaire rules imposed by the party and its cultural representatives who presided over the artistic production of the country. Everything was subject to scrutiny and interrogation. Even the dimensions of a

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid. 154.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 157.

photograph could be controversial, especially if the subjects were monumentalized; the supra-dimensional was reserved for the beloved leader. Yet, at the beginning of the 1970s, large photographs could still be seen in exhibition venues, as occurred in 1971 with Grigorescu's blown-up family photographs, covered in oil, enlarged to a dimension of 2 x 2.5 m and exhibited at Casa Schiller in Bucharest. Aside from the official canon of propaganda photographs, photography was not an acceptable art form as it had the potential to "distort" the carefully manufactured reality of the party. Grigorescu's works were a way of reacting against the mainstream Communist art, with a "realism that does not impose on the real a style."<sup>140</sup> Resistance at the time was directed mainly against the officially imposed visual regime, though it took shape in small gestures; it "felt like ping-ponging with 'power.'" The power in question was in fact colleagues of ours, or people holding administrative positions within the Ministry of Culture."<sup>141</sup> There were several levels at which these constraints were felt, within the Communist system at large, but also from its representatives whose exercise of power could be more efficient, as it was less obvious, less overtly declared. Fellow colleague artists could have posed a threat, as potential informants on the "artistic deviations" happening nearby.

*Electoral Meeting* (1975) is a series of 29 photographs taken by Grigorescu at a political gathering organized by the National Security forces on 6 March, 1975; as was the rule, participation was enforced. Showing these images was unconceivable at the time. As documentary evidence of these gatherings, they did not conform to official propaganda requirements strictly enforced at the time. As artistic statements, they were

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<sup>140</sup> Ion Grigorescu, "Artistul Realist," in *Arta*, No. 12, 1973, 22.

<sup>141</sup> Ion Grigorescu, "Irina Cios in Conversation with Ion Grigorescu: Performing History, an Open Project (Dialogue and Essays)," in *Performing History: Romanian Pavilion at the 54<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia 2011*, *Idea arts + society*, No. 38, special issue 2011, 71.

similarly subject to control, surveillance and, ultimately, censorship. They had to remain in complete artistic obliteration. Their form testifies to these conditions. *Electoral Meeting* surreptitiously records an ordinary Communist manifestation. All of the images were taken with a hidden camera from the hip. The concealment of such a “dangerous” technical apparatus was necessary: these meetings were supposed to be disseminated visually only under official codes of representation, serving to praise the great party and its representatives. In fact, not long after these photographs were taken, the act of public photography in Bucharest was banned.<sup>142</sup> Official photographic versions would have to be approved, then published in local newspapers, showing the extent of population’s support for these party meetings and discourses. Grigorescu’s images depict a different version of the same reality, where participants are far from full participants in the manifestations: they are bored, waiting for it all to finish. These types of meetings were carefully orchestrated, and workers in state institutions were obliged to attend and applaud the official representatives’ speeches that could last for hours. National Security Forces and Syndicate representatives surveyed the people participating to ensure that there was no “misbehaviour.” Official signals were given when applause was expected, even though barely anybody was listening to the speakers. Grigorescu’s photographs, taken at odd angles due to the hidden camera’s position, depict the following: representatives of the Power in suits and ties, while one of Ceausescu’s official portrait dominates the background; militia men, partially hidden behind branches, monitoring the correct unfolding of the manifestation; a van in the background with several amplification systems meant to propagate the political discourse to the audience, while the people

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<sup>142</sup> Cosmin Costinas, “Demons, Allegories and Humanism,” in ed. Marta Dziewanska, *Ion Grigorescu: In the Body of the Victim*, (Warsow: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 32.

appear to be talking amongst themselves, not paying attention to the meaning of the words and not maintaining the regulated upright position of the banners representing Ceausescu's state portrait; the stark visage of a Securitate officer, walkie-talkie in hand, and severely surveying the crowd. Actors and producers were supposed to come together in an orchestrated manifestation of party support. People did come together, but not "in the manner of speech and action," to follow Arendt's terms, instead as a contraction and annihilation of a shared common ground. While visible to each other, they remained obscured in the general manifestation of visibility, similarly to the way Grigorescu's photographs functioned: while their presence was undeniable for the artist, they remained hidden until after the December Revolution of 1989.

The artist functions as a concealed witness bringing into the visual field aspects of reality, which, even though happening on a daily basis, were considered to be at odds with Communist precepts. The existence of the photographs and history of the covered artistic gestures amounts to a double impossibility: on the one hand the abolition of the witness, who was not allowed to testify, unless in a prescribed manner, and on the other hand the obliteration of representation itself. Within this conflation of impossibilities and erasure of the visual field, his photographs allude to the slight possibility of referring to everyday trauma through an artistic gesture made at the very core of power that defies its interdictions. In the case of Grigorescu's images, trauma is referred to indirectly, not through atrocious representations of repression under Communism, but through representation of manifestations that seem to be carrying on peacefully, in complete normality. The entire socio-political context of which these images were only a "normal" manifestation is nevertheless implicit. Small signs of surveillance and control pointed to

more severe strategies of exclusion, of people disappearing, losing their freedom when they disobeyed arbitrary laws.

This representation of the Communist regime in the visual field took place at a moment when the civil contract of the visual was drastically abbreviated. Grigorescu created these images even though no audience was possible. His 8 mm film, *Dialogue with Ceausescu* (1978), was also self-censored. In this work, the artist assumes the identity of Ceausescu, using the device of a photographic mask, and stages a dialogue with him. This movie was made explicitly without an audience in view; on the contrary, spectatorship had to be suppressed at all costs. “If they had found out about my film, if one of my neighbors had seen it, or a friend had talked about the film, I would have lost my freedom, ended up in an asylum, and put on drugs.”<sup>143</sup> The film was produced in 1978, but never shown to an audience until after 1989. Invisibility in this case not only addresses the subject matter of his artistic production, but also his artistic identity. While working as an art teacher, he kept the notes he took during mandatory training courses on political awareness that all teachers were obliged to attend. These writings, together with his own observations and thoughts on the (ir)relevance of the doctrine were carefully kept hidden from any public view, eventually leading to the production of a script, now transformed into a 7-minute film. The silent film is shot in black and white, using a double exposure technique. On the left side of the screen the artist assumes the identity of Ceausescu. He is wearing a mask recognizable as one of Ceausescu’s state portraits. The artist, as Ceausescu, wears costume and a tie, holding hands together in a manner immediately reminiscent of gestural patterns used by the dictator, memorized by the

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<sup>143</sup> Ion Grigorescu, Site online, <http://www.farewellcomrades.com/en/flash/#/details/20/video/>. Accessed May 1, 2012.

Romanian population from countless speeches given to promote the socialist order. The propaganda photograph that the artist used to impersonate Ceausescu – a mask he affixes on his own face – defaces the presence of the artist. An icon in its right, having taken over the body politic, the official portrait was preserved throughout the years almost unchanged, the beloved leader in perpetual youth, even though time passed and old age was affecting even the supreme leader. Embodying sovereign power, Ceausescu's portrait had permeated peoples' lives; by assuming this identity, through the mediation of photography, Grigorescu re-enacts a frozen image, a schizoid state of mind, where the visual field was dominated by the presence of this unique image as representation of power.

Grigorescu appears on the right side of the screen, in the role of the artist himself, who generates a dialogue with the "supreme leader," an action completely impossible at the time, in terms of access and content, and even less likely to be transformed into a cultural product. No proximity was allowed between the population and the "great father." The absence of dialogue is preserved as artistic strategy: no sound is actually heard in the movie. The dialogue remains muted, a direct reflection on the actual state of affairs of the time. However, the image preserves their respective roles through textual rendition, even though hardly legible. The text can barely be read. On the left side appears the written version of the words supposedly uttered by Ceausescu. On the right side, partially covering and obscuring the figure of the artist is the transcript of his side of the conversation, running downward, and reflecting the discussion taking place on the screen, without actually being heard. The text is a rendering of a dialogue that is normally supposed to take place freely, but which under censorship becomes an act of defiance.

Veils are interposed, lips part, yet words are not heard and the transcripts, running visibly in plain view, yet illegible, testify to the interruption of the space of appearance. The mirroring image, a *doppelgänger* of the artist, manifests as a radical fracture within the regime of knowledge. No dialogue is possible; instead the exchange occurs as a fictionalizing *mise-en-scène* of the impossibility of communication and arrested development of speech. The fictive dialogue questions the discrepancy between the official discourse and the realities people experienced on a daily bases: “why this hypocrisy, why this gap between the Palace of People and the street, people who have to go to prison for minor crimes, while economy is making no progress.”<sup>144</sup>

“Censorship came a few hours before openings,”<sup>145</sup> recalls Grigorescu.

Continuous control and political decisions on art, subject matter, and the right to exhibit led him to withdraw from public exposure after 1982. If his art works had been created in order to be exhibited publicly, codification would have been the only possible representational strategy. Most of the works produced and exhibited publicly during Communism preserved a coded mechanism of representation, which is today hardly intelligible since decommunizations’ de-contextualization. In their day, critical nuances tended to be mild, even though at the time they were of utmost importance. Grigorescu’s work preserves a different tonality: by not being seen, except in the presence of a close circle of friends and fellow artists, he acquired artistic freedom. By accepting visibility and public exposure, his work would have been transformed into compliance with the exception rule. Lack of audience and the artwork’s hidden existence – an absence meant from the very beginning to be inscribed in the work itself – allowed the artist to fully

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<sup>144</sup> Ion Grigorescu, Site online, <http://www.farewellcomrades.com/en/flash/#/details/20/video/>. Accessed May 1, 2012.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

experiment with this fictive dialogue and to assert what would have been not possible otherwise. Invisibility, as opposed to artistic recognition and abiding by the rules of the state of exception, offered the artist a challenging form of freedom.

While the conditions of Communism compelled artists to adopt survival strategies, whether by coding their messages, “affirmative subversion”<sup>146</sup> – a term used by Inke Arns to describe playing formally along ideological lines with the intent of subverting their message through artistic irony – or artistic obliteration (that is, if they did not subscribe to ideological artistic constraints of the regime), the situation changed after the fall of Communism. Works created in the past were exhibited in contemporary venues and exhibitions. As Grigorescu points out, the re-creation of previous works through new technological modalities and contemporary curatorial strategies distances them from their initial conditions of production and existence: “These were things that had been displayed illegally at the time, the representation of which had been done in secret, or under a lot of risk, some having been created in the woods, in the snow, and were now presented in a grand festive manner, meant to make an impression.”<sup>147</sup> Not only was history restaged, re-enacted, but also the artistic process, raising questions as to the relevance of the past and its cultural manifestations in the present. These artistic re-workings, made by Grigorescu at a time when curators were asking to make his production of the 1970s visible, became a way of asserting their contemporaneity: “I was sending the message that I was active and free. I certainly had to prove my works to be not dead, but alive,

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<sup>146</sup> Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance,” in ed. Irwin, *Art East Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, (London/Ljubljana: Afterall Books, 2005).

<sup>147</sup> Ion Grigorescu, “Critical Resistance from Within: Irina Cios in Conversation with Ion Grigorescu,” in *Performing History*, 76.

contemporary, actual.”<sup>148</sup> In the 1990s and 2000s he re-enacted some of his projects created before the Revolution. The film *Dialogue with Ceausescu* (1978) was re-enacted in 2007 as *Post-mortem Dialogue with Ceausescu*, in a changed bio-political context, when the Palace of the People, the initial setting of the first movie, hosted the Parliament headquarters, the symbol of the new power. A prominent feature is the inscription within the image of the date of its recording. Two characters wearing two oversized masks, one representing Ceausescu, the other the artist himself, have a conversation. The distorted voice of the dictator, speaking as through a megaphone device, is heard constantly, underlining his “supreme father” role in building the country, his personal implication in constructing a successful vision of the perfect world order. The dialogue, or if we follow the logic of the first movie, the lack of it, also envisaged the new agents of power and the new political system. This reinterpretation of his own work, years after from the initial artistic rendering, is imbued with a different social context and approach toward his own artistic practice. Re-taken years after the first one was produced, the new “dialogue” surpassed the simple re-staging of an art product, putting forth a new fictional debate, similarly unresolved, between the dictator and his followers, the ones who eliminated him in a suspicious trial.

*Manifestation on the Street*, produced in 2011 and part of the *Performing History* project, is a video projection on a white sofa, which makes references to the Communist past through propaganda archival documents. The audience is expected to lie down and experience the movie as shown on their body. Grigorescu presents images filmed during Communist demonstrations, starting with those that happened forty years ago, celebrating the National Day of Romania, and continuing with images taken immediately after the

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 74.

Revolution, when people were taking again to the streets. He interrogates history as “communion with the others,” a narrative that needs the presence of others in order to become manifest. However, history during Communism was transformed into an arrested set of events, a serially interrupted space of appearance where the “coming together” was not possible, except through the repetition of its spectacle, disclosing what was “plainly visible,” in Arendt’s terms. Parades were different each time, different actors were inserted in order to celebrate political events; yet the same scenography was staged. Large gatherings were organized to celebrate and praise the power system; however, as manifestations of the visible, they were similar to the ones happening in order to oppose the same power system, under a different disguise, as they occurred after 1990: ambiguity is inserted within the reception of visual representations of mass gatherings and their social ramifications. Staged history is retaken through archival footage that question actors, authors, and finally the presentation of events as history, especially in the case of manufactured ideological, Communist heroic history: “because they were the same for every edition, every year, icons cast in the same mould: that of the parade – by the army, by the guilds. The same old story.”<sup>149</sup> His staging of history, in fact his “performing of history,” functions against simple categorization of the past, against museum-ification and therefore against its easy conceptualization, and ultimately against the “rush to simplify and to act politically correct, according to new rules” which made the artist “want to perform history with no fear of the falsehood of enactment.”<sup>150</sup> Images of parades follow one after another, with blurry outlines and faded colors, pinkish, bluish and grayish tonalities, colour casts resulting from TV transmissions transposed onto

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<sup>149</sup> Ion Grigorescu, “Critical Resistance from Within,” 76.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

video format. English subtitles actually follow the contours of bodies on the projection sofa, referring to the political discourse of the time, pointing to the need for Communist Romania to reach independence from foreign influences, slogans of prosperity, signaling out the “antagonistic classes,” “the industrial agricultural country,” and condemnation of ‘barbarism and capitalism.’ Within the projected video footage, large masses of people form with their bodies living portraits of the Ceausescu couple and textual slogans, as for example “Ceausescu and the People;” a mass of people disciplined into taking a required shape to praise the body politic, they march in “communion.” Grigorescu inscribes these manifestations not only as cultural representation and connections between past and present, but also as references to a long-term continuation of the state of exception perpetuated during Communism and the new state of exception experienced during Revolution. The visual realm breaches the distance between what is seen and what is experienced, between performers and performed, ultimately between actors and spectators. The support of this video projection changes constantly, it alters its shape and frame: the sofa remains static, yet whenever spectators become part of this cultural visualization, their bodies are transformed into carriers of history, similarly to the bodies of people forming large official effigies during Communist parades. Never the same, subject to antagonistic interpretations, history is thus reinterpreted escaping fixed framing, on the basis of a literal living and lived experience.

Whether it is possible to understand the suffering experienced by others, to diminishing the distances between sufferer, witness and spectator, and ultimately to appropriate the visual field of trauma and its exhibition for artistic use: these questions remain in suspense, in continuous transformation. The paradox of the image lies in its

double nature. It is a tension of “setting apart and keeping separate which at the same time is a crossing of this separation”<sup>151</sup> As pointed out by Jean-Luc Nancy, the image manifests in distinction, as “shock, confrontation, tête-à-tête or embrace,” yet establishing a rapport with what it is withdrawing from. Following Georges Bataille’s line of thought, Nancy ascribes the image the quality of being ‘unbound.’ “what it transports to us is very unbinding, which no proximity can pacify and which thus remains at a distance, just at the distance of the touch, that is, barely touching the skin, *à fleur de peau*.”<sup>152</sup> In Grigorescu’s case, literally barely touching the skin, the image floats on the surface of the skin and continues to exist after the spectator’s body leaves the scene of the projection. The distance activated by the image, even though referred to as “absence,” due to the withdrawal of the image from the thing represented, is reanalyzed as an “intense presence,” since “the image is showing of the thing in its sameness.”<sup>153</sup> Spectators are temporarily part of this surfacing of history, exhibiting the image and carrying along traces of this bodily projection even when the screening stops, and they leave the exhibition venue.

The *Performing History* project was presented as part of the Venice Biennale in 2011. Two generations of artists shared the same exhibition venue in a challenging dialogue, not exempt from controversial artistic debates: Grigorescu, representing a voice from the past, exhibiting works produced during Communism and more recent ones, and Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkacova, referring to the present. The initial proposition made by Grigorescu was to mix their works, in a combined display, a discourse otherwise rejected by curators, who wanted to establish a clear demarcation between participants.

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<sup>151</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, 3.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 9.

The artists' display strategies proved to be at odds with desires of the curators, leading to heated debates regarding the role of the artist, their capacity of determining what and how the art works are presented, and ultimately the role of curators in choosing, selecting and deciding what acquires visibility within the art world. On the day before the official opening of this exhibition, the artists made an intervention within the Romanian pavilion, spraying orange paint on all their works and therefore unifying them in a continuous dialogue. They performed their own artistic history, as Daria Ghiu underlines, an act of recuperating and subverting a new "official" position of exhibiting the East for the West, and ultimately through a performative act, bringing into the present works that were supposed to belong to the past.<sup>154</sup> This action was filmed by Grigorescu. The text running across their works stated: "The curator bets on the artist, not the artist on the curator. Deal or feel. Risk or mercantilism. Reclaim or sustain. Money or more. Yell or whisper."

Reworking some of his earlier themes is constant in Grigorescu's art. As early as 1978 he produced a digital print mounted on aluminium, which he re-exhibited later on as photographic print on textile, in which he is depicted lying on the bed, writing with a typewriter in the seclusion of his apartment/studio. The image is taken from above, his head not visible. Only the reclining body makes its way into the image, his identity thus remaining partially camouflaged, a commentary on the visibility of the artist within his own work in a severely strict political context. At the time, typewriters were considered to be instruments of dissidence. Words had the power to materialize "dangerous" attitudes. Owners of typewriters were obliged to register them with the Security forces. The words in this image remain invisible, there is no message seen on the bright white paper. The room is poorly furnished with artist's belongings in disarray. The image is

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<sup>154</sup> Daria Ghiu, "Live Performing History," in *Critic Atac*, Online edition, Accessed June 1, 2012.

framed with another photograph of a rough carpet. The carpet functions as more than a decorative element in a domestic environment. As a frame, it sets limits on the photographic paper, the limits of the visual field, constrained once more by the medium of photography itself. Domesticity, through the framing carpet, encircles this representation in a form of containment that offers no possibility of unbounding, unless toward the inside, or following Nancy, through the presence of the image itself: a self-representation, manifesting not toward a potential audience, but inwards toward the presence of the artist himself, as producer, as subject and almost sole receiver of his creative act. What is seen points to the visual field and extends this register toward, as Judith Butler called it,

the operations of the frame ... where state power exercises its forcible dramaturgy, is not normally representable – and when it is, it risks becoming insurrectionary and hence subject to state punishment and control. Prior to the events and actions represented within the frame, there is an active and unmarked delimitation of the field itself, and so, of a set of contents and perspectives that are never shown, that it becomes impermissible to show. These constitute the non-thematized background of what is represented and are thus one of its absent organizing features.<sup>155</sup>

The artist reinterpreted his 1978 photograph and transposed it into an artistic discourse that, while free of political constraints of the past, repositions the discussion within contemporary control mechanisms. In his photographic work, *Psychoanalytic Sofa* (2011) the framing of the image is a device that underlines the quotation of his own previous artwork. A blurry carpet cropped photographically is juxtaposed on the photograph itself, framing it. The liminal border represented by the frame, connecting the

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<sup>155</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), 73.

inside with the outside in a passage that belongs simultaneously to both realms is part of the photographic representation itself. The photographic frame mirrors in this case the carpet depicted in the image as placed underneath a sofa that refers directly to psychoanalysis. This carpet is covered by yet another carpet, retaken once more on the wall oriental carpet. This repetitive device is also to be found digitally imposed on the frames of the bookshelves, a juxtaposition that does not try and pretend to be technically photographically perfect, the cropping and pasting remaining visible, the framing carpet being of a lesser photographic quality than the rest of the image, with blurry edges. This representational strategy refers to an artistic positioning directed less toward the West (where the work itself was exhibited), but rather to the East (to the orient), as a new focus of *orientation*: the oriental carpet. The text affixed on the background wall reads: “Freud establishes how a new language in justice, ethics, and science is usable even with the secret police. In the meantime the language is retained only by the walls of psychoanalytic society. But man has already the liberty of compromises, mistake and he looks at his neighbors as study objects. Sad, possibly irremediable.” Moreover, as part of the Venice exhibition Grigorescu presented a 1-minute video called *Carpet* (2008), projected directly on the floor of the exhibition room, referring to this domestic element as silent witness of daily gestures and simultaneously as spiritual symbol of prayer.

These works constitute the basis of a recent exhibition *The Diplomatic Tent* (2011) presented at “Salonul de proiecte” in Bucharest, combining in an active dialogue Grigorescu’s art and that of the artistic duo Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkacova, who deal in their works with the power structures of contemporary society and the artist’s entry into a global market. This exhibition took place shortly after the Venice Biennale.

The duo's symbolic multi-layered pyramidal cake *After the Order* (2011), appropriating an image from a Communist magazine published in 1911 – also re-enacted by the artists as a performance for the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary in 2006 – is eaten up by the visitors to the exhibition. The photograph standing at the basis of this edible political statement is taken from the magazine “The Industrial Worker” and represents the stratum of societies, from peasants, workers, bourgeoisie, priests, and military men. Each level bears a textual inscription. The lower one, at the worker's level, refers to “we work for all – we feed all;” continuing with bourgeois party people – “we eat for you;” the military – “we shoot at you;” the priests – “we fool you;” emperors and dignitaries – “we rule you;” and topped with a bag on which the symbol of the dollar is inscribed – “Capitalism.” This photograph is translated into an object, a sugary desert with figurines representing each hierarchical stratum. At the end of the performance the only trace of this image of pyramidal stratification is a desolate metal skeleton, initially used to support the weight of the cake. Bits and pieces of the sweet dessert are still present, scattered around, but the whole image/object is already ingested: it is bodily internalized to the extent of disappearing.

The tent as dwelling place representing the Orient is taken as major metaphor, transposed in the presentation of works, photographs on textile, which appropriate some of the artists' previous works. Photographic images are imprinted on hanging textiles, which cover the walls of the exhibition venue. The works of the artists are intermingled, in a common artistic production, combining explicit political overtones with contemporary representations of present-day society. Grigorescu transposes an image from his previous short video *Ame* (1979) to one of his textile photographs, depicting a

diplomatic discussion of the ‘Oriental’ powers of the world, while the artist, a presence photographically inserted into this gathering, is performing circumcision – a previously censored image in *Ame* – explicitly pointing to power mechanisms, both within the past and the present. Past is only one element, one manifestation of biopolitics where states of exception fully developed and manifested. Yet history-in-the-making and its artistic representation are no less prone to the same mechanisms of control, under different devices and occurrences. As the curators of this exhibition, Magda Radu and Alexandra Croitoru pointed out, “beyond signifying the idea of a ‘ritual solidarity,’ this composite image stands as a representation of the ‘relation between the artists and the politicians’ – underlying the fact that the artist is tolerated even when he carries out radical actions, but – ultimately – he is divested of any kind of power. The message gains an unprecedented resonance in the globalized context of the art world, when a number of artists from Asia (and other parts of the world) are being instrumentalized in order to illustrate the adoption of more relaxed cultural policies, but who, in reality, are confronted with numerous interdictions and with censorship”.<sup>156</sup>

*PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE STATE OF EXCEPTION*

Whereas the works discussed so far address the state of exception mostly under totalitarian regimes, and through its social and artistic consequences, the suspension of law and of protectedness extends far beyond these bio-political realities into present-day ‘states of exception.’ In her series of photographs *Another Black Site* (2006), Alexandra Croitoru, collaborating with Stefan Tiron, investigates the possibility that apparently

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<sup>156</sup> Magda Radu, Site online, [http://salonuldeproiecte.ro/?page\\_id=65](http://salonuldeproiecte.ro/?page_id=65). Accessed 23 May 2012.

neutral places might host systems that render people into subjects, and taken to the extreme, might create the conditions of ‘bare life.’ Their photographic project starts from the hypothesis that some CIA secret activity might be occurring in Romania. She photographed places lacking human presence, but somehow imply dark secrets, seeking out this possible loss of representation. Aviation hangars, offices without a precise business purpose, and corridors devoid of human presence are photographically recorded as spaces without clear determinants. These images show in the foreground a deserted road, grass growing randomly, or sudden apparitions in the landscape as bunker shapes, without precise function. Neither specifications, nor final documentary reports are given. The viewer’s imagination is free to fill in the void of information, introducing doubt and suspicion as to the purpose of these architectural buildings. While making visible these *potential* states of exception, “islands of illegitimate power,”<sup>157</sup> Croitoru preserves their unknowable quality, in the absence of certainty regarding their purpose and scope. Mihnea Mircan summarizes: “What we do know, and this is where the artistic project underscores social and political fact, is the absolute possibility of those things happening. The difference matches conflicting views on what democracy might be, on how power should be exerted and bridled ... *Another Black Site* is another place of indeterminacy, postponement and disorientation, another place ... outside the reach of norm, another black spot in a thickening network.”<sup>158</sup> Discussing the relevance of Agamben’s thought for contemporary society, Mitchell Dean stresses out that “it is the inability of the nation-state to capture and control life – especially ‘bare life,’ *zoé*– which means that the sovereign states including liberal democracies are often found to be engaged in a kind of

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<sup>157</sup> Mihnea Mircan, “Alexandra Croitoru,” in *Photography in Contemporary Art*, 82.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

inclusion through spatial exclusion and enclosure such as is found in the detention camps for refugees or those “unlawful enemy combatants,” and other secret and public locations.”<sup>159</sup> Given the plausibility of such suppositions, these unmapped sites acquire the potential to become spaces where bare life might be maintained. Deserted corridors bear no human trace, bluish light captured by photographs renders a cold atmosphere, closed doors flank long halls, or when open, have metal grids, reminders of prisons. Walls preserve marks of the passing of time, paint partially uncovered, little holes, and restrictive announcements accompany the desolate rooms and halls. The only potential human presence, as possible coercive power, is alluded to through some open doors. No narrative is explicitly employed, yet, by omission, fear creeps in, as Bauman pointed out: ‘Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear [...] ‘Fear’ is the name we give to our uncertainty: to our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be done.’<sup>160</sup> The secret and public location, potentially hosting the conditions of bare life, is problematized by Croitoru’s photographic project, never pointing in a journalistic documentary manner to its actual occurrence. Her photographs therefore document not the presence, the existence of such a reality, but its possibility, the “spatialisation of the state of exception.”<sup>161</sup>

The “orientation without order” produced by politicization of life and its consequences are depicted not only in artworks that refer directly to confinement, as in the case of Stefan Constantinescu’s *Archive of Pain*, Ion Grigorescu’s performances in two acts or Alexandra Croitoru’s *Another Black Site*, but also in its political and social

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<sup>159</sup> Michelle Dean, “Land and Sea: In the Beginning All the World Was America,” in *After the Event: New Perspectives on Art History*, eds. Charles Merewether and John Potts. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>160</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, 2.

<sup>161</sup> Mitchell Dean, “Land and Sea,” 32.

consequences, as dis-orientation. Calin Dan's large production photographs and video stills documenting and accompanying the video *Emotional Architecture2: Sample City* (2003) testify to the architecture of power, as left-over architectural remains of Communism. The man with a door on his back depicted in Dan's work, wandering through deserted urban spaces, takes as its starting point a Romanian folktale character, buffoon-like in his continuous search for a place to settle down, to find the "familiarity of the world." In this folktale the main character – Pacala – is told by his brothers to "pull the door behind you when you leave the house."<sup>162</sup> These words are taken literally, without subsidiary connotation, and the door becomes part of his journey, as he carries it along on his back, an allusion that words under Communist propaganda were considered to be exact replicas of reality, references having only denotative meaning. Connotation was "dangerous," since it could break the intelligible level of knowledge and it could point to something other than what was officially promoted as the accepted language. Ambiguity of language had to be abolished, or when detected, had to be controlled. As Dan points out "this episode triggered a semantic shock, a subliminal awareness that language has the capacity to create ambiguity with unexpected and painful consequences."<sup>163</sup> Dan activates the urban architecture of Bucharest of the 2000s, still much indebted to the legacy of Communism, pointing to blocks of flats that remained unfinished in a megalomaniac's project. As Dean stresses out, referring to Dan's work: "the breakdown of the old *nomos* leaves us in a social and political order without orientation."<sup>164</sup> The "order" unraveled is that of the authoritarian architecture that the artist, as Pacala, literally counter-balances in one of these video stills: he is depicted

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<sup>162</sup> Calin Dan, [http://www.ehituskunst.ee/en/12/4142/emotional\\_architectu](http://www.ehituskunst.ee/en/12/4142/emotional_architectu), Accessed 20 May 2012.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Mitchell Dean, "Land and Sea," 32.

balancing in a fragile equilibrium on the edge of a concrete slide, his door on his back, above unfertile ground – a potential, future construction site with an endless row of Communists block of flats disappearing in the distance. Irina Cios describes Dan’s work as ”exercise of ‘dissection’” of a building looked upon as an organism made out of concrete, animated from within by a chaotic human presence.”<sup>165</sup>

Re-activating a common ground after the space of appearance has been destroyed does not happen immediately after the conditions of totalitarianism have ceased to be visible, right after the fall of this regime. The potentiality of this familiar world, damaged and fragmented, is only gradually brought to life. Uncertainty dominates. Symptomatic of the long term consequences of the erasure of the public space is Mircea Cantor’s photograph *All the Directions* (2000), a self-portrait by the side of a road, construction cranes and unfinished buildings in the background; he holds in his hand a white cardboard on which nothing is written. Or similarly, to complement this artistic statement, his lightbox *Unpredictable Future* from 2004, depicting a window on which the words “unpredictable future” are written with his finger on the hazy surface, raindrops pouring down and smearing the letters. In the real world, these words, melting into each other, will disappear when the window was cleaned, or simply when enough rain fell on it to erase the temporary unpredictability. But since these words have been captured in artistic representation, the unpredictability instead refers to their life in the world and to their permanence, even though unpredictable in terms of reception.

Cantor’s series of black and white photographs *Holly Flowers* (2010) refers to the

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<sup>165</sup> Irina Cios, “Photography: Between Intimate Diary and Sketch Book – Calin Dan,” in *Photography in Contemporary Art. Trends in Romania, After 1989*, 98-99.

tools – guns – used to maintain states of exception, yet in the absence of a strict contextualization, local or global (even his artistic curriculum vitae states that Mircea Cantor lives and works on Earth). The states of exception the artist points to are to be understood by expanding the local specific conditions of their occurrence, where totalitarian states have imposed their laws. They are more insidiously present within contemporary society. Cantor does not spatialize his “holy flowers,” he chooses to keep them outside of a specific geo-cultural region. Deceptively beautiful, as kaleidoscopic images, they promise to entertain the eye of the beholder, and are shaped as contemporary ‘spiritual’ faith, with proliferating devotees, nonetheless bearing the possibility of surveillance and control under the disguise of beauty and safety. On close inspection, the holy flowers appear to be made out of machine gun parts, reassembled. A machine gun is mirrored ad infinitum in a kaleidoscope, becoming a cunningly beautified “flower” to be looked at and imagined. The photographs are made from composite images where the reflection in the mirror of a machine gun is assembled together with different other angles of the same destruction weapon. Only one point of focus is preserved, underlining one small detail, the rest blurred, the depth of field preserving the outlines of the machine gun, yet not perfectly readable. In Mircan’s words:

Machine gun and mirror interlock in a camera, a device to select, stage, view, register and archive selves and performances, unanimities and indignation, to patrol disputed territories and landfills, peaks and abysses, and to subject all to a logic of big numbers. This camera occupies both blind spot and vanishing point – it draws and organizes a world to guarantee self-reflection, and allows a political life in its proximity only to the extent that this does not obstruct the transparent exercise of its vigilance and the mildly narcotic pleasure of its flawlessness.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Mihnea Mircan, “Mircea Cantor: Holy Flowers,” in *Idea arts + society*, No. 36-37, (2010), 36.

These examples of artistic representation dealing with states of exception, either in their occurrence, under totalitarian regimes, as political consequences of these social circumstances, or simply as possibility of existence can be found in other non-Romanian examples that address this matter. Important in this respect are Carsten Höller – *The Baudouin/Boudewijn Experiment: A Large-Scale, Non-Fatalistic Experiment in Deviation* (2001) implying the deferral of power by the king for one day in order for the law on abortion to be passed by the government; Alfredo Jaar – *The Silence of Nduwayezu* (1997) analyzing the dilemma of representation in cases of utter human destruction; or Aernouk Mik – *Training Ground* (2007) questioning the working methods of the power system. Moreover, the concept of bare life proved important for *Documenta 2007* and for the interpretation of works of art that address confinement and its social consequences. Representation itself is interrogated when dealing with “naked life.” While bringing to the surface subjects denied visibility in the social common ground of the space of appearance, this newfound visibility functions on an unstable foundation. Referring to the capacity of photography to represent the state of exception, T.J. Demos asks a relevant question: “But what if to represent is to make absent?”<sup>167</sup> According to Demos, representation takes place in the negative “indicated through the lacuna, blurs, and blind spots that mar the image, but also open up possibility within it, which parallels the condition of the subject stripped bare of political representation.”<sup>168</sup> This is the case of Constantinescu’s project *Archive of Pain*, where individual figures are presented stripped of other cinematographic devices, with their words pointing to the trauma they went through. Representation in this case triggers an important imaginative dimension,

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<sup>167</sup> T.J. Demos, “*Life Full of Holes*,” in *Grey Room*, No. 24 (Fall 2006), 77.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

nonetheless in the negative. Ion Grigorescu's videos and photographs operate on the same level of masking and pointing obliquely to trauma. Alexandra Croitoru's *Another Black Site* alludes to bare life through lack of certitude, her "documentation" process investigating the unknown and its possibilities of existence. Absence is a constitutive part of representation. Similarly, yet in a different socio-political context, Emily Jacir's *Where We Come From* (2001-2003) addresses the exiled Palestinian population as it is contained or denied return to its country of origin. The performances she undertook as response to her question "If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?" are documented through a series of photographs she took while fulfilling their wishes, on their behalf, together with written texts in Arabic and English. No one who responded to her question is portrayed in any identifiable manner. Only her performances find visual representation, as for example the act of playing football or putting flowers on a tomb. This double absence, on the one hand from political representability, translated in bans on their freedom, and on the other hand, from the visual field, as enacted by Jacir, points to the paradoxical logic ascribed to the representation of bare life. As Demos summarizes: "the piece ... dramatizes the parallel between political illegibility and representational erasure, where the existence of the exiled subject is conveyed only through a skeletal descriptive language reminiscent of a depersonalized bureaucratic discourse."<sup>169</sup>

While the works I have analyzed in this chapter refer to specific socio-political contexts that make possible the conditions of existence of bare life, of the state of exception, they cannot be understood solely within the restrictive frameworks of local conditions. Though ignoring these prerequisites would strip them bare of their specificity, these works do point to a larger understanding of the problems of representation when

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 79.

dealing with bare life, with the unprotectedness of *zoé* from the law and ultimately with an extended contract of the visual, which makes possible the imagining of bare life – even when playing on the absence of representation or lack of representability. When Holler's *The Baudouin/Boudewijn Experiment: A Large-Scale, Non-Fatalistic Experiment in Deviation* was performed, no documentation whatsoever was produced. This performance took place inside Brussels's Atomium from 10:00 am, 27 September, to 10:00 am, 28 September 2001. The only account is represented by the performance itself and by the art critical discourse following it, as the present one. The split between what is to be known and the visible is enacted as an explicit ban on the existence of photography documenting this performance. This action referred to an actual historical occurrence: in 1990, HM Baudouin, The King of Belgium, stepped down from his sovereign prerogatives, in order for the Belgian parliament to pass a law on abortion. The only legal loophole through which such an act could have been performed was that he be declared unable to govern for the duration of a day, either due to madness or illness. The state of exception therefore created allowed for the suspension of the law in order for the law to function.

The unrepresentability of naked life is countered by strategies of the visible, where imagination plays a crucial part. Enduring trauma, and testifying to it is one of the strategies of representation, which proves to be not fully reliable, due to the nature of trauma itself and its transposition within a cultural act, as Constantinescu's *Archive of Pain*, and Grigorescu's photographs show. Baer suggests that the camera's inability to effectively capture trauma must be read in conjunction with the medium's "original

affinity with darkness and obscurity,”<sup>170</sup> and further on “the image reveals that representations of trauma cannot constitute evidence, it documents precisely the abolition of referential systems on which the notion of evidence depends.”<sup>171</sup> One important element that makes the representation and translation of trauma into a cultural product possible is imagination. “In order to know, we must imagine for ourselves,”<sup>172</sup> as Didi-Huberman underlines when inquiring the “impossibility of representation.” It is the task of the artist to reconsider history, though this effort inevitably leads to transformation and deeper concealment of what must remain hidden. The act of “imagining for ourselves” takes the unknown and the unutterable and turns it into representation. The act of imagining is perceived as an obligation when dealing with “bare life.” The act of looking is transformed into sustaining what has been preserved. In short, the daunting legacy of the past is manifested in the act of looking at, of acknowledging what has happened, even if the extent of the trauma remains forever distant and incomprehensible.

The legacy is carried on by recollection, by looking, by naming, and by artistic representations as critical response to the obliteration imposed under states of exception and their extension into the present. Art practices represent, as Groys underlines, “places of historical comparison between the past and the present, between the original promise and the contemporary realization of this promise and thus, posses the means and ability to be sites of critical discourse – because every such discourse needs a comparison.”<sup>173</sup> In this respect the art practice provide the necessary stepping back in order to maintain the critique of representation and to “measure our own time against this historical

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<sup>170</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 117.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 2.

<sup>173</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power*, 129.

background.”<sup>174</sup> Measuring our own time can be further advanced through acts of memory, which surface from the past as interpretations in the present. History, memory, and cultural practices function together; mediation and distance are always implied, as well as an intense crisis of knowledge when attempting to make visible what was invisible. The intricate mechanisms of memory transposed into artistic practice will constitute the next chapter.

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 130.

## ALTERNATE MEMORIES

### *RE-WORKINGS OF THE COMMUNIST PAST INTO THE PRESENT*

The body as locus of memory revisits the past, following rules of fragmentation and discontinuity, of recalling and forgetting. It challenges the notion of the past understood as coherent and “uninterrupted history,” by bringing forth multiple histories, which are represented by acts of selection and organization performed in the present. Marianne Hirsch underlines acts of memory as “performance, representations and interpretation” and moreover acknowledges cultural memory as transmission in the shape of individual voices and bodies, through the mediated agency of the witness. Voices of the past, alternate histories of power and powerlessness, of exclusion from a master narrative are embedded in the (un)reliability of the witnesses and testimony that reach the present in a mediated way, through ideological discourses.

Witnessing destabilizes certitude, and the more so if we consider the case of witnesses of traumatic events, implying belatedness, as proven by Cathy Caruth.<sup>175</sup> The viewer of trauma is a “secondary witness,” since the events that took place are classified as memories, embedded with “inherent latency,” as “the protective mechanism that provides for an experience that is wholly other than that which was called for by the original event.”<sup>176</sup> In this context, bodies maintained in states of memory and postmemory<sup>177</sup> are transformed into surrogate bodies, re-enacting an “unrecoverable” traumatic past. “Postmemory” is understood by Hirsch as memory of trauma transmitted

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<sup>175</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995).

<sup>176</sup> Jessica Catherine Lieberman, “Traumatic Images,” *Photographies*, 1:1, 2008 5.

<sup>177</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory” in *Poetics Today* 29,1 (Spring 2008), 103-128.

to a second generation, activating “the relationship that the generation after those who endured cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors within which they grew up.”<sup>178</sup> Cultural products can function as activators of postmemory enabling those who did not witness trauma to maintain a relationship to this “received memory,” and in effect, to imagine it.

A renewed cultural interest in tropes of memory has emerged in recent years in countries that experienced a history of totalitarianism – as it happened for ex-Communist Eastern Europe – enhanced by political discourses that generate officially sanctioned memories, in order “to create public spheres of ‘real’ memory that will respond to the politics of forgetting pursued by post-dictatorship regimes either through ‘reconciliation’ and official amnesties or through repressive silencing.”<sup>179</sup> As Andreas Huyssen points out, amnesty<sup>180</sup> is one of the desired effects, because many of the prominent members of former totalitarian regimes did not disappear from the political scene, but became members of the new power. Under these circumstances former abuses are less likely to surface and to be acknowledged publicly, since amnesty is, in Judith Herman’s terms, a “a form of political amnesia.”<sup>181</sup> The national political context, through which the past is remembered, accounted for, and used as legitimization for the future, affects the way fiction is interlaced with “reality” in constructing narratives of the past, of “present pasts.”<sup>182</sup> Whereas the appeal to memory might point to the necessity of remembering, it

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>179</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 23.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Judith Herman, M.D., *Trauma and Recovery*, 242.

<sup>182</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 23.

is equally symptomatic to a certain fear of forgetting, as underlined by Huyssen: “we try to counteract this fear and danger of forgetting with survival strategies of public and private memorialization. The turn toward memory is subliminally energized by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space.”<sup>183</sup> Bogdan Ghiu describes the reconsideration of recent Romanian history as passing through two distinctive phases: one of them occurring after 1989, and therefore immediately after the fall of Communism, trying to “frame a moral-philosophical judgment of the former regime,”<sup>184</sup> the other one being possible only in the years 2000, for a second generation “free from traumatized adult memory.”<sup>185</sup> These two distinct moments activate two different types of memory and reconsideration. Moreover, they generate cultural productions that “translated historical-memorial trauma in artistic products ... memory was only able to free itself indirectly, through a genuine ‘fabulatory treatment,’ through a *controlled delirium*, in other words, through the filter of the specific conventions and norms of an artistic code. Culture was yet again functioning, with its gains and losses, as an instrument to sublimate political, revolutionary violence.”<sup>186</sup>

The role of art representations in re-analyzing and activating memory of the past acquires great importance for countries passing through a decommunization process, as opposed to philosophical and moral judgment seeking to reinterpret it ethically. According to Ghiu, artistic products represent the preferred interpretative paradigm adopted in Romania – cultural interventions allowing reconsideration of this traumatic past without attributing it definitive ethical judgments, a predominant pattern of the

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>184</sup> Bogdan Ghiu, “Brief Autobiography,” in eds. Alexandru Niculescu, Adrian Bojenoiu, *The Romanian Cultural Revolution*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 13.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

1990s: “Against this ‘direct,’ ‘frontal’ moral philosophical model, everybody seems to prefer, with a certain historical delay, the ‘indirectness’ of art, of image and narration *mediated* through artistic forms.”<sup>187</sup> The narrative and artistic representational model does not address an actual ‘trial of Communism,’ but an investigation of the past as ‘elaboration of memory.’<sup>188</sup> It “performs mourning, it buries the past, helping us to break with it in order to go on living; at the same time it marks it so it cannot be forgotten... [it] should become creative, useful, in a word, a memory generator. It transforms history into a sign, into a form of storage that can be manipulated, handled and ready to be lived.”<sup>189</sup> While producing “a typological and historical multiple indirectness,” art relativizes the truth claim on the past, it neutralizes it to a certain extent, by fictionalizing it and turning it into a representation that follows aesthetic rules of production, dissemination and reception.

An important cultural production reinterpreting Romanian history under Communism is Andrei Ujica’s film *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu* (2010). *Idea arts + society* journal dedicated a theoretical dossier to this film in 2011. The movie was produced more than twenty years after the Romanian Revolution, after Ceausescu’s trial and execution. Ovidiu Tichindealeanu considers these specific historic moments to be symptoms of failure, hindrance for subsequent development of a democratic society, starting from the controversial trial behind closed doors and the execution, continuing with the divergent scenarios offered consecutively as versions of the truth on Ceausescu’s death and finally, the well kept secret of his grave. They point to an unaccomplished

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

political and social transfer, to an “endless mourning in reverse”<sup>190</sup> leading to continuation rather than dissociation from the past and its specters. Ujica’s movie follows his previous movie, *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), co-directed with Haroun Farocki. Ujica and Farocki focus on the status of image as mediator with respect to historical evidence, truth claims and memory. If *Videograms* employs mostly private amateur video recordings, *The Autobiography* uses official propaganda archive of the Party preserved at The National Film Archive and The Romanian Television – Ujica accessed more than 1000 hours of state propaganda footage – portraying a rather humanized facet of the dictator’s personality. As Tichindeleanu puts it, “the film dissolves that post-communist anti-communist default, the negationist explanation of Communism as ‘madness’ or ‘non-sense.’”<sup>191</sup> As part of their original broadcast, and thus of the initial reception of these images, these propaganda films were accompanied by extensive commentary glorifying Ceausescu’s state visits and the unflinching support of his loving people. Dictatorships, as Herman notes, required not “merely acquiescence, but the complicity of the general population.”<sup>192</sup> The historical propagandistic meta-narration provided by these commentaries was erased in Ujica’s movie, leaving the reconstruction of this past to be formed as a succession of images, interpreted by an audience expected to connect the links between missing information, images, memory and divergent levels of expectancy on how the history of Communism should be remembered and presented through cultural products. The emergence of this film generated wide discussions and challenged the anti-Communism paradigm ascribing the

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<sup>190</sup> Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, “The Author of the Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu,” in *Idea arts + society*, No. 38, (2011), 96.

<sup>191</sup> Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, “The Author of the Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu,” 101.

<sup>192</sup> Judith Herman, M.D., *Trauma and Recovery*, 243.

past to an undifferentiated and pervasive morally questionable evil, presenting an image of the dictator closer to the patriarchal figure of the protective father, carrying for his children and their well being. This perspective effectively problematizes the way Romanian society deals with its historic trauma, shame, and even complicity in the perpetuation of abuses disguised under protective discourses. The more so, since it is comprised not only of victims but also former perpetrators – participating in different degrees to the success of Communism – which renders the retrospective accountability for abuses inflicted in the past very difficult. “The banality of evil,” in Arendt’s terms, was not remotely possible following this form of acceptance, complicity, and a general official discourse of fatherly protection offered by the “beloved leader.” Culturally reformulating the past and re-commemorating elements that tend to be forgotten represent acts of awareness, positioning the civil society in more complex circumstances in which the past is not accessed according to an agenda based on undifferentiated vilification. Herman underlines the necessity of recovering the past as necessary stage in the healing process, where “without some form of public acknowledgement and restitution, all social relationships remain contaminated by the corrupt dynamics of denial and secrecy.”<sup>193</sup>

While Ujica’s movie actively appropriates archival footage from Communist propaganda, there are other cultural instances where the past is reconsidered through its physically remnants, manifest in concrete visual repositories of Communist legacy still visible in the architectural configuration of cities. This is the case of Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor’s works *Procesul/The Trial* (2004-2005), *Vacaresti* (2003-2006) and *Praful/Dust* (2007). Vatamanu and Tudor’s work *Vacaresti* (2003) is composed of a

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

video and a series of photographs recording the performance made by the artists on the site of an eighteenth-century monastery, demolished in 1986 under the Ceausescu regime. The video shows Tudor walking the perimeter and tracing with a stick the outlines of the physical site previously occupied by the monastery, an empty space for future architectural construction that would better reflect the ideology of Communism. As visually depicted in the video, these plans were not realized and the present condition of this site is desolate. Past trauma is actualized in this instance in a bodily reconfiguration of an empty space. The artist's body delineates the body of the building as it existed in the past, but left no visible traces in the present barren landscape. Neither of the artists had actually experienced the monastery as physical presence. They knew it from photographs. However, photographs taken by the artists before 2005, the year when the performance took place, document the transformation of this space after the demolition of the church: a large socialist unfinished construction in ruins that was in turn destroyed to make way for the new architectural project of building a shopping mall. This mediated memory – through photography – is doubled by the existence of their performance on video, as cultural product working with the blank spots of the past, which, as Mihnea Mircan points out, situates “the work between an unclear ‘then’ and a problematic ‘now,’ pointing at loss and at the entropy that architecture ‘constructs’ while it seeks to embody power, be it political or economic.”<sup>194</sup> This work was re-contextualized artistically in the video installation *Dust* (2005-2007). The video was shown on two small television screens, placed on the floor, while pierced bags of concrete were hung on the wall, the dust dripping down, gradually smearing the walls and floor of the exhibition. The

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<sup>194</sup> Mihnea Mircan, <http://www.monavatamanuflorintudor.ro/vacaresti.htm>. Online. Accessed 2 April 2012.

concrete is presented in its ‘informe’<sup>195</sup> quality, before its usage as construction material; it leaves material traces, but builds nothing; it imprints only a temporary mark, easily effaced when the exhibition ends. Its materiality cedes room to emptiness, a space incompletely filled by the video work documenting the performance.

In Vatamanu and Tudor’s video *The Trial*, archival information does not refer directly to the past, but rather to consequences in the present as material visual testimonies that shape contemporary Romanian urban structure. The cinematographic strategy of images shot from a moving car recording the cityscape is combined with archival sound and text of Ceausescu’s trial during the Revolution. The video consists of long shots of Communist block of flats, part of Ceausescu’s major attempt to rebuild the country in the 1970s and 1980s, but still pervasive in Romanian contemporary architectural landscape. The result is a continuous visual flat surface that, while referring to the past, marks the present as a solid lack of transformation. This architecture was presented on TV during Communism as short propaganda clips pointing to the accomplishments of the regime. After more than twenty years, it is still present, standing in for failure, the Communist legacy in the present, which is a changed perception of this architecture.

The uses of archival documents by these two artists inform the case studies that ground my investigation of the intricate mechanisms of memory as they refer to the Communist past and its subsequent interpretations. These key works are Stefan Constantinescu’s photographic pop-up book *The Golden Age for Children* (2008) and Irina Botea’s video *Audition for a Revolution* (2006). On the basis of these works I argue that the recovery of the recent traumatic past in the form of memory does not follow a

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<sup>195</sup> Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

linear structure, but is disrupted by a structural impossibility of fulfillment, by its continual deferral, and by mediation as cultural transmission of the memory of trauma. Constantinescu uses photographic archives and Botea employs video archives from the Communist historic heritage; they are transformed into cultural products, going beyond their documentary and referential function, pointing to the imaginative re-workings of the past into the present. The archives of Communism and of the Romanian Revolution – both public and private – are given new interpretations and they surface as documents under active transformation, under a new form of visibility. As Ghiu points out:

There are no secret archives. Any type of archive, once constituted and written, is already public. To archive, meaning to write, to store, is to expose oneself to oblivion and repetition, to iteration, borrowing, usage, ‘manipulation’ and reconstruction. Power, any sort of power, however discreet, produces archives: it makes everything public, even by hiding it ... The secrets of totalitarian regimes do not actually lie in archives, but are hidden within us.<sup>196</sup>

“Hidden within us,” the “secrets” of history are not so much revealed as shown to be veiled by art’s transfiguration. While these works activate memory by referring to the past, their critical production and reception makes them more than simple “artefacts of remembrance.”<sup>197</sup> Memory is shown to exceed acts of testifying and legitimizing remembrance understood as direct reference to historical experience through several levels of mediation and construction; it does not happen in consensus, but rather through successive interpretations.

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<sup>196</sup> Bogdan Ghiu, “Brief Autobiography,” 15.

<sup>197</sup> Peter Osborne, “The Truth Will be Known when the Last Witness is Dead:’ History Not Memory,” in eds. Charles Merewether and John Potts, *After the Event*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 202.

Historical events are registered as fractured, multiple narrations via “constructions of the collective meaning of the past through the assembly and interpretation of exterior, documentary sources,”<sup>198</sup> as Peter Osborne underlines. They acquire coherence in view of their relationship with a future moment, and it is through this future projection and the present’s own ideological constraints and desires that history is reconfigured and tied to its referential function.

At a second, more complex level, memory of trauma introduces belatedness in the economy of remembrance, even though it also serves as modality of reinserting the past into lived experience in its actuality, and therefore of projecting the promise to heal potential wounds through mourning. This is crucial in societies witnessing the collapse of socio-political regimes whose history was manufactured ideologically – by eradicating “toxic” references to elements not in conformity with Communist dogma – and where, after the fall of these regimes, history became again the vilified topic of debate, no less radical in its truth claims. The hope of recovering the past as memory cannot be fulfilled, due to the nature of memory, which relives it as present interpretation and which “associates history with the *living*, that is with the present, and not just the past,”<sup>199</sup>

Moreover, as representation of the traumatic past, the artworks’ references to historical events through memory actualize local collective knowledge, but it also inscribe it in an expanded context of presentation and reception. The “speculative collectivity of the historical present,”<sup>200</sup> as Osborne calls it, based on non-national collectives and on the “trans-national character of the new art spaces,”<sup>201</sup> questions the assumption that the art

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 206.

production of history or memory is equally accessible in all places, at all times, by everybody. Constantinescu's reinterpretation of Communism and Botea's re-staging of the representation on the Romanian Revolution testify to the "staging of the disparity of memory and historical experience through a subjugation of memories to artistic forms."<sup>202</sup>

**STEFAN CONSTANTINESCU: *THE GOLDEN AGE FOR CHILDREN*, 2008**

*A NOT SO INNOCENT GAME*

Stefan Constantinescu's project *The Golden Age for Children* was published in 2008. The work takes the hybrid form of a photographic pop-up book for children – an educational toy – and a family album – a repository of memory – both strands dealing with the Communist history of Romania. Constantinescu introduces historical facts with questions "did you know that...?" in parallel with the personal history of his own childhood, which is illustrated with formulaic photographs similar to those that existed in every family album. He recuperates official propaganda photographs as well as vernacular photographs and reconstructs one history, among many, of the period between 1968 and 1989 in Romania, also called "The Golden Age."

I will start my excursion into the workings of memory with a game that I remember from my childhood, when pop-up books barely existed and when, under Communism, the broadcasting of cartoons was restricted by the National State Television to one hour on Saturdays at 1pm. Still, games were played at all times. One of them was to construct images depicting famous cartoon characters by connecting the dots. But the "game" I am suggesting now has a different twist, as advanced by Constantinescu. The

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 216

final outcome is to reveal a hidden image, a portrait. Instructions: the player is presented with a card on which the features of a face – lips, nose, and eyes – are schematically drawn. In order to successfully reveal the portrait, the player must connect all the points that mark the outline of the image, which are numbered in an ascendant order, starting from 1 up to 90: a seemingly innocent game that heralds a time of entertainment and excitement for children. And yet, it proves to be anything but innocent. This game represents the cover of Constantinescu's photographic book, *The Golden Age for Children*. The image that will appear is one of the official state portraits of Ceausescu, who was the President of Romania from 1974 to 1989, a portrait that during Communist years had been present in all institutions, in all textbooks, pervading the lives of people, manifesting therefore as one of the most powerful propaganda images.

History under Communism had the firm goal of changing the regime of knowledge. As Constantinescu underlines, he belonged to a generation who “was taught a manipulated version of history.”<sup>203</sup> Contrary to this, the artist reverses this official history to allow spaces of private existence, and moreover, to allow the reconsideration of his own past, as privately included in the general development of history. As Herman points out, the process of reliving trauma is an attempt to master it, to overturn the initial helplessness, which “constitutes the essential insult of trauma and that restitution requires the restoration of a sense of efficacy and power.”<sup>204</sup> The creative act is part of an attempt to reposition trauma, to integrate past experiences into a lived history.

This cultural resurfacing of the past was performed after 1989. It represents an act of recovery for the artist himself, as well as for its audience, a “re-education” in view of

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<sup>203</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, “Georgiana Zachia: Interview with Stefan Constantinescu,” in *Stefan Constantinescu*, (Stockholm: The Romanian Institute of Stockholm, Labyrinth Press, 2008), 22.

<sup>204</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 41.

the renewed freedom gained after the fall of the regime, which countered the official narrative of “Communist re-education” put into play for long years. There are several potential audiences for this book, yet an important beneficiary is the artist himself. In the process of selecting, organizing, and visually structuring his own version of Communist history, both public and private, Constantinescu performed an act of re-appropriation of his own lived trauma. This project stemmed from “a desire to understand some things and ... make them my own”<sup>205</sup> – a modality to re-consider his own history, previously confiscated under official propaganda versions and narrations. The subjectification of history via a personal account was denied during totalitarianism, it was a “forbidden game,” since all subjects had to be first and foremost “children of Communism,” whose private lives were subsumed to the master goal of radical social rejuvenation, schooled in the Communist doctrine. The artist re-enacts this “game” and shows the blank spots of official control where family life was still possible, as depicted in vernacular photographs. Constantinescu is well aware that these visuals materializations, the amateur photos of Communism are in effect the *official* ones, an awareness shared by all Romanians. Propaganda images came to impose the representation of reality that was easily recognized to be ideologically manufactured, provoking irony and privately circulated jokes.

The “forbidden games” of children who suffered trauma is described by Herman to bypass the light-spirited nature of childhood games and to enact a “grim and monotonous” pattern where “play does not stop easily when it is traumatically inspired. And it may not change much overtime.”<sup>206</sup> Constantinescu’s pop-up book invites the audience to a severe

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<sup>205</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, “Georgiana Zachia: Interview with Stefan Constantinescu,” 22.

<sup>206</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 39.

“game” of browsing the pages of Communism, with little space for playing unless in formal patterns. His book is structured in clearly delimited sections – a pedagogical tool, that covers some key social aspects of the development of Communist trauma for himself and for others: “1968,” “Bucharest,” “Old Man Frost,” “On Vacation,” “The Earthquake,” “The School,” “PCR (The Romanian Communist Party),” “Shortages,” “Of Value,” “Radio Free Europe,” “The Church,” “The Army,” “1989.” The pages of the book are red. Playfulness seems to be welcomed only when images are revealed by pulling them in and out. Instead of the expected surprises to cheer the spirit and the eye, this act uncovers other levels of trauma, superimposed one on top of the other, combining images and memories under the disguise of the play.

Apart from the attempt to “master” his own history, through visual retelling and reconstruction of trauma, the artist addresses an audience not necessarily made up of children, but those who remained in a state of infantilized adulthood: the generation who lived their childhood, youth and even their adult life under restrictions of Communism. On the one hand, this was a generation considered to be developing under the thorough protection of the “beloved leader,” to be carried under the wing of the almighty father, guiding their public and private lives with a firm but loving hand: a powerful paternalist paradigm of “protection.” All citizens of the country were considered to be the dictator’s children, who were provided for in all aspects and details of their lives. On the other, these children’s development was arrested, since trauma is assumed to paralyze development. Yet, the experience of trauma does not end once the event is over; on the contrary, it is prolonged, through “intrusions” in Herman’s terms, long after its occurrence: “trauma repetitively interrupts ... trauma arrests the course of normal development by its repetitive

intrusion into the survival's life ... it is as time stops at the moment of trauma."<sup>207</sup> Under the trauma of Communism, this generation was to a certain degree frozen in "childhood." These are some of the "children" for whom Constantinescu constructs this history and some of the children about whom Ion Grigorescu speaks in one of the letters included in the book. Following the degradation of values under Communism, children offered the smallest chance of overcoming evil, a promise coming from an unknowable future: "We had children because I thought it would be a new interval, my generation had no chance, maybe theirs wouldn't either, but without children only the bad remains."<sup>208</sup> These generations connected by a lived trauma are those who, according to Constantinescu, were the most interested in the book, who responded with a form of nostalgia: "I think that their reaction was strange, well, strange on the one hand but quite understandable on the other: to get nostalgic about that period when seeing the book. This was not at all my intention, but in retrospect, I think that nostalgia is an important part of how my generation and I feel about that period. Of course this feeling is not directed toward the system, but rather toward the holidays at the seaside, the sand between our toes, the Iris concerts, all in all that period of our childhood and youth which coincided with Ceausescu's regime."<sup>209</sup>

The innocents, or those kept "innocent," are not only Romanians – children of the beloved father of Communism – but also the "innocent" Westerners, those who did not know, who were not told or simply who did not want to know. As Constantinescu points out: "I live in Sweden and I always felt the need to talk about these things in a clearer way since my audience lacked certain information. Not all audience, but the great

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>208</sup> Ion Grigorescu, "My Dear Stefan Constantinescu, My Dear William Tell," in *The Golden Age for Children*, 36.

<sup>209</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, "Georgiana Zachia: Interview," 23.

majority”<sup>210</sup> and moreover “When Ceausescu’s regime came to an end I thought that it was important for these things to be told and at the same time talking about them was educational both for the viewer and for me.”<sup>211</sup> Even the title of this project played on so-called Western innocence, echoing the popular “Golden Book,” which summarizes general knowledge needed by Western children. Yet, in this case this necessary knowledge was not a playful one, nor trauma-free, even though almost no violence was depicted, except for the last section dedicated to the Romanian Revolution, the one that entered Westerners’ consciousness as a mediatic event, the first bloody revolution to overturn a dictatorial regime in the Eastern Communist block.

The book was first showed in Sweden in 2008 at Botkyrka konsthall, at the Romanian Cultural Institute in Stockholm, and later on as part of the *Periferic* Biennial in Iasi, Romania, and at Umea Buildmusset, where it was included in the exhibition *The Map: Navigating the Present*. At Botkyrka konsthall it was accompanied by an educational project, together with artist talks, targeting young students between 13 and 18 years of age. While learning some of the facts about Romanian Communism, these students were encouraged to reflect on their own life stories and thus to integrate the history of others through analogies and associations with their own personal experience.

#### *IMAGINING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF AN IMAGE*

The divergent modes in which history is being remembered, a generation apart, is compellingly illustrated by the genesis of this project, which started when Constantinescu’s seven-year old son saw Ceausescu’s portrait and asked his father: “Who

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

is this guy?” A problematic memory lineage is established through this question, which crosses three generations: a grandfather, who is the protagonist of many of the photographs presented in the book and who emigrated to Sweden during Communism, a father, the artist, who lived part of his youth in Communist Romania and therefore experienced first-hand the realities of those times; and a son who was born in Sweden, and for whom the memories of Communism can be transmitted only in an intergenerational form, through the mediation of histories, photographs, and stories. This question is symptomatic of the postmemory of children born after the fall of Communism, a generation that lives under completely different social conditions. For them the realities of the recent past are far from being fully known or acknowledged, unless they are systematically passed down from previous generations in the form of stories and photographs.

Hirsch describes the various modes of addressing memory, as supplementing history itself, going through the “syndrome” of belatedness or “post-ness.”<sup>212</sup> They define a challenging connection between memory and a traumatic past. As underlined by Hirsch, these conceptualizations start from the presupposition that there is a relationship established between descendants of survivors of traumatic events and recollection of the past, inscribing a certain kind of memory of events that have been transmitted to those who did not experience this past directly. Yet, as a “received memory, this is not considered equal to the memory that an actual survivor might possess. The paradigm of postmemory shares with other models a rupture with the past and a paradoxical dialogical

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<sup>212</sup> As argued by Hirsch, it was previously termed ‘absent memory’ (Fine 1988), ‘inherited memory,’ ‘belated memory,’ ‘prosthetic memory’ (Lury 1998, Landsberg 2004), ‘*mémoire trouée*’ (Raczynow 1994), ‘*mémoire des cendres*’ (Fresco 1984), ‘vicarious witnessing’ (Zeitlin 1998), ‘received history’ (Young 1997).

continuation. Constantinescu's book makes this transmission possible in a visual and narrative manner, activating memory of trauma with both vernacular photographs from his family album, but also with images inscribed in the collective memory. However, even though these events are experienced in a mediated manner, they retain a powerful connection that is gradually transformed in a form of memory itself. Hirsch provides an important nuance in understanding this particular type of memory, which is not characterized by recalling, but by imagination. "Postmemory's connection to the past is imaginative investment, projection, and creation."<sup>213</sup>

The effects of postmemory are felt not only by direct filiations, but they can be inherited and embedded at the more general level of contemporaneity or shared condition with any second generation. Constantinescu's book constructs a memory of Communism and addresses an audience comprised not only of children belonging to a second generation, who did not directly witness the Communist regime, but also a more subtle category of children, the traumatized Romanians, and the "innocent" ones, the artist's adult contemporaries in the West, those who need to learn and who had no previous access to the condition of people under this totalitarian society.

While the second generation experiences postmemory through projection and fictionalization, those who witnessed the events are themselves prone to the activity of imagination that fills in the gaps of knowledge, to associations built after the events took place, which inform their memories through defamiliarization. Several levels of estrangement are present in Constantinescu's book: memory is manifest through subsequent forms of remembering and forgetting the past, marked by the experience of living in a different country, which does not preserve and maintain the same collective

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<sup>213</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 107.

memory; Constantinescu recalls, reconstructs and re-imagines this history in a subjective manner, in its turn infused by his experience of immigration. Moreover, this is a book that did not take shape immediately after the fall of Communism or immediately after the process of immigration itself, but became an art project twenty years later. The artist avoids the construction of a purely personal history of Communism, restricting its relevance solely to a familiar heritage. Excessive individualization of traumatic events as passed further on by family narrative carry with it the likelihood of enclosure, which might occult the larger social context and narrative of that specific event. Constantinescu's revisiting of the past is a forging process of creation and of imagination that blends reality and myth in constructing a memory of Communism both for himself and for others.

The image that appears on the cover of the book is a connect-the-dots puzzle game representing one of the official state portraits of Ceausescu, who was the President of Romania from 1974 to 1989. During the Communist period, this type of image was easily recognized even in its fragmented form generated by the dots to be connected together, and still recognized by people who lived through this political regime. Ceausescu's image was turned into an effigy, rendering to the biological body a power that went beyond youth and old age, or any other affect of time, bearing a power of its own and living an independent life from the natural one. It had been transformed into a political body of the sovereign, which could not be "touched" and which ruled the everyday life of people. The image evokes a long list of praise words: Ceausescu was called 'демиург,' 'all-thinker,' 'beloved son,' 'first citizen of the Fatherland,' 'the flawless genius,' 'the eternal star of the Romanian sky.' His regime was called 'The Golden Age', a phrase preserved in the title of the book. However, the situation is different twenty years after the fall of Communism,

which partially obliterated its recognition and its significance as a power statement. Its memory faded away. An image that was pervasive 20 years ago has proved to be impermanent. A certain invisibility had taken its place, both in terms of the new generation, born and raised after 1989, and also in terms of its recognition and identification outside the borders of Romania.

During Communism, an extended visual propaganda apparatus enhanced Ceausescu's presence in public life: propaganda images were on display in institutions, schools, television, and magazines. Party meetings and congresses were widely documented, since these were the places where strategic decisions were taken for the "benefit and social construction" of "the new people;" consequently, everyone had to be fully aware of the great promise that lay ahead. Publicly, state-approved images permeated the visual domain with images of happiness and fulfillment, as a powerful means of forging a parallel reality to the one people were actually living in, presenting so-called "documentation" without direct correspondence to the actual social and political reality. Images depicting food stores promised the communal prosperity of Communism, field trips to chemical plants or to abundant autumn crops underscored the five-year plan of Communist development, which was declared to be dramatically increasing production. The expected result was direct and exponential growth of the population's welfare, even though in reality those responsible for annual reports faced increased poverty as a consequence of collectivization. The production was reported to always exceed expectations and previous planning. 100-percent fulfillment was a minimal target to be declared. A mandatory discourse of statistics rich in accomplishments had to be matched by visual presentations with appropriate propaganda imagery, a glorifying statement

camouflaging a precarious situation. However, the population was living under conditions that licensed abuses without fear of legal punishment. The mere voicing of distrust in the governing body transformed individuals into a possible threat to the ‘new order,’ and triggered punishment, sometimes prison or even death. In Romania’s ‘Golden Age’ virtually every citizen – benefiting only officially from the legal rights that come along with this status – was a potential transgressor of Communist ideology, but at the same time a latent ‘petty sovereign’ in Judith Butler’s terms, who reigns “in the midst of bureaucratic army institutions mobilized by aims and tactics of power they do not inaugurate or fully control.”<sup>214</sup> Under these conditions, public space was highly controlled not only physically, but also through visual representations.

Individuals’ visibility, their “space of appearance” in Hannah Arendt’s terms, was altered. As James Mark underlines, “before 1989 individuals had been required to write their own family pasts into official Communist histories in public autobiographical writings necessary for job applications or to gain entry to tertiary education.”<sup>215</sup> A politicized life story was publicly told and reconsidered to fit within the ideological doctrine, operating through a series of factual omissions – that might have raised questions either referring to these people’s “bad” origin, or to their relationships with others with “unsound” relatives, possibly the ones who emigrated and settled abroad, or even rejecting any connections with those who might have owned private properties in their family history. A general purging of “toxic” elements imbued the telling and construction of autobiographical stories meant for public eyes and ears. This situation failed to be represented publicly by propaganda images, but was included obliquely in vernacular

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<sup>214</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 56.

<sup>215</sup> James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), XXV.

photographs, which, even though not always explicitly depicting this bio-political situation, implied it through shared and silent knowledge on the general context of those visual testimonies.

The situation of Romanians under Communism was partially unknown to the international gaze, unaware of the severe abuses happening internally. The controlled media apparatus of the Party blocked information, visual testimonies and cultural productions to surface publicly if they were not ideologically approved beforehand. A crisis situation that under normal conditions would have triggered a reaction of urgency was veiled under the disguise of normalcy, or at least was shrouded in partial visual “silence.” No emergency claim could have been formed with respect to a situation that not only was publicly projected as being functional, but it was professed to be experienced internally as an almost utopian form of consensus regarding the acceptance and embrace of the “beloved leader” and the party that made possible the “flourishing of the country.” Internally, the population was living on a permanent basis on the “verge of catastrophe.” As Zygmunt Bauman points out, “when everyone, at all times is vulnerable and uncertain ... it is survival and safety, not a sudden catastrophe, that appears to be the exception ... It is the avoidance of randomly distributed blows that appears to be an exemption, an exceptional gift, a show of grace, heightened vigilance, extraordinary efforts and exceptional shrewd precautions.”<sup>216</sup> In effect Romanians were denied the protection they should have been entitled to. This social distortion was disguised under propaganda discourse regarding the protection that the state offers to “its children,” since Romanians were considered as being sheltered by the “caring Father.” The state portrait was an

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<sup>216</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2004), 50.

embodiment of this “protection” and “good surveillance.” As Marius Babias notes, the irony lies in the fact that the same generation of children raised under Ceausescu’s “caring wing” was the one that took away his power and eventually put him to death.<sup>217</sup>

*The Golden Age for Children* – Constantinescu’s personal history of Communism – looks back at the past through the fissures of this official effigy, now a dotted image. It resurfaces, 20 years after the fall of Communism, photographs that account visually for the difficult life conditions of a population controlled at all levels of society and which ultimately testify to mechanisms of selections that allow certain visual evidences to become iconic while others remain subdued. Through visual associations and narratives, the artist re-imagines the past when Ceausescu’s official propaganda image required no further explanation.

#### BEGINNING

Constantinescu starts his book with a universal beginning: with birth, and with its impossible remembrance. The account of this year, 1968, combines several documentary tools – personal photographs, propaganda images, descriptive texts and even material documents – acknowledging the fragmentary access they provide to a personal or collective history, and moreover pointing to the multiple voices that combine and interfere in building that memory/history. This information suffers from a good insufficiency, supplemented through chains of associations, which makes the process of recollection possible. As Ariella Azoulay states, “a solitary image cannot testify to what is revealed

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<sup>217</sup> Marius Babias, “The *Euro*-self and the Europeanism: How the Communist National Discourse Acquires a New Face, that of the Postcommunist Anti-modernism – The Romanian Case,” *Documenta 12 Magazine* special edition, in *Idea arts + society*, No. 24, 2006.

through it, it must be attached to another image, another piece of information, another assertion or description, another grievance or piece of evidence, another broadcast, another transmitter.”<sup>218</sup>

Within the pages of the book, a miniaturized birth certificate bears institutional witness to the artist’s coming into the world. Constantinescu’s world was the Communist one, at least for a limited period of time. This document is inserted in the book in its material form, with pages to be turned around, as administrative testimony and identification of the life that was just born. The first page of *The Golden Age* announces the arrival of the artist as an infant, “a picture of me at the age of six months, taken by my father in our house on 18 Laptari St., Bucharest, August 8, 1968.”<sup>219</sup> This is an exact account of a moment that the artist himself cannot possibly remember, unless remembrance is constructed and triggered by the concrete presence of the photograph. On the surface nothing could be more neutral than such a baby picture, nothing could be less politically charged than that. However, this image, which pops up from the book as an eye-catching element for children to discover, to touch and to grab, and possibly to tear apart, does not stand alone. The year the artist was born, 1968, in itself the inaugural moment of his life and therefore of utmost importance from a personal point of view, also triggers political associations. Life under Communist ideology was subordinated to political life, less a matter of self-belonging, but of belonging to the political body, as the book is organized to show. Above a nearby photograph representing a maternity ward with cribs and newborns, the gloomy text announces the reality behind this propaganda

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<sup>218</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 191.

<sup>219</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, (Stockholm: The Romanian Cultural Institute of Stockholm, 2008), 4.

image, namely that “in 1968 the birth rate was three times what it was in 1966.”<sup>220</sup> The reason was simple: following the 770 Decree of 1966, abortion and contraceptive methods were banned “for women under 40 years of age or with fewer than four children” and further on “a long-term plan was developed to increase the birth rate by introducing a tax on divorce and unmarried individuals. In 1968 only 28 divorces were approved in the entire country.”<sup>221</sup> This is a short notice that carries with it severe consequences, considering the fact that an entire generation was born following an ideological decree. This generation was named “decretei/children of the decree.” The most intimate aspects of adult life – sexuality and procreation – were transformed into public displays of obedience to the official rule. Tom Sandqvist summarized this condition:

a part of the absurd and even macabre and grotesque monument of which Ceausescu was dreaming, a monument intended to eclipse in brilliance all the rest of equally ambitious and megalomaniac plans imposed until then by the dictator ... the embryo in the uterus became ‘the common property of the whole society.’ ... In the ‘80s a secret order was issued and even applied in several parts of the country: fertile women had to submit to gynecological controls whether they were following the law or not by using contraceptive measures. Female medical doctors were forced to examine every month all women working in Bucharest factories ... Most examinations were also made in the presence of special governmental or party agents called the ‘menstruation police’ ... books about sex and reproduction were a ‘state secret’ and could not be used except for medical purposes being kept under strict surveillance ... To put it mildly, the situation was hopeless for millions of women; ten times more women than anywhere else in Europe were dying of various diseases caused by rudimentary abortions already a couple of

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

years after 1966 ... Hospitals were sterilizing rusty utensils, bandages were washed and re-washed.<sup>222</sup>

On one hand, an abundance of visual propaganda documents bluntly stood in for the invisibility of people governed by Communist rule. On the other, apart from the party-controlled images that surfaced publicly, there were numerous other vernacular photographs that privately documented the social realities and the actual difficulties faced by individuals and families. Moreover, even if sometimes the vernacular photographs, as in the case of the apparently innocent baby picture, did not directly address the grim social environment, they were predicated by it and the implied references were silently acknowledged and resurfaced through the agency of memory. The invisibility in this case refers to what is obscured and covered under the disguise of normality, “the banality of evil.”

#### *SYMBOLS OF THE PAST*

Far from building another “official” history, Constantinescu presents a subjective account of those years, without aiming at an exhaustive overview. Thematic subjects are approached from multiple angles, testifying to the impossibility of accurately recovering a recent past, a recent history, unless through an incomplete perspective. It represents a cultural act the more significant if we consider that Communist history subscribed to only one possible version, the official approved history of the Romanian people, re-interpreted in a heroic key from its genesis up to the Communist regime. Historical figures were completely erased from historic documents and textbooks and others reconsidered to fit

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<sup>222</sup> Tom Sandqvist, *Stefan Constantinescu: Dacia 1300: My Generation*, (Bucharest: Simetria, 2003), 24.

to the nationalist discourse. During Communism, history was a propaganda tool, to be reinvented and rewritten in order to support party dogma with manipulated facts. Moreover, since those times were part of a larger “re-education” project, and therefore part of a “history under construction,” the lives of people, whether in the private or the public realm, were infused with political tonalities and were structured so that to eliminate the possible errors and deviations from this ideology. And re-education is precisely what the artist is providing the innocent children of the West. Trauma leads to re-enactment, as Herman underlines: “Traumatized people find themselves reenacting some aspect of trauma scene in a disguised form.”<sup>223</sup>

As analyzed by Marius Babias, the Communist doctrine under Ceausescu based its promises on a radical nationalism – through enforced securitary mechanisms – that justified its isolation from other states. An extended program of industrialization destroyed rural communities; the increase in “production of children” was regulated through abortion politics, “a project which is considered to be one of the most monstrous social experiments in the recent history, an expression of the naturalization and essentialization of people, fatherland and nation.”<sup>224</sup> Communist nationalism and its control mechanisms prompted the dissolution of social classes, but also advanced the idea of the state as independent from other socialist countries. This situation led to the “emancipation of Romania from the block policy” and was manifest in the reaction toward the “Prague Spring,” (1968) condemning the Soviet invasion and thus determining a favorable Western official position on Romania’s state policy. This situation allowed Ceausescu to develop internally his ideological constraints, based on

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<sup>223</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 41.

<sup>224</sup> Marius Babias, “The *Euro*-self and the Europeanism,” 224.

fear and coercive strategies to disband the structures of society. Economic shortages were justified by the fact that Romania should be kept independent from “foreign” influences; “at the expense of the basic food provisions of the population, the regime exported all the goods that could be sold in order to pay off the external debts.”<sup>225</sup> Their clients were Western nations and also other Communist countries, including China and the Soviet Union, as important friends, allies and trading partners.

Constantinescu refers to these conditions in short texts that accompany the chapters of his book, with titles referring to specific social and economic situations of Communist Romania. Institutional manifestations and ideological requirements are depicted in propaganda images that were officially disseminated in order to reinforce the political agenda and vernacular photographs complicate the reference to the workings of Communist society and its recollection through visual testimonies.

1. *Old Man Frost*: The religious holidays posed a threat for the leader of the state, and therefore they were transformed into secular symbols: “Old Man Frost was Santa Claus’s replacement in folk tradition. The Party considered Santa Claus too religious for the new social reality. Old Man Frost made his first appearance in 1948 when the Communist Party decided that the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of December would become working days and Old Man Frost would hand out gifts on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December instead.”<sup>226</sup>
2. *Shortages*: “In 1982, Ceausescu decided to pay off all the foreign debt occasioned by the forced industrialization of the 1970s. The massive exports and minimization

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid. 226.

<sup>226</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age*, 8.

of imports had as consequence the necessity of the introduction of austerity measures ... In 1984 the Scientific Nutritional Ratio Program was launched.”<sup>227</sup>

3. *Of Value*: “Kent cigarettes, coffee, soaps, pantyhose, jeans, tape players and Bulgarian, Russian or Serbian televisions ... were considered valuables before 1989. The possession of foreign currency was strictly forbidden and punishable with jail time.”<sup>228</sup>
4. *The Church*: “One of the main goals of the Communist party was to impose atheism by canceling religious holydays at the official level as well as via destruction of churches and increased pressure on religious freedom. In Bucharest alone, during the 1980s around 25 churches were demolished in order to make space for the New Civic Center and the People’s Palace construction projects.”<sup>229</sup>

The social conditions bred by Communism twisted the ideal of belonging to a visual community since encounters between participants were politically orchestrated to generate and disseminate a harmonious message on the social realities depicted. Photographs bear witness to the differences arising between initial reasons of their production and their reception. The visibility of people living under Communism was only to themselves in the form of vernacular photographs kept private, thereby observing the rules of containment that characterized social life, their bare lives. Contact with relatives living in the West was strictly monitored and all letters sent abroad were opened, inspected, sometimes banned or simply “lost,” making almost impossible the transmission of textual and visual information on the condition of people living in Romania. The spectator, normally an active part in the photographic circle, was almost completely

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 24.

missing. The re-territorialization that Azoulay asserts when defining the characteristics of the civil contract of photography was possible in Romania only after the December Revolution.

In the case of propaganda images, as depicted in *The Golden Age for Children*, the ideological scope for which they were produced was radically altered by their dissemination twenty years after the fall of Communism. A renegotiation of meaning takes place, which escapes the initial intention and doctrinary rules, but which, by the fact that it happens after the conditions that imposed restrictions on the visual field ceased to exist, is also manifest as imagining the past by a non-homogeneous community. The imaginary reconstruction is inherent to the civil contract of photography, or as Azoulay puts it, this contract “is a social fiction or hypostatized construct,”<sup>230</sup> and furthermore, the “various uses of photography created a new community, in part actual and in part virtual ... The civil contract of photography that the emergence of this community exemplifies is the hypothetical, imagined arrangement regulations within this virtual political community.”<sup>231</sup> The mutual contract dissolves or becomes abbreviated when performed under the conditions of the state of exception, while being continued after this situation is transformed. Whereas imagination is a constituent part of this negotiation, it is more highly activated when social paradigms change or when visual testimonies travel across borders.

Under Communism, amateur photography captured the grievances of people at a time when propaganda images presented a different reality than the one they were experiencing. But access to photographic technology was limited. The average person’s

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<sup>230</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civic Contract of Photography*, 26.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

photographs passed through professional photographic studios, which could mean control, potential interrogation, and ultimately long-term surveillance. Some people did have access to photographic processing materials, but images thus produced could not leave the constrained space of the apartment or the restricted circle of close friends and relatives. Still, the controlled “homogenization of the field of vision” was pierced by vernacular photographs, even if they were kept hidden, as in the case of an image shown in Constantinescu’s book, which depicts a line of people waiting in line in front of a store. This photograph is revealed at the bottom of the page, after unfolding other ones, referring to shortages. The caption states: “They just received meat! Lines of dozens of people formed instantly whenever butchers shops received shipments.” The reason was that “from 1986 till 1989 the daily food ration per person was established as: 107 grams meat, 215 grams dairy, 75 grams fruit, 116 grams potatoes and 181 grams of other vegetables. Limitations regarding consumption of warm water, electricity and heating had already been introduced in 1975.”<sup>232</sup> Other images seem to be more neutral, as for example the one which occupies a central part in the chapter called “Bucharest” and which in the book is identified as autobiographical, depicting Colentina Road, lined with Communist blocks of flats, with few people and some cars. Nearby is the apartment given to the Constantinescu family after their house was demolished, and in its place a new school was erected, where the artist as a child was schooled with Communist doctrine. This program of demolition was due to the replanning of Bucharest’s urban structure, following Ceausescu’s “megalomaniac ambitions to ‘modernize’<sup>233</sup> the country,” as Sandqvist puts it. Familial houses were planned to disappear, since they allowed little

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<sup>232</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age*, 19.

<sup>233</sup> Tom Sandqvist, *Stefan Constantinescu: Dacia 1300*, 31.

centralized control and signified a “bourgeoisie” mode of life, sharing less to the communal goal of “Communist togetherness.” The alternative was for people to live in huge blocks of flats, where “close neighbors,” potential “petty sovereigns,” were capable of surveying and denouncing deviations. However, the same Communist blocks of flats are, as Tichindeleanu points out, the “visible archives of a project of centralized production of subjectivities.”<sup>234</sup> The photograph presented by Constantinescu does not directly hint at any trauma, or radical subjectification. People are almost missing, not much is happening, except for a few Dacia cars passing on the street and some others parked directly on the sidewalks, blocking the passage of pedestrians. Partial absence is all the more powerful since these massive concrete buildings manifest as an undeniable statement of presence and of subjectivity “developed mainly behind doors.” Standard living conditions for the Communist people were strictly regulated in serial apartments in grey blocks with long rows of windows: 12 square meters was the maximum housing space to which a person was entitled. These serial apartments functioned as “barricaded cells, monads turned inward”<sup>235</sup> and developed a new type of privacy: “the façade of concrete blocks may have suggested a filtering grid to the planners, but serial living functioned more like a production of inaccessible private reservoirs of accumulation, subtracted from the flows and processes of general exchange.”<sup>236</sup> These were the intimate spaces where vernacular photographs could be kept in private family albums, where collections of objects and goods reminiscent of the West were concealed, such as the VHS player shown in Constantinescu’s book, and where *Radio Free Europe* could be still

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<sup>234</sup> Ovidiu Tichindelean, “Building Modernity” in *Documenta Magazine, No. 1-3, 2007, Reader*, (Cologne: Taschen, 2007), 305.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

heard illicitly. These two visual representations of Communist life and society stand for two poles of privacy and control: on one hand, lines of people publicly visible in the streets, recorded visually in vernacular photographs that are kept in the intimacy of private houses and serial apartments; and on the other, the visual testimony of these same apartments – confining zones of potential autonomy from the ideological apparatus of Communism. Constantinescu depicts these instances of “autocratic values”<sup>237</sup> in the photographs present in his book; moreover, the existence of the photographs he uses constitutes in itself a form of testimony to these microcells of autonomy from the centralized state politics

When people were photographed in the context of the severe social conditions that marked them, they became part of the larger transmission of visual documents. Their personhood was, in effect, delayed. Constantinescu presents these types of photographs, allowing therefore for them to be publicly seen, investigated or ... played with. The context has completely changed. The realities they depict are things of the past and the previous restrictive ideological rules no longer apply. The emergence into visibility is produced when the citizens themselves have acquired new social and political rights. Moreover, since these photographs physically travel in the forms of the book and exhibitions that Constantinescu proposed, they enact a form of deterritorialization: they are not only seen by Romanians, but in other cultural and social spaces. In Sweden, the book was presented in 2008 at Botkyrka Konsthall, accompanied by an exhibition. The Swedish ethnologist Agnes Ers states in one of the letters included in the book that there associations can be drawn between Romania’s “Golden Age” and the “Golden Age” implemented in Sweden. Whereas a form of egalitarianism was proposed as common

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 209.

goal in both cases, the means of achieving it were completely different. In Romania, violence was used as a recurrent tool; in Sweden, the principles were of non-violence and non-authoritarian. Neither of these programs was fully successful. The reception of Constantinescu's project in Sweden centered on its educational value, providing a creative tool for learning about the history of an ex-Communist country and inviting at the same time a reflection on their own history. The sense of urgency that characterized these photographs during Communism is nowadays replaced by a certain detachment and therefore by a renewed relationship between visibility and invisibility.

Through photography and the book as cultural product, Constantinescu points to manifestations of trauma, not only in the historical context of these images, but also for their reception as representation, or as Baer puts it as “an appearance of meaning that ... continues to defy comprehension and that, although concerns the past, did not exist there.”<sup>238</sup> The texts that explain the general ideological and factual framework of Communism form a hermeneutical membrane to account for the way a “scene becomes meaningful only in and as representation.”<sup>239</sup> They are combined with vernacular photographs coming from his family album as well as official propaganda images. The photographic images that reconstruct a traumatic Communist history make references to abuses through what Walter Benjamin calls the “optical unconscious,” the “capacity to make the viewer aware of a dimension of reality that is at once ‘there’ indisputably ‘yet cannot be perceived.’”<sup>240</sup> In a traumatic context, identification of the viewer with the individual who has experienced trauma and is represented in photography leads to gaps of cognition, embedding an impossible occurrence, “because the original subjects

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<sup>238</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, 12.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 88.

themselves did not register the experience in the fullness of its meaning,<sup>241</sup> they are “radically alienated from parts of their own experiences.”<sup>242</sup> Constantinescu’s compilation testifies to this alienation. Whereas the accessibility to the events experienced by witnesses is hindered for those who only receive these testimonies, the knowledge acquired from survivals of trauma is knowledge that “they never wanted to possess.”<sup>243</sup> The unwanted quality is not restricted only to those who suffered trauma, but also to those supposed and hopefully expected to be involved in its amelioration: the Westerners, who chose to ignore what was going on, or simply were not aware of the dimension of evil happening in Romania, a fact that proves once more the successful propaganda system implemented and diligently carried along in Communism.

*COLLECTIVE MEMORY/PERSONAL MEMORY*

Constantinescu presents visual accounts that permeated the collective imaginary of generations living under Communism, shaped by dramatic images depicting the ‘big accomplishments’ of the regime – for instance, large monumental boulevards with names meant to glorify the new social order, “The Victory of Socialism,” many of them built at the expense of historical neighborhoods that were destroyed. This destruction remains inscribed in the memory of people living at the time and obliquely activated in the present not only by photographs but also by blank spots in the urban structure of the city. Constantinescu’s book contains vernacular photographs that record this transformation and follow the demolition or relocation of churches standing in the way of these big plans,

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid. 93.

in the pop-up idiom some images literally sliding away from the page in order to reveal empty spots. One archival image depicts Mihai Voda Church, which was moved 298 meter down a hill with a 6.2-meter vertical slant in 1985. He provides the context: “One of the main goals of the Communist Party was to impose atheism by canceling religious holidays at the official level as well as via the destruction of churches and increasing pressure on religious freedom. In Bucharest alone during the 1980’s, around 25 churches and monasteries were demolished in order to make space for the new Civic center and the People’s Palace construction projects.”<sup>244</sup> At the bottom of the page dedicated to “Church,” two other photographs can be alternatively pulled away, both of them representing the same location in Bucharest at different moments in time: one of the photographs shows a string of apartment buildings in front of which there is a construction site, with Saint George-Capra church in the background. The second photograph depicts the same spot, with the church relocated and occupying the former blank spot in the foreground of the image. It was moved 89 meters, to be hidden from view behind a wall of concrete apartments. These two images are stacked one on top of the other and divided into small strips. The procedure of pulling the images out and back gradually discloses them. Interlocked strips make both images visible at the same time, though not in their entirety, but as alternate visual fragments. By using a playful strategy, Constantinescu dynamically reveals the process of relocation, and points to the way memory accesses these visual testimonies as fragmentary, coded and incomplete, even as they resurface into the present through the agency of the viewer.

The artist parallels this visual and narrative information about the public sphere with photographs belonging to his family album. The caption of one of these personal

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<sup>244</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age*, 24.

photographs reads: “Together with my parents on the beach at Mamaia on the Black Sea coast, August 8, 1973.”<sup>245</sup> For an innocent eye, this caption and image alludes to a typical family vacation. Yet, the photograph activates not only personal memories; in fact it is mediated by publicly available images and narrations in a Communist country. Vacations at the beach were regulated by the state, and the annual trip had to be prepared in minute detail: gas consumption was heavily restricted and had to be meticulously saved throughout an entire year. Besides his own personal photographs, Constantinescu layers other generic vacation images and summer cards meant to officially promote dream beach escapes for the Communist people. They are physically superimposed in Constantinescu’s book through a visual device of representation that allows a conflation of images and at the same time a gradual discovery, by browsing and pulling away top images in order to reveal the ones underneath. Public images are incorporated with personal history, and become constitutive part of one’s own family narrative and imagination, blending the private and the public. A hybrid conflation is produced between collective memories and images superimposed on the ones transmitted through familial heritage. Neither of them exists in the absence of the other.

As a personal history documented by photographs, turned into a public book to be published in 2008, almost 20 years after the fall of Communism, Constantinescu’s project questions the recovery of history in the form of visual documents. He enacts the family album as a preserver of personal memories, which is the result of collective endeavor and authorship, charged with hidden emotions and untold stories, connections that are partially lost or radically transformed by the act of memory and postmemory.

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 10.

The assembled images function as more than recollections of a time past, they bring in associations that go beyond the personal history. An image taken from the family album depicts the author “in the fifth grade at General School 30, together with my classmates. Razvan and Ionel.”<sup>246</sup> They are wearing Pioneer school uniforms and scarves. However, images of pioneers belong to a wider collective memory that makes references to the Communism, even for those who did not experience it directly. The larger context refers to more than a personal recollection: “The political organization of education system was structured as follows: falcons of the Fatherland (4-7 years old), the Pioneer organization (8-14 years old) and the Union of Communist Youth (15 and 26 years old). One of their most important functions was propagandistic.”<sup>247</sup>

In each of these instances, significant lapses of information are persistent; neither propaganda nor vernacular photographs fully represent the realities of those times, but they do illustrate the mechanisms of representation imposed on the field of vision. The alterations of meaning and narratives attached to these photographs come as a result of the transformations they have undergone: they have traveled across physical boundaries, across time and socio-political systems, and moreover, the context of their presentation has been radically changed, thereby interpolating several layers of distortion, that, while making visible some of the social conditions experienced under Communism, account at the same time for the different modes of reception that revise and contextualize these photographs. This ‘noise’ is an inevitable component of the hermeneutical process, because the work itself is many things: 1. It is a personal illustrated history. 2. It is a book for children, which was transformed into an exhibition to be presented in galleries. 3. The

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

personal story is intermingled with the more general one of the Communist society captured by propaganda photographs. 4. It is a story told 20 years after the fall of Communism, when the realities presented diminished in the eyes of the new generations, born after 1989, giving testimony about a mode of addressing the past subjected to the tropes and interpretational paradigms of the present that itself is marked by an ambiguous transition period of decommunization. 5. The work was first presented in Sweden, and therefore it has been embedded within a different collective imaginary than that of Romania. However, this selection operates through exclusions, leaving aside large portions of both personal archive photographs and official ones. The visual and narrative testimonies can serve, as Charles Merewether puts it, as a “necessary supplement to memory, but can never serve as sufficient to that which has past ... the past is bound to the future, always coming after the originating event, witness to the fracture of its own condition, opening to a horizon that exceeds its referent.”<sup>248</sup>

*PROPAGANDA IMAGES/INVISIBLE TESTIMONIES*

Constantinescu’s revisiting of the recent past and its visual testimonies makes possible the transmission of photography beyond physical or symbolical borders of sovereignty. It creates an extended field of vision, which surpasses the constraints of a particular community, as it is the case of Romanians under Communist regime. Depicting a utopian society, propaganda images silently extended their significance for Romanians, who were aware of the intricate mechanisms of manipulation put into play. These official images simultaneously implied to them, as well to a present audience a parallel reality

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<sup>248</sup> Charles Merewether, “Memory, Documentary and the Archive,” in *After the Event*, 120.

below the surface of the visual field, and the existence of other images that could have testified to the lacunae of representation implemented by propaganda apparatus. As Azoulay states, the presence of “the camera modified the way in which individuals are governed and the extent of their participation in the forms of governance.”<sup>249</sup> Whereas the *social contract of citizenship* restrains its subjects to a specific territory, the *civil contract of photography* opens up these spaces: “the citizenry of photography is based on an ethical duty and on patterns of deterritorialization ... the citizenry of photography has no sovereign and therefore no apparatus of exclusion.”<sup>250</sup> This statement can be questioned when applied to confined political and totalitarian regimes that promote certain images and exclude others from the public view. The massive quantity of state images produced during Romanian Communism were an attempt to construct an official history through an extensive visual archive meant to be the “authoritative” source for decoding the past and the present, the Communist present. In Constantinescu’s section dedicated to PCR, The Romanian Communist Party, a propaganda image depicts Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu receiving flowers from Pioneers during the Science and Education Congress, November 28, 1985. Apparently, it stands for a fulfilled and successful gathering. In fact, during Communism, the censorship of freedom of speech and of expression, and abuses performed in the name of “greater ideals of progress” were doubled and legitimized by the highly controlled visual apparatus. An ideal form of belonging to a visual community as claimed by the “civil contract of photography,” in Azoulay’s terms, is unattainable within Communism, which ruled out and excluded from public view the visual representations that contradicted the state ideology.

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<sup>249</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 89.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

Romanians felt confiscated by the public realm and in the representations abounding in all visual communication channels, in newspapers, and the only TV channel they had access to. Newspapers were literally filled with images of propaganda. Yet, within the civil contract of photography, the conventions presupposed by the act of photography does not imply a consensus. “The photograph does not speak for itself ... what is seen in the photograph is not immediately given, and its meaning must be constructed and agreed on.”<sup>251</sup>

Propaganda images mention nothing about deficiencies that are nevertheless depicted in vernacular photographs, as in the case of “Fram Refrigerator” images or those of vegetables sellers in markets almost empty of any products. In the *Shortages* section a “Fram” refrigerator – the name of the brand, nowadays obsolete – pops-up from the left side, completely empty. The caption reads: “The Fram refrigerator in real life.” By turning the page of the little booklet, another image appears: the same refrigerator, this time completely stocked. The caption points to this difference: “Fram refrigerator in the brochure.”<sup>252</sup> This statement on contradictory realities is developed by Constantinescu through the central photograph of this section, presenting two peasants selling few vegetables in a market, as well as the photograph depicting an elderly woman in rugged clothes nearby and oversized advertisement published the shortages of the 1980s. The Communist advertisement reads: “consuming these products fortifies the organism,”<sup>253</sup> an ironic statement, then and now.

Regardless of the fact that propaganda images were presented as documenting reality, they were not taken at face value, as in the case of an image which showed Nicolae

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>252</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age*, 19.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

Ceausescu followed by a party delegation during one of his work visits in Teleorman and which pops up from the book. It was implicitly understood that, at the core, a fundamental lie was being staged, even though this understanding had to be passed over in silence. Any questioning of their truth value would have nullified the values that the photographs were trying to promote: freedom, access to welfare, etc. Since the fall of Communism, propaganda photographs have been relocated and become documents testifying to a strategy of manipulation. Their counterparts in terms of access to visibility – unofficial photographs representing the difficult social realities – create a breach in this controlled system of representation, becoming documents of the missing stories, the gaps left by propaganda images.

*VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHS/INVISIBLE TESTIMONIES*

Constantinescu introduces vernacular photographs taken from his family album, which, without necessarily making direct references to Communist Romania, trigger memories related to the social conditions of those times, also alluded to through the constant and intrusive presence of the red color that serves as visual background for the viewing process. Other vernacular photographs documented the actual social realities, the shortages and difficulties faced, but these images were confined to the private realm. The traumatic past is brought into representation as a fundamental crisis of knowledge. According to Arendt, what gives cohesion to actions is their manifestation in the public space of appearance – dissolved in totalitarian regimes. The reconsideration of the past in the form of photography actualizes the potentiality of the space of appearance within the visual domain, by making conditions of human existence visible, which ‘must first be

seen, heard and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were, into things.<sup>254</sup> This is what Constantinescu's project helps us to see and to imagine.

Seemingly innocent vernacular photographs preserve this memory in an oblique way, through personal memory and histories attached to them. This is the case of a photograph depicting the artist and his brother posing near a *Dacia* car, carrying underneath the caption: "Rest Stop at the Muierii/Woman's Cave, where we took a photo. My father was in a hurry to get to Fagaras, where uncle Gica lived at the time."<sup>255</sup> The information is sparse, providing factual information, details about a family life that went on without incidents, tourist places often visited by people going on vacation or just traveling the country. A few pages further on in the book, Constantinescu proves that even a car image is not devoid of political connotations. Spreading on an entire page, the *Dacia* car is presented as an icon of those times, being considered one of the symbols of Communist Romania, the national car. The additional implications were fully known at the time and survive as anecdotes. The *Dacia* car was hardly affordable; it cost 70.000 lei, the average of five-year's salary; acquiring such a car was in itself a big accomplishment, which implied the possibility of movement and therefore of potential freedom. However, "in the 1970 and 1980 the waiting period for a *Dacia* was three to five years. This was due to the lack of efficient production and because export took priority over the demands of the internal market."<sup>256</sup> Freedom of movement was drastically diminished by the state through controlled quantity of gas allocated individually and through the strict regulation of the number of cars accepted on the streets, with odd and even license plate numbers allowed to circulate every second Sunday.

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<sup>254</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 95.

<sup>255</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age*, 10.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

The representation of the past via charged objects and symbols is a strategy that Constantinescu employs in other works. His movie *My Beautiful Dacia* (2009) takes as its starting point this same car/icon to retell the history of Communism and its subsequent transition to capitalism through multiple stories connected to this car. It includes the recollections of a well-known football player – Miodrag Belodedic – who immigrated to the former Yugoslavia at the end of the 1980s, and whose stories of border crossing are directly connected to the existence of Dacia car.

The images Constantinescu shows in *The Golden Age for Children* were taken at a time when the statuses of citizen and non-citizen alike were not clearly defined and when each of them was a potential candidate for the other category. Citizens could become non-citizens, and non-citizens could become citizens according to the needs of the state power. Individuals were thus assigned under arbitrary laws that accorded them no protection: as potential “non-citizens” – “enemies of the state” – their condition was prone to abuses, threats, and ultimately disappearance from public existence. “Invisibility” and thus forgetfulness and erasure from the collective memory and from the visual realm of representation would have been some of the “mildest” punishments applied. Whereas propaganda images were shown during those times to testify to their presence as citizens, the underlying principle of society was belonging to the category of non-citizen, benefiting only from a limited access to visibility, manifested as a distortion of their public space of appearance.

Photography has the potential to extend the temporal and spatial boundaries attached to them in ideologically controlled states and brings a dimension of citizenship to those that have neither image, nor voice: “the civil contract of photography protects the

citizens vis-à-vis power, endowing her political existence with a dimension beyond the bounds of being subject to power.”<sup>257</sup> Looking at, interpreting and witnessing the suffering of others as present in photographs allow them to come to the surface, to benefit, even though sometimes retrospectively, from rights previously denied. Under these conditions, the civil contract accounts for the disappeared as well as the disenfranchised. This is the case of photographs from Communist times presented after the fall of Communism. However, from the moment a photograph is taken, it becomes part of a representation of reality that presumably can change its meaning. The “here and now” of the moment triggered by the act of photography enables a form of presence that is re-actualized within the civil contract by the many encounters, some antagonistic, that define it.

By altering the means of dissemination and the perspective from which these images are seen, Constantinescu questions the coherence of the narrative surrounding images. These images have been turned into documents that address citizens belonging to a different geo-political reality, where at least in principle the freedom of expression is taken for granted. His narrative no longer follows the rules of evasion, of camouflaged speeches and meaning, which does not mean that indeterminacy disappears. However, as testimonies of a traumatic past, these photographs – and the memories they trigger – are inscribed by non-experience and latency.

Baer’s investigation of the relationship between photography and trauma is based on the possibility that some images “bypass painstaking attempts at contextualization and deliver, straight up and apparently across the gulf of time between the viewer and photographically mummified past, a potent illusion of the real.”<sup>258</sup> In order to account for

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<sup>257</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, 192

<sup>258</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 2.

this transmission from a dangerous past to the safe ground occupied by a viewer in the present, he makes the distinction between two ways of understanding history. One model perceives it as being continuous, flowing and sequential – the paradigm of history as long duration – which in turn renders photographs as “frozen moments” of a historical occurrence. Another paradigm considers history as the emergence of a “sudden event,” erupting in “bursts and explosions,”<sup>259</sup> or in other words history as “a vast rainfall” – which in Baer’s view is also the most pertinent paradigm for thinking about photography, one that makes possible the understanding of photographs “of events and individuals that for various reasons have been cast out of the forward-sweeping movement of history.”<sup>260</sup> The only certainty that a photograph can offer is its “testimony about time,”<sup>261</sup> not veracity and its relationship with reality or truth.

Under Baer’s paradigm, photography “provides special access to experiences that remained unremembered yet cannot be forgotten.”<sup>262</sup> These experiences are addressed in the pages of *The Golden Age for Children* that are dedicated to the existence of *Radio Free Europe*. Constantinescu presents apparently neutral images, depicting an ordinary family gathering with his father in front of an obsolete radio. This event may or may not have been witnessed as such by the artist, as a direct participant, in spite of the familiar setting of a domestic kitchen; in fact, it may not have been lived directly by many. Nevertheless, the existence of this radio and of people chronicling an outside, freer world, their life stories, and sometimes suspicious deaths are part of collective memory. Visually this vernacular image does not express any tension. The text brings a new layer of

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 7.

meaning: the radio broadcast information from the external world to those living under Communism; this was different information than that provided by the official national television program, which was dominated by propaganda and patriotic messages. Image, language, and narration complement each other, in their inherent lacunary natures.

Jessica Lieberman establishes the connection between traumatic memory and photographic images, drawing an analogy with the displaced relationship between reality and its interpretation. She traces a genealogy of the understanding of trauma: from Freud's "traumatic neurosis," produced even though the subject seems to have passed through a traumatic event unharmed, to Caruth's belatedness of trauma as relying on "the structure of its experience or reception." The traumatic experience manifests itself in its absence, in deferral mode; it embodies a paradox in as much as it fails to be experienced as such and will never be recovered in its past experience. It remains unconsumed, as a form of non-experience that will continue to be brought into presence as a renewed form of recovery. Lieberman distinguishes five stages of trauma manifestation: "1. it is a form of experiencing an event; 2. that experience is delayed; 3. the delay in the experience works as a protective medium; 4. the delayed, protective form of experience is repetitive and is itself threatening and 5. the delayed, protective and repetitious suffering is an experience that is different that it would have been if it had been had at the time of the event."<sup>263</sup> The unaccomplished experience of the event in the past resists its relegation to the past, therefore the inherent loss of memory is reinforced by its resuscitation in the present through photography.

Even though there is no violence explicitly represented in the vernacular photographs that Constantinescu selects for his subjective version of the recent history,

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 88.

they do point to a collective trauma surfaced by the presence of photographs. Lieberman parallels the two types of absence that underline both trauma – “indexing events as memories” – and photography – “indexing events as images,” since both raise the challenge of an event whose witness disappears or has never been present. The indexing of events as images produced by the photographic act transforms the experience of an event into the experience of representational images that are inscribed into a collective repository of images that transmits the history and memory of that particular event into the future. The experience of secretly listening to Radio Free Europe, and of the tragic fates of some of the radio journalists who overtly opposed the political system is transmitted through photographs. Traumatic events become part of reality captured by photographs for a spectatorship that did not witness them directly, as manifestations of soaked in invisible memories. Their experience becomes not only an act of recovery, but also of reconstruction through interpretation. The experience of Communism as traumatic event is to a certain extent a *missed* experience, if we follow Lieberman’s analysis: “it is that initial absence or lack, the non-experience of the event, that ... endows the event with the power to endure as a recurrent source of pain and as a site of perpetual reinterpretation.”<sup>264</sup>

#### *A SUSPENDED CONCLUSION*

In *The Unfinished Revolution*, James Mark addresses the need to remember the Communist past, focusing on “the relationship between these new public cultures of memory and the frameworks that individuals drew upon in rethinking their own histories

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

and life stories.”<sup>265</sup> Recourse to memory is not homogeneous, nor is memory accessed similarly at all times and in all places; instead there are moments of public silence with regard to memories of the past. As he points out, “during the brief interlude after its collapse, when ‘victory’ was assumed to have been achieved, Communism was often forgotten or not thought worthy of invocation.”<sup>266</sup> The decommunization process was under way, but the heritage of the past was far from being overcome; as a consequence, looking back would become more and more an internal necessity, fulfilling different purposes, a means of acknowledging what came to be perceived as “unfinished revolutions” in Mark’s terms: “Thus the practitioners of a new ‘memory politics’ in post-Communist Central-Eastern Europe invoked, commemorated and reflected upon their Communist pasts not to confirm their mastery over a now demonized and banished political system, but in order to confront and weaken its continuing hold on the present.”<sup>267</sup>

In other Eastern European countries, like Poland and Hungary, the transmission of power was done following “round table discussions,” in the absence of violent public protests. Incorporating former Communists within the new power apparatus was perceived as a sign that the former political regimes were defeated since even their representatives could hold a seat of power. This “controlled” situation led to a less imperative need for reconsidering the Communist past and its memory. In Romania, the silencing of dissidents and total annihilation of the opposition before the 1989 Revolution led to a non-existent alternative political class. Romania experienced a violent transition from one-power system to another, which did not conclude with the events of the Revolution or in the

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<sup>265</sup> James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution*, XIII.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, XIII

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV

years immediately following. As Mark argues, the reconsideration of Revolution as unaccomplished stems from a double pressure: external, from international forums and commissions, mostly from Western Europe; and internal, from the necessity to reinvestigate the past in view of the present social context. Public political life in Romania continued to be permeated by prominent former members of the Communist Party, who won elections and continued to hold a grip on power, preventing the development of a genuine democratic social apparatus.

Following years of partial socio-political amnesia, civic society addressed the memory of Communism by “working through” the past, in order to apprehend its legacy in present-day public life, dominated by political parties that continued to win election and promote individuals who had held high ranks in the former Communist party. Art took a more personal approach, as in the case of Constantinescu’s book. After the fall of Communism the preferred way to address memories of the past was through personal testimony, thereby countervailing the controlled fabrication of history and memory performed under the former regime. As Mark explains, “following years of manipulation of public memory by the Communist state, the personal account was ascribed an authority to embody the realities of the past experiences that even a reformed history lacked.”<sup>268</sup> Constantinescu activates his personal memories as cultural memory without claiming any authority or an official new version of history.

The last visual section of the *Golden Age for Children* is dedicated to the 1989 December Revolution that marked the end of Communism in Romania – the only one in Eastern Europe that turned into a violent upheaval and where blood was shed. Television played an important role in transmitting images and messages from those confusing days.

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., XX1.

The Revolution can be considered a “condition of emergency,” representing the prolongation and consequence of the fifty-year social abnormality that had remained mostly unseen by the international public, except indirectly as propaganda. The Revolution temporarily continued the state of exception previously in force, on various levels simultaneously, yet, with an important twist, bringing to the surface the conflation between the *sovereignty* and *homo sacer*. What previously had been the “body of the king,” the sovereign, with power of life and death over everyone in the country, had in a matter of days become the paradigmatic *homo sacer*, a body subject to the will of the masses, punishable without triggering any legal consequences: guilty as charged without trial. Ceausescu’s death sentence was pronounced without hesitation, at least for that moment. It too was a state of exception, in terms of the conditions experienced by Romanians and also with respect to the international community, which lacked perspective on the long-term confinement that ordinary Romanians had endured. The eruption of Romanian visibility was a shock on many levels.

Some of the most mediatized images of the Revolution were those of Ceausescu being captured and later killed after an ad hoc trial. Constantinescu combines these images with iconic representations of Ceausescu “in the balcony of the PCR Committee Central in Bucharest during the meeting (December 21).”<sup>269</sup> This photograph can be physically pulled away, revealing another one, which depicts Ceausescu “after capture, climbing out of the armored vehicle which took him to Military Unit 01378 in Targoviste, where he was tried and executed on Christmas Day at 2.45 pm.”<sup>270</sup> The temporal sequentiality of these moments is physically replicated in the presentation of

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<sup>269</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age*, 28.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

images one on top of the other. The huge December manifestation of support for Ceausescu was staged, alongside with the images that were supposed to document and promote it in order to control the masses and to discredit the anti-Communist manifestation that started in Timisoara in the previous days. The strategy failed; its intended significance and consequences were reversed. The middle of the page, dedicated to the year that Communism fell in Romania, is occupied by a recto/verso unfolding image. One side contains a black and white propaganda photograph of the large gathering preceding the upheaval, where a mass of bodies displays a flood of banners and state portraits representing Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu. Visually, individuals are lost in a large anonymous demonstration; they become almost insignificant when compared to the repetitive large-scale official portraits of the leaders and the banners denouncing the interference of “imperialist forces” in the internal affairs of the country. When opened up, the image reveals another one, a blurred and pixelled capture from the TV broadcast of the same event, with unclear contours of people and scenery. The massive gathering was meant to show support for the leader. Both pieces of visual evidence record the moment before this manifestation turned into upheaval; at the same time, these images refer to a fundamental absence, which, in the economy of the events, became clear only after these images were taken: almost identical visual appearances can stand in retrospectively for different associated meanings. The first one, as propaganda image; the second one as symbolizing the efficiency of television in overcoming Communist power. As Tichindeleanu explains, this absence can be turned into an instrument of manipulation, because “unlike the subjective experience, as well as unlike the dynamics of text and sound, a fundamental feature of the visual, an essence of its “grammar,” is that the

absence cannot be shown in images. As a result, the image becomes a key instrument for power, which is always interested in the perpetuation or the controlled change of an existing, present order.”<sup>271</sup> The juxtaposition of these images that refer to two different devices of recording reality is symptomatic of the way in which the Revolution allowed Romanians visibility, through representation. Constantinescu presents the liminal moment when the visual regime suffered a radical transformation that marked also a change in the bio-political structure of society. This section of the book is the only one where images of violence are shown, depicting revolutionaries and tanks patrolling the streets.

These images were widely distributed. They were seen live and become symbolic images of the fall of Communism. The Revolution was the moment that did not present beautified images, but rather first-hand accounts of terror and violence happening on the streets, marking the moment when the fall, capture, and eventually the death of the ‘beloved leader’ was photographically documented, both publicly and privately. In the same manner in which the collective imaginary of Romanians had been pervaded by visual of propaganda, the new generation that passed through the Revolution has imbedded images of dead people shot on the streets, of large demonstration, streets patrolled by tanks and the Communist leader’s death. Images produced both by governmental institutions as well as vernacular photographs have permeated the visual realm. These channels of transmission have become complementary. However, the images that have surfaced are far from being an exhaustive representation of those moments, thousands of them are still unseen and unknown, in institutionalized archives or as part of family albums that will never be part of a public exhibition. They are like the

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<sup>271</sup> Ovidiu Tichindelean, *The Author of the Autobiography*, 99.

layers of visual testimonies displayed in Constantinescu's book, layers of memory and imagination combined to produce one renewed narrative of the recent past. Countless other histories and memories of Communism will remain hidden, concealed under closed covers of family albums. Yet, a "witnessing by adoption" has been possible by browsing through the pages of this book.

By presenting the history of Communism and of the "Golden Age" in the form of a hybrid family album, Constantinescu performs an act of re-visitation: that of bringing a previous invisibility into the representational realm. At the same time, the work acknowledges the inherent lacunae of knowledge triggered by the recovery of the past through visual documents, marked by connections obliquely filled in through the act of memory and imagination. In this context, the game Constantinescu places on the cover of the book becomes illustrative for the process of recovering a recent traumatic history. The artist provides the dots, as well as the space between years. By the end of this book, Ceausescu's portrait becomes recognizable. The obscure dotted image on the book cover has been transformed into a photograph. The child's question, "who is this guy?" is answered and Ceausescu's portrait becomes recognizable, but the dots and the connecting lines remain visible as scars on the collective memory.

**IRINA BOTEAN: *AUDITIONS FOR A REVOLUTION*, 2006**

*REPRESENTING THE REVOLUTION*

Irina Botea's video project *Auditions for a Revolution* investigates the collective memory of an event – the Romanian Revolution from 1989 – that radically altered the structure of Romanian society. Her attempt is inscribed in an almost impossible scenario

in terms of credibility and veridicity. Instead of reconfiguring and establishing a re-encounter with the past, she underlines the mediated access to the past through the present, entangling this negotiation in a series of disruptions at the level of representation and speech, activating “the relationship between the outside of the events and the inside of remembrance.”<sup>272</sup>

Botea’s 22-minute video records a performance given at the Art Institute in Chicago, where she asked her fellow students to audition for the “mise-en-scène” of the Romanian Revolution. This performance took place in North America in 2005, twenty years after the Revolution. She presents video documentation of these auditions and the players’ re-enactments of key moments of this historic event. This footage is displayed on a split screen with excerpts appropriated from Andrei Ujica and Harun Farocki’s movie, *Videograms of A Revolution* (1992) – a “directed” version of those events, which makes use of private camcorder recordings made in 1989, thus relying not only on the renown “official version,” but also on alternate voices that constructed visually and narratively the Revolution. Their movie assembles video footage taken by state television and amateur cameramen and reconstructs the sequence of events that led to the overturning of power in Romania, investigating the crucial role played by television in the development of the Revolution. They make use of cinematographic devices, voice-off commentaries, juxtaposition of images, “soft montage” – the insertion of video footage within the central screen, depicting what was not broadcast live at the time but was nevertheless recorded from other visual angles – in order for different and sometimes contradictory interpretations to converge. They employ the editorial technique of stopping the flow of

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<sup>272</sup> Tina Wasserman, “Constructing the Image of Postmemory,” in eds. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 160.

images, rewinding the footage with forensic attention in the attempt, hope, and promise that relooking at images might answer questions about what really happened. But the film left audiences in suspense. By appropriating images from Ujica and Farocki's *Videograms of a Revolution*, Botea extends the dilemmas and uncertainty over the meaning, structure, development, and scope of those events, and complicates it by juxtaposing a new version in the form of a "staged" revolution.

The beginning of Botea's video shows a gathering of seven men and women in front of a wired wall. These non-professional American "actors," engaged to play the role of Romanian revolutionaries, will be involved in the re-enactment of events that they barely know – events that took place on a different continent, in a remote country, some twenty years ago. They wave their hands, carry flags, and utter words in Romanian, playing parts with which they have little connection, starting from a ground of non-knowledge and non-implication. They listen carefully to the instructions that the artist/director offers in voice off. Directions are given to perform gestures, including how many times they should be repeated. A dialogue is established between performers and the off-camera director. Actors, together with the director, rehearse the uttering of the words "Liberate/Freedom" with a heavy foreign accent and a sometimes slightly amused attitude. These were slogans chanted during the Revolution; now they are spoken without fully acknowledging their meaning. Questions regarding the meaning of the words abound as part of the rehearsal and reconstruction of this event. Two captions alternate on the screen, one marking the year as 2005, the other as 1989, even though the same students-turned-actors are continuously present in the rehearsal taking place in Chicago.

Actors read a script in a foreign language, Romanian, without knowing the full meaning of the words, simply mimicking the way those events were presented by the media at the time of their occurrence. There are important differences, as Margaret Morse points out, between the way the Revolution was broadcast to audiences in Romania and abroad. Outside Romania, not only were real-time events replaced by montages, but certain images were borrowed from Yugoslavian television. For example, one of the iconic images of the Revolution – that of the television studios taken over by the participants, followed by the speech given by the poet Mircea Dinescu, and the actors Ion Caramitru and Florin Piersic – was not given the same importance in the United States as in Romania.<sup>273</sup> The real-time developments from the streets were presented on CNN as reportages, including interviews with dissidents living abroad. Many commentators would describe it as an enormous simulacrum, partly due to a long history of counterfeited images presented as news in Romania, fueled by confusion over the build-up and actors playing a part in the Revolution. As Morse points out, the first images broadcast in the United States represented the paradigm of “news out of control,” since, Romanian, a language that nobody could understand, was the language of explanation. Morse’s questions regarding the function of the image – “how is it made,” “how is it disseminated,” “by whom,” and “to what purpose” – are mirrored, stimulated, and provoked by Botea’s re-enactments.

The actors that Botea directs are told in minute detail how to act and look like revolutionaries. Their right hand should be raised in a particular manner – “Like this?”/ “Like this!” They try to find the right gestures, which during those social manifestations of

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<sup>273</sup> Margaret Morse, “The Turning,” in *Idea arts + society*, No. 22, (2005), 152.

December 1989 occurred spontaneously as mass emulation and direct embodiment of chants and slogans heard in the public agora. It could be said ironically that participants had been training for this moments their entire lives. They had repetitively experienced mass demonstrations. Only the reasons differed. “Libertate/Liberty!” the students rehearse loudly, but awkwardly, as it is a word they only recently learnt. They can barely utter it and the result is not quite intelligible. They are provided with scripts they have to memorize or read. What was for Romanians, within the development of the Revolution, an electrifying feeling of freedom, now becomes a process of re-learning, in order to access memories that do not belong to them, but which will become part of a collective memory of fictionalizing mediation: one that they themselves produced. Questions abound when trying to get the right vocal tone of a “revolutionary:” “How many times?” Time and again, they utter these slogans trying to achieve the correct pronunciation. Laughter erupts. They repeat and chant together “Poporul si armata/The People and the army,” followed immediately by a sincere question: “What does it mean?” This dialogue director-actors is preserved in Botea’s video, it is part of the re-enactment, of the audition itself and ultimately of the reception of the work.

A lack of comprehensibility lies at the core of Botea’s film. Actors read the script with difficulty. The words are fragmented and almost unintelligible in the absence of subtitles that appear on the screen, as an aid for foreign audience. The utterance fails to perform its function; it points to a paradoxical silence. As Botea underlines, “language is a metaphor for trying to discover the language of a Revolution or the language of a change.”<sup>274</sup> In December 1989 the participants were not in complete control of the events,

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<sup>274</sup> Irina Botea, “Un instant de citoyenneté” at *Jeu de Paume*, 30 June-27 Septembre 2009, <http://www.jeudepaume.org/index.php?idArt=833&lieu=1&page=article>, Online. Accessed 27 March 2012.

they did not fully understand the newly spoken language, that of the Revolution, or the meaning it carried. Similarly, the American actors do not take part in the making of the revolution and they are not fully immersed in its rehearsal.

Television news broadcasts have become iconic moments of the Revolution, with key figures remembered as they appeared during those moments; even the colour of their sweaters remains inscribed in the collective memory. Words uttered during those moments have since been propagated in countless stories. Botea's rendition de-familiarizes this iconicity and rapid identification. A contemporary American non-professional actor, playing the part of a news anchor reads in an abrupt manner Romanian words that do not quite add up: he announces, twenty-five years later, the confrontation between policeman and revolutionaries, and finally Ceausescu's death. Far from being meaningful, it is almost incomprehensible. The result is laughter from the audition crew members: an initial dramatic moment, which those witnessing it would instantly recognize from small details and fragments of visual information, is turned into confusion. The actor was reading the wrong lines. "Could you tell me what I am saying so I know what I am meaning?" Even when reading the "correct lines" in Romanian, the ones that are part of the audition script, the only way of understanding him is through English subtitles: "We announce that the defense minister was proved to be a traitor and acted against Romania's independency and sovereignty. After realizing that he was discovered, he committed suicide." The same message is repeated by another actor who rehearses the reading of the text, and only in a third reading does Botea display actual Romanian TV footage featuring a well-known Romanian anchor. This figure was a constant presence associated with reporting propaganda news of the Communist regime, part of the two hours of daily television that

Romanians were allowed to watch before the Revolution. In this instance not only would the language have signaled propaganda, but also the tone of the anchor's voice would have been easily recognized: "We appeal to all those who love their country and people to act decisively against all traitors."<sup>275</sup>

Images from the rehearsal in Chicago, where a woman is waving a Romanian flag on an overcast day, shortly afterwards become part of a different strategy of presentation, when the split screen shows in parallel the two representations of the Revolution. The cloudy Chicago sky, recorded with a bluish tint, mirrors the overcast atmosphere of Bucharest revolting against Communism, as presented in Ujica and Farocki's movie. The voice over, originally present in *Videograms* points this charged moment in the development of the December events: "The sound of the helicopter in the air." The camera shakes, it is hand-held by an amateur videographer, it pans the mass gathering and then tries to focus on some individual faces, in a back and forth movement between large and close up shots. Botea preserves this iconic moment that refers to Ceausescu's flight from the headquarters of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, marking the beginning of the fall of his regime in Romania. Showing the two versions in parallel functions to unveil the representation strategies employed, where doubt is inherently present when trying to decipher the meaning, development, motivations, and even the identity of the "actors" who played a part in the unfolding of the past. Both sides of the screen represent staged events. The constructed character of the audition is explicitly underlined in the rehearsal through a series of representational strategies: the presence of the camera physically appearing as recording mechanism, preserving the artist's directions and active physical interventions as part of the work. Constant shouting is

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<sup>275</sup> Irina Botea, *Auditions of a Revolution* (2005).

heard in the background: “Camera rolling!” “Action!” Moreover the artist shows in split screen not only images from the Revolution, juxtaposed to those filmed in Chicago, but also two versions of the same moment on the set in Chicago, presenting in parallel the miniDV camera footage and the 16 mm camera recordings, with colour variation stemming from the use and technical qualities of the two different recording apparatus. These versions are shot from almost the same vantage point, with only slight differences, and pointing to strategies of representation that allow certain elements to surface in the visual field while other are excluded, or rendered less important by directorial decisions and selection processes. The narrative voice-over, taken mostly from *Videograms of a Revolution*, makes constant reference to the modalities and conditions in which these images were originally captured, by amateur cameras. The camera is a permanent presence mediating the way the Revolution was perceived, assimilated and preserved in the collective memory, but also plays a crucial part in looking back at this traumatic past.

#### *CULTURALLY REMEMBERING A TRAUMATIC PAST*

The traumatic past, singularized in this case as the representation of the Revolution, is referred in Botea’s re-enactment as a series of non-experiences. Her work shifts a historical event into cultural memory, into an art product. She works against what John Potts calls “an abdication of memory,”<sup>276</sup> – considering the past as “irretrievable lost” – and against memorization by introducing elements of reconstruction that are inherently foreign to development and initial social conditions of the events depicted. Trauma plays against itself with irony, introducing distance. As Potts underlines, “the

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<sup>276</sup> John Potts, “The Event and its Echoes,” in *After the Event*, 192.

event becomes a trace linking past and present, to be creatively re-worked, re-enacted or transformed in the process of remembering.”<sup>277</sup>

Botea’s video re-enacts in artistic form the belatedness of trauma. The concept of trauma, as investigated by Caruth, is centered on the notion of a delayed response to “an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience and possibly also increased arousal to and (avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.”<sup>278</sup> This understanding of trauma accounts for several levels of distortions and gaps: the traumatic event does not cease to trouble the victim, but rather it is recognized at a future point; moreover, this event fails to be experienced at the moment of its occurrence, erecting a certain numbness as protective mechanism, which can be reactivated by stimuli long after the occurrence of the traumatic event. Under these delayed circumstances, the event in itself is not sufficient for the explanation of traumatic effects. What should be considered instead is, as she states, “the structure of its experience or reception ... To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.”<sup>279</sup>

The possession by the image or event is re-interpreted by *Auditions of a Revolution* as the return in the present of an event experienced by Botea, but also by somebody else, somewhere else, still maintaining its hold on imagination and memory. It is repetitively acted by actors who attempt to reconstruct the settings, mood, and significance of an event that is known afar and abroad mainly through the mediation of the visual regime, through

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>278</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995,) 4.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 5.

images, and less through its conflicted significance. Even though the actors remain at a distance, they activate what Kaja Silverman calls a “*heteropathic*” paradigm, understood as “introducing the ‘not-me’ into my memory reserve.”<sup>280</sup> Mieke Bal further explains heteropathic identification as “socially productive, in that it wrenches the subject outside herself, enticing her to go out and meet the other on their ground.”<sup>281</sup> This ground will remain foreign and partially incomprehensible in the staging put forward by Botea.

At the same time, even though Botea was herself active participant in the Revolution, her own memories do not offer direct access to the experience of those events. By continuous return to the initial event in its literal form, trauma manifests, according to Caruth, as “distortion of meaning” and the traumatized “become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”<sup>282</sup> Trauma places the entire notion of truth into a profound crisis, paradoxically (and confusingly) because of its excess of literalness and because its knowledge is not fully possessed. The overwhelming traumatic event produces a fundamental uncertainty that, as symptom of history, questions the access that the traumatized subject has to his or her own experience. This uncertainty can be extended toward the understanding of history itself as being in crisis, “to whose truth there is no simple access.”<sup>283</sup> Not bound to the space and time of its occurrence, the experience of trauma can be transferred across other spatial and temporal boundaries.

Several levels of inadequacy and “non-experiences” are present in Botea’s project. In contrast to “lived memories,” many mediated memories are “imagined

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<sup>280</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 185.

<sup>281</sup> Mieke Bal, “Setting the Stage: The Subject *mise-en-scene*,” in *Seductiveness of the Interval*, (Stockholm: Romanian Cultural Institute of Stockholm, 2009), 103.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

memories,” in Huyssen’s terms, disseminated by media, prompting an accelerated process of forgetfulness.<sup>284</sup> The dynamics of forging collective memories is unstable, underlining the clashes and permanent transformations of “media and temporality, memory, lived time and forgetting”<sup>285</sup> among socio-political groups. Distance as an element of estrangement implies, apart from physical distance, a cultural one: Chicago is a long way from Bucharest. Moreover, in Botea’s work, risk, danger, and personal motivation, as factors animating and sometime justifying the “high rhetoric” of the Revolution, are missing. She counters both official and amateur images of the Romanian Revolution, as presented by TV channels of communication and recorded by private cameras with a fictional representation. This juxtaposition does not produce an overlapping regime of knowledge, either in terms of the actual acting, nor in terms of the urgency of the utterance. The degrees of instrumentalisation and manipulation remain uncertain, interwoven in the remembrance of those days and in the revisiting of the iconic images that imbued the collective imaginary. Even the Revolution as such can be considered to be an “audition” for a play that never happened.

Investigating the assumption that there is a “correct” version of the events of December 1989, accessed by active participants and by those witnessing it, Botea’s rehearsal questions the possible truth-claims regarding the causes and scenarios of the Revolution, advancing an interrogation on visual testimonies and memories of the traumatic past re-accessed through cultural memory. Layers of meaning are juxtaposed, combining what is manifest through visual testimony with the implied knowledge and memory presupposed by the visual regime. Memory does not access only the presence

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<sup>284</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 27.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

recorded through photography or video recordings; it also activates the invisible in an oblique manner, while leaving aside significant portions of latent memory. Tichindelean summarizes this complex mechanism of vision:

The industries of photography, film, television produce a certain semiotic repertoire of visual tropes, thus directing and limiting the framework of subjective experience and cultural memory. As a result, on the one hand, the ready-made materials of visual culture industry are a source for critical reflection, which aims to find the new articulations of power and the historical limits of subjectivity precisely in the visual apparatuses created by power, and, on the other hand, critical reflection using visual means seems to be trapped in the fragile position of an internal criticism, always looking for absences, for that which is not shown or cannot be seen, always threatened by the thesis that the rules of composition of the regime of visibility are not of a visual nature themselves. But it is precisely a grammatology of the visual, an insulation of its epistemic field, which makes possible the observation of the ways in which something external to the visual regime determines certain limitations of the gaze and perception in contemporary culture.<sup>286</sup>

Botea enhances these inadequacies, attempting to revive a form of knowledge “external to the visual regime” and its external or rather “adoptive” interpretation. By interrogating how history can be perceived by those who did not witness it directly, and moreover, how can they be active participants, bearing witness to the events that happened twenty years before, she appeals to an extended formation of memory, experienced through postmemory. Her work addresses a historical past that has not been experienced by present generations, except in a mediated form, and as history. This memory is thus not characterized by recalling, since the initial experience of the events is inherently missing, but it is determined by a connection to the past that dramatizes what

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<sup>286</sup> Ovidiu Tichindelean, “The Author of the Autobiography,” 99-100.

Hirsch explains as “imaginative investment, projection and creation.”<sup>287</sup> The diffusion of the unexperienced past is made possible through the mediation of collective memory. Whereas individual and family memories are intergenerational, the political ones are trans-generational, “no longer mediated through embodied practice but solely through symbolic systems.”<sup>288</sup> However, these types of memories are disputed, modified, and continuously shaped by the act of transmission.

Under these circumstances, the concept of postmemory not only extends toward the experience of trauma but also absorbs its transmission and reception as representation. It points toward the category of “adoptive witnesses,” as-yet-unborn bystanders; toward the gaps in knowledge that may refer to trauma; and toward the problematic inconsistency of passing these memories across generations. The Romanian Revolution that marked the fall of Communism was publicly transmitted to the next generation through visual documents, testimonies and artistic productions. More than twenty years later “adoptive witnesses” bodily re-enact the various forms of this transmission.

*TELEVISED REVOLUTION: UNFINISHED CONVERSATIONS*

In 2005, the magazine *Idea arts +society* published a thematic issue analyzing the mediatic nature of the Romanian Revolution, with articles written from a broad range of perspectives, by Konrad Petrovski, Ovidiu Tichindelean, Peter Weibel, Margaret Morse, and Peter Spangenberg, aimed at reinterpreting this turning point of recent Romanian history, which still poses more questions than it can answer. Botea’s *Auditions for a*

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<sup>287</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 107.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

*Revolution* speaks about these dilemmas and the indeterminacies still permeating this problematic past, the way it is reconstructed and accessed through memory passed over in artistic manifestations. She considers the points of view of those who witnessed it directly and of those who were receivers of images transmitted internally and worldwide, at a distance. At the time of publishing, the authors were calling for a more consistent analysis of the Revolution within the Romanian cultural space, an event that “challenged the relations of forces and forms between mass-media and reality, or between mass media, elites and masses.”<sup>289</sup> They noted that this charged moment in Romania’s recent history was infused by its mediated character, considering that “media technology has not been only the main instrument for leveraging the change, but also the means for adjusting subjects to the new historic situation, expediting thus obedience to the new power data.”<sup>290</sup> The special case of the Romanian Revolution, the first revolution to be witnessed live internationally, was underscored and seen to disturb the dialectics between “actors” and spectators to a traumatic event, further challenging the agency of memory. “From a media history point of view, the Romanian Revolution seemed to be the historical moment during which the visual apparatuses stopped ‘just’ recording ... it entered the most profound social dimensions and has become that which pushes forward the change and even brings it about; through the occupation of the Romanian Television and the live broadcasting, as a world premiere, of a ‘revolution,’ global history seemed to have entered into post-history, where every event is an image and any image may be an event.”<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Ovidiu Tichindelean and Konrad Petrovski, “The Romanian Revolution as Media Phenomenon,” in *Idea arts + society*, No 22, (2005), 142.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>291</sup> Ovidiu Tichindelean, “The Author of the Autobiography,” 96.

During the Revolution international televisions broadcast the manifestations, allowing the remote spectators' participation through the consumption of images and live transmissions; the effects of this long reach and the mediated character of those events cannot be overlooked. Shortly before the last act, as demonstrations began in Timisoara, Ceausescu cut off communications, and telephones lines were blocked. But close proximity to a border increased illicit access to information channels functioning abroad. During the days leading up to the ousting of Ceausescu from power, Timisoara's people relied to a certain degree on the news transmitted by foreign radios and televisions about the impact their actions triggered in the country and especially in Bucharest, and they depended also on them to transmit, interpret and make visible abroad the events happening within the city,<sup>292</sup> and therefore to legitimize them by making them known. Under these circumstances, the act of witnessing the Revolution did not happen solely as eye-witnessing, but was filtered through communication channels. Lived experience was combined with a mediated one, in the same manner that memory manifests in retrospect by combining multiple accounts, an important one being connected to the collective memory activated by images and video recordings.

Who is the witness and how can one testify, about what event? Who are the eyewitnesses: those who were physically present in the street or those who witnessed everything in front of the television screen? These questions underlying dilemmas of looking back through the agency of memory at the events of the Revolution are asked by von Amelunxen, in a conversation held with Spangenberg and Ujica, and published by *Idea Magazine*. These authors and artists investigate the reception of the Revolution seen

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<sup>292</sup> Andrei Ujica, "Time and Screens: Conversation between Hubertus von Amelunxen, and Charles Grivel, Georg Maag, Peter M. Spangenberg, Andrei Ujica," in *Idea arts +society*, No. 22, (2005), 159.

from abroad, from a distance. Ujica pushes these inquiries further, underlining that “media witnesses” perceive “media events,”<sup>293</sup> their perceptions being determined by the filtered character of this regime of knowledge. Whereas in Romania people were barely aware of the transformations that shuttered Eastern Europe earlier in 1989, those watching the transmission of the Revolution from afar were fully aware of them, and they were already anticipating to a certain degree the conclusions of these manifestations in Romania. They came partially as fulfillment of their expectations, which took into account a scenario of conflict, involving the possibility of witnessing its incipient phase, the climax, with street protests and victims, but also its “conclusion,” including Ceausescu’s trial and his violent death – presented in multiple scenarios by media through successive edited versions that gradually surfaced publicly. Botea’s video activates a different expectation, years after the event has been consumed, and in other cultural spaces. The outcome of the Revolution is known; it had a conclusion that overturned the Communist regime, following the violent upheaval. Yet, witnesses to this mediatic event – both Romanians and an international audience – are barely able to testify to the development of those events, to the reasons and power structures that shaped and determine the unfolding of the Revolution, to the participants and their roles during those charged days. Years after the conclusion of the Revolution, one might expect the illumination of the still obscure elements that built historically this important event. Botea’s video refuses to fulfill such an expectation by maintaining the character of incompleteness, of fragmented instances of history surfacing in an artistic product. Moreover, her project is exhibited as a video projection, shown in museums both in Europe and in North America, activating a fragmented temporality of the viewing

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<sup>293</sup> Andrei Ujica, “Time and Screens,” 160.

process. Spectators drift in and out of the venue where the film of the Revolution unfolds in loops to be visually picked up at different stages of development. The Revolution is once again experienced as an unfinished process, where the beginning is never stable, always being disrupted by alternate interpretations, by possible additions (and omissions), and by intrusions of the re-enactment of the Revolution itself, as performed by the American amateur actors. The course of events is stopped, reinitiated, perturbed as such and potentially repeated as part of the viewing process of this installation.

For Romanians, the new visual regime was manifest in shock waves, embodied in television transmissions – an image dissemination channel that previously equated with manipulation and official propaganda. The “act of witnessing as witnessing itself” was a paradoxical result of this situation, implying self-representability: an exchange in the visual regime when events in reality were determined by the fact that they were visually mediated, and the broadcast events were the consequence of reality contrived through media. As Ujica points out, the visual regime was of fundamental importance, since it was a modality of defending against “the invisibility of evil”<sup>294</sup> – the one captured on the screen, the street upheaval, dead bodies lying on the sidewalk, tanks patrolling the city and houses pierced by bullets. As Botea points out in an interview for *Jeu de Paume* where her work was presented in 2008, the Revolution could not be understood simply as a mass movement, but also as a coup d’état, which later on contained, apart from purely political orchestrated overtones, also “microcells of freedom.” As long as the revolutionaries’ presence and the effects of the Revolution were seen and transmitted internally and internationally, the invisibility of threat was kept at bay and the promise of protection seemed to function. Visibility of the Revolution while still unfolding accorded

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 161.

with the promise of eradicating the sovereign, who had previously controlled the same visual. During the December Revolution, Ceausescu was cast away and executed as part of a bloody series of events that marked both Romanian identity and their reputation abroad, as a renewed form of “barbarism.” As Babias points out, “the world was traumatized. The tribalism had returned in the middle of Europe. At the same time, the world was shocked that the Romanian Revolution has been staged like a B-class movie ... Ceausescu died an archaic death.” Moreover: “The same way that the West ... considered the Balkans in their entirety as disorder, inadequacy, maculation; Romania has declared the equivocation of its own self as an anomaly.”<sup>295</sup> This “anomaly” needs to be considered.

In Botea’s video the defense against “invisibility of evil” is presented through the strategy of the split screen. On the left side a short excerpt from Ujica and Farocki’s film shows from a low angle the Primaverii Boulevard, with construction underway, and a soldier with a gun running to take shelter. He is closely followed by several women carrying shopping bags. Gun shots are heard in the distance. The hand-held amateur camera zooms in to a deserted block of flats where the shots were supposed to have come from. On the right side we see the footage from the rehearsal with students in Chicago, filmed from the back, rushing through corridors of what appears to be a university building. Shortly after, still on the background sound of gun shots, the screen is filled in with urban North American scenery, horizon blocked by red brick buildings. Sound recording from the Revolution is heard: “Tell me, where are you shooting? Boy, where

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<sup>295</sup> Marius Babias, “The *Euro*-self and the Europeanism: How the Communist National Discourse Acquires a New Face, that of the Postcommunist Anti-modernism – The Romanian Case,” *Documenta 12 Magazine* special edition, in *Idea arts + society*, No. 24, (2006), 228.

are you shooting?” The setting remains unchanged for a few seconds, until a group of students enter the visual field, marching, carrying Romanian flags, hands raised in the air and chanting “The Truth! We want free elections.” Bullets were fired, but the aggressors were never identified; truth was claimed as the newly acquired right of a population breaking out of decades of control and manipulation. Years after the Revolution, truth is still being sought, thousands of kilometers away, but it is not reached, not even as part of the rehearsal of a fictional narrative of events that happened in reality. The strategy of the split screen is presented as visual confrontation but also as the visual consolidation of two versions of the same event, which do not solve the mysteries still shrouding the Revolution. Thousands of images have surfaced in attempts to reveal the nature of those events, and at least to understand the motivations and to identify the actors behind it. At the same time, numerous divergent interpretations have been attached to the same events, to the same images. Botea assembles a play of incongruities that complement and simultaneously disrupt each others’ narratives. A Tower of Babel is produced in the end, without reconciliation.

Botea focuses on the mediatic character of the television and the construction of a narrative that happened simultaneously before and behind the camera, on the means of legitimizing the Revolution and moreover, on the way that recollection plays on the fissures of knowledge in existence at the very moment that the event is unfolding. The change of power was manifest as the interruption of the normal broadcasting hours of propaganda, when revolutionaries invaded the studio. As Peter Weibel mentions, at 10:30 on 22 December 1989, Ceausescu fled the Central Committee – an image that was captured by television news and photographic images and was transmitted

internationally. An hour later, television switched its affiliation and proclaimed itself in support of the street upheaval.<sup>296</sup> Weibel analyses the shift in power in relation to the visual regime embodied during Communism by propaganda images transmitted via television, and wholly submissive to the ideological doctrine of the regime. Ceausescu owned a private TV station, which could have been connected to the public state controlled television at any time, controlling to the highest degree the propaganda image transmitted and projected into the imaginary of ‘his’ people, meant to be subdued and kept in fear. Weibel argues that if beforehand Romanians were offered a body politic, during Revolution this was taken over by the mediatic apparatus of the television. People addressed their fears and hopes live on TV, and there was a total fascination with the news broadcasts of those days.

Historically, overcoming collective fear through the visual regime was crucial during December events, even though it happened obliquely for many Romanians via TV broadcasts. They were able to witness an embodiment of their own fears and, at that moment, of their hopes. The moment at which the television studio became crowded with people who had not previously had access to visibility during Communism is symbolic for the re-memorization of the December events. One of these iconic moments, appropriated by Botea in her work, through the excerpt from Ujica and Farocki’s’s movie, shows Mircea Dinescu and Ion Caramitru attempting to inform spectators of the changes that are occurring and about the next course of actions to be taken. Neither was coherent. Shouts of “We won! We won!” interrupted the announcements. For Romanians this was a live event. Negotiations as to who the spokesman should be were captured live

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<sup>296</sup> Peter Weibel, “Media as Mask: Videocracy. The Sublime Object of the Revolutionary Gaze,” in *Idea arts + society*, No. 22, (2005), 148.

by cameras: “Let Caramitru (actor) begin. He is a well-known face.” Their discourse started with a loud appeal: “Brothers!” Years later, for Romanians and potentially for others too, the sound of this one word points powerfully and unmistakably to the confusion of those days and at the same time to the hope for the ‘radical’ change under making, as communal effort. It reactivates an entire political context, when for the first time actors and poets gained a public political voice against the regime. Dinescu had previously been held under house arrest after giving an interview to *Liberation* in which he expressed anti-totalitarian views. Later on, he became a controversial figure on the political scene of post-Communist Romania. Similar to the 1989 broadcasting, when the “behind the scenes” was often shown on the screen, the presence of the camera as a mechanical device is overt throughout Botea’s documentation of the auditions. Voice-off shouts – “Camera rolling,” “Cut! Cut! Thank you!” “Action” – are included in her video and are heard repetitively before the actual rehearsals begin. The construction of re-enactment as cultural representation is therefore fundamental, and further enhanced by the split screen. The imperfectly mirroring screens refer on one hand to the making and production of an event and on the other hand “the audition becomes a step located somewhere between theatricality and real life, a preparation for an event that took place in the past, and a futile gesture or an attempt to try and change or understand where things (the revolution and its aftermath) started to ‘go wrong.’”<sup>297</sup>

During the Revolution, just as the visual presence of people on TV screens embodied the overcoming of the former power, a new power was taking over in a less overt manner. Manipulation was pervasive; information was distorted, starting with the

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<sup>297</sup> Irina Botea, Site online, <http://www.irinabotea.com/pages/auditions%20for%20a%20revolution.html>. Accessed 5 April, 2012.

manner in which the street riots were presented, up to the number of victims and the number of Securitate forces reported. As Tichindelean explains: “the good news of the broadcasted revolution soon became a story of endless speeches, which fragmented the positive meaning of the revolution, whatever it was; the frame of the broadcast revolution has changed already in the afternoon of 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1989, from the enthusiastic popular crowd in Studio 4 – another iconic positive image – to the solitary speakers in Studio 5.”<sup>298</sup> Collective memory registered those images, and also the doubt associated with them. Fiction intermingles with reality, history with manipulative narration, in the same manner in which memory is infused by imagination, interposing not only the images that represent the visual testimony of those days but reactivating disjointed and fragmented social and political contexts. These images trigger correlative associations, uncertainty, and suspicion invading the recreation of this particular public historic event. As Hirsch suggests, “the images already imprinted on our brains, the tropes and structures we bring from the present to the past, hoping to find them there and to have our questions answered, may be screen memories – screens on which we project present or timeless needs and desires and which thus mask other images and other concerns.”<sup>299</sup> Images of the past and the way they build up its narrative are instilled by temporality of their production; they are also conflated with images and desires of the present.

The media impact of images that become history through their repetitive broadcasting, constructing mediated memories is analyzed by Peter M. Spangenberg as a consequence of their insistence and the shock-effect they produce; images are inserted in a “pre-science of memory.” Extended connections to complexities and diversities of

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<sup>298</sup> Ovidiu Tichindelean, “The Author of the Autobiography,” 95.

<sup>299</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 120.

global events neutralize local relevance, whereas excessive mediatization of media reality leads to partial collective forgetfulness.<sup>300</sup> Discussions, debates and visual remembering that took place in subsequent years are directly associated with those images, even though twenty years later, urgency is not present anymore, and the more so since numerous other conflicts have added their own visual representations and been disseminated in accelerated succession.

In a similar vein, Peter Weibel addresses the Revolution as a transformation that takes place primarily at the level of the seen, of the visual regime of knowledge, a dialectic between what is seen and what is kept concealed from the public view.<sup>301</sup> His analysis contests the assumption – gradually transformed into a cliché – that the Romanian Revolution is a tele-revolution, a concept adopted for comfort reasons, stating that television was the weapon of the people against the Communist power. He confronts this assumption, calling it a “totalitary videocracy in the name of freedom.”<sup>302</sup> The army occupied the television headquarters and coordinated its actions through this powerful communication tool. Weibel calls it the first example of a war “without body,” but which, following common knowledge, would have needed a form of embodiment, provided as visual testimonies: he points to the dead bodies that seemed to justify the violence, and which in the case of the Romanian Revolution were shown visually: instead of being murdered by Securitate, these people had previously died of natural causes; the number of victims was highly augmented, with rumors counting up to 80,000 dead, the actual number being, as he states, 689. What seemed to be a live televised revolution happening in a spontaneous manner represented in fact a modality of manipulation by a power

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<sup>300</sup> Peter M. Spangenberg, “Appendix to the Televised History,” in *Idea arts + society*, No. 22, 2005, 144.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

apparatus that broadcast its own maneuvers. “Frontul Salvării Naționale/ The National Salvation Front Party,” formed by former Communist party members, declared itself as the new power claiming to legitimize the Revolution. Television as propaganda and manipulation tool of the Communist regime is turned into a modality of disseminating the new power.

Botea includes in her video archival images depicting the way Revolution was presented on television – by official anchors, by people taking over the transmission studios, by military representatives transmitting their messages to the population and the army – but also less known footage of the discussions for initiating a new party, “Frontul Salvării Naționale.” This episode is referred to through private footage of meetings that took place in the days of the Revolution and immediately following it. Whereas some of the excerpt she appropriates from Ujica and Farocki’s movie are iconic images transmitted worldwide, those showing the “behind-the scene” discussions of influential politicians of the moment were not circulated until after the event concluded. The split screen depicts on the left side images from a small closed room. The camera focuses on the table full of documents and papers spread all over the place, and a series of politicians sitting down, standing and gesticulating, discussing the best options to present themselves publicly. They are characters easily identifiable by Romanians who witnessed the Revolution: the closed shot travels from one character to the other, identifying visually those present at the meeting. Simultaneously, the right screen shows a modern room, with blinds pulled down, and young students rehearsing their roles. Documents that filled the room during the Revolution – containing legal statements and declarations, scripts defining the status of the new party – are replaced by papers with the script to be read by

actors, the written version of the dialogue taking place in the left screen. There is no synchronicity between the two sides; a small delay between them disrupts the parallel viewing and potential superposition of the two recordings. At the time, politicians were trying to forge themselves a new identity, with a new name to define themselves: Ion Iliescu's voice off is heard saying: "Salvation" is no good, it sounds like a coup d'état" – precisely the coup d'état that, from the beginning, they were suspected to have been enacting. Moreover, the battle of words and names continues: "The party and the state power, this sounds like the devil."

When explaining the transfer of power in Romania and the formation of Frontul Salvării Naționale, Mark points out that "The resultant power vacuum was not filled by opponents of Communism but rather by lower-ranking nomenklatura, who formed the National Salvation Front (Frontul Salvării Naționale, or FSN) ... The transition was thenceforth primarily guided by former middle and lower ranking members of the Communist party and this control both helped their successor party to victory at the first post-Communist elections and ensured that ex-Communist interests remained embedded within state bodies. More than a decade after the end of Communism, 63 percent of the current political elite had held political positions in the Communist Party prior to 1989."<sup>303</sup> When looking back and incorporating a historical perspective, the discussions for the formation of FSN seem to be prophetic and Botea plays on this aspect of memory that does not refer solely at one isolated moment in time, but it incorporates the social context that succeeded it.

The awareness of others' gazes, of international audience and of history in the making, was overtly expressed by one of the generals who took the stage during the

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<sup>303</sup> James Mark, *Unfinished Revolution*, 35.

manifestations. It was a history consciously constructed for later memorialization. Therefore the future perspective on the past, and the future process of remembering had to be fed with appropriate images and information. It was a specific memory that was supposed to be formed: “The world is watching us. We must show that we are responsible and we know the meaning of law and order.” But memory does not listen to the rules of coherence. Botea’s re-enactments function as a “mediation of memory,”<sup>304</sup> addressing the manner in which the Revolution happened and was experienced even at the time of its occurrence, with a present and future audience in view: “In that revolution, you were like an actor; you were in between reality TV and the reality of your own life.”<sup>305</sup> Being constituted part of the events did not produce necessarily accurate memories or understanding of what was happening in the moment, because events were also lived through the production of images for an audience, as Botea points out: “I remember there was this crazy moment when a Romanian politician said, ‘Well, everybody’s watching us. We have to prove to the Western world that we are good revolutionaries.’ But what does that actually mean, *we’re good revolutionaries*? You know some people are shooting; we don’t know who’s shooting; we don’t even have guns most of us, and we just have to come to the television to defend the television, so what does that mean, ‘you are a good revolutionary?’ That you are a good sheep, or a good wolf, or bird?”<sup>306</sup>

Incomprehension, doubt, and fragmentation are the source of this re-enactment: of those witnessing the Revolution and making history; of the mechanisms of media that

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<sup>304</sup> Steve Rushton, “Tweedledum and Tweedledee Resolved to Have a Battle (Preface One),” in eds. Anke Bagma, Steve Rushton, Florian Wüst, *Experience Memory Re-enactment*, (Rotterdam: Piet Zwart Institute 2005), 5-12.

<sup>305</sup> Irina Botea, “Reenacting a Many Possible Past: An Interview with Irina Botea.”

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

were not spontaneous and ideologically free even when people speaking from this tribune seem to have been unscripted, as in the case of Dinescu's speech; of those who witnessed it from afar; and finally, years after the completion of those events, of the actors in Chicago who speak a language they do not understand. Because it was transmitted live, the Revolution was supposed to be a transparent event, occurring in complete visibility and thus exposing the threads that would help disparate moments to acquire the consistency of a story, of a coherent chains of events, with a beginning and an ending, with a causal reaction capable of justifying the subsequent events. Botea undermines this assumption and refers back to the constructed and carefully orchestrated nature of those events, but also to the selection process active within the visual regime. Ujica's choice of footage represents a first level of directorial editing. Botea continues this process by deciding on what becomes story and what gets access into history through the re-play of an already performed selection imprinted in the collective memory. The narrative thus created produces an apparent form of control, or in Hayden White's words: "to give to real events the form of story"<sup>307</sup> leads to an authoritarian perspective seemingly mastering the past. Yet, Botea leaves open fissures of knowledge, missing information and forgetting and presents this charged moment of the past in an inevitable fictionalizing way. The time that has passed introduces a distance that transforms the way memory works, even when it deals with a lived event, with a memory that refers back to an event that was witnessed. As Mieke Ball points out, "among memory's toys a particular relevant one is time. Time is where subjectivity is produced: over time, in time with time."<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, 1980, 5-27.

<sup>308</sup> Mieke Bal, "Setting the Stage," 92.

*REALITY/ REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA*

Investigating the situation of post-Communist countries in Eastern Europe, Groys describes their condition as a “blind spot for contemporary cultural studies”<sup>309</sup> and he asks for a reframing of the general theories and vocabulary of cultural studies in order to be able to address their specific cultural practice. Whereas there is renewed international interest in these countries, in the name of diversity and heterogeneity, Groys notes that Western culture experiences an opposite approach, since it “strongly dislikes the gray, monotonous, uninspiring look of Communism.”<sup>310</sup> The collective imaginary of Communism “was made available for private appropriation”<sup>311</sup> in the years after its fall. Groys describes this phenomenon as “post-Communist art ... which appropriates from the enormous store of images, symbols and texts that no longer belong to anyone, and that no longer circulate, but merely lie quietly on the garbage heap of history as a shared legacy from the days of Communism.”<sup>312</sup> Botea looks back at this “store of images” and reactivates it, inscribing it anew in the collective imaginary, shaped through artistic productions.

As investigated in her work *Auditions for a Revolution*, interpretations and visual dissemination of these events are still contested, even though thousands of images surfaced during December events for the first time, documenting them and showing in real time their development. The Revolution was the moment that did not present sanitized images, but rather first-hand accounts of terror and violence happening on the streets. Groys’s analysis of war and its representations are informative for the

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<sup>309</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power*, 150.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

simultaneous materialization of events and iconic images transmitted during the Romanian Revolution, nowadays part of the collective imaginary, both within Romania and abroad: the historic event “coincides with its documentation, with its representation.”<sup>313</sup> Following a discussion that inquires into the indexical nature of images and their claim to document truth, Groys points to the shame that comes with questioning and negating the truth-value of images depicting violence. They present the “image of our suspicion, the image of our angst. The hidden reality behind the image is shown to us as ugly as we suspected it to be.”<sup>314</sup> Images and video recordings depicting Ceausescu’s final days, as well as images of people taking over the television during those turbulent days have become symbols of the Revolution itself. They have acquired “the symbolic value of a representation of the political sublime,” understood not in the Romantic tradition but in the sense of exhibiting the “ugly, repelling, unbearable, terrifying.” Part of their iconic status is due to a “certain quest for the strongest image,”<sup>315</sup> as they need to be recognizable in order to make their way into mass media. While news media channels are subject to the market demands for “strong images,” contemporary art practice appeals to a broader range of images and perspectives, and therefore performs a critique of representation, able to “measure our own time against this historical background”<sup>316</sup> – the missing element in news images. In her *Auditions for a Revolution* Botea makes use of these canonic images, and twists them by their juxtaposition with recordings made twenty years after the Revolution, featuring actors who not only did not participate, but who had little access to the collective memory formed about this socio-

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<sup>313</sup> Boris Groys. *Art Power*, Cambridge and Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008, 122.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-8.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

cultural space. Thus, Botea subverts the creation of a national imagery and the way it is perceived and ultimately determined by international patterns of representation, since, as Groys puts it, the cultural unity and quest for identity for ex-Communist countries is shaped not only by an internal necessity, disrupted during the previous regime, but also as a response to international markets. At the same time, forming this cultural identity is not simply a matter of digging into a recent past and excavating historic heritage roots and traces, because Communism radically broke both tradition and cohesion. The task is to re-imagine them.

Botea performs a re-enactment that escapes clear categorization and legitimation. As she stated “it’s a very conscious decision to mediate their history. This is important in reenactment, this *attempt* at personal mediation. When you know the ending, you’re really focused on *how* something happened and what possibilities were not taken advantage of. I think that’s very important for the present.” Whereas the Romanian Revolution is a public event, for her it involves also a highly private implication, which surfaces through the act of memory: the artist herself had been part of those events. Memory activates the private in the tumult of the public. Moreover, this re-enactment takes place distanced in time and space from the actual event. It implies first of all a gaze from afar at an event that comes to be perceived not from within, at the moment of its manifestation as fragments of information, confused accounts, and fear, but an event whose outcome is known, or at least *supposed to be known*. The Romanian Revolution generated a significant culture of claim and counter-claim as to its legitimacy as a revolution vis-à-vis a coup d’état.

Looking back is “not *just* a repetition of the past – because you can never really repeat it – it’s a remediation of the past *for* the present,”<sup>317</sup> a healing of trauma. Trauma theorists consider, as Herman underlines, that unlike “normal memory, which is the “action of telling story,” traumatic memory is “wordless and static ... a series of still snapshots or a silent movie”<sup>318</sup> Re-enactment and the process of reconstruction through a cultural act transforms traumatic memory and integrates the traumatic event in one’s living history, as story,<sup>319</sup> assimilates it while acknowledging the harm produced. It is a process of liberation. Botea’s re-enactment repeats an event experienced in the past, as produced in media, and via cultural representation, re-contextualizes it and finally it changes its outcome by introducing distance. Botea’s work considers several stages of distancing. 1) First of all it is an event performed twenty years after the real one happened, therefore time intervenes as an estrangement factor. 2) It happened at thousands kilometers away from the initial place that witnessed the manifestations. 3) It was performed with people coming from a different culture, often having only scarce previous knowledge of the events of the 1989 Revolution. 4) This acknowledgement happened only in a mediated form through images broadcast by television and interpreted according to their own specific ideological set of rules. 5) The “actors” speak Romanian, without really understanding the meaning of the words they utter, they speak a foreign language, with a foreign meaning. 6) The juxtaposed footage comes not from archival live TV broadcasting from the events themselves, but was appropriated from Ujica and Farocki’s movie *Videograms of a Revolution*, which collected and juxtaposed images

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<sup>317</sup> Irina Botea, “Reenacting a Many Possible Past: An Interview with Irina Botea by Caroline Picard, January 7th, 2011, Art 21, <http://blog.art21.org/2011/01/07/reenacting-a-many-possible-past-an-interview-with-irina-botea/>. Online. Accessed 6 April 2012.

<sup>318</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 175.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

either from the Romanian television or from private sources superimposed with a narrative commentary. 7) Botea's own need for elaborate distancing from the trauma of the past witnessed first-hand as active participant in the Revolution. Trauma compartmentalizes the past in dissociative patterns in order to escape it.

While interposing layers of distance, Botea also advances a series of elements meant to preserve continuity and close contact, to make possible the participatory nature of the audience and of the witnessing process, yet maintaining the dilemmas underlying her work. Apart from a digital video camera, she also used a 16 mm movie camera of the type that was in use at the time of the Revolution. While there can be no certainty that this was one of the cameras utilized for filming the Revolution, it did belong to Sahia Film, the official movie production company of the Communist regime, whose cameras were used in December 1989 to record the street demonstrations. As she states: "the idea of using a camera that had been a witness like I was a witness felt reassuring."<sup>320</sup> Besides revisiting the technological material available at the time, she employed a digital camera when interviewing her colleagues in Chicago. Technology becomes a modality of making the correspondence between present and "an unstable relationship to the past."<sup>321</sup>

The split screen produces a schizoid experience: both the original and the reconstruction share a parallel visual space in front of the audience, who "remembers" through Botea's work; but little better than the actors re-enacting through their bodies a history they did not previously experience. Actors and audiences will preserve a new form of memory of the Revolution, radically different than Botea's, yet no less real and mediated. As Inke Arns points out: "Botea's *Auditions for a Revolution* can be

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

understood as an attempt to re-insert herself into the endless sequences of images and events that comprise history; as an attempt to re-live a specific historic situation which is only indirectly accessible to us, or conveyed only by media images.”<sup>322</sup>

Botea documents a fiction that re-enacts a real event. Or as Botea puts it: “reenactment is a construct. It’s always an event. It’s always a construct but there is also something truthful happening there. There is a reality in the construct of it that happened and they are layered on top of each other. Because those things actually happened. And we were there!”<sup>323</sup> Yet, being there does not allow necessarily a better access to the development of the events than being elsewhere. People were watching the events live, as they unfolded. Confusion was everywhere. Images were doubled by commentaries, and by impromptu messages that got corrected live by other members in the TV studio. Revolutionaries were taken for terrorists and the other way round; participants were not clearly identified, neither when the events were unfolding, nor years later, when they sought to achieve some level of closure and major inquiries started to take place within society. Debates are ongoing regarding the principal actors of the revolution and the roles they played.

#### *STAGING THE PAST*

Traumatic pasts have, as Baer explains, a “troubling grip on memory and on the imagination because they were not consciously experienced at the time of their

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<sup>322</sup> Inke Arns. “History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance.” Curator's text for the exhibition at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, 18.11.2007 - 13.01.2008.

<sup>323</sup> Irina Botea, “Reenacting a Many Possible Past: An Interview with Irina Botea.”

occurrence,”<sup>324</sup> Re-enactment becomes a belated, staged “lived experience” of trauma lived somewhere else. Re-enactment is considered by Herman to be an intrusion phenomenon attempting to “integrate the traumatic event ... The trauma is resolved only when the survivor develops a new mental ‘schema’ for understanding what has happened,”<sup>325</sup> when traumatic memory is transformed into a story that can be shared to others, lived as it is. It goes beyond the repetitive stereotype of initial accounting of trauma, unchanged in time. Beyond the “prenarrative”<sup>326</sup> and unassimilated stage of trauma, re-enactment brings it forth into the present as repetitive attempts to remember, transform, mourn and master the traumatic event.

Re-enactment “is about *sharing*. The piece is also about sharing and questioning the possibility of rioting,”<sup>327</sup> as Botea explains. Sharing implies an exchange, a negotiation, and it also presupposes the difference activated by communities that come in contact through the act of sharing. Involving people from a different generation, nationality, language and culture in order to reconstruct a charged moment of the Romanian past represents a paradoxical appeal to memory through the presence of those who in fact have no memory about those events. The past comes in the presence through an act of sharing. Or as Botea puts it: “What if you’re not part of that history, does that mean you’re not allowed to try to understand it?”<sup>328</sup> The gaps of knowledge are main “actors” in this re-enactment, always disrupted by what can be remembered, by whom, and by the context of remembrance.

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<sup>324</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 8.

<sup>325</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 41.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> Irina Botea, “Reenacting a Many Possible Past: An Interview with Irina Botea.”

The auditions follow rules of theatricality, as the staging on which the working of memory are performed, never quite pointing to the reality of the event itself:

1. The background scenery: Botea tried to identify locations in Chicago that resembled Bucharest at the time of the Revolution.
2. The actors: fellow colleagues, students, and professors at the Art Institute of Chicago who are given minute instructions on how to act and what to say.
3. The audience: firstly, Irina Botea is participant, witness, audience and cultural producer to the Revolution; secondly, the events, as seen through Ujica and Farocki's representation are shown to spectators-turned actors, formed by American students, who did not take part in those events; and finally the audience of this movie, presented both in Romania, possibly to people who were part of the events – and abroad, to those who were not part of the Revolution, but had potentially mediated memories of it, either by witnessing it live on television or through recalling and the memories of a previous generation.

The performative theatricality of Botea's *mise-en-scène* repetitively revisits a unique event. What is questioned, though, is the uniqueness of the recorded events, since suspicions of the Revolution being staged still circulate. The split screen device makes the layering of stories explicit. Imagination comes into play activating "the various tasks memory undertakes: healing, denial, revision, invention, recreation and re-creation, forgetting ... Remembering the past can be a creative process, and situating oneself in a shared temporal web is a necessary part of being in a society."<sup>329</sup> Memory follows similarly incongruous paths and turning points as a staged event that becomes

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<sup>329</sup> Jane Marie Law, "Introduction: Cultural Memory, the Past and Static Present," in *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, 7.1-2, 2007, 7.

continuously reconfigured by the insertion of different actors into the “play” and by the intervention of the audience. Mieke Bal explains: “rather than standing for a disingenuous inauthentic subjectivity that parades as authentic, theatricality is the production of the subject: its staging.”<sup>330</sup> The setting of Chicago becomes a rendering of “Bucharest 1989,” with the hollowed flag, as a powerful symbol of the Revolution waved on both cases. The footage from the Revolution depicts large masses of people, gathered together and shouting “truth! truth!” arms raised and a general cacophony of voices heard in the background: people who took part in those events and for whom, at the moment, truth and freedom seemed within reach. Retroactively, truth might seem graspable again. In fact it eludes representation and memory once more. Confusion is still part of the game. In her December 2005 documenting footage a voice off can be heard: “Irina, tell me what to shoot.” Presumably many of those documenting the Revolution might have asked the same question.

The camcorder footage taken over by Farocki’s documentary is presented in the form of memory revisited. Moreover, a new type of memory, no less constructed than the first, becomes part of a cultural heritage on the Revolution and its recreation in the act of remembering. The raw footage is not presented as testimony legitimizing reality, but as construction material for a mediatic history. These are recordings of events that really happened, yet they do not necessary point to one reality. They function as mediations in the sense that the technological medium was inscribed within a socio-political context that blurred the distinction between reality and fiction at the very moment that the events were unfolding. They testified to an existing reality, but more important to the critical perspective that has to be attached when witnessing this “reality” and version of events. It

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<sup>330</sup> Mieke Bal, “Setting the Stage,” 97.

is an excess of history and an exhaustion of it at the same time, speaking therefore for the cognitive impasse of recreating in memory the events that took place twenty years before. Another history, an alternative one is gradually formed. The connection with reality that raw footage might have triggered – for those who experienced it actively or in the conscience of secondary witnesses to the Revolution – is thus interrupted and blocked by the explicit presence of the enactment, but it is also reactivated through this strategy. A form of “lost in translation” becomes apparent, even though the same language is spoken, even though the same gestures are made, even though the same sentences are uttered in both instances. The missing elements are not revealed. There are no new stories being added to the ones already being told. However, Botea’s work speaks for the untold stories of the Revolution, for the missing gaps of knowledge and for the missed encounters of a spectatorship positioned in between memory, reality and fiction. An actor’s demand “Please at least tell me what I am saying,” is not easily answered. Dilemmas persist and they challenge the limits of knowledge.

The particular conditions of the Communist past tested these limits that nevertheless held firm as long-term consequences for the structure of society. Cultural acts confront this crisis and critically reinterpret it, by attempting to excavate not only a recent traumatic past but also its social prolongations, as in the case of people who, years after the fall of Communism and after the Revolution, find themselves in a situation where establishing a “common ground, a “familiarity of the world” is still problematic and they embark on a fatal journey of immigration. Matei Bejenaru’s video work recuperates part of their personhood by bringing some of their challenges into visibility, through mediated artistic interpretation, as investigated in the next chapter.

## THE UNPROTECTEDNESS OF IMMIGRATION

The migrational phenomenon is an increasingly important feature of contemporary society implying physical and communal dislocation. Native lands, borders, and new social environments are all to be considered as posing imaginary and factual challenges that have to be faced in this process. The migrational trajectory implies more and more screening, surveillance, and traceability.<sup>331</sup> Border crossings are highly charged mechanisms of selection and exclusion, arbitrarily drawn lines of enclosure and protection. They are passages only for those who are wanted on the other side. Moreover, within the bio-political reality of immigrants, refugees, displaced populations or foreigners without proper documentation to prove their legality, new forms of camps have been created. Instead of being temporary, they have become long-term “states of exception.” In spatial terms, through the re-location of immigrants to an “extraterritorial” space, they become “locked up outside” and under control. Such populations – whether they are called “undesirable,” “vulnerable,” “foreigners,” “marginal,” or “internally displaced”<sup>332</sup> – pass through a process of uprooting and unbounding: the border is used to screen, identify, and account for their admissibility within a new socio-political or economical space. Under conditions of uprootedness, (im)migration, social transformations and exclusions from the domain of visibility, the means to tackle these phenomena are inadequate, as the process breaks human bonds and weakens community cohesion. The “solidity” of communities as experienced in modern times has given over

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<sup>331</sup> Paul Virilio, “Stop Eject,” in *Native Land. Stop Eject*, eds. Paul Virilio and Raymond Depardon, (Paris: Foundation Cartier pour art contemporain, 2008), 191.

<sup>332</sup> Michel Agier, “The Camps of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Corridors, Screening Vestibules and Borders of Internal Exile,” in *Native Land. Stop Eject*, eds. Paul Virilio and Raymond Depardon. (Paris: Foundation Cartier pour art contemporain, 2008), 240-1.

to the “liquidity”<sup>333</sup> of social paradigms, fundamentally transforming communal experience.

This chapter investigates artistic productions by Romanian artists who address the phenomenon of immigration. The main case studies are: Matei Bejenaru’s *Travel Guide* (2005-2007), *Maersk Dubai* (2007) and Stefan Constantinescu’s *Passagen/Passages* (2005), but my analysis also includes other Romanian cultural representations of mobility triggered by immigration, in a context where mobility is not solely an attribute of immigrant populations, but it also informs the production and reception of the artworks themselves. The works of Pavel Braila, Dan Perjovschi, Mircea Cantor, and Daniel Knorr are considered within the changing patterns of “the resubjectification of the East.”<sup>334</sup> My study focuses on the fundamental vulnerability that stands at the core of the migratory pattern, radically dislodging the ‘space of appearance’ of immigrant communities, a vulnerability that is also mirrored at the level of representation and access to visibility. Immigrants’ stories often remain untold, fall into oblivion, and ultimately fail to pierce the silence that accompanies their displacement. There are, however, some artistic works that, on the one hand, bear witness to this phenomenon and, on the other, transform it through acts of imagination and fictionalization. Even though there is a pronounced documentary aspect in the works of these artists, a trend increasingly present in Romanian contemporary art after 1990, they simultaneously perform a construction and a reinterpretation of this social aspect, through subjective storytelling, as in the case of Stefan Constantinescu.

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<sup>333</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear*, (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2006).

<sup>334</sup> Bogdan Ghiu, “For a Resubjectification of the East,” in *Idea arts + society*, No. 35, (2010).

After the fall of Communism, Romanian border rules became less restrictive, allowing a certain degree of freedom. Following years of complete confinement, and against the background of transition from a totalitarian toward a more democratic society still plagued by remnants of the Communist past, immigration seemed to offer a solution to the realities and dilemmas of decommunization. But far from being a smooth process, immigration has also proven to be dominated by unprotectedness. In my analysis the dislocation associated with immigration is considered primarily in view of Zygmunt Bauman's, Judith Butler's and Michel Agier's theoretical writings – establishing a conceptual foundation for understanding the fundamental precariousness of the process. Immigration liquifies communities; they lack stability and coherence.<sup>335</sup> Immigration might be justified by social reasons, stemming either from economic shortages and the promise of a future “normalcy,” or by political factors that through their violent nature prompt displacement. The “caring-and-sharing” quality of community is disrupted within the turmoil of social upheaval, as the individuals face society's failure to deliver the promise of security. In Zygmunt Bauman's terms: “among the imagined totalities to which people were able to believe they belong and where they believed they could seek ... shelter, a void yawns at the spot once occupied by society.”<sup>336</sup>

In the same manner, the illegal immigrants, as represented by Matei Bejenaru in *Travel Guide* and *Maersk Dubai*, experience a precarious state by their acceptance of the status of illegality. The illegals become a category that disrupts the understanding of citizenry because they break “the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid.,21.

<sup>336</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Community* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 113.

nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis.”<sup>337</sup> They are not only expelled outside the law, they do not live in its absence, but, by denying it, they are constantly under its threat, under the danger of being caught and subjected to its rules or even of being killed. As Agamben puts it, they are “abandoned” to the law and not protected by it.

Matei Bejenaru’s *Travel Guide*, and *Maersk Dubai* and Stefan Constantinescu’s *Passagen* speak about the estrangement accompanying immigration, and about the social and economic hurdles faced when embarking on this journey. While they employ a documentary mode, their “documents” are far from being exhaustive. They do not attempt to construct a survey of immigration, but rather they present their depictions as art works, inscribing them within a different aesthetics, both focusing on social aspects as the raw material of artistic reflection. As Mark Nash underlined when speaking about *Documenta II*, a trend setting international art fair whose 2008 theme was the notion of documentary in art, “in order to communicate effectively, indeed in order to function as art, all the work had to function aesthetically,”<sup>338</sup> an aspect even more important in the case of Bejenaru’s *Travel Guide*, which, devoid of artistic intentions, would simply have broken the law.

#### PERSPECTIVES ON THE ART OF THE EAST

The art production I investigate with relationship to immigration and its changing patterns also activates a discussion pertinent to the unresolved problems and dilemmas that Europe is confronted with: the encounter, and sometimes absorption of divergent values and norms, both cultural and socio-political, stemming from the migratory forces

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>338</sup> Mark Nash, “Reality in the Age of Aesthetics,” in *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 114, (April 2008).

inscribing the contemporary historical and cultural dynamics East/West. Art works not only address patterns of migration and immigration, they follow similar routes, as cultural productions. They are works about exile, and they also exist partially in “exile.” Their conditions of existence, production, and dissemination respond to internal configurations and also to attempts at definition that come in contact with the larger field of artistic discourse in a complex East/West negotiation. Mieke Bal, along with Sam Durrant, addresses this double identification, double exposure, as “migratory aesthetics” understood to represent “the various processes of becoming that are triggered by the movement of people and peoples, experiences of transition as well as the transition of experience itself, into new modalities, new art work, new ways of being.”<sup>339</sup>

Whereas the East/West distinction is still operative even at the denomination level, it cannot be conceived simply as a cultural or social dichotomy. Its workings are far more elaborate and contradictory, with centrifugal vectors intersecting centripetal ones. A two-way direction is activated, especially after the inclusion of countries that historically belonged to the Eastern block, Romania among them, in the European Union. Expectations from both sides often clash and resuscitate divergent interpretative paradigms, while advocating an inclusive common social and cultural ‘language’. A migratory pattern can be ascribed to the art practice too, in terms of its reception and exhibition strategies, in short, in terms of its conditions of existence in an international context. The work cannot strictly be defined as stemming from Romanian realities, but also from its contact with the expectations and selective patterns of inclusion that come from elsewhere. Since 2000, renewed interest in the art of Eastern Europe, galvanized by

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<sup>339</sup> Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord eds, “Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making,” in *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race*, Vol. 17, No. 1. (1 November 2007), 10-11.

Western cultural actors and public, has reconfigured the work, to ‘incorporate’ it within a larger artistic circuit. This is not done in the absence of ideology, but responds to a model that inscribes the East in a nationalistic paradigm, as a return of the repressed.

Accordingly, the West’s expectations are to be fulfilled, and the East should conform in order to be identified and legitimated as the “East” and thereby recuperated by the West; there are analogies with the situation familiar to exiles.

An interesting process of migration/“immigration” can be observed in the absorption of the art of the East. Two important recent international exhibitions, as well as the 2011 Romanian participation in the Venice Biennial with the project *A Romanian Cultural Resolution*, recapture this discussion and contextualize it twenty years after the fall of Communism in the Eastern block, prompting complex debates on the realities and contradictions of the reductionist socio-cultural stance of a coherent East. One of these international exhibitions is *Gender Check: Feminity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*<sup>340</sup> The other one is *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*.<sup>341</sup> More nuanced attempts to address these issues have materialized in the publication of *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (2006) by the Irwin group. This is an extensive overview that documents and archives art from the Eastern Europe, including critical texts and analysis written from an Eastern perspective.

Returning Eastern European art to visibility comes as a consequence of a revised concept of history and cultural representation, attempting to bridge the gap between the

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<sup>340</sup> *Gender Check: Feminity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* exhibition was presented at MUMOK (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig), Viena, 13 November 2009 – 14 February 2010 and at Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Varşovia, 19 March – 13 June 2010.

<sup>341</sup> *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe* exhibition was shown at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 14 April – 19 July 2010.

two bio-political regions that developed under different political coordinates for nearly half a century. East and West were divided and their art is thought to need rehabilitation and coordination. This reevaluation presupposes a discontinuity at the level of history, but also in terms of art manifestations and practices. Bogdan Ghiu summarizes the dilemmas posed by a reconfiguration of the Eastern art within the Western circuit of art dissemination:

Is there an “East” any longer? Is there a “West” yet? Is it that only the Eastern Europe’s history of art, as a metonymy of history in general (and as a *heuristically* strategic type of history), needs to be regarded and acknowledged, from the *canonical* point of view of the West and from a *notionally, categorially* occidental point of view, as being “discontinuous,” or, rather, does this “*discontinuous*” history of the East(ern art) have the vocation of – and can be, there, used for – introducing an essential discontinuity, a fissure, an interruption not only in the *canon* of the Western history of art and in the domination of the occidental point of view upon history in general, but also, in series, as regards the fundamentally Western *concept* itself of history and *the categories* that make it possible?<sup>342</sup>

The reconfiguration takes place through its double nature, as Ghiu points out, coming from the marginality of history and from that of contemporary art: “Twice out of the borders does the “assault“ upon the (history of the) Occident (re-)begins: out of the *East* of Europe and out of the history of contemporary *art*.”<sup>343</sup> The East seems to prefigure a re-evaluation of the Western canon, as a means of completing a perspective that lacks the important dimension of alterity, embodied by recent history and art of the East. However, as Ghiu advocates, this is only one step in a larger deconstruction, which should also consider not just a reconfiguration internal to the Western canon, but also one

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<sup>342</sup> Bogdan Ghiu, “For a Resubjectification of the East,” in *Idea arts + society*, No. 35, (2010), 59.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

that develops a larger discussion of the principles of canonization. Recovering the “alterity,” or “barbarism,”<sup>344</sup> if we follow Marius Babias, of the East and of its art, is a necessary phase for the *relativization* of the Western canon of art. Sharing a liminal conceptual border, contemporary art from the East redefines its presence within the larger canon of European art. However, this reconfiguration threatens assimilation, that is, the nullification of its constitutive character of alterity. The exhaustion of alterity implies an erasure of the traits that made its existence – its very visibility – possible. The recuperation of the East closes down the openness toward its “foreigner” status, as a “perverse effect of confinement: the confirmation, the consolidation of the Western modernist canon by the reclamation of the East, that is by the exhaustion of the opening for the inner alterity.”<sup>345</sup> Brushing history against the grain, the past twenty years have changed the modalities through which the art of Eastern Europe is understood, in terms of a re-evaluation that does not dissolve the outlines of its specificity. Or, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out, the stranger should preserve its quality of a stranger and should be acknowledged as such in order for it not to disappear.<sup>346</sup> Instead of recognizing, recuperating and reintegrating the East, therefore still speaking in patronizing terms, the art of the East should be acknowledged in its “strategic discontinuity,”<sup>347</sup> recovering without assimilation. My study is adding to this understanding by positioning the artworks in a specific Romanian context, as acknowledged alterity opening up to cultural and historical visibility.

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<sup>344</sup> Marius Babias, “The Euro-Self and the Europeanism,” in *Idea arts + society*, No. 24, (2006).

<sup>345</sup> Bogdan Ghiu, “For a Resubjectification of the East,” 62.

<sup>346</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'intrus*, (Paris: Galilée, 2000).

<sup>347</sup> Bogdan Ghiu, “For a Resubjectification of the East.”

The years following the fall of Communism were beset by indecision on the denominations to be used to define this socio-cultural space. The inclusion within European Union raised dilemmas regarding the names previously used – such as East-Central Europe, Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Europe – and new terms started to appear, as, for example, the Balkans. Artistic curatorial projects followed these discourses by questioning the inclusion of such diverse ethnic and national manifestations under the same cover. Such an example is the exhibition *In the Gorges of the Balkans* presented at Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, in 2003, including artists arguably locatable in the ‘Balkans.’ As the boundaries of Europe shift, resistance against defining Eastern art in relation to Western art grows, accompanied by a demand for specific analyses, against “the inclusion of the other”<sup>348</sup> in political and social terms, but also as visual artistic paradigms of representation.

These two large exhibitions, both presented in the East – *Gender Check* – and the West – *Promises of the Past* – questioned the existence of this difference in a context in which Eastern art is no longer confined within its ideological perimeter: “What does it mean to define a type of art as Eastern European today? What does this mean at a time when this concept is becoming obsolete, with the emergence of a new communal world in which these Eastern/Western European divisions have ceased to exist?”<sup>349</sup> Twenty years after the fall of Communism, the art of the East goes beyond the simplifying categorization attached to it in the past decades, as post-totalitarian or post-Communist art. Ghiu advocates maintaining the difference between East and West and a form of resistance to assimilation through the eradication of difference, advancing the idea of the

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<sup>348</sup> Jean Verworen, “Histoires potentielles, discontinuité, et politique du désir,” in *Les Promesses du passé: une histoire discontinuée de l’art dans l’ex-Europe de l’Est*, (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou), 2010, 23.

<sup>349</sup> Christine Macel and Joanna Mytkowska, „Préface“ in *Les Promesses du passé*, 14.

“resubjectification of the East,” through art practices that make possible the “awaking from the narcosis of the resorbence within the West,”<sup>350</sup> and reclaiming in representation its recent history, “that is to say the expressively and semiotic, visual, therefore implicitly *artistically identity* recent battles. The relatively late docile revolt, of the East’s self-reclamation, is a revolt of art against the ideology, against the media. Strategically, art appears to be the privileged, strategic medium of negotiation between *the stereotype-image* and *the expression-image*.”<sup>351</sup>

Dan Perjovschi is represented in the exhibition *Promises of the Past*, alongside other artists from Romania and Eastern Europe, such as Daniel Knorr, Roman Ondak, and Anri Sala. Perjovschi’s *Romania/Removing Romania* (1993-2003), also part of *The Romanian Cultural Resolution* project, involves two phases, as two sides of an artistic discourse on the situation of the artist in the Romanian cultural and social context. The first part presents images from the video documenting his performance that took place in 1993 when he tattooed the word ‘Romania’ on his left shoulder. Sinziana Ravini described this act as ridiculing the aesthetical attachment and identification of an artist with his birth place,<sup>352</sup> against feeling “cattle-marked, owned by someone beyond my reach.”<sup>353</sup> The “permanence” of the tattoo would be reversed in 2007, when, as part of the exhibition *In the Gorges of the Balkans*, he removed this mark: “once the tattoo was removed, Perjovschi declared himself “healed” from Romania.”<sup>354</sup> He performs a critique of the “essentialisation of identity discourse” in Cristian Nae’s terms, who interprets

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<sup>350</sup> Bogdan Ghiu, “For a Resubjectification of the East,” 66.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Sanziana Ravini, “Dan Perjovschi” in *Les promesses du passé*, 136.

<sup>353</sup> Dan Perjovschi, in “Interview with Roxana Marcoci.”

<sup>354</sup> Sinziana Ravini, *Dan Perjovschi*, 136. Original in French: “une fois le tatouage enlevé, Perjovschi se déclara ‘guéri’ de la Roumanie.” Author’s translation.

Perjovschi's gesture as "signalling the beginning of a period when artists could break with national and regional associations."<sup>355</sup> The removal of the tattoo leaves a scar. The remaining traces point symbolically to Romanians' artistic and social existence, reconfigured as somatic identity within his body: a permanent mark is erased, but it becomes an internalized presence. In an interview with Roxana Marcoci, Perjovschi underlines the floating identity ascribed on Romanians within the art world:

I thought performance should last as long as its author did. However, ten years later the context changed. I too changed my views and decided to remove the tattoo. This was a political statement made within the international context of the Balkans. You see, in 1995 I was exhibiting in East Central European shows, at the end of the 1990s in East European shows, at the beginning of 2000 in South East European shows, and subsequently in Balkan shows. Yet I have never moved from Bucharest. This geopolitical situation compelled me to remove the tattoo. I sometimes joke that erasing the word Romania from my shoulder marks the moment when I became an international artist.<sup>356</sup>

The debates raised by the exhibition *Promises of the Past*, as underlined by its curators Christine Macel and Joanna Mytkowska, are evocative for Eastern European art and its inclusion within the European larger artistic discourse at a time when its borders – political and economical, but also cultural – have been erased as functioning principle. "Eastern Europe does not longer exists."<sup>357</sup> A first step was the fall of Communism, which breached the radical separation between Western and Eastern Europe. A second stage was Romania's inclusion in the European Union in 2007. After the fall of

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<sup>355</sup> Cristian Nae, "Undoing the East Postcommunist Art and Performative Critique of Identity," in *Romanian Cultural Resolution*, (Ostfeldern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 21.

<sup>356</sup> Roxana Marcoci, "Dan Perjovschi," in Dan Perjovschi, Lia Perjovschi, Kristine Stiles, Andrei Codrescu, Marius Babias, and Roxana Marcoci. *States of Mind: Dan & Lia Perjovschi*. (Durham: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 2007), 166-67.

<sup>357</sup> Christine Macel and Joanna Mytkowska, "Préface" in *Les promesses du passé*, 18. Original in French : "L'Europe de l'est n'existe plus." Author's translation.

Communism, Romanian art benefited from a renewed freedom to address social problems and to perform a critique of society; it was followed by a sustained effort – both from within and as a result of art international pressures – to define itself in conformity with the Occidental art; recently these perspective have been relativized, assuming a less determined configuration based on geographic coordinates. The French curators summarize the attitude toward re-evaluation of the art coming from “the old Eastern Europe.” First, it is considered to be “local narration” that escapes the dialectics East /West, but marked by unequal rhythms of history.<sup>358</sup> Secondly, it is seen through the veil of reflexive nostalgia, as understood by Svetlana Boym and Susan Stewart, which “does not pretend to reconstruct the mythic place called home.”<sup>359</sup>

The reconfiguration of Romanian cultural discourses, initially as part of the Communist block, then included in Eastern Europe, and finally, as a partner in the European Union, fostered artistic debate, as symbolized by the Romanian Pavilion at the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennial. An installation entitled *European Influenza* (2005) by Daniel Knorr, born in Romania, but active artistically in Germany, was an empty space, without any works of art. Visitors did not have to pay entrance fees. His action was retaken within *Re:Location* project, foreigners being granted free access to exhibitions, a strategy reminiscent of Jens Haaning’s *Foreigners Free* (1997-2001) where foreigners could enter the public swimming pool in Biel, Switzerland, free of charge. Knorr’s project becomes an artwork through the activation of critical debates regarding its conditions of existence and pertinence to the Romanian art scene. The exhibition took place in 2005. The walls of the gallery preserved traces of previous exhibitions, scratches, inscription, holes and

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>359</sup> Svetlana Boym, quoted by Christine Macel in *Les promesses du passé*, 19. Original in French: “ne prétend pas reconstruire le lieu mythique que l’on appelle chez soi.” Author’s translation.

nails that remained still unpulled. Moreover, it offered its visitors free of charge a 1000-page English reader containing controversial critical texts on the impending Romanian inclusion in the European Union. Marius Babias, curator of this exhibition, writes that:

While the political sphere formalizes EU integration process as a geopolitical vision of a greater Europe and forces norms on society (the new member states had to democratize their political systems on the Western model, accept international rules of competition and integrate thousands of EU laws to their national legislation), the field of culture has the potential to bring forth a perspective that treats the process of European unification as an opportunity for creating a critical Europe.<sup>360</sup>

The *Over the Counter* group exhibition presented at Mucsarnok Museum Budapest, Hungary, included Matei Bejenaru's works *Maersk Dubai*, *Travelling Guide* along with the work of 29 other artists questioning the representation of the East through a Western perspective. The exhibition addressed the spectator in a confrontational manner, "by turning his/her naïve relation to the socio-economic environment into a more conscious and more ethics-oriented one."<sup>361</sup> Mircea Cantor, a Romanian artist based in Paris, showed his *Double Head Matches* (2002-2003), composed of a movie and 20,000 matches, modified so that both ends were covered in phosphorous, a gesture that would have not been legal elsewhere, but was still possible in the Romania of the 2000s, that is, before its inclusion in the European Union. The work was also shown in Belgium divided politically between Flammands and Wallons,<sup>362</sup> referring through poetic representation to the divisions that burn with similar flames if they are ever lighted.

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<sup>360</sup>Marius Babias, exhibition statement, <http://www.reprezentacenaroda.cz/en/about/galerie-vytvarneho-umeni-v-hodonine/>. Accessed 15 June 2012.

<sup>361</sup>Krisztina Szipőcs, "Over the Counter: The Phenomena of Post-socialist Economy in Contemporary Art," in *Idea arts + society*, No. 35, (2010), 84.

<sup>362</sup>Christine Macel, "Mircea Cantor," in *Les promesses du passé*, 58.

Matei Bejenaru and Stefan Constantinescu's works have recently been included in the project *Romanian Cultural Resolution*, featuring a large variety of Romanian artists, grouped in three distinct sections. This project debated the cultural production of post-Communism, defined by Western set of norms and mechanisms of cultural dissemination, but also as a result of self-colonisation, as Babias describes it:

self-colonisation refers to the metamorphosis of the identity of entire regions. The developing interest in recent years in East European art and culture follows the same itinerary as politics and economics; it is not shaped by the logic of the cultural sphere. The dilemma in which East Europeans find themselves aroused from the fact that the pressing need to tackle the phenomenon of self-colonisation leads indirectly to a buttressing of the Western hegemony in the post-Communist East, for it occurs in the very expression of its critique. This is particularly so, because those East European artists and intellectuals who are invested with the power to speak draw their authority and independence, not least in economic terms, from the West.<sup>363</sup>

Cristian Nae acknowledges the problematic configuration of artistic identity in terms of post-Communism, which “like other cultural ‘posts’... embodies itself an essentially relational condition ... it may be considered to be the closure of modernism or its completion, as the failure of materialized Communist ideology as a modernist emancipator program, or as the discourse of the unrealized potential of modernism, that is of the ‘off modern’.”<sup>364</sup> The ‘off modern’ is a term used by Svetlana Boym to describe a liminal condition. “Off-modern” follows a nonlinear conception of cultural evolution; it could follow spirals and zigzags, the movements of the chess knight and parallel lines

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<sup>363</sup> Marius Babias, “Self-Colonisation: Dan Perjovschi’s Critique of the Post-Communist Restructuring of Identity” in *Romanian Cultural Resolution*, 73.

<sup>364</sup> Cristian Nae, “Undoing the East: Postcommunist Art and the Performative Critique of Identity,” in *Romanian Cultural Resolution*, 17.

that intertwine on occasion asymptotically.”<sup>365</sup> The discourses that shape Eastern European identity are increasingly aware of the dichotomies implied and the dangers of excessive identification in terms of geo-political coordinates, while at the same time acknowledging the formation of a paradigm of ‘Easternness,’ both in terms of localization of production and the content required to be identified as such, through curatorial and exhibition projects. To avoid falling into the traps of marketing the East both as difference and as fixed identity, to be produced as “being refined, diverse, local and specific – with a flavour of exoticism, if possible,” Cristian Nae advances a performative analysis of this identity: “artistic identity in the cultural field is not only represented in language or images, neither described nor invented, but is simply performatively produced; it is the result of performative cultural acts and not a substantive description or a behavioural attribute of the ‘given’ set of differences.”<sup>366</sup> The exoticism, sometimes considered barbarism, could be summed up in Perjovschi’s ironic words: “I am not exotic, I am exhausted.”

Matei Bejenaru’s works were included in the section called *Fetish Factory* curated by Adrian Bojenoiu, presenting *Together* (2007), *Strawberry Fields Forever* (2002) and *M3 Work, Memory, Movement* (2008), along with Stefan Constantinescu’s *Archive of Pain, Troliebuzul 92*, and *The Golden Age for Children*. Pavel Braila’s *Shoes for Europe* (2002) and Dan Perjovschi’s drawings were part of this exhibition, as well as his long-term work/performance, *Romania /Removing Romania* (1993-2003). This section of the exhibition considered the stereotypical perception of Eastern art, as a

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<sup>365</sup> Svetlana Boym, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/o/off-modern/off-modern-svetlana-boym.html>. Accessed 20 June, 2012.

<sup>366</sup> Cristian Nae, “Undoing the East: Postcommunist Art and the Performative Critique of Identity,” in *The Romanian Cultural Revolution*, 18.

modality of fetishizing a traumatic past and its re-workings in post-Communism through cultural productions.<sup>367</sup> Pavel Braila's *Shoes for Europe*, a 26-minute movie, addresses the differences between East and West. Romania is part of the Western understanding and imaginary of the East. However, even this assumption can be further disjointed. For the Republic of Moldavia, Romania signifies the West. Braila tackles this subversive understanding of the East-West relationship in a movie showing the trains being altered in order to cross the border between Moldavia and Romania: trains have to 'change their shoes,' to transform their mobility, passing from a longer to a shorter axial configuration. Braila's movie contains no dialogue, showing only the changing of the wheels as preparation for the journey of getting through the borders toward "West." He depicts the physicality of crossing borders and the ever-challenging dilemmas of defining West and East: "It's about isolation, which is not only imaginary, but also practical."<sup>368</sup> He filmed the entire movie with two cameras during only one night, due to both time restraints belonging to the changing operation itself, but also because it was filmed at the border between a former Soviet Union country and Romania. He represents these border constraints, and also makes them constitutive of the production itself. A similar strategy was used in the performance *Welcome to EU* (2006), which was closely monitored by Moldavian authorities. Moldova is not part of the EU. Against the background of the official song of European Union, Braila modified his own passport and those of the participants, by printing on it the well-known European symbol with 12 stars, an action that represented an infringement of state policies. Crossing the line between artistic

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<sup>367</sup> Adrian Bojenoiu, "Fetish Factory," in *The Romanian Cultural Revolution*, 71.

<sup>368</sup> Pavel Braila, "On the West Track: Interview with Pavel Braila by Vlad Morariu," in *Idea arts + society*, No. 27, (2007), 101.

license and illegality as social practice is an artistic strategy also employed by Bejenaru in his work *Travel Guide*.

Cultural production defined in migratory terms decentralizes and questions notions of integration, adaptation or recuperation of ‘Eastness.’ Artistic production does not replicate an existing reality, but creates alternate versions of cultural “identity,” either prescribed from outside, or stemming from internal subjectifications. If cultural production in Romania is defined as different from the West and its conceptualizing canons of inclusion of the East, immigration follows similar routes of negotiating the construction of floating identities. A debate took place in 2010 at the *Romanian Athenaeum* in Bucharest between Gabriel Liiceanu, a well-known philosopher and cultural figure in Romania, and Herta Müller, German writer of Romanian origin who immigrated in Germany before 1989. Immigration as social symptom of the decommunization period is a phenomenon that follows on the footsteps of immigration as a means of escaping Communism. Whereas some individuals managed to breach the confines of Communist Romania – Müller immigrated in 1987 – others remained in the country. But within the country, a subtle process of cultural and social internal immigration took place. Liiceanu’s question – “what happens to a whole generation who have never felt at home precisely because they did not identify with the language that was supposed to give them public expression?”<sup>369</sup> – generated a tense public discussion, which opposed two irreconcilable worldviews. Müller advocated an extreme form of opposition that should have taken place in Communist Romania, condemning the silent cultural resistance that many of those who remained in the country managed to practice.

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<sup>369</sup> Gabriel Liiceanu, “Liiceanu in dialogue with Herta Müller” *Dilema veche*, No. 347, 2010 (Romanian version); *Eurozine* (English version) Online publication accessed March 5, 2012.

Müller's aggressive condemnation of the apolitical stance of Romanians during Communism and lack of overt dissident movements opened up a Pandora's box of debate, though dialogue could not fill in the gaps of understanding and knowledge between those who left and those who stayed, any more than it could for those sharing similar social patterns of existence. Cultural representations conform to this indeterminacy of meaning, since they imply a reevaluation of the past that is marred with moral dilemmas. Still unsolved, they bring to the surface important nuances that go beyond a simple reduction to moral binaries. There were those who chose to immigrate – making therefore a radical gesture of denial, putting their lives and future in danger, but acquiring a freedom of speech and of artistic expression not possible in the Romania of those times, and there were those who remained and chose not to follow doctrinary rules of cultural representation and who, though not directly opposing the totalitarian regime through their cultural production, confronted it by not entering “the equation which destroyed language,”<sup>370</sup> by not being subsumed to its ideological norms. The result was “withdrawing into an insular field of competence.”<sup>371</sup>

Müller's criticism was welcome with loud rounds of applause by an audience composed of people who experienced life before 1989 and others born after. In subsequent discussions and public debates, the moral responsibility under an oppressive regime came up repeatedly, as a way of dealing with the memory of a totalitarian regime, confronting opinions coming from people living in the country and others who belong to a Western perspective. This was the case of the dialogue between Andrei Plesu, a

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Andrei Plesu, “The Logic of Accusation has No End,” *Dilema veche*, No. 369, 2011, Eurozine (English version) Online <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2011-05-25-michnikplesu-en.html>, Accessed March 9 2012.

Romanian art historian, and Adam Michnik, a Polish historian, which took place on 14 February 2011, on the same stage at the Romanian Athenaeum. They discussed the “resistance through culture,” Michnik acknowledging the small cultural gestures that appear when freedom is denied, repositioning the previous discussion within the laws of normality. As he puts it: “I find it rather risky, from an emigrant's point of view, to morally reproach those who did not emigrate ... I have enormous respect for those who did not emigrate, who wanted to stay where life was most difficult. I have never criticized emigrants. But I don't enjoy listening when they accuse others, such as me, of not having been courageous enough ... Herta Müller reproached Romanian intellectuals for not being heroes. However, you are allowed to expect heroism only from yourself, not from someone else.”<sup>372</sup>

The patterns of mobility and of migration that characterize Romanian society and art scene include multiple vectors, some of them stemming from the past, but also triggered in the present by a complex geo-political situation, with important consequences in the production and dissemination of artworks.

**MATEI BEJENARU: *TRAVEL GUIDE, 2005-2007***

Matei Bejenaru is an artist working and living in Iasi, Romania, a city situated in the Northern-Eastern part of Romania, functioning geographically and culturally as a border point between Romania, Ukraine, and Republic of Moldavia. Bejenaru is also the founder of the *Periferic Biennial* that took place between 1997-2010 in Iasi, an institutional platform for promoting and debating contemporary art established as

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<sup>372</sup> Adam Michnik, “The Logic of Accusation Has No End.”

important counteractive manifestation to the centralization of art happening in Bucharest. Apart from the exhibition opportunities offered by the Biennial, there were other initiatives in Iasi, such as the publication of *Vector* magazine – Bejenaru serving on the editorial board – promoting a critical interpretation of the social environment of Eastern European countries, fostering discussions and debates on cultural production and their connection with the public social sphere. *Vector* gallery was the institutional venue that consolidated the visual artistic discourse of the region. Some of the Biennial's editions continue to be informative about aspects of importance defining this artistic production. Important in this respect are *Between Centre and Periphery* (2000), *Local Players-Global Players* (2001), *Prophetic Corners* (2003) and *Focusing Iasi* (2006).

Bejenaru addresses the “periphery” in a multiple-folded perspective, inquiring into the artistic manifestations of societies that have not completed their decommunization and also the art production of this social space, its tools of dissemination, and access to visibility within an artistic global perspective. These topics are echoed in the development of the *Periferic Biennial*, as well as in Bejenaru's own artistic practice, which reflects on the representation of the social crisis of this society. *Periferic Biennial* grew from a local event – peripheral with respect to the center of cultural power represented by Bucharest in the 1990s – into an important manifestation of contemporary art, gradually linking Romanian artists with international ones, performing a form of artistic migration on both directions, both from inside to the exterior but also the other way round. It exposed a double folded approach to artistic collaborations, promoting “regional mobility.”<sup>373</sup> In this case, international exposure does not refer solely to the Western art world, but also to an essential re-evaluation and re-positioning within the art of the East. Bejenaru underlines

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<sup>373</sup> Matei Bejenaru, <http://www.networkedcultures.org/index.php?tdid=45>. Accessed March 5, 2012.

this necessity: “Unfortunately, at present, we don’t know much about each other.

Romanians know very little about Macedonians, Bosnians know almost nothing about Romanians, and the Serbs have probably never traveled to Romania before. Both Bulgarians and Romanians are focusing too much on Brussels.”<sup>374</sup>

Bejenaru’s *Travel Guide* is a pocket brochure that acts as an unofficial guide for illegal immigration from Romania to Europe and more specifically, to the United Kingdom. The flags of Romania and the UK are butted together on the bright coloured cover of the folded brochure. The work contains real maps of train routes from Romania, to France and Belgium, with legends attached, locating with precision train stations, border stations or “punct terminus,” in this case, England. The brochure can be easily taken along due to its small format and the information is revealed by unfolding and expanding it, as a larger map that not only provides geographical positioning, but also valuable information on immigration trajectories and directions to be followed. Even the quality of the paper resembles that found in official travel guides. Elaborate textual information is offered in a systematic and clearly organized manner, so that pertinent data to be found easily. Columns of text run throughout the length of the brochure, with information subdivided in small chapters, ranging from “Ways of Getting to France or Belgium,” “By Bus,” “By Train,” “Travelling by Boat,” “Basic Information about Containers,” to “About the Illegal Romanians in Great Britain.” Hand-drawn maps in blue colour draw attention to important points of transit, while areas of interest in the Zeerbrugge harbour are singled out and highlighted with yellow permanent marker. Important visual clues are instantly spotted by the reader, the visitor to the exhibition, or the immigrant, as the case may be: photographs of harbour zones in Bruges and le Havre

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

and those depicting the actual container mechanisms are digitally altered to include vectors of bright red color, marking distances and important spots. A colour chart provides graphic information on the degree of risk in crossing the frontiers at specific border transit points. The feasibility of selecting certain cities as transit points is statistically measured according to four factors, on a scale between 0 to 10, ranging from qualification such as “minimum/maximum” when referring to crossings and risk; “convenient/very difficult” when recording travel conditions; and “inattentive/alert,” qualifying the vigilance of the border control. Each of these elements is represented graphically by a different coloured column of indicative heights.

#### *THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT OF IMMIGRATION*

Bejenaru addresses the processes of immigration in *Travel Guide* and *Maersk Dubai* from the point of view of the Romanian society, which lived through several waves of immigration after 1989. *Travel Guide*, as an explicit and controversial guide for illegal immigrants, outlined all necessary steps to be taken to reach their destination country. The work was completed in 2005, two years before Romania became a member of the European Union. The *Travel Guide* no longer has any practical function in political and geographical terms because the borders between Romania and the European Union have become fluid. But it perpetuates in artistic form its desired “obsolescence.”

What was once a real challenge, involving even the possibility of death, is nowadays merely a formality. As a consequence, the illegal aspect of immigration has diminished; but the process of immigration itself continues to be very active in a country

still fraught with political instability.<sup>375</sup> Twenty years after the fall of Communism, some Romanian politicians were still contesting the legitimacy of the Romanian diaspora's vote. In 2005, when Matei Bejenaru conceived *Travel Guide* as an artistic project, "Romania had an active population of 8.3 million (age range between 20 and 45 years). Romanians who work abroad represent 10% of the country's population and 25% of the working population. Practically one out of four active Romanians work abroad, legally or illegally."<sup>376</sup> The guide represented a population trying to change its economic status through illegal immigration, influencing not only the situation in the country of destination but even the one at home. The money they sent back "made a more significant contribution to the budget balance than foreign investments. The economic growth of the past 5 years (ie. 2002-2007) began to be influenced by the money sent from abroad (the 4.9% GDP increase in 2004 was due to the 7% consumption increase, whereas the medium wage hasn't increased the same)."<sup>377</sup> The 2011 census established that the population of Romania had decreased significantly over the previous two decades, reduced by 3.8 million people since 1992. From 2002 to 2011 the country lost 2.6 million people, the largest loss during peace time, according to the Romanian National Institute of Statistics.<sup>378</sup> This shrinking of the population is due to a great extent to the large

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<sup>375</sup> Beginning on 16 January 2012, Romania witnessed large social demonstrations against the government, health system, retirement benefits, education, public acquisitions, and public political figures. Both the representatives of the government and of the opposition parties were rejected when they attempted to join the demonstrations in University Square. The range of distrust was widespread. These were the largest demonstrations since the 1989 revolution, and are symptomatic for a transition society still struggling to overcome the long-term Communist legacy. In June 2012, another political crisis was strongly felt. In six months, no less than three prime ministers were appointed.

<sup>376</sup> Matei Bejenaru, "Travel Guide," in *Situatii/Situations*, (Bucharest: Galeria Posibila, 2007), 80.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Adelina Mihai, *Financial Newspaper/Ziarul Financiar*, "E oficial: România a pierdut 2,6 milioane de locuitori din 2002 până în prezent. Cea mai mare pierdere de populație pe timp de pace," Friday, February 3rd 2012, Online edition, accessed February 4th 2012.

number of Romanians deciding to immigrate, most of them to Western European countries, such as: UK, Spain, and Italy.

Whereas Bejenaru's *Travel Guide* functions as an artistic project, bringing into representation and visibility the social situation of illegal immigration, it does so by playing against the mechanisms that deny the very existence of the people they depict. The work is presented in large museums, thereby acquiring a degree of legitimacy. Ironically, it is acceptable to talk about illegal immigration within such a context, as long as the illegals can be contained. The guide was designed to be used by both illegal immigrants and museum-goers. *Travel Guide* was exhibited in numerous galleries, museums and biennials, in Romania and abroad, among them Thyssen-Bornemisza Contemporary Art Vienna, Nestroyhof Vienna, (2006), Prague Biennial 3, (2007), Posibila Gallery, Bucharest, Romania, (2007), Tate Modern London – Level 2 Gallery (2007), the UK, and Mucsarnok Museum, Budapest, as part of *Over the Counter* group show.

#### ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION ON THE “INVISIBILITY” OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

Even though pervasive in contemporary world, illegal immigrants do not belong to any success story. They are “out of view, out of thought and out of action.”<sup>379</sup> They remain hidden: a dark little secret, uncovered in this case by artistic discourse. Bejenaru's project is literally a travel guide for illegal immigrants, an attempt that would probably have failed if published as a regular brochure, outside the artistic aesthetic and conceptual discourse. It could have been banned, precisely because it contained information about illicit ways of crossing the border. As Bejenaru states: “I don't think it would have been

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<sup>379</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2004), 24-5.

legal, as it was encouraging the breaking of immigration laws ... Therefore it would not have been lucrative. I had to explain over and over again that it was an artistic project ... that art had the right to be on the verge of the law and to criticize the system.”<sup>380</sup>

Challenging legality through art, Bejenaru’s project underlined the situation of those to whom the guide is addressed, who “experience a fragile and uncertain relationship to the law and to the states – those that have expelled them and those that have accepted them.”<sup>381</sup>

Inclusion of the guide within artistic discourse allows the artist to bring to the surface information accessed with difficulty by emigrants and without which they might risk their lives when embarking on this voyage. Bejenaru makes underground knowledge public, making official what normally remains carefully guarded within the economics of society’s rules and behavior. His project takes the form of an installation and a brochure to be distributed to the audience. The project was first published in the art journal *Idea arts + society*, Cluj Napoca, Romania in 2005, addressing primarily an art audience. One year later, Tyssen – Bornemysza Contemporary Art commissioned a public art project in which the map detailing routes of immigration was mounted as large street billboards, to be read and accessed by passers-by, and therefore by people who would not necessarily enter an exhibition space, immigrants and their friends among them, democratizing it and potentially reaching those who would had practical need for this information. The text of the street advertisement image reads: “Look carefully ... visas, borders, and you are in England.” Furthermore, the project was exhibited as an installation, with brochures easily

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<sup>380</sup> Matei Bejenaru, *Situations: Artist Talk, Micropolitics*, Exhibition Catalogue, (Galerija Miroslav Kraljevic, Zagreb, 2007), 4.

<sup>381</sup> Michel Agier, *On the Margins of the World: The Refugee Experience Today*, (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2008), 10-11.

accessed by visitors, who could grab them and take them away, as free information. Some of them might have been immigrants themselves. The railway map on the cover of the brochure is also presented separately as a greatly enlarged image, mapped out either horizontally on the floor, with visitors literally stepping on this blown-up red chart that fully reveals the routes of immigration, or vertically on the walls of the gallery space. Visually, this map cannot be avoided. It is presented to be analyzed, either with curiosity, or in view of extracting precious information. Tate Modern London displayed the *Travel Guide* in 2007, an exhibition choice all the more charged since the guide described in minute detail how Romanian immigrants could illegally reach the United Kingdom. Bejenaru interrogates the functioning of an art project within a gallery environment and outside the perimeter of artistic discourse, turning a document into a valid art gesture and an artistic act into a document with practical functionality.

The strategy of subverting the immigration rules applying in society, was also employed by Tania Ostojic in her work *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* (2000-2005). It comprises a participatory web project, performance and media installation with color photographs. She published an advertisement containing a nude self-portrait, as a visual token for her eligibility as immigrant, marketing herself to be suitable for marriage with a man who could help her gain EU citizenship. The project verged on illegality. After exchanging 500 letters with applicants around the word she staged a meeting-performance in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade in 2001, performing this meeting as representation and real event, which led to the marriage that was supposed to grant her the visa and legal papers needed to reside in Germany. Her status was never quite clarified; she received only short-term residential permits. The

final phase of the project was the *Divorce Party* organized as part of the Integration Project Office Installation in Berlin in 2005. Her works defines a gendered condition of the post-Communist era, fake marriages being sometimes the only solution for immigration, as a means of acquiring a new legal status. Her artistic representation is radical, exposing herself to prosecution and deportation. As Bojana Pejic notes: “Twenty years after the Wall fell, one can even claim that visual artist in Eastern Europe have provided us with the most radical social criticism by deconstructing traditionalist values accepted by the new post-socialist societies, such as nationalism and patriarchy.”<sup>382</sup>

#### *TRAVEL GUIDES FOR CROSSING BORDERS*

Travel guides usually provide advice, tips and destination information, promoting amazing places, the adventure of a lifetime, gateways, popular places, sizzling cuisine and restaurants, nightlife, glamorous resorts and hotel facilities, and exclusive deals. Local knowledge – the insider’s view – offers invaluable insights into a way of living otherwise inaccessible. Lists have been made: best restaurants, best hotels, and top shopping spots. Some of these guides even make an inventory of common mistakes, whether linguistic or behavioral, based on cultural differences, all with the declared intent of facilitating planning for a trip to be remembered. Everything is supplemented with maps, sketches, and photos to better equip travellers for their journey. The intended result is to trigger as few surprises as possible. Travel guides pretend to erase at least part of the unknown that lies ahead in any journey. The Romanian artist Matei Bejenaru does exactly this. The twist is that the audience is not meant to enjoy a leisurely trip, but to dig out vital information

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<sup>382</sup> Bojana Pejic, “Postcommunist Genderscapes,” in *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter Konig, 2010), 250.

for a successful border crossing and safe arrival at their desired destination: he gives tips on how to reach the desired country illegally, whether by train, by air or by sea, and how to avoid the surveillance of frontiers and law enforcement officers who are themselves aware of these channels of illegal transport.

The traces of illegal immigration that Bejenaru brings into the open follow the rules of insecurity. Despite the large number of refugees and immigrants, their existence is “generally conducted away from the global gaze,”<sup>383</sup> being a “population formed out of this confusion, this mixture of impasse and rejection. A single population but not a homogeneous one, made up of individual trajectories of wandering.”<sup>384</sup> Each of their destinations is potentially unstable, since they do not benefit from any clear status: in order to reach a destination, illegal immigrants have to obtain visas, sometimes fake passports, to develop human connections, to acquire work permits along the way, and they have to change their housing constantly. Under these conditions, this controversial travel guide seems to be more than welcome, as a rough compass for their journey.

Matei Bejenaru’s project instructs the illegal immigrant on how to avoid being caught on the liminal space of the frontier. However, the border – as a “refracted membrane” that allows the free circulation from the inside to the exterior and which prevents the unwanted elements of the exterior from penetrating in – becomes a “space without a world” once those attempting to break it are acknowledged as illegal immigrants. This status places them in the so-called “zones d’attentes,” where their future is to be determined, but which does not follow the rules and laws applicable to citizens that are not “flawed.” Frontiers become extremely charged spaces, meant to differentiate

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid.,10.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.,11.

the interior from the exterior, and to separate the polluted elements from the safe ones.

“The frontier is the site of a risk of contamination,” or “pollution” of identity. The notion of pollution is found in the writings of Mary Douglas, who associates it with the idea of the margin: “polluted shores are polluting, thus frontiers must remain impermeable.”<sup>385</sup>

Michel Agier analyzes the new borders erected against illegals. These new ‘screening vestibules’ are meant to control and redirect the illegal foreigners and asylum seekers, but they become camps that temporarily shelter the “undesirable populations, refugees, the internally displaced, undocumented foreigners.”<sup>386</sup> Their role is to face the new migrational phenomenon and to redefine the zones of exceptions: borders are “more impermeable and more complex in order to better filter out and reject.” These new forms of encampment deny the principles that stood at the basis of their foundation and existence. As Agier suggests, they activate extraterritorial rules and normative laws, applying the principle of control for the “undesirable.” He defines this problematic situation as “locked up outside” and “isolated on the inside.” Under these circumstances borders become spaces of surveillance par excellence, marked by material means of banning the entrances of the unwanted: electric, barbed wires and concrete walls, but also less visible check points, activated when illegals are concerned. This defense system is supported by the adjacent spaces, which are transformed into “confinement areas” where the screenings take place “transit centers, holding zones, reception and detention centers.”<sup>387</sup> A successful immigration crossing means avoiding these systems of surveillance and control.

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>386</sup> Michel Agier, “The Camps of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” 240.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 241.

*IMMIGRANT COLLECTIVE IDENTITY*

As heterogeneous as migrating populations might be in terms of legal status, conditions of displacement, and the causes that triggered their situation, they share a challenging unity: “an identity of existence that is unforeseen, unnamable and on the margins of common humanity.”<sup>388</sup> By crossing the border, individuals are expected to become part of a larger community. A community that proves to be illusory, in Marc Augé’s terms, or rather a community that poses problems of identification from the very moment one tries to define and contain the notion of community: “Identifying with a singular term individuals who have something ‘in common’ means to create an illusory entity, taking its desires or its fears as realities.”<sup>389</sup> The attempt to relegate individuals to a prescribed collectivity fails to take into account the specificity by which these individuals are identified, either by themselves or by others, in relationship to members of their society.

In spite of the illusory quality of this generic attribution, the cohesion that they experience as immigrants creates a new collective identity, without the solidity of race, nationality, and religion. It often remains less manifest and less publicly declared. When confirmed and acknowledged publicly, their status throws them toward the social periphery and identifies them with the figure of the unwelcome stranger, the intruder. In the absence of public acknowledgement and legitimization, their access to visibility is made in the form of stories, or other cultural products bearing witness to their radical displacement, as in the case of Bejenaru’s *Guide*. As Agier explains, this recognition is a

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<sup>388</sup> Michel Agier, *On the Margins of the World*, 73.

<sup>389</sup> Marc Augé, *La communauté illusoire*, (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2010), 21. Original in French: “Englober sous un même terme des individus qui ont quelques chose ‘en commun,’ c’est créer une entité illusoire, prendre ses désires ou ses craintes pour des réalités.” Author’s translation

redemptive act of humanity that would restore the rights taken away from them by their status of refugees, illegal immigrants and displaced people. Agier's question is symptomatic: "to what point are people still marked physically and morally by the sufferings of ... exodus – internally in their own memories and externally in the views of others?"<sup>390</sup>

#### *RULES OF MOBILITY*

Bejenaru's *Travel Guide* provides tips on how to reach the desired country whether by train, by air or by sea. By sea, containers provide a relatively safe environment if enhanced by the application of skills and practical abilities. The text of the brochure enumerates situations, solutions and advice: "it is necessary to have at least four litres of mineral water, several chocolate bars, bread and dry salami, some pills, a flash lamp, a lever, a hammer and pliers. Never travel alone."<sup>391</sup> Designed to transport economic goods, containers can be refurbished to serve as mobile homes for immigrants. In other instances they represent "permanent" houses – in a state of temporality – as also happens in the port of Amsterdam where they host Dutch students. The versatility of these solutions responds to a liquidity of society defined through its changing patterns. Transportation devices had to adapt to increasing demands for capacity: modular containers responded to the need for rapid exchange between modes of transport, by land, air or sea. Ironically, containers providing human housing, or transportation, offer illegal immigrants a solution to their dilemma. They can also prove to be their burial sites, as has happened to countless individuals who attempted to reach their destination hidden in

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<sup>390</sup> Michel Agier, *On the Margins of the World*, 75.

<sup>391</sup> Matei Bejenaru, "Travel Guide," in *Situations*, 99.

claustrophobic containers, often with insufficient breathing space, and poor insulation against the freezing cold outside. In Bejenaru's *Guide* a photograph annotated with red permanent marker unveils the security mechanism of the container, so that those wanting to enter have access to descriptive, technical, but also visual clues: "containers can be easily unlocked with a metal lever."<sup>392</sup> Crucial information needs to be digested before embarking. Some can be found in the harbour newspaper, such as "departures and arrivals, the date, the time, the destination ... and the transporting company."<sup>393</sup> A chart gives the technical data of the journey. Moreover, "once in the container with the desired destination, check the ratio of the amount of load to the remaining space. The more space you have in the container, the easier you can breathe. Each container has two little air holes on the upper part of the door side ... It is advisable that no more than three persons should be in the container."<sup>394</sup> This information spelled out in Bejenaru's *Guide* can prove to be the difference between life and death. Many of those who attempted to cross the English Channel in containers died from suffocation.

The container – as a confining model of housing, as a vehicle of long-haul exile that could well turn out to be "one-way" – apart from its practical function and utility has been already included in the cultural and social space. Paul Virilio mentions the artistic manifestations of *Hotel Everland* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (2007-2008), which was offered for rent as a "night-time shelter" or the cylindrical cabins designed to offer shelter in Heathrow airport for transit passengers. Bejenaru mirrors this discourse in his art project.

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>394</sup> Matei Bejenaru, *Situations*, 98.

The current mobilization of migrants is discussed by Virilio as one of the most “important political events in the history of humanity,”<sup>395</sup> their destination being altered to follow the rules of the *ultracity*, marked by outsourcing “where the external has been winning hands down over the internal everywhere you turn, and geo-physical history has been turned outside out like a glove.”<sup>396</sup> This phenomenon transforms the rules and bio-political status applied to migrant populations: “At the end of 2007 the cities of La Haye and Rotterdam alone were facing an influx of 40,000 new migrants. The idea of setting up containers to accommodate Polish laborers was being touted ... and nobody was put off by such a blatantly segregationist practice at local government level in relation to foreigners from the Eastern European Community.”<sup>397</sup> Social and economic conditions of the twenty-first century are defined by what Virilio called a “portable revolution,” by an accelerated migrational phenomenon, which determines the development of the *ultracity*, as a space of departure, as a temporary residing space, in fact as a halt for numerous other destinations. Migration engenders floating identities, which in their turn are determined by the new speed that characterizes their movement. In this context of rapid transformations, traceability replaces identity, as Virilio points out.

The large mass movements that nowadays affect populations seems to be unchanged when compared to migration statistics after each of the World Wars. Nevertheless, what is missing from these accounts are the illegal immigrants who go undocumented and who remain unknown and therefore not registered until the moment they are “tracked down,” caught, indexed and finally, surveyed. The illegals represent,

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<sup>395</sup> Paul Virilio, *Native Land. Stop Eject*, (Paris: Foundation Cartier pour art contemporain, 2008), 188.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

“the missing energy of the expanding world of population in exile.”<sup>398</sup> Paradoxically, Bejenaru’s *Guide* reveals immigrants’ trajectories, making their strategies and existences visible, but his intention in doing so is to make it possible for them to remain covered; by not being caught and brought to light, they lack visibility, and continue to be defined as “missing energy.”

Bejenaru’s *Travel Guide* conveys in an art form information normally concealed, but known to a certain extent both by immigrants and by authorities, providing a form of artistic accountability to their vulnerability, restoring their status of being “invisible by not looking at them, and unthinkable by not thinking.” Within functional societies, illegals are considered to be byproducts, peripheral elements that need to be kept under control. They represent, as Zygmunt Bauman points out, “the human waste,” the “great unknown, which all strangers in our midst embody,”<sup>399</sup> and moreover, they bring with them “distant noises of war and the stench of a gutted home,” threatening to a certain degree the security of those who receive them. The artist rejects this condemnation. As he points out, “I have conceived this guide as a sign of solidarity with the Romanian young people who couldn’t find their place in their own country and who were taking great risks to get abroad and to make something of themselves.”<sup>400</sup>

Illegal immigrants are part of a larger phenomenon of migration. Modern times are witnessing an unprecedented mutation, a “planetary repopulation,” as Virilio stated in a conversation with Raymond Depardon, with whom he had an exhibition at Foundation Cartier in Paris in 2008, called *Native Land*. This radical event of recent history is likely to be expanded in the years to come, and to include not only a re-location from the rural

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>399</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 66.

<sup>400</sup> Matei Bejenaru, “Travel Guide,” in *Situations*, 61.

to the urban space – most common in the last half of the century, but most important, from urban to urban centers. Whereas the problem of migration is far from being a new phenomenon, the novelty of Virilio’s approach lies in the fact that he identifies the possibility of an entire social stratum of the population dissolving into the new model of “living – together,” the city. Yet, as the world advances into the twenty-first century, the radical difference stems from the nature of the urban space. Migration has imposed a new rhythm, that of velocity, of speed, where everything escapes fixivity. Bejenaru’s *Guide* follows the trajectory of the big cities, as preferred choices for first-time immigrants, since they offer bigger economic opportunities than other more remote places. The graphic map, present both on the cover of the brochure and largely blown-up on the walls of the galleries, lists important cities in Romania as potential departure points – among them Satu Mare, Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Bucharest, (the list is quite extensive) – and continues to identify the nodal urban places in the immigration trajectory, passing through Paris, Zeerbrugge, Calais and Le Havre in order to reach the United Kingdom, through Hull, Newcastle, Dover, Southampton, Plymouth or Bristol.

#### *PRACTICAL INFORMATION FOR THE ILLEGALS*

Every step is taken into consideration in Bejenaru’s *Travel Guide*, starting with potential reasons for immigration and the risks involved in such an endeavour. An informed comparison between conditions encountered in England or Spain helps the would-be immigrants to sort out their goals and to make a choice for their future lives. A strategic map and a chart is offered for consultation, indicating the various routes to be taken in order to transgress a country’s borders, England’s for example, by water, train or

plane. However, the preliminary steps to be considered involve the modalities of reaching other European countries, like France, or Belgium. The bus route appears to be the cheapest one and thus potentially the most advantageous; however, Bejenaru identifies the pitfalls of this option, as it might involve stricter controls and routine checks at the borders and therefore it can be dangerous. The guide states that the 500 Euros that Romanians were required by law to show at the border can be borrowed on a short-termed basis from some bus companies. The number of border checks, length of wait times, amount of money needed, as well as the bus routes and travel connections, all these things are listed with precision. Bejenaru discloses the meeting places of the immigrants established in Paris, where useful information can be obtained regarding transit to England. Paris, in its turn, is presented not in an easily recognizable tourist fashion, but from a different perspective, as a place of underworld communication channels accessed by immigrant communities and their potential hotspots. It is an unfamiliar cartography of Paris for immigrants, presented with places to sleep, cheap hotels, bus itineraries, stations, prices and general advice. Visually, the *Guide* presents hand-drawn maps, with important strategic points singled out with thick lines of color, or underlined with permanent markers; a copy of a plane ticket Bucharest – Bergen via London issued by KLM Royal Dutch Airlines reigns with its pink inklings, on top of which is officially written in large black capital letters: NOT GOOD FOR PASSAGE, as a double visual reminder of both the possibility and the refusal that such a plane ticket can imply.

Further on, the crossing of the English Channel can be made, according to the guide, either by ferryboat or by loaded truck. In order to successfully reach one's

destination, one piece of clothing proves essential, the “sleeping bag with double aluminum foil,” to protect the illegal passenger from being discovered, since thermic and sweat sensors are installed in order to detect the presence of the hidden human body. Photographs come into play, supplementing textual information with depictions of the wagons – fundamental knowledge for getting through the Eurotunnel. Their documentary status is taken at face value in this case. They represent evidence recording the whereabouts of strategic places in the immigrants’ journey. All details are important: the crossing of the fence in order to reach the railway yard; the tarpaulin covering the wagons; the proper time to leave during the night; the acquaintances that should be made at the railway station; and the fact that this journey should never be undertaken alone.

*A PERMANENT JOURNEY*

Whereas a journey can be the beginning of an exile, travelling is not the same as immigration. A trip from one place to another can represent a short trajectory, without charged moments, a destination to be reached. On the contrary, the journey of immigration can be prolonged indefinitely, with frequent stops, most of them unwanted, occurring not because of a pre-planned itinerary, but in order for the immigrants to be controlled. Frontiers are raised all over the place, even without them being physically installed: a trip in a foreign city without proper documentation, the possibility of immigrant gatherings being monitored and surveyed, or simply a walk to the grocery store. They all have the potential of becoming a journey on which the immigrant can be tracked down. The guide does not stop after offering important details and information on the journey itself, but continues with the necessary steps to be taken once the illegal

immigrants arrive at their destination, where they should become, to a certain extent, invisible. That is, in order to survive there, their social identity has to change into the lasting invisibility that they will face as part of the community. Bejenaru offers guidelines regarding the first months of staying in England as illegal immigrants in order to facilitate their existence, with information ranging from accessible jobs, places likely to be friendly for them, tips on police raids, and the best means of transportation to avoid a routine police check.

Once illegals have arrived at their destination, their status changes radically. A new collective identity is formed based on vulnerability. From belonging to a recognizable and “visible” community, they are transformed into individuals who belong nowhere. But this “nowhere” is materialised through the physical phase of crossing borders. Bejenaru provides a companion in this journey, both as a valid guiding document and as artwork that has also travelled and adapted to different exhibitionary complexes along this trajectory. Supplementing the descriptive and visual strategies of regular travel guides, adjoining image and explanatory text, together with statistical information presented in color charts, Bejenaru also subverts them by adding hand-drawn maps pointing to a more intimate and potentially illicit knowledge, which should be accessed only by few people. Yet, the intended audience is large; he inscribes this project into an international exhibition circuit; he enlarges maps of immigration routes, presents them in public places, and actively intervenes in social situations. He considers his art to be “situationist ... the outcome of a political way of thinking, with a special awareness when it comes to social issues.”<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Matei Bejenaru, “Interview Dan Lungu – Matei Bejenaru. Iasi, March 3rd 2007” in *Situatii/Situations*, (Bucharest: Galeria Posibila, 2007), 62.

PERSPECTIVES

*Travel Guide* was presented with *Together* at Tate Gallery London, the two works serving as opposite ends of the same story. The *Guide* provided survival kit information for immigrants. *Together*, a performance recorded as a film, depicting those who had managed to immigrate to the UK, appeared to represent success in their endeavour. The road in between is marked by all the untold stories, where failure cannot be denied.

In *Together* immigrants slowly form a temporary community, following the artist's instructions. Matei Bejenaru assembled 250 Romanian immigrants living in London, for a performance that took place in 2007 in front of the Tate Modern. He documented in a movie this public gathering, where, as the artist puts it, "they share a common attitude." The silent black and white movie, filmed in slow motion, does not personalize this gathering, apart from some individual close-up frames. Immigrants lack individuality here, and are defined only as belonging to a larger community. Apart from that, there are no shared traits identifiable as pertaining to a Romanian community, there are no names involved, nor any other specific characteristics that would point out to the nationality of the participants. Nevertheless, Bejenaru describes a certain feeling of uneasiness: "... many of them are very frustrated because of this label of being Romanians coming from a poor country, being seen here in this way. The film, I think, is interesting because it shows the emotion of these people, so you don't have to speak to use words because you just have to look to people and they have the power to send an emotion through a gaze."<sup>402</sup> They are not at ease being filmed, and moreover, they do not connect with each other. Even when sharing the new collective identity of immigrants,

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<sup>402</sup> Matei Bejenaru, *The Irresistible Force: Artist Talk*, 20 September 2007, Tate Channel, accessed January 28, 2012.

they remain isolated.

For the duration of the performance, immigrants occupy the same public space, which is not a neutral one, but quite the contrary. The plaza of the Tate Modern, and subsequently the presentation of the movie as part of *The Irresistible Force* exhibition, makes visible a community that once arrived and formed outside its native country, lacks cohesion and a sense of protectedness. It tends to become absorbed within the larger flux of immigrant communities or within the population at large, neutralizing its specific traits, and therefore experiencing a form of disappearance. This situation engenders a form of voicelessness that denies community its public existence. Bejenaru reverses this situation.

Bejenaru's performance *Strawberry Fields Forever* (2002) took place at the Center for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona, as part of eBENT Festival. The work addresses a large population of Romanian immigrants, most of them women living in Spain who pick strawberries for very low wages. His project consisted in making strawberry jam out of the very fruits gathered by these women workers and serving it to the public. Therefore he transformed a social act into an artistic product, investing his audience with a participatory agency. The same products can be purchased in grocery stores, leaving out the working conditions of these women. By relocating the act of strawberry jam production to the space of the gallery, he invests it with a value otherwise lost: the workers' production is valued and made to count through an active artistic intervention into the social. Moreover, the label plays a twisted role in this work. Normally part of an information system that allows the consumers to access the nutritional benefits of the product purchased, this label provides different information,

disclosing the hourly wages a woman would receive for her work: 3.29 Euro, representing the minimum salary in Spain at that time.

As pointed out by Alina Serban, Bejenaru is interested in “the dialogue with the nomadic communities, in the schizophrenia of transition,”<sup>403</sup> by referring to the concrete situations they have to face. In *Travel Guide, Together* and *Strawberry Fields Forever* Bejenaru produces a testimony that acts as a claim to the right for a “collective voice,” an awareness regarding the multiple potential drawbacks and dangers faced by the anonymity of the illegal immigrants.

**MATEI BEJENARU: MAERSK DUBAI, 2007**

*FEAR, VIOLENCE, SAFETY*

Matei Bejenaru’s video *Maersk Dubai* (2007) investigates the real danger of immigration, translated not only in terms of a problematic identity or social hardship, a memory and longing for another side of the border, but in this case into the actual deaths of immigrants. The artist recovers a few names from the anonymity of immigration and ultimately from the anonymity of death, making known and visible the violence that accompanied them, ultimately giving them a voice that breaks the silence of their “lives in between spaces.”

*Maersk Dubai* is a 8 minute-video shot entirely in black and white. It opens with footage of ocean waves – a low horizon and no shore. The waves occupy the image from the bottom, filling in almost completely the screen, where the horizon appears as no more than a thin strip of grey. This video is generally projected at large scale on a gallery wall.

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<sup>403</sup> Alina Serban, “Art as Social Practice,” in *Situatii/Situations*, (Bucharest: Galeria Posibila, 2007), 33.

The loud sound of breaking waves fills in the exhibition space. After a few seconds of this loud but uneventful sound, the artist-narrator, speaking in measured tones, begins to recount in Romanian the story of three immigrants, stowaways who died on their way to Canada, having been thrown overboard. This narrative appears to a foreign audience in subtitles, translating sound into text. After a quick display of photographs identifying the three immigrants, a map of Europe is slowly panned by the video camera. Ocean waves again fill the screen, to be taken over by images of ships in harbour and huge containers being carried away to be loaded for a transatlantic journey. The artist's voice continues to explain the deteriorating Romanian socio-economic conditions that have triggered so many decisions to immigrate. The filming is slow paced, lingering on close-up images of stacked containers or following their slow transportation with cranes from one industrial platform to another. This lengthy visual rendition is abruptly interrupted by the insertion of archive footage recreating the story of the three deaths. The rhythm of the film changes. This is footage appropriated from a previous documentary; Rodolfo Miguel, one of the sailors who witnessed the drama, recreates the events and the camera follows him closely across the narrow upper deck of a ship. It is a night shot with only one directed light partially illuminating the scene. The camera follows his hands as he points at specific places, and returning afterward to a larger angle. This sailor recalls in short broken-English sentences the events that led to the stowaways' deaths. His voice is frantic, as are his movements. When this dramatic rendition is stopped, no narrative voice continues the story. Bejenaru introduces a montage of family photographs depicting those who died, in complete silence, immediately followed by the same long shot of the ocean wave, which again fills exhibition space with its visual presence and loud sound.

This video was exhibited in Spain in a group show called *De Romania* at Canem Gallery in 2008, but also in Taiwan, at Taipei Biennial 2 in 2008. The Maersk Dubai was a Taiwanese ship; Bejenaru therefore connected the presentation of his video with a relevant social space. In Bucharest this video was exhibited in a solo show at Galeria Posibilia in Bucharest in 2007, in conjunction with *Travel Guide*. The walls of the gallery were painted black and visitors had to make their way through the space in darkness with the help of flashlights. On the walls were printed in white parts of the text contained in the *Travel Guide*, referring to the mechanism of opening the containers and the safety precautions to be taken by immigrants. This information was gradually brought to “light” by the wandering beams illuminating the room. The visitors’ cautious journey through the dark exhibition space ended in the room where *Maersk Dubai* was shown. They arrived at different points in the video, which ran in a loop. Benches provided rest. The loop strategy presupposes the irregular presence of the viewer, who might come in and out and only partially experience the projection, sometimes starting at the end, and staying to see it from the beginning, in order to complete the visualisation process. In this case, however, even though visitors might have missed part of the projection, there is some previous knowledge on immigration already assimilated, mediated culturally, through Bejenaris’s *Guide*. Thus the ocean waves appearing recurrently in Bejenaru’s video are already charged in this exhibitionary strategy, a situation not necessarily experienced as such in a group exhibition where this preliminary step is missing. The dark room where *Maersk Dubai* was projected at Galeria Posibilia could be reached after the rest of the exhibition had been experienced. *Travel Guide* functioned as a renewed guide, not only in terms of the actuality of the information provided, but as artistic guide,

which provided important art clues for the viewing process of yet another representation on immigration: the video *Maersk Dubai*.

The initial introduction into *Maersk Dubai's* visual representation of the story of immigration turned deadly is simultaneously static and marked by movement: a promise of transformation never accomplished. The film is informed by the visual and sound presence of the ocean waves, acting as backdrop for a narrative performed in voice-off. The waves seem to repeat the same movement throughout the movie in recurrent patterns, almost a visual loop. The ocean is filmed from a fixed camera position – a static perspective – with no changes in the visual field, only the waters eddying and flowing, filling almost the whole screen, opening toward fixed horizon. The sound of the ocean acts as the soundtrack. Initially, the visual field remains closed, it does not make visible anything other than itself.

When the sound of the ocean recedes and the voice of the artist is heard, the three murdered stowaways are identified by name – Radu Danciu, Petru Singeorzan and Florin Mihoc. Their itinerary before embarking on the ship *Maersk Dubai* was through several European countries. A map shows the connection between points of departure and arrival, round circles underlining the two fixed spots of their trajectory on firm land: Transylvania and Algeciras. One of them is generic, identifying a region in Romania (well-known to a foreign audience from other cultural productions, most of them bordering on the cliché) the other one is more specific, a city, but less known, except from a subjective point of view, acquiring a presence through Bejenaru's visual representation of this story of immigration: Algeciras, Spain. Stable geographical coordinates are shortly replaced by absence of localisation. Bejenaru reiterates the

presence of the ocean, in an identical manner to the one that marked the beginning of the movie. It retakes its position and its presence as the underlying element, or background, while the narration continues in voice-off. There is a movement from the specific to the general. Whereas to this point the immigrants' stories have been presented as individual instances of ominous fate, the artist extends the context toward the general socio-political conditions of post-Communist Romania, which generated severe situations of economic shutdown, prompting these people, and countless others, to choose the solution of immigration. The ocean represents a visual reiteration supplemented with an abundance of statistics and data. Its own generic movement is gradually animated by an image that at first seems static: a photograph of a harbour with transporting ships and cranes. It soon becomes obvious that this is a moving image, animated in the background by the slow advance of a ship – small in the visual field, large in reality – entering a harbour. This scene is soon followed by a movement from a long view to a more intimate one, making use of close-up images of containers stacked one on top of the other. The modular industrial shapes completely fill the screen, blocking any form of visual opening. Only a few visual elements interrupt this overwhelming monotony. Some of the containers are inscribed with the brand names of their provider company. The word “Capital” appears on one of these containers as an ironical reference, the more so when underscored by the narrator's voice positioning the immigrants' story and their tragic fate within the context of “a country striving to leave the communist dictatorship behind.”

The “Capital” container becomes suddenly animated, carried by a large crane in order to be loaded on a ship, the camera following this dynamic movement within a moving image that is otherwise static. Now the audience receives an explanation of the

uses of these containers for transportation, the narrating voice explaining that they carry across the ocean not only goods, but people, with “unbelievable stories.” It is “capital” that prompts the immigrants’ decisions, their movement across geo-political spaces, and it is the movement of the container inscribed “Capital,” floating above and carried by the crane with a back-and-forth movement that is filmed by Bejenaru as he relates the story of the ocean crossing.

Bejenaru constructs a narrative with few edited visual elements, which he, as director and narrator doubles by providing key elements of the socio-economic context of immigration. This formulaic presentation changes radically when he takes up the story of the three immigrants’ deaths. The artist brings in an external source of information, the fact that he found out about their fate from a documentary on Romanian television. Actual footage from this documentary is incorporated into Bejenaru’s movie. It contains recorded testimony from one of the sailors who witnessed the stowaways being thrown overboard; he bears witness to the last minutes of these immigrants’ lives. This archival footage occupies much space in Bejenaru’s construction. A reversal of language occurs: whereas until this moment, the language heard in Bejenaru’s voice-off narration is Romanian, the testimony of the sailor is in English. The audience experiences this change of language not only through sound, but also visually because subtitles are important elements of this video work. Translation is part of this experience of migration, metaphorically and actually; English subtitles are required for an international audience to decipher Bejenaru’s words, whereas the sailor’s English had to be translated for a Romanian audience. This testimony of death is closely followed by the visual presentation of a series of family photographs of the three immigrants, in total silence

that contrasts with the sailor's loud voice, just heard. This silence produces for the spectator a fissure in the experience of the movie, followed by the roar of ocean, whose sound levels these testimonies and stories. But they have been told and so this image of the water that seemed initially without traces, without marks, acquires new meaning, through this visual repetition. The audience experiences the loud "silence" of the absence of words against the backdrop of the water, in a shot held for an entire minute. This marks the end of the video, creating a space for contemplation in front of the moving image.

These immigrants traveled in illegality, exposing themselves to the dangers of being caught and subjected to the law. Bodies that embark on this type of travel are, from the very beginning, potentially at risk of being turned in, and consequently, of being subjected to severe punishment. As underlined by Zygmunt Bauman, in a situation when safety is enhanced, immigrants come to be associated with danger. Access to safety and the promise of protectedness is constructed through demonization and control of the flawed individuals. "Political governance, therefore, has become partially dependent on the deviant other and the mobilization of feelings of safety."<sup>404</sup> Moreover, he explains in corporeal terms the fear associated with the presence of immigrants: "immigrants embody – visibly, tangibly, in the flesh – the inarticulate yet hurtful and painful presentiment of their own disposability."<sup>405</sup> Placement under the sign of threat has radically transformed the notion of the immigrant. While governmental reasons for preventing illegal immigration project fear, it also allows governments to promote themselves as keepers and preservers of the population's safety. "The purpose of the

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<sup>404</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 56.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

exercise remains ... to reinforce ... the mouldy and decaying walls meant to guard the hallowed distinction between “inside and “outside.”<sup>406</sup> The means of achieving this is to identify and regulate human waste.

From the beginning these immigrants had placed themselves outside the norms of protection by embarking on the ship as stowaways. In Judith Butler’s terms, their condition raises the question of “who counts as human life” and who does not. Butler’s analysis of violence as being propagated in a circular manner – returning upon itself once activated – helps us to understand the complexity and troubling nature of the violence performed against these immigrants. Situated in a “state of exception,” they suffer a form of derealization, of spectrality that allows violence to be inflicted upon them. Their existence is not fully acknowledged and protected, rather it is denied and therefore the punishment that comes as a consequence fails to perform its task, it fails “to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated.”<sup>407</sup> Moreover, “violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object.” On one hand it can be said that violence comes as a consequence of a social discourse already implemented, but on the other, the absence of discourse regarding certain lives also produces a dehumanization process that inflicts violence on those bodies. The derealization of the “other” means that it is “neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral.”<sup>408</sup> In this case spectrality reaches the ultimate form of violence: death.

Illegal immigrants vanish in countless unwritten obituaries when their lives are lost because, from the very beginning, they find themselves in a situation where protection is

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>407</sup> Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 33.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

not guaranteed, on the contrary, they are hunted. Their “common space” is disrupted and blocked; instead of foreseeing the beginning of a new life, immigration is determined by previous conditions that prompted the initial displacement, which, far from being neglected or distanced, function as a renewed constraint, an “empty space.” “Quarantine is their very horizon;”<sup>409</sup> they are marked by a state of waiting at the periphery. In the case of the stowaways from Maersk Dubai, the quarantine translated partially in material terms, since, in order to save his life, one of the immigrants was hidden in one of the crew’s rooms until the arrival of the ship in Halifax. Precariousness of life, as argued by Michel Agier characterizes contemporary immigrant communities: “The world today is confronted with the sustained existence of precarious lives, of temporary materialities that can be assembled and taken apart, of urban or global mobility without any permanent base, of unstable situations from which the past and future seems to be absent.”<sup>410</sup> In the case of the three immigrants, the absence of past and future leads to factual obliteration of life, because they counted as “less than human,” and therefore they could be disposed of (murdered) to avoid fines for illegal transportation.

Vulnerability, as Judith Butler puts it, is a common human trait, “one that emerges with life itself.” It is nevertheless enhanced by social and political constraints: “Certain lives will be highly protected and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as “grievable.”<sup>411</sup> Grief is not a democratic right. It follows hierarchical rules. Some are more grievable than others. Following their testimony about the fate of the Romanians, the sailors on Maersk Dubai required and

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<sup>409</sup> Michel Agier, *On the Margins of the World*, 39.

<sup>410</sup> Michel Agier, *Camps of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*,” in *Native Land*, 238

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

received political asylum in Canada. The evidence they provided for the lost lives could have put their life and their families' lives in danger. The existence of illegals forms a category of "non-grievable" death – since they become vulnerable by their initial decision, forcefully or wilfully taken, which dislodges their life coordinates. Because they do not qualify completely for social recognition, their loss is not understood as the loss of a particular person; rather they normally become numbers in statistical evidence.

Whereas the death of the three immigrants was talked about at the time, as Bejenaru points out in voice-off, "there is no way of telling how many had the fate of Radu, Petru and Florin."<sup>412</sup> Remembrance of lost lives is itself a less than an egalitarian process, even though "loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to other, or at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure."<sup>413</sup>

Not being part of the success story, the illegals count as merely waste. In Bauman's words, "We dispose of leftovers in the most radical and effective way, we make them invisible by not looking at them, and unthinkable by not thinking. They worry us only when the routine elementary defenses are broken ... when the comfortable, soporific insularity of our *Lebenswelt* which they were supposed to protect is in danger."<sup>414</sup> This double manifestation of "non-existence" characterizes people living under rough social conditions. Both internally and externally they remained invisible and "unthinkable." They disappeared from view, even though their existence was undeniable. This disappearance is reversed through Bejenaru's artwork.

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<sup>412</sup> Matei Bejenaru, "Maersk Dubai," in *Situations*, 109.

<sup>413</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

<sup>414</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 27.

*MEASURES OF DISTANCE: REMEMBERING, WITNESSING*

Bejenaru's movie constructs a narrative thread describing the general conditions of immigration in Romania and the specific economic shortcomings that generated it: "A Western politician stated that freedom and democracy makes sense to Eastern-Europeans if they earn at least 300 dollars a month. In the nineties, even if they were lucky enough to be paid in due time, the Romanian workers did not get more than 100 dollars. And then, how could have freedom meant anything to them?"<sup>415</sup> Apart from narrative explanations in voice-off, Bejenaru develops his movie as a visual discourse. The initial long camera shot of flowing water preserve no visible traces of the events that took place in and above its surface. Even though it functions as a great erasure, as an overwhelming leveling, the water is the carrier of tragic encounters, burying under its weight bodies and stories. Matei Bejenaru provides no shore to this dark water. Free sea (*mare libre*) and firm land (*terra firma*)<sup>416</sup> contain patterns of orientation and of spatial consciousness and are also regulated by international laws. This "orientation" toward West, as a projection of freedom and immigration is subverted by Bejenaru, a trajectory from the Old World to the New World is transformed into a non-world. The movie shows the uninterrupted water, with no localisation systems, no possible orientation, but also no variation. His video points to no land, the water has no edge, but becomes distinct through representation. Water becomes the background for transmitting these immigrants' story.

Bejenaru made use of film footage from a documentary broadcast on the Romanian Television in 1997, called *The Process of Halifax* by Lucia Hossu Longin, the same film director who, after the fall of Communism in 1989, made a series of TV

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<sup>415</sup> Matei Bejenaru, "Maersk Dubai," in *Situations*, 108.

<sup>416</sup> Mitchell Dean, "Land and Sea," 21.

documentaries on Communist prisons in Romania and on the resistance against this regime. Bejenaru incorporates in his video the black and white archival footage containing the oral testimony of one of the sailors who helped the fourth immigrant escape this tragic fate. Vernacular photographs accompany visually the artist's voice narrating their history. The memory of the immigrants' personhood and of the events that led to their death is activated obliquely through the photographs presented, taken from their family albums and included in Longin's movie, referring back to their existence before leaving the country and embarking in this journey. These events would have remained unknown if it were not for this testimony and consequently, if it were not for the documentary made by Longin. A fate of oblivion, which most often than not pertains to those whose lives "do not count," whose existence, as well as death, can be buried in silence.

Representative for the middle 1990s in terms of a population recently coming out of Communism, the experience of immigration proves the way in which border, in this case ocean, can become a threshold to be crossed at different levels of risk and the way in which bodies become "redundant" when disrupting the laws in force or when endangering another's wealth. The act of covering the distance between physical borders – those of the country left behind, and those "fencing" the country one heads toward – implies a spatial and temporal trajectory that articulates as an extremely charged space, but which sometimes becomes a locus of obliterated memory. This obliteration of memory is partially recuperated by the oral testimony, which, without recalling the immigrants' existence, surfaces the last moments of their being alive, as seen by a witness. Whereas the rest of the video is narratively marked by the artist's voice-off, in

this case only the sailor's voice is preserved. The voice-off recedes in order to make place to the sailor's account of that fateful night.

The reality of a liquid community – as that of immigrants' – changes at a faster pace than its members can react to by adjusting and forming stable guiding points. In this context of uncertainty, fear is constant. Fear and precariousness stand at the roots of Matei Bejenaru's works dealing with immigration, as a consequence of a social environment that failed to preserve the feeling of cohesion and hope. Moreover it is fear facing death: the final moments of those immigrants were dramatic, according to the eyewitness, who reproduces the immigrants' final words, as they were still fighting for their lives. The outcome is a radical dislocation that ends up in death and therefore in a final dismissal of the initial reasons that might have justified in the first place such an endeavor. When death intervenes, the story is passed along by witnesses of the tragic event, and by the recollections formed in the collective memory through secondary witnesses.

Upon their arrival in Halifax two Filipino sailors who had witnessed the throwing overboard of the Romanians testified to the crime committed at sea. The archival footage containing Rodolfo Miguel's account on the death of Radu Danciu and Petrica Sangeorzan is incorporated into Bejenaru's video, functioning as documentary evidence to the ultimate witnessing of death. Taking the form of a reconstruction, the footage follows the Philippino sailor on the ship deck, attempting to reconfigure the details of those fateful events through pointing with precision at the empty space where the three Romanians spent their last moments and begged for their lives to be spared, or through indicating the remains of the rope that was cut off with a knife by the ship captain, thereby throwing

them into the ocean. However, the main elements are missing; there are only traces left, reminders, fragments of rope, a bucket of water near the spot where they were thrown into the sea; only the sailor's emotional evidence refers directly back to that night. He resorts to descriptions of the place, to indexical fixation of objects present at that moment, which were touched by the stowaways, to gestures trying to replicate the ones made during that night. In spite of the documentary nature of this archival footage, and of the recalling of the events that ultimately led to the death of the three immigrants, the only undeniable event is the one that bears in fact no recollection, the one that allows for no witnessing: death. Miguel witnessed the unwitnessable and as such his account remains flawed, speaking in fact about the impossibility of recalling, of reconstructing what was the final moment of their lives. It is a testimony of trauma, manifest in its belatedness. Bejenaru relocates this documentary footage, adding meaning to it by positioning it in the economy of his own movie as the consequence of a larger precarious social context that disrupted the continuity of society and community recovering from Communism.

Whereas modern existence is dominated by strict regulated codes that construct a feeling of belonging to a community based on race, nationality or territory, the aesthetics that governs it is rather one of distance, as argued by Augé, a distance that ignores the ruptures faced by this 'illusory community'. The visual field is marked by images of distance, whether they are satellite images, or those presented on TV channels, which render a global neutral view, without borders: "These everyday images belong to a 'global' world, which presents itself as being 'without frontiers,' a global world where the spaces for communication, circulation and consumption, and 'non-spaces' do not stop

spreading out, and where some of the old frontiers abolish themselves.”<sup>417</sup> Satellite images, TV news or TV documentaries, like the one that was at the basis of Bejenaru’s movie, which present short information on immigrants who have been captured or even killed are broadcast in parallel with other news stories. They become part of an enormous archive of images and information, effacing the specific characteristics that define each individual existence. The privilege of observing from a distance offers the illusion of comfortable unity: “The last frontier was conquered, beyond which it appears to be no more than a small undifferentiated globe.”<sup>418</sup> Bejenaru disrupts this view at a distance, and repositions the footage within his video, in an art context, to be experienced in the space of art galleries, outside the context of the flow of images flooding TV channels and moreover, as part of a different temporality.

As Bejenaru explains in voice-off: “maybe no one would have found about their death if it not were for two Filipino sailors on the Maersk Dubai.” It is a revealing comment, that reflects on the invisibility of immigration. The deaths of the immigrants could have gone unaccounted for, un-mourned and unnoticed in the absence of the storytelling; first of all of the sailors – who risked a great deal in choosing to reveal the deed on the ship; then, the transmission produced through news information; thirdly, the documentary footage; and finally, through Bejenaru’s art work. The footage used by Bejenaru does not offer an exhaustive account of the events that took place that night. The events are foggy and will remain as such. The artist appropriates an already existing

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<sup>417</sup> Marc Augé, *La communauté illusoire*, (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2010), 9. Original in French: “Ces images quotidiennes sont celles d’un monde ‘global’ qui se présente comme ‘sans frontières,’ d’un monde global où les espaces de la communication, de la circulation et de la consommation, les ‘non-lieux,’ ne cessent de s’étendre et dans lequel s’abolissent certaines des anciennes frontières.” Author’s translation.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Original in French. “L’ultime frontière a été franchie, au-delà de laquelle n’apparaît plus que comme un petit globe indifférencié.” Author’s translation

material, shot in a different socio-political context – Romania of 1996 – and intended for a different audience: a TV show presented to a population only recently emerged from Communism and for which the mirage of immigration was alluring. His movie is shown in art galleries and museums, most recently at the Tate Gallery in 2008. It is shown as an artwork, transforming, interpreting and imagining visually the crossing of the ocean as a decisive moment of the immigration journey; it addresses an international audience, with little previous knowledge on the specific geo-political context, except for the one provided by the artist. It is also exhibited in Romania, where the social explanations might seem reductive.

Bejenaru uses the grammar of documentation, with voice-off, photographic evidence and video footage, combining multiple perspectives on the reality he depicts, but the semiotics is that of “fiction” as “forging” of reality,<sup>419</sup> in Rancière’s terms. The only undeniable event is that which cannot be documented: death, and therefore accessed through the agency of imagination. However, his work visually digs the ruins of the past and its material presentation, in an attempt of reconstructing a story, that is, a coherent chain of events out of fragmentary and incoherent evidence; this endeavor is never accomplished. While Bejenaru depicts a specific situation, his representation is not a reconstruction of these immigrants’ lives. Family photographs are used to account for the past existence of the persons now disappeared. They are tangential testimonies to existences that escape being contained in visual or narrative terms. The photographs refer to their death in an oblique manner, by pointing back to an earlier moment when their presence was captured by the camera eye, advocating for the “there–has-been-ness” of

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<sup>419</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Documentary Fiction: Marker and the Fiction of Memory,” *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (New York: Berg, 2006), 158.

photography if we follow Barthes's understanding of photography. The few photographs taken from their family albums represent the only visual accounts through which the three immigrants "materialize" as individuals.

*MEDIATED MEMORIES OF IMMIGRANTS' LIFE AND DEATH*

Whereas the first part of the socio-economical explanation is presented on the backdrop of moving water, the rest of the narrative uses as background a series of images presenting harbors and containers used for the transportation of goods, but also for transporting people. Bejenaru suggests a causal chain of determinates, which prompted individuals to experience the realities of the harbour as transitional passages toward other potentially more welcoming countries than the one they were living in: "in the nineties the average Romanians were cut off from the rest of the world. They could not go anywhere without a visa, except for Turkey and Hungary. This explains why many desperate people tried to cross the borders illegally in order to seek work in Europe or America."<sup>420</sup> Following these images that point to working conditions and sites of passages, Bejenaru inserts the pictures of the three immigrants. These black and white photographs stand in for a desire to recuperate the loss of their lives, and are being shown after they ceased to exist.

The intervention of the artist associates their isolated photographic portraits with other visual accounts, which refer by proxy, in a metonymical manner, to the events that led to their death: next to their small portrait photographs, Bejenaru visually introduces moving images of freight trucks and containers stacked one on top of the other. The

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 108.

transition from the private nature of the photographs in a family album to a narrative that explains the conditions that compelled them to immigrate, and the subsequent visual images that accompany this narration, passes not through a form of storytelling that activates memories triggered by visual testimonies, but a storytelling that constructs a narrative. He maintains the unknown and incompleteness of their life and death story by eluding their personal private existential data – that might have been hinted at in other photographs.

The initial choice of photographs to depict the three immigrants was not made by the artist himself. He follows a previous controlling authority, which selected the manner in which the story was to be told visually. These were images previously chosen to be part of Longin's documentary that aired in the 1990s. The artist re-plays this selection, as a means of closing the temporal gap between their death and the making of the movie. No first-hand account relates to these persons' lives. Therefore their past is remodelled through a performative action that does not belong to a lived experience, but to a reconstructed one, in the absence of recalling, of the "act of memory," except in what death is concerned. But death itself cannot be recalled and cannot be summoned as part of anyone's memory.

A process of mediation informs both the status of the image and the narration employed by the artist. The artist does not refer to complete family albums, which are browsed through with the intent of calling part of the lost existence back to life through subsequent connections established by the association of images referring to familiar faces, ordinary events of the past, or celebrations. Other multiple photographs (assuming their existence) remain silent, unknown references testifying to other moments that might

have been selected by the subjects to be part of this visual recording of their lives. Bejenaru does not provide the larger context of these persons' individual lives. However, some elements are still visible. After the sailor's testimony ends, Bejenaru shows a photograph of Radu Danciu, which depicts him as a boy, in a familiar environment, pointing to a community of relatives, connected both through family resemblance and through affectionate gestures. The hand of a woman, possibly his mother, rests protectively on his shoulder, while the rest of the family poses in front of a village house. Another vernacular photograph depicts him a few years older, but still a teenager, together with a friend in front of the backdrop of a traditional wall carpet. In both instances he is identified by a digital arrow, while his name appears on the screen. No additional information is provided; no sound is used. These images follow closely the testimony of the sailor, and the circumstances of the immigrants' death: they function as testimonies of the past on the death that have already been produced. In the economy of the video, their visualization is continued with the recurrent pattern of ocean waves. Water takes over and fills in the screen, as another pointer to the unknown that connects one shore to the other, both of life and death, of physical shores and of economical shores, but also of those between the artistic discourse and its reception. Duration is felt physically. Nothing disrupts the flowing of water for an entire minute. Silence reigns, except for the redundant and monotonous sound of the ocean: the same sound from the beginning of the movie, but having acquired a different meaning, no less located, no less pointing equally to sound and silence, to death and its impossible representation.

The mourning takes place at a distance, through a multileveled account: that of the artist, of the sailor, recorded in the documentary footage and appropriated within this

movie, and that of the photographs.’ They are parts of a puzzle that while recalling immigrants’ life, announce also their death. The audience therefore becomes the potential ultimate mourner of the dead. The “successful” mourner, according to Butler, follows a pattern of transformation: “perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which one cannot know in advance.”<sup>421</sup> At the same time, loss is not fully graspable, it involves a dimension of non-knowing, of a residue that remains uncovered and unaccounted for, an “enigmatic dimension.” Grief exposes the unbearability of the past actions that produced a loss. “To foreclose that vulnerability to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way.”<sup>422</sup>

Bejenaru bases his representations on specific cases of immigration trauma. *Travel Guide* formulates the specificities of Romanian illegal immigration on route to England, subverting and addressing in its physical format – an object that can be carried away – the access to information that illegals themselves have to obtain in order to reach their destination. In the case of the stowaways on the Maersk Dubai, death is the outcome of their journey, a prospect that, while present, as an extreme form of one’s annihilation when undergoing the illegal path of immigration, it is still not necessarily the norm. It exists though as potentiality, and as shown, in some cases as actuality. Unprotectedness is embedded in Bejenaru’s works. Yet, the works manifest in patterns specific to art representation. Before these works become infused by an interpretational framework, it is their physical presence that manifests in exhibition venues, for an audience that experience

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<sup>421</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

them in specific contexts of display. Sometimes this experience is abbreviated. A brochure can be thrown away as quickly as it is picked up. Countless brochures are barely opened, quickly browsed, or simply taken away as souvenirs of one's passage through a certain space. Slow paced video images of water flowing followed by the narrative introduction of a story of trauma and death with little editorial strategies is hardly the promise of entertainment. The reception of these works varies, is transformed not only by their content displayed for different audiences, and thus with different cultural patterns of interpretations, but also, by their specific contexts of presentation, as seen in the case of the exhibition that took place at Galeria Posibila, combining these works, and positioning them in dialogue, or as in the case of the *Travel Guide*, which de-contextualised, would verge on illegality. When *Travel Guide* was exhibited in the Prague Biennial in 2007 as part of the exhibition *If you find this world bad you should see some of the others*, the brochure was stacked on two sides of the corner of a wall, acting as display support, with the enlarged image of the train routes showed nearby. It was a transit spot within a larger exhibition, with other works conflating visually, where the migratory phenomenon acted on the visitors themselves, going from one work to the other. Patterns of art reception are not homogeneous, though they are grounded in the visual. Under these conditions, what can such works bring into visibility, into presence? Can they possibly convey the conditions of immigration, as mediated through representation? The challenge is to extend their manifestation into the promise of transformation through the act of viewing, where the visual always exceeds its framing and comes in conjunction with a larger cultural production, both visual, theoretical and social. In the case of the works I analysed, this is a strong promise. The visual experience does not fall on a void. It has its own specificity,

into which other culturally formulated patterns of visualisation are inserted, and where other artworks may inform reception, and insinuate themselves persistently and fragmentarily. While my readings are embedded in the analysis of these specific works and the conditions of their reception, they also reflect an extended theoretical paradigm of precariousness, which informs my understanding by opening up to other cultural and theoretical acts dealing with immigration.

**STEFAN CONSTANTINESCU: *PASSAGEN*, 2006**

*IMMIGRATING TO ROMANIA*

Whereas Matei Bejenaru's works deal with issues of immigration from within a Romanian perspective, but in a global art market, in the case of Stefan Constantinescu the situation is different. His own biographical history speaks for a different relocation. Being a Romanian artist who moved to Sweden in 1997, his works have become internationally recognized and exhibited in his double status, both as Romanian and as Swedish artist. Recently he represented Romania at the 53 International Art Exhibition – La Biennale de Venezia 2009 with the movie *Passagen* and *Troliebusul 92* and again at the 54 edition in 2011 in a collective exhibition called *The Last Analogue Revolution – a Memory Box*, as part of the larger *Romanian Cultural Resolution* project. His latest short movie, *Family Dinner* (2011) was nominated in 2012 for the *Startsladden* best short film at Götteborg International Film Festival, dedicated to Scandinavian filmmakers. He belongs therefore to two different cultural spaces, working through the contradictions of a double role. In *Passagen* Constantinescu addresses immigration not from a Romanian perspective, but from that of immigrants who, in order to escape the Chilean dictatorial regime, fled to

Communist Romania of the 1970s, and subsequently to Sweden, in the 1980s. Whereas these subjects speak about specific challenges faced within Communism or triggered as a consequence of this socio-political environment, the artist addresses their experience before a larger, international audience.

*Passagen* is a film that deals with immigration and its sense of non-belonging, or rather of longing for a space that fails to materialize. It was presented as a video projection at ICR Romanian Cultural Institute London, Bucharest Biennial<sup>2</sup>, Posibila Gallery in Bucharest, Galerie 8 in London and Local\_30 in Warsaw, as well as part of the *Seductiveness of the Interval* project at Venice Biennial in 2009, together with Ciprian Muresan and Andreea Faciu, a project re-exhibited at Renaissance Society in Chicago. It was witnessed therefore by both a local and an international audience, thereby combining different modes of understanding the experience of immigration, activating the interrogation on strategies of representation that address the “suffering of others” and its reception by those who experienced similar forms of containment and also by those who are situated at a distance. The work also exposes the terms of cultural representations activated by a documentary mode employed recently and prominently in Eastern European art, as a modality of referencing certain events, while “agitating” the contents, by inducing doubt and relativity. Even though the movie is presented in art galleries, in cinemas and television, Constantinescu’s preferred mode of showing it – and therefore of being experienced by the audience – is within gallery exhibitions, inscribing the documentary paradigm as part of an art experience, not in the least because time perception and public expectations are different.

Stefan Constantinescu's movie investigates the immigration journey of three Chileans, who fled the country in 1973, after the Pinochet coup d'état, when Salvador Allende was assassinated. Some 200,000 Chileans took the path of exile, most of them to the United States, Argentina and Sweden. However, Communist Romania under Ceausescu was also a possible destination for them, a "Communist paradise." One of the immigrants interviewed for the movie, Ronaldo Alberto Aguire Brito, is still living in Romania, however different this may be from the country he first chose to settle in – the Communist Romania of the 1970s. Another one, Pedro Ramires now lives in Sweden, after a detour through Romania. And finally, a third person, Daniel Ricardo Vera Oliva underwent a complex "multiple-stop journey" of immigration, passing through Romania, immigrating a second time to Sweden, and after twenty-three years there, going back to Chile, which was eventually acknowledged and experienced as his home country. In fact his journey of immigration was a continuous one. It never ceased unfolding, from the initial moment of departure from Chile, as refugee. His native country remained throughout this journey an imaginary place, a fictive homeland, preserving all the qualities that every other place seemed to lack. This "Chile" was the desired destination that made the complex situations that the refugee faced in order to adapt to new realities more bearable. But when confronted with this well-preserved container of memory and imagination, immigration took a renewed form as an immigration within one's own native country. Even though settled once again in his homeland, the refugee finds himself in a perpetual journey from which isolation and loss are recurrent realities.

Illegal immigrant populations experience a state of incertitude that at times can be transformed into a long-term 'state of exception.' The initial violence, or problematic

conditions that prompted their leaving the country in the first place does not end once this movement occurred. It is extended throughout their journey and in their subsequent new existence. The uncertainty and precariousness of immigrants can become traits of their new collective identity, marks prolonged indefinitely: suspension from ordinary norms becomes, in their case, the norm and moreover, their waiting and lack of protection is turned into a way of life, since their condition is characterized by incompleteness. The words that have come to identify this new collective identity capture this liminal condition, about the precariousness that shapes their lives: ‘displaced’, ‘dispersed’, ‘damaged’, ‘repressed’, ‘expelled’, ‘escapees’.

#### *TELLING THE STORY OF IMMIGRATION*

*Passagen* is a 62-minute film constructed from a series of interviews with Chilean immigrants who recall their experience of immigration in front of the camera. The interviews recording the testimonies of these people are mostly filmed by a fixed camera, in a economy of editorial means. Constantinescu intervenes little as directorial presence. However, he is the unseen primary audience and witness of this storytelling, and from time to time he is interpolated by the people who appear in the movie, with questions to be elucidated, such as being asked about a meaning of a word in Swedish that he might know. He is present both behind the camera and obliquely as a presence in the film itself, as an “actor” that takes part in it, but is never seen.

The movie opens with a statement on representation, by presenting an excerpt from Pedro Ramires’s own short movie in black and white, continues with a series of interviews taken in domestic environments, follows Pedro Ramires’s return to Romania,

the camera presenting details of this encounter with a familiar place – for example the communist block of flats’ staircase and short dialogues with old neighbours still living in the same place – and finally moving back to Sweden where Ramires is filmed both in his austere apartment and at work as a train guard in Stockholm. The movie is constructed through a series of tableaux, of chapters, most of the times in close shots. The camera changes angles in order to capture small details that sum up a micro world of meaning. It remains a detached eye, but at the same time the presence of the artist is continuously felt throughout the movie, acknowledged by the participants. It is the element that makes possible the existence of the movie and of the representation of immigration, but also a physical presence that introduces distance and even endangers the entire project. Before starting to shoot this film in 2005, Constantinescu established a close connection with the people he interviewed, and especially with Pedro Ramires. The artist explains that the movie was almost brought to a halt after a year of constructing a solid relationship with Ramirez: “Although by the time I started shooting we entrusted each other and had built a certain history together, when the camera appeared between us, I felt that our relationship didn’t work anymore and that the camera created a huge distance between us.”<sup>423</sup>

The artist constructs his version of immigration by cinematographically moving back and forth between accounts of highly subjective feelings and testimonies of specific experiences of immigration. Irony and humour are part of the story and are shared collectively when recalling the initial experiences of immigration. Based on recorded oral testimonies, Constantinescu’s movie is constructed following the patterns of passage, of the voyage characterized by its lack of closure, by its being “in-between-spaces,” without

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<sup>423</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, “Interview with Stefan Constantinescu by Georgiana Zachia,” in *Stefan Constantinescu* Exhibition Catalogue, (Stockholm: The Romanian Cultural Institute of Stockholm, Labyrinth Press and pioneer press, 2008), 24.

reaching a final destination. He asks people to perform in front of the camera, to recall their experiences and lives, which unfold as selective compilations of events, facts and feelings chosen to be revealed for an audience, activating simultaneously a negotiation between what gets to be told publicly and what remains silent. Through speech and the act of storytelling he rebuilds the experience of immigration, in its ordinariness, but also its exceptionality: “in practical and political terms, the existence of speech and the formation of subjects is a key question for the hypothesis of a “community” of displaced persons and refugees.”<sup>424</sup> What comes across is a form of “affective speech,”<sup>425</sup> as T.J. Demos called it: “Speech thereby becomes an inventive, generative medium, not a transparent approximation of a pre-existing reality. It is shown to be performative and constitutive, rather than passive and reflective.”<sup>426</sup> Even when those being interviewed recall events they actually experienced, by trying to dig memories out of the past, they do so through combining memory, forgetting, imagination, self-construction, desire, and fragments of events that occurred in the past, as seen through the veil of the present context they find themselves in. Their storytelling surfaces as performative acts through omissions, selections, in other words, through a process in which the past is organized as story. The act of storytelling and of recalling happens in front of the camera, yet it is further produced for an audience as a consequences of a series of ordering directorial acts, which select, cut, and delete, deciding what comes to be experienced as final product. This directorial intervention can be understood in terms of the *fictionalizing* aspect of the documentary, as summarized by T.J. Demos: “Far from being opposed to

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<sup>424</sup> Michel Agier, “The Camps of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” 65.

<sup>425</sup> T.J. Demos, “Kutluğ Ataman: The Art of Storytelling,” in *Kutluğ Ataman: The Enemy Inside Me*, Ed. Birnur Temel (Istanbul: Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 30.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

fiction, documentary is actually one mode of it, joining – both in continuity and conflict – the ‘real’ (the indexical, contingent elements of recorded footage) and the ‘fabulated’ (the constructed, the edited, the narrative) in cinema.”<sup>427</sup> When describing Kutluğ Ataman’s art to be “documentary fiction” – an artist whose practice is partially based on storytelling in front of the camera, a strategy that can be paralleled to the one employed by Constantinescu – T.J. Demos follows Jacques Rancière’s arguments. Rancière considers “fiction” to be an element that infuses both memory – “the work of fiction” – and the documentary, as “forging” reality: “Fiction means using the means of art to construct a ‘system’ of represented action, assembled forms ... documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood.”<sup>428</sup>

The raw material of experience is activated in Constantinescu’s film through acts of performance, where people “play” their story; they construct it in the process of telling in front of the camera, and therefore with an audience in view. Memory surfaces cinematographically mediated. The movie deploys a careful selection of elements to be excavated and presented, elements that gradually construct a narration and a visual discursive field, also including the authorial presence. The artist, as director and witness to the testimony, is acknowledged both privately, behind the camera, and publicly, in front of the camera by one of the people appearing in the movie, Pedro Ramires. It is not a film only about the experience of immigration as lived by others, it is a film about Constantinescu as well: “after a while he (Ramires) couldn’t take the filming anymore, and eventually he couldn’t stand me. It was quite unexpected because he said that he would go all the way, because the film was important, at the same time as he was telling

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>428</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Documentary Fiction: Marker and the Fiction of Memory,” *Film Fables*, (New York: Berg, 2006), 158

me that this was not a film about him but a film about myself.”<sup>429</sup> The same statement is seen in the actual footage when Ramires interrupts his storytelling and memories of his past and addresses Constantinescu directly, introducing a meta-narration and a breach in the audience’s experience of the movie: “It’s not my life you are watching, this isn’t me, it’s your film.” Whose film is it in the end? In front of what audience did he testify and make public his memories? Is it Constantinescu, is it the camera, or the audience of the film, never the same, never identical with itself?

This documentary is reemployed by Constantinescu in *Dacia 1300: My Generation*, (2003) following an autobiographical mode, using interviews with his neighbours in Bucharest and their experiences related to the car Dacia (the first *Dacia* factory was built in the year the artist was born, 1968). A reinterpretation of the same symbol is his movie *My Beautiful Dacia*, (2009) where he presents the recent history of Romania under Communism and of the socio-political consequences still felt years after its fall, when Romania became part of the European Union. He depicts different generations, all of them connected by their stories related to Dacia, the car – as both a symbol of a nationalistic discourse of the past, but also of the present transition of decommunisation. Immigration is a theme in this movie, both as it happened before 1989, through the story of Miodrag Belodedic, an icon of soccer professional league, but also through the more recent story of two persons who leave Romania to immigrate to Spain. Constantinescu presents their journey in its unfolding, accompanying them cinematographically, with real-time effects throughout their journey. He follows them before they leave the country, with emotional moments recorded by the camera: leaving

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<sup>429</sup> Stefan Constantinescu, “Interview with Stefan Constantinescu by Giorgiana Zachia,” in *Stefan Constantinescu*, 24.

the house; saying farewell to relatives, first moments of the journey, crossing the border. This film was included by curator Mark Nash in the exhibition *One Sixth of the Earth. An Ecology of the Image* (MUSAC, Spain, 2012). While exhibiting artists coming from what is currently designated Eastern Europe – including other Romanian artists, such as Matei Bejenaru, and Irina Botea – this exhibition addresses this charged space, considering the cultural nomadism experienced by artists who leave their countries and become artistically active abroad, together with an acknowledgement of a stronger presence of the local art scene, all seen through works that address the specific histories of this socio-political region. *My Beautiful Dacia* acts as a fictional documentary, in which testimonies, facts and humour blend to present multiple perspectives on the recent history of Romania, preserving not only the tension of memories being made public, but also the tension of what is negotiated to the surface and what remains concealed: this car is also the protagonist of a less known story of the Revolution when Ceausescu fled the mob, as well as being a vehicle for transporting new immigrants.

Whereas in *Passagen* Constantinescu addresses a specific pattern of immigration, passing from one totalitarian state to another, he produces this experience as representation to be witnessed by an audience in an international gallery context. This establishes a distance that interrogates the possibilities of effectively communicating meaning when showing works from “over there” and presenting them “over here.”<sup>430</sup> As Irit Rogoff points out, even though there are several international exhibitions – Documenta 2002, Manifesta 5, Istanbul Biennial – that address the “precise articulation of where we speak from,” they do so through “a tendency to play with our consciousness

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<sup>430</sup> Irit Rogoff, “The Where of Now,” in *Time Zones* catalogue (London: Tate Publications, 2004), 85.

and toy with notions of direct and uncomplicated experience of place.”<sup>431</sup> *Passagen* is experienced first and foremost as art work, travelling around, to a certain extent migrating its contextualised construction of meaning, activating “newly imagined realities.” A migration of the art works is produced, with no less stable points of reference as the bodies themselves. The 62 minutes required to see the entire projection demands a form of sustained attention necessary for the experience of moving image work.

#### *RAMIRES'S ROMANIA*

The recording of refugees' stories reveals experiences that have remained relatively unknown to those who did not belong to their group even though living in close proximity. Due to the pronounced nationalistic ideology advocated by the official state propaganda apparatus, Romanians were kept at a distance from immigrants, even when the later ones were officially welcomed within the territory of Romania during Ceausescu's regime. Refugees coming from Chile benefited from privileges that Romanians could hardly think of. Immigration in Romania of the 1970s was not talked about publicly, unless referring to people leaving the country, and then in a secretive, private way or in judgmental tones. Nationalism and propaganda discredited and downgraded the notion of immigration to the point of calling it treason. From an official point of view, immigration was far from being a valid option for Romanians, even though it was constantly thought about and even dreamed about. From this perspective, a general dissatisfaction with Communist socio-realities of those times, it must have seemed

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

bizarre for other people to consider coming to live within the borders that for Romanians were becoming more and more restrictive. A reversed trajectory took place creating a situation that isolated the political refugees even more.

One of the persons interviewed, Pedro Ramires, completed studies in law in Chile and in cinematography in Romania; he lived for a few years in Romania, before moving to Sweden, where he made several attempts at becoming a filmmaker. Nowadays he is a train security guard in Stockholm. Constantinescu starts his movie with footage from one of Ramires's first attempts at cinematography, a short black and white film depicting Chilean children playing near a Communist block of flats: a *mise-en-abyme*, a statement on the representation of immigration. The musical score is performed by Inti Ilimani, "¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!" that translates as "The united people will never be defeated." The song is a symbol of Chilean resistance to the Pinochet regime. The final soundtrack, "Thank you for a Wonderful Day" is a Swedish song. Constantinescu inserts Ramires's unfinished movie between Chilean and Swedish songs, as symbols of these immigrants' journey.

Constantinescu retraces Ramires's trajectory, passing through Bucharest, Cluj, and Iasi before arriving in Stockholm. The artist records on camera Ramires's arrival in Bucharest. Details are rendered suggestively, from the dark staircase of the block of flats he used to inhabit to conversations with neighbours dressed in outdated winter coats. The hand-held camera closes in on the visual field when the commonly shared metal mailbox is shown diagonally, with missing numbers and unlocked little doors, indicating vacated apartments. An old elevator is seen nearby, a familiar feature of a Communist block of flats. While descending in the claustrophobic space of the elevator with its barely lit

graffitied walls, Ramires refers to one of the terraces of that block of flats, as not only connected to his past existence, but also the precise spot depicted in his short movie, just seen by the viewer through Constantinescu's re-presentation. Ramires's memories are mediated not only by the encounter with the space, but also by his own cultural production. Constantinescu depicts both outdoor scenery and indoor environments. They unmistakably refer to Communism, starting from the appearance of the buildings, Dacia cars parked nearby, of specific living room, of doors and apartment halls. One of the statements Ramires utters when confronted with this space, and therefore when having to face his initial decision of immigration, is "I do not think that I will ever come back ... well if it depends only on me,"<sup>432</sup> even though, as he reveals throughout the interview, he somewhat regrets leaving Romania. His backward trajectory, triggering a "head-on" encounter with his past, is done almost unwillingly. The artist and Pedro had established their friendship before collaborating on this film and therefore his recollection is partially a self-imposed act of awareness, at times despite even himself, an almost forced memory prompted by the act of filming and of re-telling: "I did it for you."

This "you" is a migratory presence itself, embodied on a first level by the complicity of the artist's presence, rendered visually through the shaking of the camera and the drops of water coming from the snowflakes that imprint the lens, and therefore the image itself, as "noise," as imperfection that makes the encounter more intimate. Even though memories are recovered as an act of friendship, this implying a certain confidence that they will be recorded faithfully and without alteration, the act of memory itself is less linear, maintaining fluctuating consistency with respect to the past. Forgetting, distortion, and loss are part of the complex mechanisms of memory and even

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<sup>432</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

more so when memories are performed in front of the camera for an unknown, virtual audience. They are thrown into the world, to be seen by a spectatorship not necessarily familiar with this type of experience, activating the ‘otherness’ of immigration and in this case, the ‘otherness’ of Ramires’s own history.

Far from being only pleasant, recollections of immigration expose in a renewed manner those who are willing to be part this process of digging up the past: “I know that before leaving I was afraid. Now I am not afraid anymore. I adapted. But I do not think I could integrate myself here, again.” Romania remains for Pedro a foreign country, a transitory phase in his larger immigration journey, where a familiar sense of alienation creeps in, despite the years spent there. When revisited, Romania becomes a tourist destination once again; he might go there by a “charter trip to the sea.” Memory does play a role in activating that utopian place, but it always evades it, it cannot be fully grasped: “Because Romania isn’t there either, but it’s closer to Romania the way it was when I lived here.”<sup>433</sup> The isolation is deepened visually by the deserted park in winter that serves as a location for the film and by the junction where he stops, which, instead of opening up toward two different directions, encircles a small park island. The roads connect again a few meters away. In the end, he “does not feel well anywhere” – a state of suspension often evoked by immigrants when trying to come to terms with this deterritorialisation that does not end once they arrive in a new country.

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

*THE FAMILY ALBUM OF IMMIGRATION*

Constantinescu does the interviews in Romania, in Sweden and in Chile, prompting the immigrants to address their memories while confronted with the space in a physical, concrete manner, but also through the mediation of photographs, as representations of their immigration experience. At the same time, while Pedro's native language is Spanish, he uses Romanian while in Bucharest, and Swedish while in Stockholm, even though at times he has to search for words to fully reveal his thoughts. Constantinescu therefore plays on different levels of estrangement, an important one being the linguistic level.

The movement from one country to another is represented in the economy of the video through technical and directorial strategies. For example, parts of the video refer to different locations, Bucharest, Santiago de Chile or Stockholm; the return to Romania as a country of immigration is rendered through a hand-held moving camera; the storytelling prompted by a reactivation of memory through family photographs is mainly done in an intimate manner in close-ups, accompanied by Ramires's hands leafing through the pages of the family album, which reveals images from numerous cities connected to his immigration. Moreover, the video as a medium of representation is experienced by varied audiences, migrating into the international and heterogeneous venues of art exhibition. Mieke Bal summarizes this connection between movement, video and migration:

Video and migration are both anchored in the conceptual metaphor of movement – but a movement that cannot be taken for routine, “natural”, or realist. On the one hand, the moving image with its video-specific effects that multiplies and

complicates, and then frames it; on the other, the moving people with the moving – including, emotionally – images they generate in the social landscape.<sup>434</sup>

While space and movement are condensed when surfaced through acts of memory, the experience of time is in its turn mediated. On one hand, there is a “time of the duration,” as pointed out by Miguel Hernández-Navarro,<sup>435</sup> referring to the perception of time. In *Passagen*, this subjective experience of temporality is activated first of all through the act of storytelling, which shrinks in large periods of time and constructs a narrative string of events, following the pace of recollection prompted by the browsing of family photographs, but moreover, through the experience provided by the art works itself, by the video editing, that allows distanced moments in time to be seen if not in synchronicity, in close simultaneity. On the other hand, there is a “time of the succession,” addressing the unfolding of events in a specific context, in this particular case referring to physical immigration. The result is a porous experience of multi-temporality, which Bal would call “heterochrony.”<sup>436</sup> “Migration also consists of the experience of time as multiple and heterogeneous. The time of haste and of the wait, the time of movement and of stagnation; the time of memory and of an unsettling present. The phenomenon that I call multi-temporality; its experience, heterochrony.”<sup>437</sup>

In Romania, the camera registers Ramires’s memories triggered by the encounter with a familiar space. When in Stockholm, Constantinescu films him browsing through a family album with photographs taken in Chile and Romania. The family album occupies

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<sup>434</sup> Mieke Bal, “Heterochrony in the Act: The Migratory Politics in Time,” in *Encuentro Reader*, workshop at ASCA in Amsterdam, co-organized by Cendeac in Murcia, Spain, 2007, 205.

<sup>435</sup> Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, “Second Hand Technologies: Migratory Aesthetics/Politics of Resistance,” in *Encuentro Reader*, 123.

<sup>436</sup> Mieke Bal, “Heterochrony in the Act: The Migratory Politics of Time,” 203.

<sup>437</sup> Mieke Bal quoted by Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, “Second Hand Technologies: Migratory Aesthetics/Politics of Resistance,” in *Encuentro Reader*, 123.

the frame diagonally, while the subject's hands leaf through the pages of the album, unfolding a visual narrative. The lighting casts shadows and because the pages covered with transparent plastic sheets reflect light unevenly, the photographs are not always legible in their fullness; they are revealed by light but also concealed by glare; they are made partially opaque for the viewer by the filming process.

For immigrants, the family album acts as a repository of memory, sometimes as the only physical connection they still have with the country they left behind, but also recording the different stages of their journey, both in spatial and in temporal terms. Constantinescu records the viewing of the family album, while the sound registers Ramires's voice. His album of photographs begins with a postcard of his hometown, Antofagasta – it is physically detached from the album and shown to the audience – and pictures from his early childhood. The camera lingers on these images as the story unfolds and keeps them at the center of the visual field. Black and white images are placed next to colour ones, large ones near thumb-sized photographs, sometimes with torn edges; the same persons appear recurrently in different contexts and at different ages, making it difficult to establish an exact chronology. Tourist postcards, snapshots, and studio portraits of various formats are pasted at multiple angles, recording both ordinary moments but also important personal events: graduation, first trip to Romania, first trip to Sweden, pre-production evidence of his cinematographic attempts, and so on. Family members are prominent in the photographs taken in Chile, testifying to the existence of a large, past community. However, they cannot be securely identified by the audience, as camera travels back and forth, faithfully registering the indexing finger that points at the pictures. Images of Ramires's relatives are juxtaposed, recording the transformations that

the past has inscribed onto their bodies. The family album is conceived as a memoir and travelogue, the two not excluding each other. As Martha Langford puts it, a “memoir is a person’s account of the incidents of his or her life – the figures, transactions and movements that have affected it.”<sup>438</sup> The travelogue in Ramires’s case goes beyond the recording of trips undertaken in various countries, because, in itself, his memoir represents a continuous trip: the journey of immigration.

The initial scope of an autobiographical album is normally centered on a small audience, since it is meant to be viewed within the restricted private space of family members, and therefore for an audience who has access – however fragmentary or disjointed – to the underlying stories that accompany the photographs. Ramires carried his family album on his immigration voyage, but most members of his family remained back in Chile. In Sweden he is without family and with only few friends. The advent of the movie and of the oral storytelling that the interview triggers, throws his photographic memories into the world, before an audience that is not familiar with them, prompting their acknowledgment in a highly public space, determined by different rigors and expectations. The stories are brought to light by a performative gesture that takes place in front of the camera. As Bauman points out, “stories are like searchlights and spotlights; they brighten up parts of the stage while leaving the rest in darkness. Were they to illuminate the whole stage evenly, they would not really be of use. Their task, after all, is to ‘cure’ the stage, making it ready for the viewers’ visual and intellectual consumption; to create a picture one can absorb, comprehend and retain out of the anarchy of blots and

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<sup>438</sup> Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, (Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 64.

stains one can neither take nor make sense of it.”<sup>439</sup> Ramires’s photographs are present; they have materiality, flatness. But the photographs within a family album normally remain silent, except for those who already have some hints of the underlying stories that occupy them, who can dig out some of their context. They preserve as much forgetting as remembering, but also forms of non-disclosure even though they manifest visually in an overt manner. Creating shaky images that are sometimes too bright, sometimes too dark, Constantinescu’s lighting and shooting techniques match the characteristics of memory.

As he tries to trace Ramires’s story of immigration, Constantinescu appeals to a doubled modality of recollection, both visually through the photographic family album, and orally, through storytelling. He juxtaposes paradigms of meaning production, each with its own codes. Ramires is the only one who can recall the events of the past, bringing together his own memories, but also the events that occurred since these photographs were taken. His entire social and emotional context is changed, and this has some bearing on the way memories are shaped and passed over. Irrespective of the highly subjective value they have for Ramires, these photographs have acquired different qualities over time. Not only personal memory, activated by the view of familiar faces is inscribed, but also collective memories, referring to the larger social context, as in the case of a series of photographs taken during his graduation in Chile. These mark an existential rupture in his life, a before and after. While they record an important moment in his professional career – university graduation – his affective memory refers simultaneously to an event yet un-happened at the moment when the photograph was taken, but which will become associated with it thirty years later. The event that would determine his future life and his decision to immigrate to Communist Romania of the

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<sup>439</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Life*, 17.

1970s, a photograph taken on 11 April 1973, five months before the coup d'état in Chile. As Langford puts it, "any photograph is a potential kernel story, a discrete, catalytic reference to a longer story that is teased out and expanded in conversation."<sup>440</sup>

Language is an inherent part of the presentation Ramires makes and therefore in the activation of the latent context these pictures presuppose. The transmission of knowledge connected to these images is interrupted by the fragmentation and discontinuity of the oral presentation, or by an accident, as it occurred with a random telephone call during the interview, which Constantinescu maintains as integral part of the narrative. He does not edit from the final version of the movie what normally is considered to be an error. Moreover, interruptions are prompted by language itself. The events depicted in some of the photographs belong to a past connected to a specific geographical location and subsequently to a specific usage of language: Chile/Spanish. The narrated events trigger associations with the specific language used at the moment of their occurrence, requiring mental translation into the language of the interview, into Swedish. The graduation took place at the Supreme Court in Santiago de Chile: "we had to take an oath ... or the oath. I do not know how it is in Swedish."<sup>441</sup>

The family album contains elements less well preserved: names are forgotten, individuals fade into obscurity, histories get mixed up. In their ordinariness, they accompany events that are still to be remembered, alongside people who were an active part of the past, together with those who played a less significant role, at different ages and stages of their lives. The organization of the album is not always done in a chronological manner. It follows subjective patterns, associations that are kept in the

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<sup>440</sup> Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 150.

<sup>441</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

teller's memory. The photographs chosen to be part of the family album are highly selective: they have been ordered in the past, according to priorities and reasons felt at that moment to be important. Ramires does not record everything. He does not keep everything. There are gaps in his photographic record. Moments are unaccounted for and large periods of time remain blank, or rather blacked out. There are no photographs in the album of the time between his graduation – and during the coup d'état – until his coming to Romania. What is preserved is the ordinariness of his life, which comes to be grasped visually and later on activated by memory and storytelling when prompted by the photographic evidence. As Langford observes: "The extraordinary aspect of photography is the 'ordinariness' that makes it matter now, that makes it memorable later."<sup>442</sup>

The experiences that count from a subjective point of view are those moments preceding and following historical events. Contrary to private moments, predominantly captured in family photographs, historical events are the first to be publicly presented and photographed, in short they are first to be given a public visual and narrative representation; but privately, they are referred to photographically only as alternate stories that touch on the private. This absence is the more important when considering that this particular family album was a carefully orchestrated selection, knowing that it would be for many years to come the only physical reminder of Ramires's native country, a physical memory in exile.

However important, the events that are engraved in the collective memory do find their place only obliquely, by association, within the family album taken away by Ramires when immigrating. This absence is unpacked by two important set of images in a personal economy of remembrance, contained in two different family albums, with

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<sup>442</sup> Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 159.

different cover colors. The final images in the Chile album depict Ramires in his twenties receiving his diploma, followed by a few images of his family attending the ceremony. Ramires's finger indexes these individuals, but while doing so, it obscures partially their recognition. The surface of the family album becomes a fictional map drawn by his finger and its shadow. There is only a short span of screen time, a few seconds, that passes between the photographic experience of Chile and Romania. In reality this period was both long and difficult. The loud slap of the cover closing the first album can be felt as a rupture, only to be continued in the next album: the immigration chapter of his life. The raw sound of the first album closing is the sole expression of the coup d'état, the event that shaped the rest of his life as an immigrant in Romania and Sweden. As Marianne Hirsch states, "the same image is doubly exposed, in the familial setting and the broader cultural, historical and political contexts in which the family life takes place. The familial life is always inflected by other institutional gazes."<sup>443</sup> The familial reading must be considered in conjunction with extra-familial approaches, acknowledging at all times the viewing positions implied, which complicate and render depth to an understanding that defies unity.

*LOOKING BACK: "THESE PHOTOS ARE REALLY BAD"*

The first images in the second album refer to Ramires's newly acquired status of immigrant. They are postcards from Cluj, iconic images recognizable to any tourist as symbols of the city: Matei Corvin Main Square, or Cluj National Theatre. They are indicators of the experience of being a stranger in a new city. As an immigrant, he arrived

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<sup>443</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Familiar Gaze*, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 12.

in a new country, a new place, without having mastered the language. The alienation of first encounter is exposed through tourist images chosen as visual signposts. His photographic album continues with snapshots of his daily life, depicting himself together with new friends, other immigrants who had either just arrived or had settled in Cluj, Iasi or Bucharest a few years before. No names are given, their stories are unknown. They maintain a limited presence in someone else's family album: Ramires's own private album. These people are called, repetitively, "some Chileans, some Vietnamese, or some Russian women."<sup>444</sup> One image is singled out, as attested by the repetitive tapping of Ramires's finger on the photograph, as a sign of recognition. What appears to be a colour photograph showing the continuous lights of the cars driving in Bucharest on the street at night points less to the city itself, but turns out to make reference to a very specific moment of his past. He explains that it was taken from the balcony where he lived in a two-bedroom apartment shared together with three other immigrant singles.

While in Romania and studying to become a film director, Ramires undertook several trips to Sweden where he worked as a drycleaner. This new country had already started to become a projection to be followed imaginatively, with souvenirs populating his inhabitable environment, snapshots from these trips, posters taken from the Stockholm metro and later on hung on the walls of his apartment, such as *Godfather II* and *Shampoo* – movies that made references to a life led under different and more permissive rules. The clash between the world he lived in and the one stirring his imagination was recorded visually in the photographs he kept under the general category of "life in Romania."

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<sup>444</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

Alongside photographs considered to be “good,” that is, in the teller’s view hinting with some precision at particular lived moments, capturing what his memory retains from the past, there are also “bad” photographs, as Ramires points in the interview. When referring to the photos depicting himself and a couple of friends upon their arrival in Stockholm, he says succinctly: “these photos are really bad.” They prove to be unsatisfactory as devices reconstructing a time and space embedded in subjective memory. They are flawed with technical and artistic errors: faded colours, bad angles and unnatural body positions. Once the oral performance begins – a performance given in front of a “stranger,” the audience of the movie, which transforms the act of remembering into a public gesture – the photographs change their function, becoming a form of theatricality. They should be “beautiful” because they are the ones that retain what is to be remembered. Under this scrutiny, they fail the test. With the assertion “yes, these photos are really bad” the album closes, a blank page at the end announcing a different continuation. Hirsch summarizes the complexities informing the reading of family photographs: “The photograph is the site at which numerous looks and gazes intersect: the look exchange between photographer /camera and the subject; the looks between the subjects within the image; the look of the viewer, which often exceeds and complicates that of the camera and which, in itself, is an infinitely multiple and contradictory series of looks; and the external institutional and ideological gazes in relation to which the act of taking picture defines itself.”<sup>445</sup>

By piercing the “opacity” of the photograph with oral narratives, Ramires opens up the complicated workings of photographic reading, in which the subject attempts to remaster the past through a veil of nostalgia, desire, loss and estrangement, but moreover,

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 16.

does so from his present unfulfilled desires. The public discourse that shaped past self-representation mingles with a present one, infused by the subject's immigration experience in the present. The larger history inflects both the act of taking a photograph but also that of performing it. Immigration, together with its underlying reasons – economic, social and familiar – informs this specific selection of visual testimonies. His accounts are embedded in the circumstances that evolved in his life, as an immigrant. This family album is testimony to the passages taken in his existential journey and to the stories that are still kept concealed and out of site. In between, in a suspended space of dislodgement and non-belonging, his account follows the same path. While revealing, it keeps things hidden, even though no truth claims are made. At the end of the interview and of his storytelling Ramires denies the importance of this public recording: “I do not want to be filmed anymore.”<sup>446</sup> The scrutiny allowed into his private life, as seen through photographs, and made public by the act of filming, is halted. But some degree of visibility has already been produced. And part of the privacy of his immigration history, of the privacy of his family album has been turned into a public representation of one self. His story becomes part of the larger social and public memory of immigration, intersecting with other stories and other photographic testimonies. None of them is definitive.

*IMMIGRATION: WITNESSING AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT LIFE*

At this point in his film Constantinescu shifts the presentation strategy. The camera focuses on Ramires, and the environment he leaves in, an austere apartment with

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<sup>446</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

little decorations. Instead of following another thread opened up by an album containing images from Sweden, he focuses on Ramires's present life in Stockholm by bluntly revealing his present condition, marked by isolation: "I had to clean things up around here, so you would not see what my life is like. What you are filming right now isn't my life. My life is entirely different, only for me ... Otherwise I don't want witnesses to my life. It's enough that I am my own witness." These words are uttered in direct confrontation with the camera, more precisely with Constantinescu's presence behind the camera. The visual field is occupied by Ramires's face and gestures, uncomfortably struggling with his own inclusion as part of an artistic representation. Initially, nothing other than his presence profiled on a blank wall is revealed. The presence of the camera, prompts Ramires to shield or at least to state his own privacy as being impenetrable, without witnesses, except himself. No visibility is supposed to happen and yet a compelling apparatus of visualization is triggered by his agreement to be filmed and by the photographs he shared in front of the camera, explaining, revealing and concealing. Rupture comes to be synonymous with his life, as a form of estrangement, both toward himself and toward the society he looked forward to becoming part of at the beginning of his immigration.

The camera only adds to this feeling of alienation; it becomes an intruder within an inner life already engulfed in a form of non-presence. As Jean-Luc Nancy might say, the *intrus* is always within, it is always there, and it remains as long as it is acknowledged as being a stranger: "There must be something of the *intrus* in the stranger; otherwise, the stranger would lose its strangeness: if he already has the right to enter and remain, if he is awaited and received without any part of him being unexpected or unwelcome, he is no

longer the *intrus*, nor is he any longer the stranger. It is thus neither logically acceptable, nor ethically admissible, to exclude all intrusion in the coming of the stranger, the foreign.”<sup>447</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy refers to a radical split that perpetuates within oneself, to an inherent lack of integrity in one’s perception and self-identification. Moreover, the strangeness triggered by immigration emanates from the radical premises of the intruder not only being perpetuated, but brought to focus constantly, on a daily basis. The foreign – in as much as it is received, welcomed – is acknowledged as such, as an intrusion that is to be preserved in its foreignness, in its difference. On the one hand exiles cannot find a place of belonging, being constantly in a ‘hors-lieu,’ a non-place, a non-inhabiting that maintains them in a suspended space. There is no place of arrival. On the other hand, they are perpetually maintained in this difference, by the fact that they are recognizable as being alienated from the society that they temporarily or even permanently come to inhabit. They pertain to a “contaminated” community, enclosed and estranged. They are foreigners.

The process of memory remains disrupted, either because it involves a great deal of loss and forgetting, or because imagination fills in the gaps causing the story potentially to suffer small changes each time it is retold, but also because there is always a distance between the teller at the moment of speaking and the one seen and represented within the photograph; and finally, because the presence of the camera and the audience it presupposes prompts a certain censorship. A back and forth movement of revealing and concealing acts in a double way: his story asks to be told, as a desire to be brought to life, as a testimony of his existence, but at the same time it remains somewhere else. ”My life is entirely different, only for me.” And yet, the filming itself is part of this life that is

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<sup>447</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “L’Intrus” in *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 2, No.3, (Fall 2002), 1.

“entirely” different. Moreover Ramires states that “I don’t want anyone to see the way it is when you aren’t here filming.” Camera lingers on his face recording only the tension that appears between director and Ramires. Only later the camera discloses the appearance of the apartment itself, revealing an austere white covered bed, a simple kitchen, a table of four with three chairs, a curtain hanging at the middle of the window and a lamp. The room as actually inhabited by him remains to be further imagined. This apparent self-control is possible because in this case he is the performer, the authority granting access to a specific story. Yet, by being part of an artistic process, he escapes once again this authoritarian voice. Ramires, a failed cinematographer is in this recording an actor, cooperating in the presentation of his story for a successful Romanian filmmaker, another symptom of his misplaced effort. He is not just erasing elements that should not appear in a video recording, cleaning up as a routine gesture of self-presentation. Instead, he is preparing a set for the camera to capture. He knows what is being done to him.

His arrival in Sweden is remembered by Ramires with a precise date, 8 August 1980. The reason for coming is not remembered as clearly: “That’s when I came to Sweden, not to stay. I did not know that I would stay, but I did ... I came here like before, to work. But then I realized that I could stay here.”<sup>448</sup> Once the process of unbounding, of ungrounding started, it continues indefinitely. It does not stop with the arrival in a certain place. A form of internal exile comes to inhabit the immigrant, doubled by a search for a place to call home, for a “family.”<sup>449</sup> But as he states, “When you are a child you think you have a family. I did not have one.” Familylessness turns into a form of existence. The

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<sup>448</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*

family album and its perusal might give the impression of reconnecting to a sense of familiarity, of being at home, even in the absence of a family, as in the case of Ramires. Yet, this is deceptive. They tell only limited versions, most of the times imbued with nostalgia and with a sense of lost happiness and unity. When faced with the experience of immigration, and of the loss of bounds, of familiar context to remind them of a shared common ground, the snapshots –“which can make a ‘brief or transitory view’ permanent, capturing ‘mere fragments of life’ that could be easily forgotten and freezing them for inspection,<sup>450</sup> as noted by artist Lorie Novak – are turned into valuable reminders, speaking about both hopes and failures but moreover, speaking about an irremediable loss, that of the past.

Having political refugee status given by the UN Committee of Emigration, Ramires was entitled to ask for political asylum in Sweden against the military junta in Chile, or, alternatively against the regime in Romania. It was an opportunity that he never took advantage of. The prospect of finding work in Sweden seemed promising, as the economic situation in Romania worsened. “A lot of years had passed until I realized how things worked.”<sup>451</sup> As the unknown unfolded, the concrete situation failed to improve: “I was afraid.” Expectation stops and the reality of immigration steps in. “During the first seven years here nothing happened.”<sup>452</sup> When addressing Ramires’s current situation, as a train security guard, Constantinescu follows him to work and the interview takes place in the closed environment of the train cabin at night-time, with no passengers in view. Ramires’s explanation of his current situation is constantly interrupted as he goes in and out, performing his duties. The camera keeps rolling. Ramires’s job as a security guard

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<sup>450</sup> Lorie Novak, “Collected Visions,” in ed. Marianne Hirsch, *The Familiar Gaze*, 14.

<sup>451</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

<sup>452</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

on trains from Stockholm to the suburbs creates an even deeper isolation and failed dreams, as he observes from the enclosure of the train the lives of people he initially sought to integrate within. While witnessing other peoples' daily lives, he goes unnoticed. This is a position that exposes the outside world without exposing himself. "It's something you can only see it from here. But you don't see this if you don't work here. They don't think; they risk their life."<sup>453</sup> Two different worlds barely come in contact, and which remain until the end separated, at best ignoring each other. For Ramires "there is no future," as he says. Precariousness of life is accompanied by a perpetuation of the present, together with a dissolution of the future, or as Paul Virilio understands it, the present time is marked by "uchronia," a "loss of time perception."<sup>454</sup>

The continuation translates as resignation: "I want the last period of my life to be calm. That's all. All. I don't want to be filmed anymore."<sup>455</sup> A closure that denies access to being seen, even though this denial happens at the end, after the movie camera has performed its role. The recording was produced. Therefore the recording must end. The unsaid will remain as such, in spite of or alongside the photographic testimonies and his storytelling. All the other versions will be kept silent. The photographs will remain in his private possession, along with the stories that failed to come to surface, either due to conscious decisions or because at the time of the recording memories remained latent. The audience closes the circle with a different type of imagination and of interpretation, always at a distance, the gap between the story told, and the image referred to and their consciousness of the limited time of a film, as time spent in the company of other's memories of immigration. But as Butler points out, interpretation "takes place by virtue

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Paul Virilio, *Stop Eject*, 238.

<sup>455</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD

of the structuring constraints of genre and form on the communicability of affect – and so sometimes takes place against one’s will or, indeed, in spite of oneself.”<sup>456</sup> The final scene with Ramires is a desolate one. Part of the train occupies most of the image, the camera remains static, and Ramires vanishes in the distance, in the night, until all that remains is the deserted train station. What remains is his testimony on his own life as an immigrant.

#### *OTHERS’ STORIES OF IMMIGRATION*

Whereas Ramires recalls the different stages of his life and immigration by making use of family photographs and oral narratives, and speaks three different languages according to the context and specific location where the interview takes place – Spanish, Romanian, and Swedish – Vera Oliva resorts to oral storytelling, in a more reflective dialogue, based essentially on the idea of the impossible return. The interview takes place in Santiago de Chile, and it starts in a familiar environment, in the company of other friends, who are former immigrants; former, because they passed through the experience of immigration, going through Romania, and Sweden, finally deciding to return to Chile. They have fond and cheerful memories, sprinkled with tragico-anecdotal events that reveal the absurdness of the society they encountered, or corroborated with the privileged treatment they received. Upon arrival in Communist Romania, they were offered juridical assistance, lawyers, and furnished apartments.

Screening was part of the process of immigration and they recall it in a negative manner, but also with humour. When they arrived in Romania and were required to

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<sup>456</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 67.

undergo x-ray exams in order to prove their health, they had to face the arbitrariness of the administrative system. The adults interviewed were children when they immigrated, and they recall comical and exciting details of that experience, as well as the anxiety their parents endured. When one of the children was singled out and a doctor left the room with her file, the children felt their parents' anxiety, their incertitude, and dependency upon others' decisions to determine their fate. The check-up was performed because the little girl wore ponytails and they were tied up with small balls that appeared as foreign objects creating big holes in her lungs during the x-ray exam. Laughter accompanies this storytelling, but, however light it may seem years after the events, and thousands of kilometers away from Romania, it is also symptomatic to the arbitrariness of the system and the fear that felt at that time.

Their stories contain not only their own experiences but they also refer to those of friends and acquaintances. The screening that was meant to determine whether they were admissible or not was a source of great anxiety. One of their friends, who was tortured during the coup d'état feared that the very signs of his previous suffering might prevent him from being accepted. The trauma he suffered before leaving Chile was reactivated by the medical screening he had to undergo: "They had tortured him wildly after the coup d'état ... they laid him on a table to make the x-ray and the machine sounded strangely ... afterwards he told me that in that moment he remembered the sound that the electric generator made when they tortured him. They electrocuted him ... it was tragic but we laughed."<sup>457</sup> In the case of refugees, the initial violence that prompted them to leave the country did not end once the move had been made. They experienced a prolonged state of violence, perpetuated even after the conditions that expelled them are long left behind, as

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<sup>457</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

proven by Agier: “the original suffering formed by the emotional personal experience of destruction of places, goods and human beings is then deepened in the course of a trajectory wandering, a wounding existence.”<sup>458</sup>

Years later, memories seem lighter. Happy ones follow tragic ones. Memories of ordinary events, little details come together with those accompanying more important events, like the devastating 1977 earthquake in Bucharest. Geographical spaces are mixed up when the act of remembering digs out the past. Referring to Colentina, a place in Bucharest, one of the Chileans names it Karolinska, a Swedish name. Their temporary confusion speaks to their transitory passages through these places. Both places are directly connected to their immigration experience, but when memory is at play, forgetfulness and error are too. Moreover, memories of their immigration are triggered by small objects or even foods, such as pickles “that always remind them of Romania,” but which are missing one essential element, a spice: “marar/dill.” The name of the spice is preserved in their mind as such, in Romanian. When trying to find an equivalent in Spanish, or in Swedish, the word escapes them. These people are gathered around a table and the interview is performed as a conversation between them that occasionally includes the director. They address him directly to provide the translation of this word, ‘dill.’ Constantinescu remains silent behind the camera and they continue to look this word up in a dictionary. After recording these memories shared in a group dialogue, prompting laughter, Constantinescu shifts the focus on Vera Oliva’s story. The kitchen, as domestic environment is again the setting for the interview. But the storytelling happens without other visual prompts. There are no photographs to reactivate memories. Vera Oliva addresses a potential audience, through the eye of Constantinescu’s camera, but whom he

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<sup>458</sup> Michel Agier, *On the Margins of the World*, 24.

also rejects, by prolonged gazing out of the window, avoiding a direct confrontation with the technical apparatus that records his testimony. The only dynamics is that of his hands moving, following more or less intense emotions.

Memories of immigration come not only as a result of highly subjective and personal experiences, they also stem from others' stories and recollections, forming a collective memory that is commonly accessed, leading sometimes to divergent stories. Looking back on the time spent in Romania, Vera Oliva admits that "when I talk to other Chileans of my age who lived there, they often remember Romania as something beautiful, as if things had been good to them there. I don't remember it that way."<sup>459</sup> These colliding opinions question to a certain extent one's memories and one's expectation of what the personal experience of immigration should look like. Even though immigration as a whole shares certain general traits and is often accompanied by conflicted feelings, it also poses individual challenges that differ greatly from one individual to another. They also shape the way memories are being recalled. They are determined not only by the events of the past but also by subsequent personal choices that are molded by the social and economic context. Vera Oliva's Romania is not other immigrants' Romania. "I think they all invented all this, that they should feel good."<sup>460</sup> Not only is immigration not perceived as homogeneous, it changes dramatically and it passes through successive stages of projection, desire, and fulfillment, through disenchantment, despair, fear, abandon or resignation. "At the beginning in the first year I saw Romanians as being in their country and leaving normal lives and that only we had problems. Slowly but surely this changed because we started to meet Romanians and

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<sup>459</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*

have the same problems.”<sup>461</sup> Confronting the reality of a Communist country, which became increasingly more restrictive and totalitarian, was the incentive for a renewed immigration. The public ideology of Communism proclaiming the welfare of the people living in “the best possible world” was doubled by a different private one, more subtle, based on their parents’ desire of fulfillment. Being a child at the time, Vera Oliva remembers that they “realized after many years how things stood. Many years. Because in fact we were repeating what our parents told us.”<sup>462</sup> This acknowledgement triggered, this time consciously, the decision to immigrate to Sweden, in April 1980. “But I do remember that I wanted to leave Romania before my parents did.”<sup>463</sup> Freedom was the incentive, as things became gradually more regulated within Romania.

*IN BETWEEN: INTERNAL EXILE*

The internal exile becomes apparent before the actual one even begins, in a longing and desire for a different space, social, political and economical. The ‘common ground’ that is supposed to give consistency to living in a certain reality becomes the projection toward a different one, making possible in the first place the idea and then the concretization of exile and immigration. Accompanying this process of immigration are attempts to preserving the connection with the home country. In this way, a new community is forged, which, without sharing all the traits of the home country, attempts to re-enact them, with different coordinates, within a different social and spatial environment. A common loss functions as the new ‘common ground.’ However, as Augè

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

argues, an essentially different experience defines this recovered identity: the generalized experience of deterritorialization, which is not experienced alone, but characterizes large populations that have made the journey of immigration, which changes not only the societal tissue of those who undergo it, but also those who receive them and those who are left behind. It is one of the most powerful social experiences of contemporary world. By crossing borders, immigrants desert a common past and common habits in order to meet new challenges, to form new connections and relationships, based on their new found precarious identity: a “illusory community,” in Augè’s terms..

In *Passagen*, first encounters with the desired destination seem to have been utopic. The subjects had left countries – Chile and Romania – where freedom was restricted and society was crumbling. But as acknowledged by Vera Oliva, “adapting to a new country always produces a crisis,” which in spite of difficulties is marked by hope and a projective feeling toward a potential future: “I thought I would never leave Sweden ... but after a while things changed.”<sup>464</sup> The uncertainty in the case of refugees can become a mark of their existence that can be prolonged indefinitely. “A state of liminal floating” emerges, without fixed coordinates or even an end in view. Suspension from the ordinary norms becomes the norm and moreover, the waiting is turned into a way of life, since their condition is characterized by incompleteness, “a midway between a point of departure and an inaccessible end point, either of arrival or return.”<sup>465</sup>

A paradoxical situation evolves in this case, which is familiar to other immigrants. A temporary state of being “in between worlds,” triggered by the process of immigration is proliferated and becomes a permanent condition. Looking for a place to settle down –

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<sup>464</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

<sup>465</sup> Michel Agier, “The Camps of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” 30.

“why would you leave a country like that (Sweden)” – they find themselves in a perpetual state of insecurity, or temporary stability, throwing them in a permanent condition of being exiled. “After a while things changed. The country doesn’t change, but you start seeing things differently.”<sup>466</sup> It is the ‘internal exile’ Agier speaks about. They once again become strangers, both toward the country they immigrated to and toward themselves. They become the living proof that notions of “stranger” and “home” are utopian fictions capable of regulating a life, but, when demystified, expose their shortcomings, an “exile fixed between two outsides, two absences.”<sup>467</sup> Apart from belonging to a social and economic precariousness – “the trajectory of exile as materially precarious and socially provisory world,”<sup>468</sup> as Agier points out, the exile is not necessarily a journey to be accomplished with a fixed destination, which ceases to exist once this goal was reached. It rather manifests as an “hors-lieu,” an outside, at a distance from oneself, which, in his view is possible due to the fictionalization of ‘extra-territoriality.’ The appearance of exteriority is the consequence of a deeper exile that cannot be recuperated through immigration, nor through the return to the country left behind in the first place.

*NO RETURN*

Vera Oliva’s journey continued. “One day, without even knowing exactly why, I woke up and I said, ‘I am going to Chile.’ Many things had happened in Chile. The

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<sup>466</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

<sup>467</sup> Michel Agier, “Le couloir de exilés,” 58. Original in French: “le parcours de l’exil comme monde précaire, matériellement, et provisoire, socialement.” Author’s translation.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

dictatorship ended and democracy began.”<sup>469</sup> The return to his native country was anticipated to a certain degree by his previous identification as Chilean: “Every time I introduced myself I would say I was from Chile, I did not say I am Romanian, I am Swedish.”<sup>470</sup> Identifying himself as Chilean, he tried to reestablish a more stable identity. This identification proves to be even more problematic when returning to his native country, since throughout the years it only existed as a form of nostalgia, a lost land to be regained and recovered, with little resemblance to reality. As Paul Carter points out “home is never a destination, it exists in the realm of the meanwhile and in-between. Its style is that of the arabesque, which, even as it reaches beyond itself toward the vanishing point, delays, expatiates, winds back and eddies about the gap.”<sup>471</sup> A renewed crisis, a third one is prompted by the confrontation with his own desire. Chile existed previously only as a potentiality to be fulfilled, as projection that made possible his experience as immigrant, knowing that there was always a place to return: “I have never lived in Chile as an adult, a new country in the end. Many of the things you knew in Chile weren’t real, they were myths. So I was like adapting to a new country, a third country. Even though we had things in common, a history, a language, it was ... it was hard anyway. I always feel, even if the years passed that I have just arrived.”<sup>472</sup> Storytelling that spans three countries and a large period of time does not leave the comfort of his own kitchen. It is filmed in Santiago de Chile. But this kitchen could have been placed anywhere, Romania, Sweden or Chile.

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<sup>469</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>471</sup> Paul Carter, “Art, Migration and Eido-kinesis,” in *After the Event*, 53.

<sup>472</sup> *Passagen*, Dir. Stefan Constantinescu, 2005, 62 min, DVD.

While interrogating the condition of immigration, Constantinescu also poses questions on the subjective conception of native land, as reflected in the imagination of those who immigrated. A similar question was raised by Raymond Depardon and Paul Virilio in the exhibition presented at Centre Pompidou in 2008, *Native Land. Stop. Eject*: “what is left of the world, of native lands, of the history of the only habitable planet today.”<sup>473</sup> Recovering through representation the identity of these mutational communities is no easy matter. Native lands are far from easily being encompassed, and the more so, when people inhabiting their territories are threatened or forced to choose the exile, not as a completely voluntary decision, but rather, as a means of surviving. The return after years of exile takes place as a renewed form of immigration, since projections, desires and nostalgia that fuelled their imagination have constructed a different mental country than the one they come to encounter when confronting it in a concrete manner. What is lost is the fundamental quality of “being rooted”<sup>474</sup> or as Arendt puts it, of “being bound to earth,” a condition that became disrupted alongside their initial departure and decision to immigrate. The “native land” translates in this case as a dystopia, losing the strength of ascribing the quality of rootedness to the people inhabiting it. It becomes a transparent and fluid notion, dissolute in the face of the new contemporary nomadic paradigm of immigration, “never at home, anywhere.”<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Raymond Depardon, Paul Virilio, *Native Land: Stop Eject*, 5.

<sup>474</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>475</sup> Paul Virilio, *Native Land. Stop Eject*, 185.

## CONCLUSION

My study establishes the state of unprotectedness as an interpretative framework for contemporary Romanian photographic and video practice. This condition, which can be traced to the abuses of a totalitarian state, has not disappeared with its collapse, but has mutated, even as formerly invisible and voiceless Romanian subjects obtained levels of visibility and made themselves heard. Armed with this insight, and moved by the work that has been made despite, and because of, this condition, I set a number of goals for my investigation: to analyze forms of artistic emergence from social and cultural invisibility; to examine memory as mediator between history, trauma and its cultural representation; to investigate social realities of a country undergoing profound changes; to explore the visual revision of important symbols of the Communist regime; to underline the manifestations and subversions of the mechanisms that form and regulate power relationships; to reconsider the experiences of immigration as a displacing process. History, memory, and cultural representation complicate the relationship with the past in a challenging dynamic. None of these levels of interpretation can be examined in isolation, but must be correlated as content arises from the past.

The challenge of the art production that I examine in this study is its critical positioning within traumatic social realities and simultaneously in differentiation from them, by working through the dilemmas of representation as mediation and transforming the raw material of the social. The use of recording media – photography and video – as the means of bringing human experience into representational visibility has everywhere been challenged in critical theory. The works of Stefan Constantinescu, Irina Botea,

Matei Bejenaru and Ion Grigorescu serve as significant case studies for the intricacies through which cultural mediation introduces distance and complicates the emergence of trauma memory into the visual.

The work that I have examined is full of impossibilities. The historical context's pretension to deliver a cohesive version of the factual trauma is non-existent. Its narrative comes into being as processes of selection, exclusions in view of present desires and recuperation needs. Lack of certainty is at the core of any act of remembrance, and the more so when referring to a traumatic history that resurfaces into the present through photographs and oral testimonies. Then may artists intervene by introducing the personal as in Constantinescu's *Golden Age for Children*, lived collective trauma through iconic images as explored by Botea's *Auditions of a Revolution*, and artistic discourse as a symptom of a past visual obliteration, now resurfacing, as seen in Grigorescu's art works. I have read deeply into these works to bring out the social implications, analogies, fragments of memory, states of remembrance, and bouts of forgetting, always conscious of the desires of the present to reformulate the past for an audience that itself escapes categorization, by introducing productive noise, a veering back and forth that while deeply grounded in the visual, exceeds the limits of its interpretation. Accessibility provided through the visual realm – a realm desired and denied by Communist-era Romanians – is radically questioned by these works, which selectively reinterpret the past and bring to visibility what was kept hidden either because of ideological restriction or socio-political constraints, and remains obscure because of the mechanisms of traumatic memory. Activating presence, reality as such, and a receding past, irremediably at a distance, the resurgence of Communist traumatic past through memory into cultural acts,

into reification, speaks against oblivion. Visual and psychological “blindness” is reversed – understood on one hand to be historically imposed through censorship and on the other as a manifestation of the present, a consequence of a precariousness of the social, as in the case of Romanian immigrants. What is at stake is the regime of knowledge and of truth. It is deferred with each act of representation, while at the same time brought closer, for interpretation and imagination, for unprotected visibility in the present.

While my analysis concentrates on specific historical occurrences that shaped Romanian past and its consequences into an ongoing process of transformation that still infuses contemporary society, it critically positions these manifestations as symptoms of a larger pattern of understanding biopolitics and the cultural production that problematizes it. My investigation of the works selected as case studies reviews the fundamental conditions that generated abusive social conditions under Communism, where the natural body was legitimated, even exalted, in its existence, in as much as it was subsumed to politics. In other words, it locates this radical displacement under the specter of unprotectedness, produced under conditions of social abuse in terms of a fundamental migration of protected life under the rules of law into its abandonment to regulations that cast it outside legitimization. This situation goes beyond the borders of Communist Romania. It is not here understood to be exclusively determinant of totalitarian states – of which Eastern European Communist regimes are explicit embodiments – but extends its significance for the larger configuration of contemporary societies, which manifest similar traits in more subtle tones. Such conditions are relevant in other parts of the world in non-democratic societies and significantly, are exhibited as

constituents of democratic societies as well, where mechanisms for the politicization of human life are abundant, though in a less overt manner. The migration paradigm, which Romanian artists have powerfully addressed, strongly determines the configuration of contemporary societies around the globe. This is one case in point. Manifestations of biopolitics can also be detected in medical and scientific experiments, as well as within the microcells of society's mechanisms of existence. I hope that my readings of these Romanian works will inform these wider debates.

Theoretical texts have largely dissected these social mechanisms of subjugation. Political and historical abnormalities of the twentieth century made it necessary to bring the evil produced into the regime of knowledge; the theory that I have employed in this thesis is both a reflection and consequence of these tragedies. While preserving the specificities of the catastrophes that they reflect on, the theories are not exclusive to these occurrences, but have applicability in other political and cultural contexts, as for example Hannah Arendt's insights, which have migrated from the Holocaust to the new camp. It is important to mention that trauma theory considers not only a personal recuperation of the past as potential healing process. Intrusions, re-enactments, disconnection, the resurfacing of the past as story and mourning are also collective and can be shared within a community as they come into the present through acts of testimony. This literature is also relevant to the analysis of the historical consequences of chronic trauma that have affected societies as a whole, whether recovering from war experience (this has been significant over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) or within communities slowly emerging from totalitarian experiences. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, 9/11 collective trauma, and ex-Communist countries are significant

example in this sense. The theoreticians that I have consulted have become important voices that influenced the art production and the critical debates regarding the double-sided confluence between art and politics, strategies of representations, and ultimately, arguments questioning the possibility of representation as such when dealing with trauma and extreme cases of abuse that disrupt the fundamentals of what constitutes and counts as a human being.

The interpretation developed throughout my study takes into consideration such theoretical incursions into historical malformations, their roots of existences and long term-consequences; it develops them in specific social, political and cultural conditions infusing the artworks and their dissemination. At the same time, it introduces a “virus,” a dimension as yet non-existent in the development of these events and in their theoretical deciphering, but only as projected potentiality, to be fulfilled at a later time: the art production reinterpreting them, in the future. This “future” turned present, and through the writing of this thesis, turned once again into a recent past, is the specific temporality that I consider in the case of Romanian art. It is also the retrospective perspective of writing a study from a Romanian viewpoint in North America, assuming therefore a cultural and interpretative distance while delving into the intimacies and contradictions of Romanian past and decommunization process. These contradictions are constitutive parts of the works that I look into. Constantinescu’s *The Golden Age for Children* is produced in Sweden, digging out, confronting and surfacing as memory, both for himself and for others, the personal and the public of Communist imagery, actualizing spaces of resistance that functioned within the private and just below the surface of the visual. It is a trauma re-enacted in the present, as Grigorescu’s works testify, recurrently interpreting

the same themes, as troubling returns of a past that for long years appeared to be settled and contained. For Romania, it took almost ten years for Communism, so visible in its time, to come back into public view. This movement exceeded memorialization, whether nostalgia for one segment of the population or “demonization” for a different group. It also bypassed the recourse to shock images already inscribed in a frozen collective memory. It resurfaced as artistic representation, as re-enactments of a fleeting memory of the past allowing little certitude: a past that manifested in the present and for which the right actors were being sought, as Botea’s *Auditions* shows, to re-play it, again and again, thereby preparing for its occurrence. This was a past happening in the present and in the uncontained future that art production promises. Here again, while my explorations are specific to the Romanian historical and cultural context, they have applications elsewhere. This “future” refers not only to Romanian specificity, but to cultural acts that exists and potentially will emerge in other parts of the world. If the Middle East miraculously opens up and the Palestinian situation changes, there will doubtless be expressions of trauma that readers of my thesis have now been trained to recognize and to situate critically. The reading of historical trauma through the theoretical texts I interpreted in my thesis becomes a process of conceptual re-localization, throwing a new light on these understandings, transforming them productively to expand their relevance. If re-enactments are constitutive symptoms of trauma’s resurgence into representation, re-reading becomes a manifestation of cultural history revisited. It is also the work that we must do.

Apart from the specific works investigated in my study, other artistic creations of the same artists continue to expand on the dilemmas of reformulations of the past and to

refer also to other socio-cultural realities. This is a symptom of migratory patterns that the artists themselves follow: some of them live and work not only in Romania, but also in Sweden – Stefan Constantinescu – and the United States – Irina Botea. Moreover, within contemporary patterns of mobility, art's production and exhibition are relocated according to centers of influences, exchanges, and collaborations, positioning these works in negotiation with the cultural spaces and traditions they come in contact with. Given that conditions of the “state of exception” do not refer exclusively to ex-totalitarian states, contemporary biopolitical societies exhibit traits of bare life, within the articulation of their internal political systems and in terms of expectations and “protection” from exterior intrusions. The artists I analyzed in my study extend their preoccupations to realities outside the sphere of Romanian society, grounding their artistic gestures in an understanding of present day society, its manifestations, forms of protest, and social implications.

Matei Bejenaru continues his incursions into the social with projects centered on the idea of work, underlining the society's working through decommunization. *Battling Inertia* (2010), a 14-minute video documentary, recuperates a moment from the past, through the use of oral history, archive photography and video footage. The memory of a literary circle in Iasi during Communism is actualized through the nostalgic testimony of one of its founders, Alexandru Tacu. This literary manifestation was active in the Heavy Equipment Plant in the 1970s and 1980s, a heavily politicized period of Romanian history, factories and workers being especially targeted and considered to be the foundation for building Socialism. The sole remnants of the circle are the physical space of the library, objects and their past arrangement: an old telephone and even the obsolete

book indexing system with cards. Preserved intact within a factory that is still active, this space disappeared from view, while existing as a monument without audience or museum institution: a non-space, except for the artist's reawakening of the past through Tacu's memories and bodily presence. The encounter is marked with obsolescence; its lack of glamour, modest ambitions and precariousness, speak to both the past and the present. Moreover, Bejenaru's recent project *Songs for a Better Future* (2010-2011) activates utopic projections. A series of video documented sound performances, staged in Bucharest, Vancouver, Innsbruck, and London, they explore the specifics of the place where they are being staged. In Bucharest, "Madrigal" choir – singers dressed in severe black and grey cloths – perform Communist songs praising the workers: "Heigh ho, heigh ho, on an iron lane/let us all now work to do/the plan we should carry through/hard is the work of the brigadier." Irony comes through this experimental composed music, based on rhythms of Communist propaganda songs, enhanced through the insertion of the words 'work,' 'memory,' and 'movement,' and "noises" from the present: 'the cell rings.' In the Communist era, jokes that subverted the constant praising of work and workers as constructors of Socialism were among the few ways of breaking through the rigours of ideological silence: one of these ironic statements "the long and frequent breaks/are the key to great success" becomes within this performance part of the choir, sung under the same heroic tune. Under the disguise of re-enactment, of sounds of revisiting the past, the core question asked is related to memory and to the fear of forgetting: Have you forgotten? You have forgotten! Have you forgotten?" This inquiry is repetitively sung by the choir: first interrogation, then affirmation, and finally surprise become part of the process of recollection. Other performances within this project took over the structure of

modernist experiments in music by producing contemporary sound pieces. In Vancouver, Bejenaru's performance addressed the Chinese immigrant community living there, appropriating musical patterns from Chinese traditional music. The same recurrent key words, 'work,' 'memory,' and 'future' acquired tonalities referring to both the past and future projections of an immigrant community living in Canada.

Sound is an essential part of Botea's video piece *Before a National Anthem* (2009), where the national Communist anthem is reinterpreted and transformed twenty years after it fell in obsolescence. The musical scores range from new compositions to Beethoven's *Ode of Joy*. Repositioning the anthem in the present, in an interpretative formula, and as such in a performative manner, Botea actualizes the formation of political imagination as ongoing process. The question "how do you compose a national anthem today?" is posed to the audience, to writers and musicians. The answers vary: they deny, reinterpret, contrasts and imagine anthems, sung as part of the performance, and establishing a confrontation between multiple variants, against stable and singular national identification. The lyrics are played in conjunction with the formal patterns of choir music for anthems, subverting them while affirming their persistent grip on collective imaginary: "I can't compose an anthem/ I can't idealize the past/and I don't want to idealize an anthem dedicated to utopia;" or the crescendo singing of disease as form of belonging to national paradigms of identifications: "I have a disease/ I am umbilically connected to Romania." Moreover, Botea uses the documentary strategy in order to interrogate the public space and its intersection with political protest, as in her video work *15M Conversations* (2011). This project employs interviews with participants in the protests that took place in Barcelona, between May and June 2011, underlying the

necessity of creating a physical presence of the masses in conjunction with modern technologies of communication in order for a community to be formed and to generate new effective forms of protest. She reinterpreted this topic in *Quick reply / 15 M* (2011), a 1-minute video, where quick reply (QR) codes are generated from links to web articles referring to these manifestations, accompanied in the background by indistinctive sounds of mass protest. Similarly, her video *Photocopia* (2011) is staged through a series of interviews and performed as essentialized dialogues where only key words were uttered, following one after the other as abbreviated answers. The persistent memory of the protests is repetitively played in successive transformations. It underlines the recurrent patterns through which memory returns to haunting elements, re-enacting them each time with different outcomes, and, in the case of art practices with different artistic strategies, as proven by Botea, who three times retakes the same topic referring to Spain's socio-political reality.

Stefan Constantinescu has continued his inquiries into the workings of the past and its present interpretations through the personal and the private, while acknowledging a continuous interference of the social and political in understanding, evaluating and surfacing memory acts. His recent project, *The Last Analog Revolution, a Memory Box* (2011) – co-curated with Xandra Popescu and exhibited as part of the “Romanian Cultural Resolution” – refers to technological means that prompt and allow visibility during social upheavals, for social change, and ultimately for fractured communities. This project assembles artists from both East and West who interrogate the relevance of borders in contemporary biopolitics. They employ patterns of recollection that underline the autobiographic element as mediator of politics and ideology. The artists included in

this project are: Stefan Constantinescu (Romania/Sweden), Péter Forgács (Hungary), Zuzanna Janin (Poland), Karen Mirza and Brad Butler (England), Deimantas Narkevicius (Lithuania), Yves Netzhammer (Switzerland), Liliana Moro (Italy), and Via Lewandowski (Germany). The project comprises six videos, a sound piece, and a sculpture. It is exhibited in the form of a cardboard installation, a transportable “memory box” to be experienced as an act of discovery, revealing “surprises” of a past not necessarily witnessed directly, but whose consequences expand into contemporary society. 1989 triggers memory as the collapse of former Communist regimes, in Romania as in other Soviet block countries, the culmination of the so-called “analogue revolutions.” Present day revolutions – notably those occurring in North Africa and the Middle East<sup>476</sup> – are considered “digital revolutions” accessing a dynamic flow of information, and characterized by technological mobility.

Politization of life and culture is a trait found in other contemporary societies. Exploring the artistic creation of Central and Eastern European illuminates the consequences for both theory and form of the workings of memory in addressing trauma, as well as the socio-political implications of states of exception created in other communities. A number of artists have explored cultural mechanisms to reverse forgetfulness and critically inscribe the social within artistic representation. In her installation *On the State of the Nation* (2010) Andreja Kuluncic (Croatia) investigates the internal ghettoization of the “others” in Zagreb, whether they are gypsies, sexual, or religious minorities. Her installation makes use of repetition and accumulation strategies, referring to the social perception of these groups in the media, television and newspapers. Stacks of newspapers are transformed into sitting platforms, used by visitors watching

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<sup>476</sup> <http://www.stefan-constantinescu.com/index.php?/works/memory-box/> Accessed 12 June 2012.

interviews on TV screens that are embedded in walls packed with other thousands of newspapers. The “foreigner” is a preoccupation that she had taken up earlier in her series of advertisements *Austrian Only* (2005) where the jobs normally assigned to or expected to be performed by immigrants, for example cleaning workers, were specifically required to be filled by Austrians, prompting a participatory involvement from the audience, mostly made out of Austrian citizens. The work not only addresses social problems and transforms them into artistic representation, but initiates a dialogue with the audience, the outcome of which becomes inscribed in the work itself, becoming part of the work. Conflicted approaches and antagonisms are enacted in Milica Tomic’s (Serbia) video *I am Milica Tomic* (2009), in which the artist performs the notion of national identity as embodied trauma. Whenever the artist proclaims her nationality, a wound appears on her body, smearing with blood an initial white dress. She constantly changes the nationality she assumes – ‘I am Serbian,’ ‘I am Croatian’, ‘I am Turkish’ – yet the symbolic wounds continue to be inflicted and recorded progressively in the video.

An even more radical statement is made by Christoph Schlingensief (Germany), in his *Please Love Austria* (2000), where participatory audience was constitutive part in the production of the action itself. This work developed a critical fracture in the understanding of social mechanisms of exclusion, enacted not only at governmental level, but within micropolitics as well. For the duration of a week, twelve asylum-seekers were housed within a CCTV shipping container near Vienna opera house. All their actions were transmitted live via internet, a social version of Big Brother surveillance; the audience could vote to decide who should be evicted and deported to their native lands. The winner of this cynical social experiment/art product could have benefited from

marriage with an Austrian citizen, a volunteer from the audience. Moreover, Schlingensief's inquiries into the social and the fractures it produces at a personal level were exhibited as part of the German Pavilion for the Venice Biennial in 2011. Before the show was open to the public, he died of cancer, his entire exhibition being transformed into a post-mortem appeal to the surfacing of trauma memory, as the motto for his fluxus oratorio *Church of Fear vs. the Stranger within* (2008) states: "Whoever shows his wound will be cured, whoever hides it, shall not be cured." This installation comprised video projections, created after he was diagnosed with lung cancer, and theatricalizes fear, death, and memory in ways that are related not only to the personal, but also to the public and the social. The pavilion was completed with other video works on the social trauma of Europe – *The German Chainsaw Massacre*, 1990, *Terror 2000* (1991–2) – and on strategies of colonization in *Via Intoleranza II* (2010), together with his opera village *Opendorf Africa*, an ongoing project at the time of his death.

Patterns of migration can be further considered from a perspective that takes into account the existence of the native land, as a point of departure for the illusory communities of migrants, as shown by Yto Barrada's (France/Morocco) photographic project *A Life Full of Holes* (1998-2004), investigating the imaginary associated with migration, as well as the social rupture produced even before its actual occurrence. Borders, as physical and imaginary exclusion mechanisms, are accompanied by screening and surveillance, allowing the free circulation from the inside to the exterior and rejecting the unwanted flawed elements: Isaac Julien's (UK) video installation, *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), exploring a group of immigrants' passage across the Mediterranean; Hans op de Beek's (Belgium) video *Border* (2001), revealing the traumatic condition of

illegal immigration through a surveillance device, an X-ray image, used to screen people crossing the border. Migrational phenomena can be also explored considering the construction of precarious collective identities on the other side of the border, where migrants are subjected to new rules and social status. On one hand, they cannot find a stable place of belonging. On the other, they are perpetually maintained in this state of difference, by being recognized and technologically stamped as “foreigners.” Examples that relate to the work I have discussed in this thesis include Kzysztof Wodiczko’s (Poland/USA) installation *Guests* (2008-2009), presenting the immigrants as silhouettes behind projected windows and Santiago Sierra’s (Spain) *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain in the interior of carton boxes*, (2000), re-exploiting the conditions of political refugees in an art context. Ironically, the same instruments that are used to discipline these populations – surveillance cameras – are also carrying their conditions to the outside world. This paradox is heightened in the works of art that address migrants’ personal narratives of rupture and isolation. In order to bring this condition to visibility, artists subject migrants to new forms of surveillance. This approach offers the promise of memory, or at least limited obliteration, but also doubles as a renewed instance of exploitation. These artistic productions gradually unravel the inherently conflicted access to visibility of communities who experience forms of containment when they change their status, from one geographical place to another, from one culture and language to another, or within the borders of the same social reality, from one form of government to another. The theme of (im)migration and mobility can be positioned in relation to *migratory aesthetics* (Mieke Bal), acknowledging the social not only as represented in art, but also as determining artistic forms and interventions in the

public sphere: artists' critical interventions reverse social and cultural invisibility, but at a cost. I have tried to be mindful of this dilemma in my presentation of works that bring to visibility both the victims and the perpetrators of violence.

My study gradually unravels the intricate mechanism of trauma memory as manifest in the visual. Yet, it is a symptom of a more persistent inquiry on the trauma of the past, social patterns of confinement and mobility and their long-term consequences: a form of repetitively coming back to the source of displacement. My research and interpretative process of deciphering the specificity of Romanian social and artistic context now leads me to pursue them in a different socio-cultural space, a perspective that offers me personally more distance and fertile ground for interrogation and critical positioning. Through research/creation, I have pursued my exploration of the memory of diaspora in the form of an artistic project entitled *23 Kilograms* (2010-2011). This work was an attempt to unravel the intimate relationship that immigrants preserve with their native land through the photographs and other small objects that they bring with them in their luggage. An incalculable number of little objects charged with past memories had to be deserted, abandoned, while seemingly impractical elements were too important to be left behind. Frequently, these were photographs. Most airlines impose a weight restriction on passengers' luggage, generally no more than 23 kilograms for each passenger. It represents an exchange, heavy when compared to a routine luggage one has to carry around, but light if it is meant to concentrate one's belonging and potential necessities for the encounter with an unknown space. The photographs that the immigrants have selected from a large personal archive offer a palpable experience of the past, while in time becoming marked by the voyage they have been through, whether torn at edges, stained,

or marked in pen on the back. They belong to the past, but they are also transformed into companions in the present. This project consisted of a series of photographs and six interviews with immigrants living in Canada. Their experiences and histories are different, as they come from diverse cultural and social spaces (Romania, the former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Cuba). One Romanian was a former political prisoner who had immigrated to Canada during the Communist era in 1988, when he was 60 years old; for him America was a myth, a personal desire deeply connected to a family history. His grandparents, on both sides, had already crossed the ocean as immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century. His family album thus contains an entire century of existence, connected to immigration and to the memories it projected, to be imagined and ultimately to be lived at a later time, as an escape from the trauma of prison. Another video projection was an interview with a woman who left Bosnia-Herzegovina when the war started; she was 12 years old at the time. Her father introduced the journey as a long vacation, from which they would surely return soon. They never returned, until after her father died; he had requested that his body be repatriated. Telling and to some degree imagining stories for the camera are signs of forgetting postponed, even if the secondary memory constructed for the audience retains only fragmentary traces of a context that under other circumstances would be rich in nuances, reformulations, or possibly denials. Two of the interviews were filmed in the same space where the videos were projected. Those interviewed were part of the audience as well, repetitively giving witness to their own testimonies, their attempts to contain memories that always escaped fixity. Informed by my research, this creative project (their creation, as well) confirmed that some memories will never surface to mediation. They are too painful or too personal to be

shared, they remain frozen in a past that some photographs taken as repositories of their past still have the capacity to evoke, while stirring and unsettling the peacefulness of forgetting. Trauma has a powerful grip on imagination, on the present, on the living and the lived.

What did we gain by following the convolutions of power structures activated by the state of exception with its long-term consequence for the visualization of the social coordinates and the regime of representation, and by entering the crevices left open by traumatic memory, its oral mechanisms of recollection, the mediation of photography and artistic acts, as intermediary steps in the surfacing of the past? The simple answer is a resistance to oblivion. And perhaps this is the main task performed by art in its reification of trauma, and its haunting challenge. Informed by productive doubt over the likelihood of completion, it is an act of presence as well as a struggle against time, against forgetfulness, activated by the workings of imagination. The works of contemporary Romanian art demonstrate that no image of testimony or history surfaces in the absence of imagination, whose active continuation of the image's insufficiency promises to reveal, while always remaining in-between the showing, the exposure, and the hiding. The "civil contract of photography" activates different actants in different parts of the world, making it possible for those who have been denied representation to surface, to come into presence, years after their human condition was preserved as image. It is a promise that extends their existence beyond the confinements of physicality, beyond the sometimes undemocratic circumstances that have characterized the politization of their lives. In order for this hermeneutical and visual process to happen, an important element is time. The works that have been considered here ask for your time. It takes time to

communicate the past as a story, to look at images, to subtract them from the anonymity of others that may also speak of trauma. It also takes time to consider cultural products and to bring them into the living present, enabling the understanding of other socio-cultural spaces that have struggled and are still struggling to achieve a crucial visibility. This is the promise of my study.

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## APPENDIX 1

## FIGURES



Figure 1 Stefan Constantinescu, *Archive of Pain*, 2000, video installation and book



Figure 2 Stefan Constantinescu, *Archive of Pain*, 2000, video installation and book



Figure 3 Stefan Constantinescu, *Archive of Pain*, 2000, 540 min, video stills



Figure 4 Ion Grigorescu, *Election Meeting*, 1975, photograph



Figure 5 Ion Grigorescu, *Election Meeting*, 1975, photograph



Figure 6 Ion Grigorescu, *Dialogue with Ceausescu*, 1978, 8 mm film, 7 min



Figure 7 Ion Grigorescu, *Post-Mortem Dialogue with Ceausescu*, 2007, 23 min, video still,



Figure 8 Ion Grigorescu, *Manifestation on the Street*, 2011  
 “Performing History” exhibition, video on the sofa



Figure 9 Ion Grigorescu, “Performing History” exhibition, 2011



Figure 10 Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkacova, *After the Order*, 2011, cake



Figure 11 Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkacova, *After the Order* in “The Diplomatic Tent” exhibition, 2011



Figure 12 Alexandra Croitoru, *Another Black Site*, 2006, photographs



Figure 13 Calin Dan, *Sample City*, 2003, video still



Figure 14 Mircea Cantor, *All the Directions*, 2000, photograph

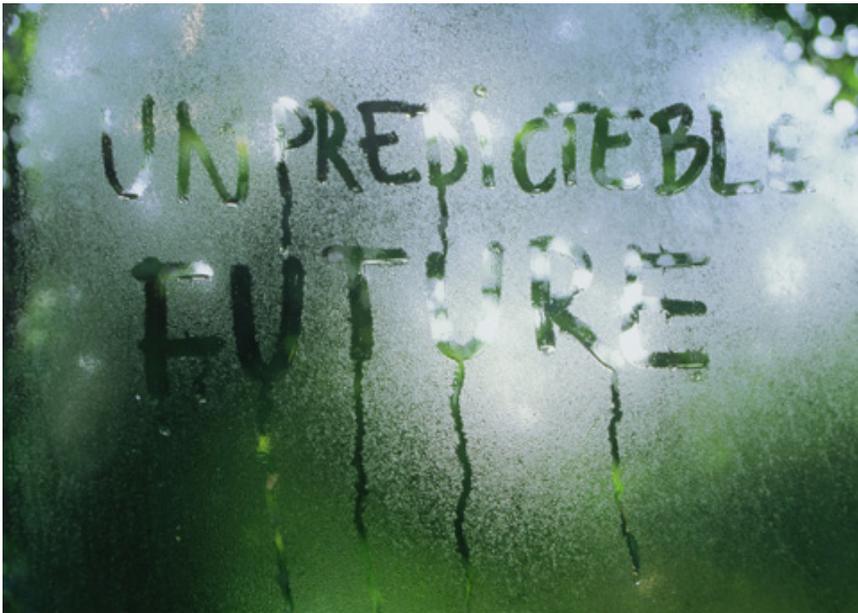


Figure 15 Mircea Cantor, *Untitled (Unpredictable Future)*, 2004, Lightbox

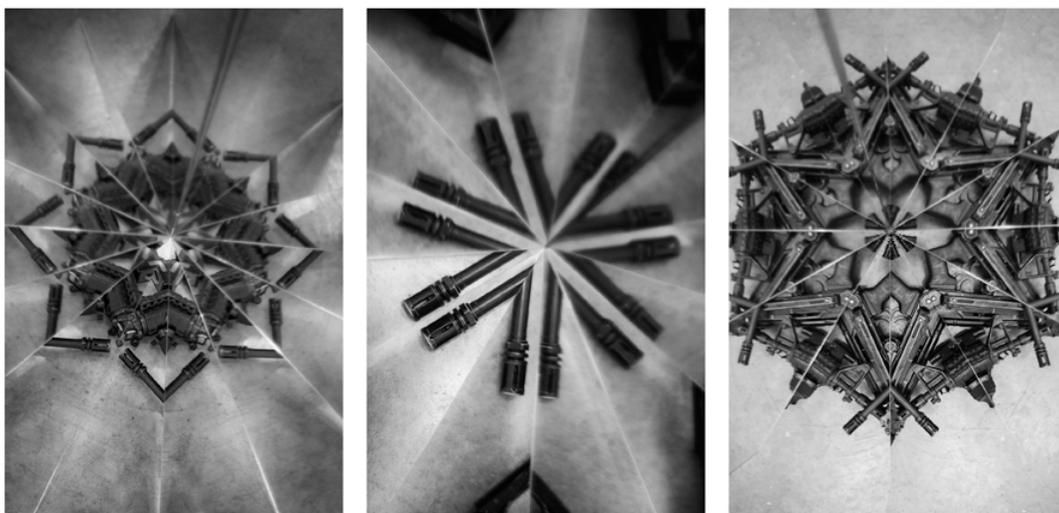


Figure 16 Mircea Cantor, *Holy Flowers*, 2011, photographs



Figure 17 Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From*, 2001-2003, photography and installation



Figure 18 Andrei Ujica, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu*, 2010, film 35 mm, 180 min



Figure 19 Harun Farocki, Andrei Ujica, *Videogram of a Revolution*, 1992, 106 min, film still



Figure 20 Florin Tudor and Mona Vatamanu, *Vacaresti*, 2003-2006, video, performance, photographs



Figure 21 Florin Tudor and Mona Vatamanu, *Dust*, 2005-2007, installation



Figure 22 Florin Tudor and Mona Vatamanu, *The Trial*, 2004-2005, video, 37 min, video still

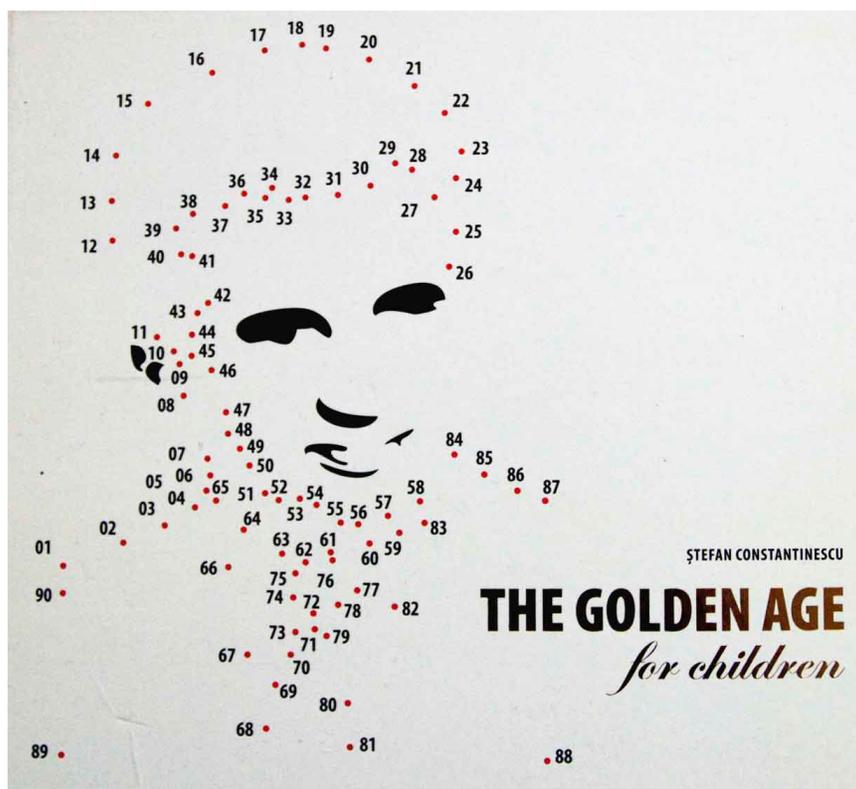


Figure 23 Ștefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008. Pup-up book



Figure 24 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008, pop-up book

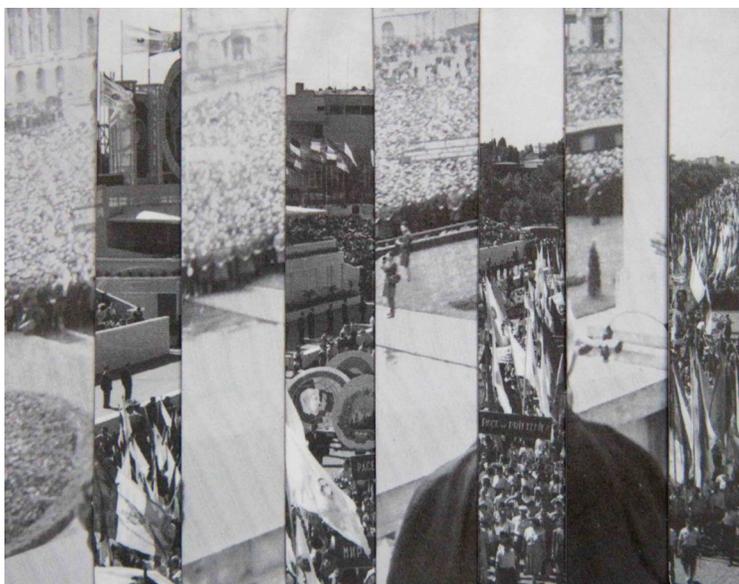


Figure 25 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008, pop-up book



Figure 26 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008, pop-up book



Figure 27 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008, pop-up book

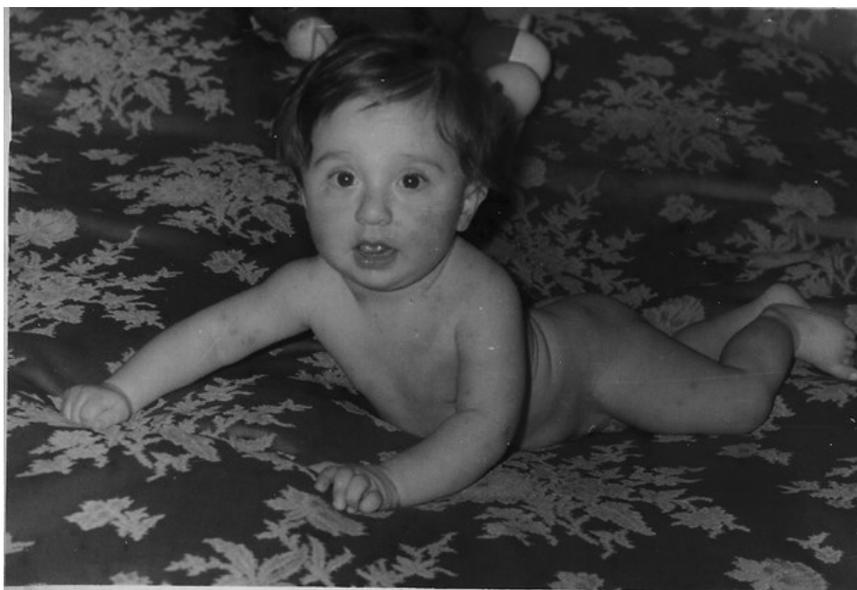


Figure 28 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008, pop-up book



Figure 29 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008, pop-up book



5. Advertisement during the 1980s period of shortages: "Consuming these products fortifies the organism". Reclamă din timpul penuriei de alimente din anii '80: „Consumul acestor produse fortifică organismul”.

6. Line at the market on Moșilor St. The feverish rush for food had become the main preoccupation for a majority of the nation. Coadă la alimentarea de pe Str. Moșilor. Goana febrilă după mâncare devenise preocuparea principală a majorității populației țării.



Figure 30 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008, pop-up book



Figure 31 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008



Figure 32 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008



Figure 33 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008



Figure 34 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008

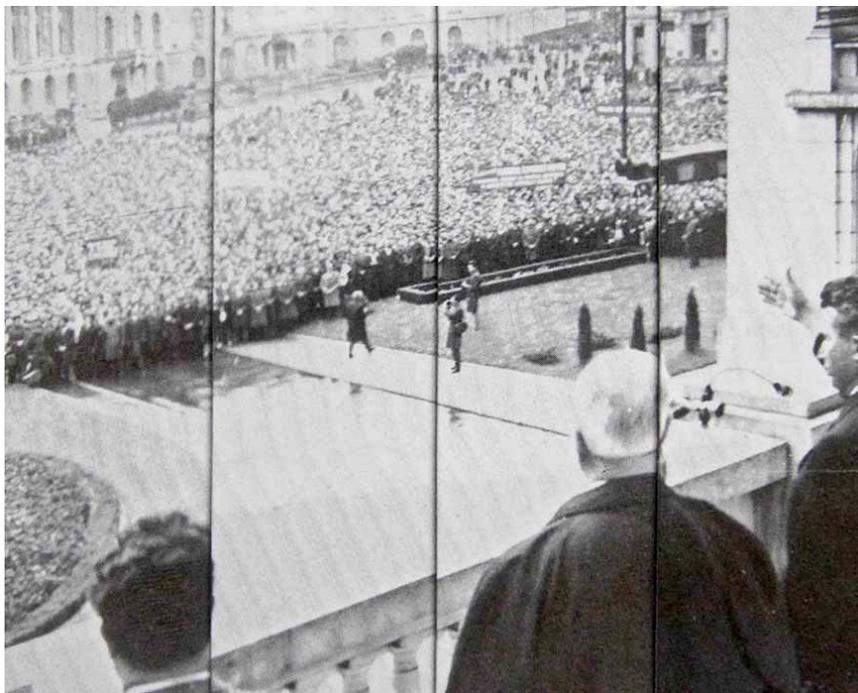


Figure 35 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008



Figure 36 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008

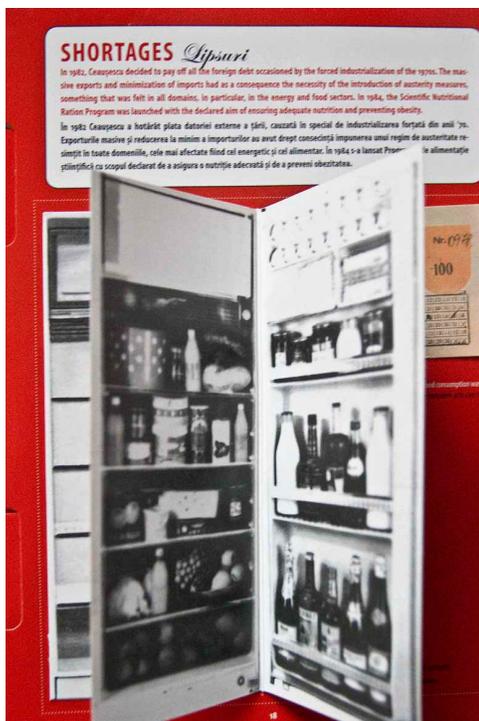


Figure 37 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008



Figure 38 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008



Figure 39 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008



Figure 40 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008



Figure 41 Stefan Constantinescu, *My Beautiful Dacia*, 2009, 54 min, film still

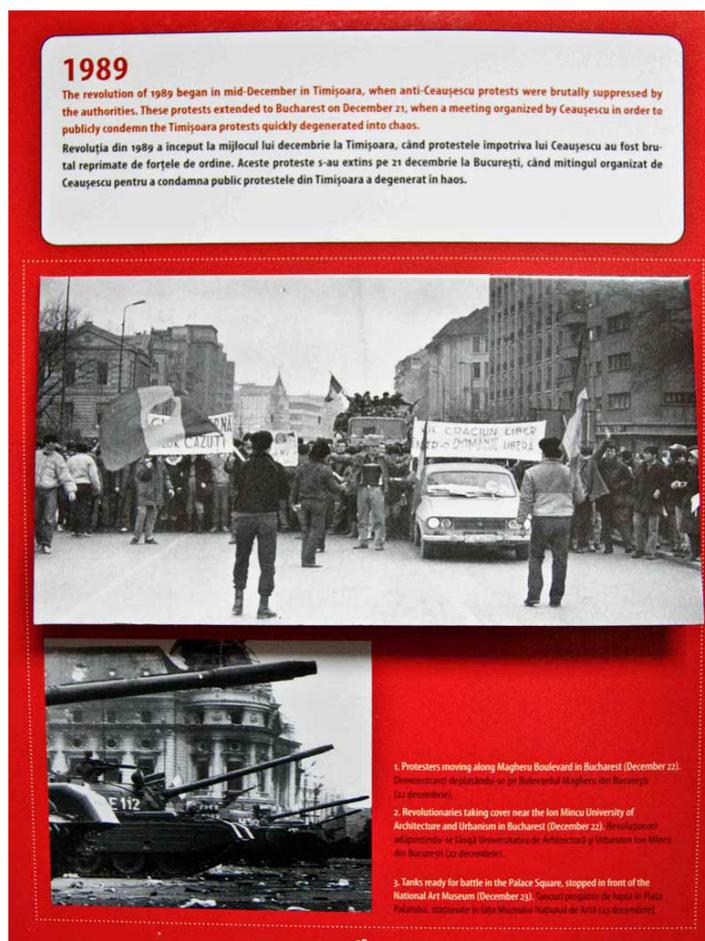


Figure 42 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008

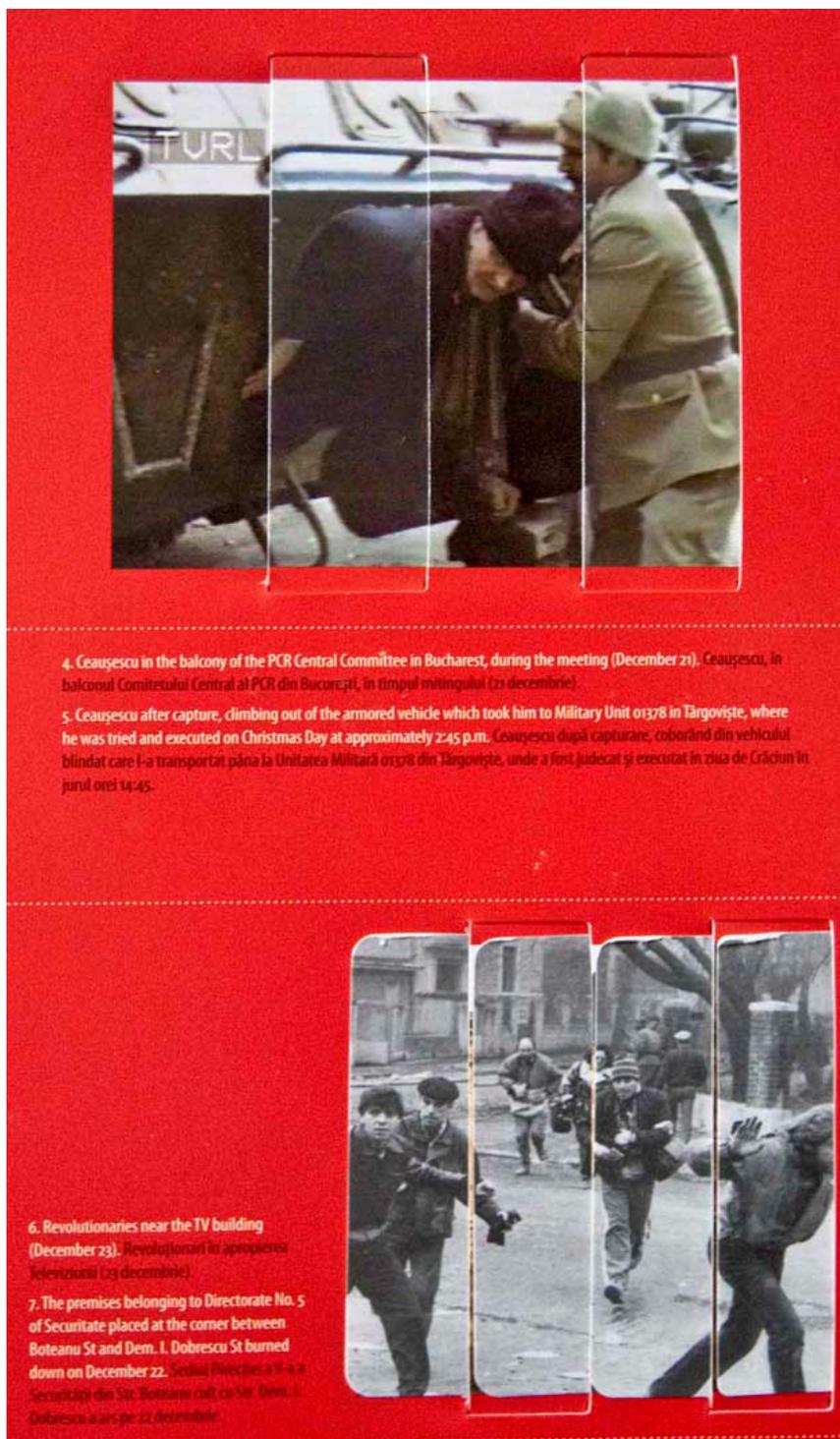


Figure 43 Stefan Constantinescu, *The Golden Age for Children*, 2008



Figure 44 Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica, *Videograms for a Revolution*, 1992, 16 mm film, still



Figure 45 Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica, *Videograms for a Revolution*, 1992, 16 mm film, 106 min, film still



Figure 46 Irina Botea, *Auditions for a Revolution*, 2006, video, 22 min, video still



Figure 47 Irina Botea, *Auditions for a Revolution*, 2006, video, 22 min, video still



Figure 48 Irina Botea, *Auditions for a Revolution*, 2006, video, 22 min, video stills



Figure 49 Irina Botea, *Auditions for a Revolution*, 2006, video, 22 min, video stills



Figure 50 Irina Botea, *Auditions for a Revolution*, 2006, video, 22 min. video stills



Figure 51 Dan Perjovschi, *Romania/ Removing Romania*, 1996-2003, performance and video



Figure 52 Daniel Knorr, *European Influenza*, 2005, installation



Figure 53 Mircea Cantor, *Double Heads Matches*, 2002-2003, 20.000 boxes produced manually at Gherla Match Factory in Romania



Figure 54 Pavel Braila, *Shoes for Europe*, 2002, 26 min, video, video still



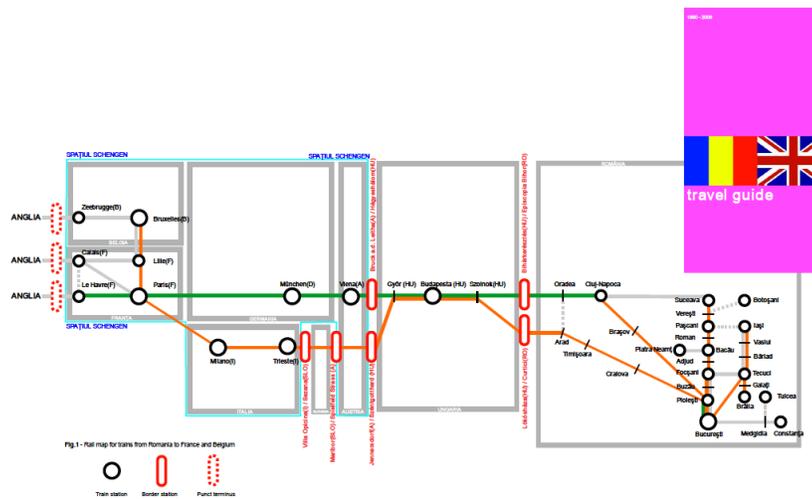


Figure 57 Matei Bejenaru, *Travel Guide*, 2005-2007, booklet

This figure is a collage of various informational graphics from a travel guide. It includes several text blocks with dense text, likely providing detailed information about travel destinations or services. There are also several maps, including a blue map of a region and a pink map of a city. A diagram shows a cross-section of a building or structure. A photograph shows a large industrial facility or ship. A bar chart displays data with five bars of different colors. A diagram shows a cross-section of a container or box. The collage is organized into a grid-like layout, with text blocks and images interspersed.

Figure 58 Matei Bejenaru, *Travel Guide*, 2005-2007, booklet

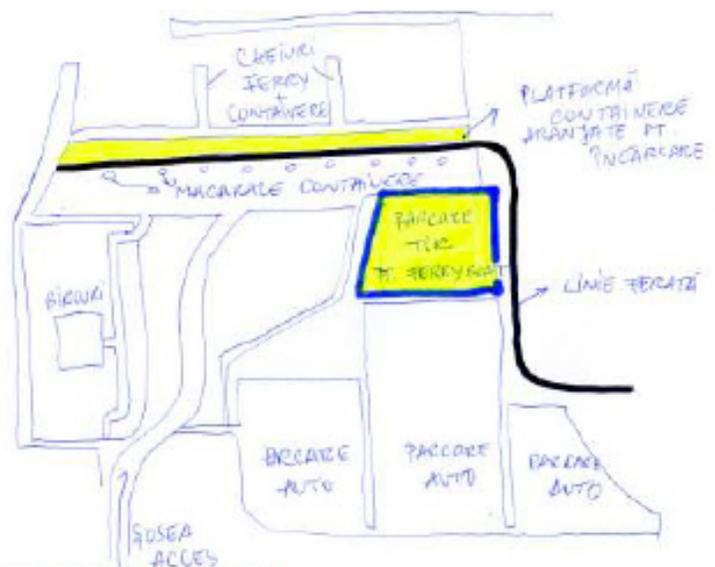


Fig.8 Portul Zeebrugge - Britanniadokk

Figure 59 Matei Bejenaru, *Travel Guide*, 2005-2007, booklet

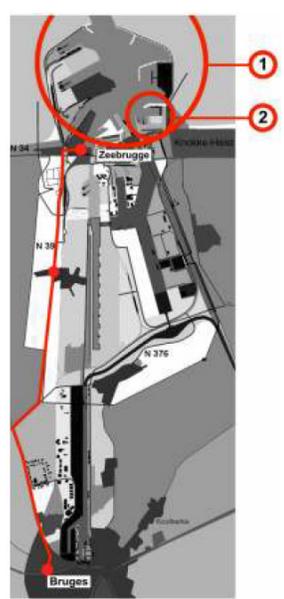


Fig.8 Bruges-Zeebrugge (1 - harbour zone, 2 - Britanniadokk)

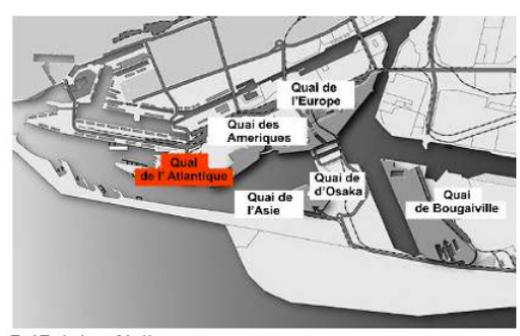


Fig.4 The harbour of Le Havre



Fig.5 Containers shipping in Le Havre

Figure 60 Matei Bejenaru, *Travel Guide*, 2005-2007, booklet



Figure 61 Tania Ostojic, *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*, 2000-2005, web project, performance and media installation with color photographs, advertisements

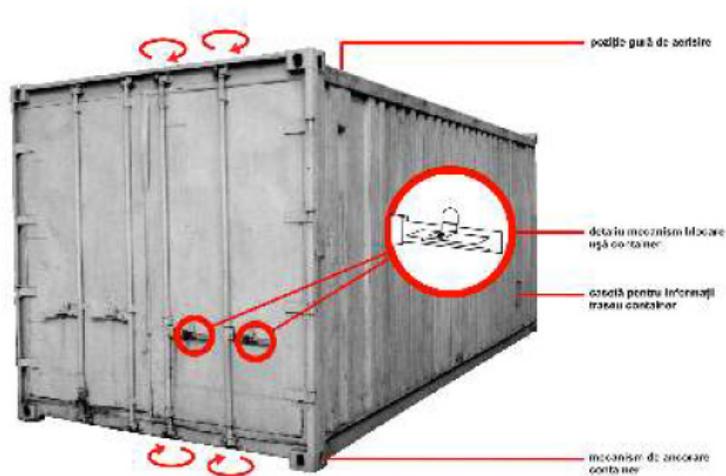


Fig.7 Locking mechanism of the containers

Figure 62 Matei Bejenaru, *Travel Guide*, 2005-2007



Figure 63 Matei Bejenaru, *Together*, 2007, video installation and photographs, still

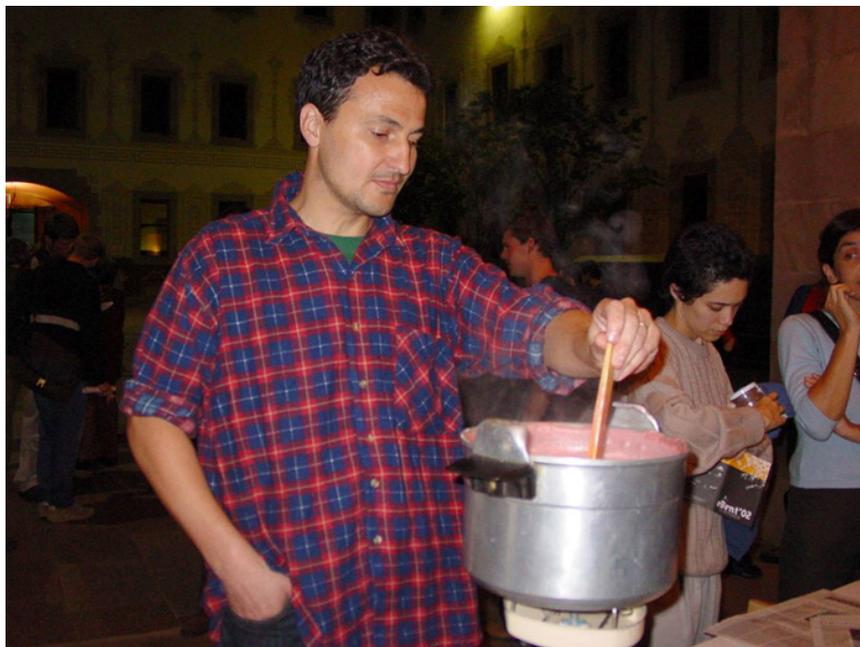


Figure 64 Matei Bejenaru *Strawberries Fields Forever*, 2002, performance



Figure 65 Matei Bejenaru, *Maersk Dubai*, 2007, video projection



Figure 66 Matei Bejenaru, *Maersk Dubai*, 2007, 7 min, video still

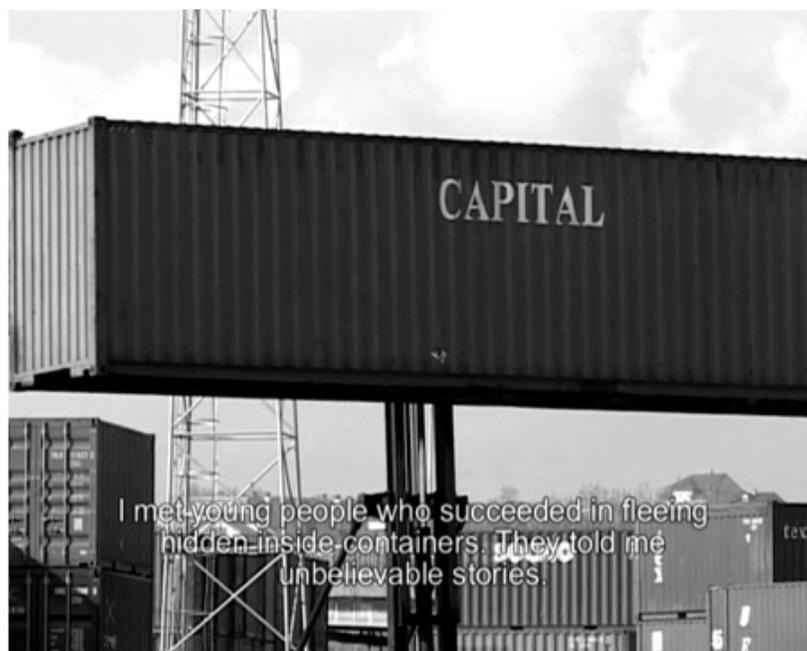


Figure 67 Matei Bejenaru, *Maersk Dubai*, 2007, 7 min, video still



Figure 68 Matei Bejenaru, *Maersk Dubai*, 2007, 7 min, video still



Figure 69 Matei Bejenaru, *Maersk Dubai*, 2007, 7 min, video still



Figure 70 Stefan Constantinescu, *Passagen*, 62 min, 2005, film still



Figure 71 Stefan Constantinescu, *Passagen*, 62 min, 2005, film still



Figure 72 Stefan Constantinescu, *Passagen*, 62 min, 2005, film still



Figure 73 Stefan Constantinescu, *Passagen*, 62 min, 2005, film still



Figure 74 Matei Bejenaru, *Battling Inertia*, 14 min, 2010, video still



Figure 75 Matei Bejenaru, *Songs for a Better Future*, Bucharest, 17 min, 2010, video still



Figure 76 Matei Bejenaru, *Songs for a Better Future*, Vancouver, 12 min, 2011, video still



Figure 77 Irina Botea, *15 M Conversations*, 2011, 5 min, video still



Figure 78 Irina Botea, *Quick Reply/ 15M*, 1.30 min, 2011, Video still



Figure 79 Irina Botea, *Photocopia*, 8 min, 2011, video still



Figure 80 Irina Botea, *Before a National Anthem*, 78 min, 2009, video still



Figure 81 Stefan Constantinescu, *My Beautiful Dacia*, 75 min., 2009, film still, part of the *Memory Box* project, 2011



Figure 82 Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, *Exception and the Rule*, 28 min. 2009, video still, part of the *Memory Box* project, 2011



Figure 83 Andreja Kuluncic, *On the State of the Nation*, installation and intervention in the media mainstream, 2008

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Figure 84 Andreja Kuluncic, *Austrians Only*, advertisements, 2005



Figure 85 Milica Tomic, *I am Milica Tomic*, 10 min, video installation, 1998



Figure 86 Christoph Schlingensiefel, *Please Love Austria*, 2000, performance



Figure 87 Christoph Schilngensief, *Church of Fear vs. The Stranger Within*, 2008, installation



Figure 88 Yto Barrada, *A Life Full of Holes*, 1998-2004, photographs



Figure 89 Isaac Julien, *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007, video installation

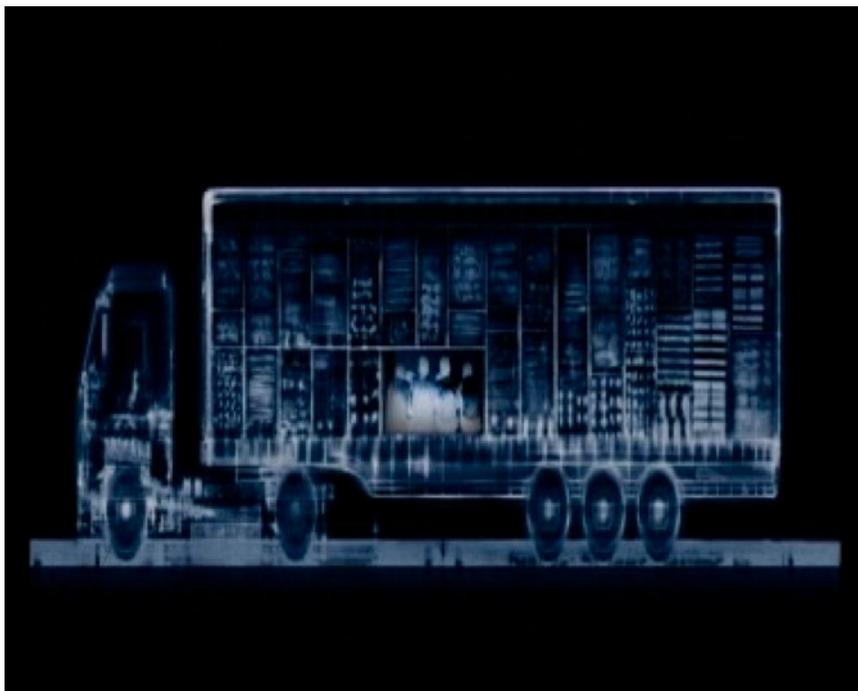


Figure 90 Hans op de Beeck, *Border*, 2001, 3 min, video, still



Figure 91 Krysztof Wodiczko, *Guests*, 2009-2009, installation



Figure 92 Corina Ilea, *23 Kilograms*, 2010-2011, video installation



Figure 93 Corina Ilea, *23 Kilograms*, 2010-2011, photograph