

RO_Archive

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RO_Archive
*An Archive
of Romania
in Times
of Transition*

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<p>005</p>	<p>RO_Archive started out as an attempt to make up for the numerous photographic archives that were lost or destroyed in the turbulent years that followed the Romanian revolution of 1989. In the process of privatising and dismantling the majority of economic entities operational during the communist regime, documentary photographs were of no monetary value, since they could not be transacted in any way at that time and therefore were lacking in any interest to the new owners, and were of no interest to anybody in general. All state-owned factories and institutions kept collections of images which, to a lesser or greater propagandistic degree, documented given moments in their activity, from their establishment to when they were finally closed down. The vast majority of these visual documents, which could have constituted important research material for anybody interested in Romania's recent history, has thus been wasted and mostly destroyed.</p>
<p>RO_Archive <i>A Number of Conceptual and Photographic Reference Points</i></p> <p>Iosif Király</p> <p>¹ The <i>Annales d'histoire économique et sociale</i> school is one of the most important movements in modern European historiography. Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) was part of the school's second generation of historians and is regarded as the man who gave the movement an international dimension.</p>	<p>RO_Archive is intended as a signal/means of approach, which will bring to the public's attention the need to document everyday reality in as systematic and continuous a way as possible, a reality that is as unspectacular as it is complex.</p> <p>At the time when I initiated this project, I had in mind a number of models that I have tried to transmit to all those who have taken part in the various phases of its development hitherto.</p> <p>In the first place, I was influenced by Fernand Braudel's way of understanding history. Thereby, what I was pursuing was sooner the "structures of the everyday" and the mode in which the <i>longue durée</i> can be captured in images, and I tried to orient the documentary process less towards events, towards what is extraordinary and spectacular in the everyday, with which the mass media are wholly concerned. According to Braudel, historical events are the product of long-term "subterranean" developments, and his interest and that of the school¹ to which he belonged was in studying precisely the strata composed of everyday life and economic transformations, rather than political events and figures, social upheavals and military conflicts.</p> <p>From the photographic standpoint, I think that RO_Archive can find its forerunners in a number of historical documentary "missions" that are as many landmarks in the history of photography, including <i>Missions Héliographiques</i>, <i>Farm Security Administration</i>, <i>The New Topographics</i>, <i>La Mission Photographique de la DATAR</i>.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">— ></p>

The images that currently make up the database were not intended to be objective in the trivial sense of mimetic documentary making or bureaucratic stocktaking. (Does anybody today still regard photography as a one-hundred-per-cent objective documentary medium?)

Likewise, they were not intended to be unitary in the rigid, dogmatic sense, and they avoided the imposition of any norms, limitations, or forms of totalitarianism, be they stylistic, be they thematic. They were made by different artistic personalities, and each author primarily pursues directions and subjects that can be found to a greater or lesser extent in any documented situation. But what lends the project coherence is a system of reference that is unitary from both the conceptual and the visual point of view. Albeit from different positions, we have all come together in the same school and have shaped a shared visual language whereby we communicate with and understand each other.

Last but not least, RO_Archive aims to rehabilitate the photographic act in a post-photographic age, when, thanks to the Internet in general and social networks in particular, images circulate and are re-contextualised with a speed and ease so great that an increasing number of people perceive a camera pointed at them by a person unknown as a potentially dangerous instrument. We would like to make all those people understand that today's reality is tomorrow's history and that they are the ones who build it and we are the ones who document it.

RO_Archive is an on-going investigation into the recuperation and valorisation of recent memory, set underway in 2007 by a team of young artists and theorists (Raluca Oancea Nestor, Cristiana Radu, Bogdan Bordeianu, Michele Bressan, Bogdan Gîrbovan, Raluca Paraschiv Ionescu, Andrei Mateescu, Cosmin Moldovan, Simona Dumitriu, Larisa Sitar), who have periodically been joined by new names (Daniel Ghercă, Vlad Mihăilescu, Valentin Cernat). The team is coordinated by Professor Iosif Király, within the Department of Photography and Time Based Media Art of the Bucharest National University of Arts (UNArte). As its primary aim, the artistic research set out to [de]construct the image of a Romania recently integrated into the European Union and to expose the indifference towards the proliferation in the media of representations of uncertain artistic and documentary value. In a period in which the conjunction between truth and aesthetic value is being rethought (see *Cinéma vérité* approaches, from Rouch to Cassavetes and Puiu, and photographic attempts to capture the moment, from Cartier-Bresson to Nan Goldin, Larry Clark and Paul Graham), RO_Archive disassociates itself from the derisory spectacle of media representations dominated by cliché and exoticism.

With a view to documenting contemporary life (urban and rural landscape, the economy, industry, agriculture, tourism, religion, education, culture, leisure, the individual as *man of the crowd* or member of a micro-community), RO_Archive has entailed photographic research in the field, focussing on the transformations inherent to European integration and on target areas around the country (more than seventy locations in Braşov, Dobrudja, Hunedoara, Moldova, Muntenia, the Jiu Valley and its mining communities, the course of the Danube¹). The research has resulted in the creation of a cultural archive of texts and images and a web site (www.roarchive.ro) that provides online access to information and events. Since 2008, sections of the archive have been presented and promoted at the national and international level as part of workshops, inter-media events (featuring Brazda lui Novac, Silent Strike, Cycler, Vali Chincişan) and exhibitions² held in spaces including the Futura Contemporary Art Centre/Karlin Studios, Prague; Institut d'Etudes Supérieures des Arts, Paris; and the Romanian Cultural Institute, Paris, part of *Mois de la Photo*.

As a documentary approach, the project employed a set of tools from the area of objectivity and veracity, but dissociated itself from trivial documentarism, limited to the category of *stadium*,³ be it the mere act of inventorying, mapping or fabricating typologies. Although it falls within the area of a lucid aesthetics, the RO Archive discourse also

1 The locations include: Moldova (Birlad, Vaslui, Bacău), Dobruđa (Năvodari, Ovidiu, the Black Sea coast), the course of the Danube (Brăila, Cernavodă, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Galați, Orșova, Oltenița, Medgidia, Ruse), Mehedinți (Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Orșova), the Jiu Valley (Tîrgu Jiu, Roșia, Vulcan, Uricani, Lupeni, Aninoasa, Petroșani, Mătăsari), Hunedoara (Deva, Hunedoara, Călan, Sîntămărie Orlea, Hătege, Simeria, Orăștie, Arad, Avram Iancu, Geogiu Băi), Brașov (Brașov, Sinaia, Cădile, Ghibmab, Făgăraș, Ploiești), București, Prahova County, Iași, Corabia, Giurgiu, Medias, Sibiu, Sighisoara.

² RO_Archive exhibitions include those curated by Raluca Oancea Nestor at the Brukenthal Museum's Gallery of Contemporary Art Sibiu, (2008, 2010) and in THE ARK, Goods Bourse (*Memories4Free*, 2009), *Open Access*, *ro_Archive* exhibition and live audio-video performance with Brazda lui Novac (Prague, Futura Gallery Contemporary Art Centre/Karlin Studios, 2009), *ro_Archive files* exhibition (2009, PARIS, Institut d'Etudes Supérieures des Arts), *Ne tourne pas la tête! Photographie roumaine contemporaine* exhibition (Romanian Cultural Institute, Paris, part of *Mois de la Photo*, Paris 2010), *CitiesMethodologies* exhibition, curated by Aurora Király & Simona Dumitriu (Casa Scarlat-Ghyka, București, 2011), RO_Archive participation in the *WHAT ABOUT Y[OUR] MEMORY* exhibition, curated by Iosif Király and Irina Cios (National Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014).

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera luminoasă*, Cluj: IDEA, 2005

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Estetica relațională. Postproducție*, Cluj: IDEA, 2007

⁵ See the French nouveau roman: Alain Robbe-Grillet et al.

⁶ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Boris Groys, *Despre nou*, Cluj: IDEA, 2003

employs a species of inner, subjective truth, and the artists' interests and personal careers potentiate the detached gaze. The photographic act is sited equidistantly between documentary veracity and artistic subjectivity, between X-raying the past and generating the new, regardless of the subject at hand: the examination of religious manifestations or fairs in the public space, the way in which migration from rural areas to the West becomes visible in the dynamic of local architecture, phenomenological observation of the peripheral expansion of cities and redefinition of the margins, the transformations of the industrial landscape and the complex signification of place and habitation (see the Danube-Black Sea Canal and the Danube as a destination and ecosystem). To these themes are added a series of personal investigations that look at the precarious state of spa resorts kept alive by a perfusion of third-age tourism, the decline of the communist pearls of the Romanian seaside, the exposure of the communist holiday that fabricated memories in two-star hotels.

At a secondary level, the project has set out to investigate critically the concept of the archive in the computer age of *postproduction*⁴ and the manner in which it penetrates the field of contemporary visual art. In an age in which the archive constitutes a basic cultural form (see also the commented reorientation from linear narrative to collections of *descriptions*⁵ or non-hierarchical data⁶), the research will set out from the question of why has the greater part of the existing archives been neglected or deliberately destroyed in Romania.

In this context, RO_Archive proposes an approach centred on the model of the post-modern archive, delimiting itself from a mere collection of cultural objects, conserved as a testament to the national past. Such an approach presupposes a redefinition of the archive as a form of artistic expression, superordinate factor or filter of cultural redundancy. In an age of the inflation of tautological information and technically archived culture, an age still resting under the sign of the ready-made and, more recently, under the sign of *creation through selection*⁷, RO_Archive pursues an approach to the archive as a mechanism for producing the future, as a potential criterion for separating art from non-art, according to the model put forward by Groys.⁸ No longer being limited to the condition of props from the past, the archive is free to participate in mapping the present and fabricating the new.

Obviously, any list that tries to map in condensed form the most significant dynamics to have marked such a long period – twenty-five years of post-communism – almost everybody knows when it began, but almost nobody knows when it might end or what descriptive meanings it might have – must accept some limits. The limits of the bestiary I here propose are circumscribed by the topics I have researched and about which I have written over the last ten years in my doctoral thesis and in *Martor*, *Tataia*, and *Dilema Veche* magazines. For the sake of minimal coherence, I have tried to strike a balance between the key processes that have affected the public and the domestic space and which have reshaped them materially and socially.

Thermopanes

Over the last decade, Romania has experienced frenetic reshaping of its urban and rural landscapes. One of the most visible elements of this “facelift” is the space in which, according to anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu,¹ individuals resort to various types of urban stage scenery and props in order to compete for *social recognition*. Whereas in the countryside, the rustic seems to be the latest “declaration of taste and distinction,” in the cityscape the *thermopane* (a heat-insulated window and its PVC-framed variant in particular), which replaces traditional wooden window frames, might be regarded as a similar declaration. With the disappearance of wooden window frames, a series of other artefacts also make their exit from the domestic stage set: curtains – replaced with vertical blinds, “like in an office,” as an acquaintance has inspired enough to describe them – and the old, massy chandeliers, which are frequently replaced with spot lights that turn houses into something akin to exhibition spaces. The *thermopane* is also one of the key elements in the period of rehabilitation, when the scaffolding, covered in banners advertising the city halls’ solicitude for the citizen, vanishes, leaving in its wake housing blocks painted in garish or “sherbet” (sorbet) colours, as Kristina Fehérváry describes them,² in an analysis of the new housing projects on the outskirts of towns in post-socialist Hungary, seemingly built in order to contrast with the grey surrounding buildings. The urban material culture integrates these domestic artefacts with a rapidity that outstrips all the countries adjacent to Romania, if we take into account the figures on consumption, and also if we cast a glance at the frontages of the housing blocks. This has already led to the emergence of at least one lexical derivative connected to the specific material: *termopanizare* (thermopanisation). Architect Ioana Tudora argues that the recent preferences of Bucuresti’s inhabitants are guided either

1 Vintilă Mihăilescu, "From Cow to Cradle. Mutations and Meanings of Rural Household in Post-socialism," *International Review of Social Research*, 1(2): 35-63, 2011

2 Krisztina Fehérváry,
"American Kitchens, Luxury
Bathrooms, and the Search for
a 'Normal' Life in Post-socialist
Hungary," *Ethnos* 67(3):
369-400. 2002

<p>010</p>	<p>by “minimal functionalism” or by “the tradition of awkward eclecticism,” in a balance produced by the desire for modernity and western chic and “the style of furnishing that became traditional in the communist period, with massy, complicated furniture, imitating the luxury of the old bourgeois home.”³ This is why the <i>thermopane</i> is more often than not also found in the presence of the rustic, wooden textures mentioned above: it is the guide for a trend and a permissive space for various combinatory models of design. The window, which for decades was an important but common <i>accessory</i> in local households, overnight became a branded <i>object of consumption</i> and, in the wider sense, a geometric locus of domestic modernisation (via the idea of comfort and not only) and of the props that bring social recognition.</p>
<p>³ Ioana Tudora, “Case frumoase, case urâte în peisajul bucureştean,” in <i>Etnografii urbane. Cotidianul văzut de aproape</i>, ed. Vintilă Mihăilescu, Iaşi: Polirom, 2009, pp. 51–64</p> <p>⁴ David Kideckel, <i>România postsocialistă. Munca, trupul şi cultura clasei muncitoare</i>, Iaşi: Polirom, 2010</p> <p>⁵ Ger Duijzings and Bogdan Iancu, “Urban Security Regime(s): Private Security, Public Space, and Everyday Life in Eastern Europe,” <i>11th Annual Conference of the Romanian Society for Social and Cultural Anthropology</i>, Cluj 21–22 November 2014</p>	<p>Anthropologist David Kideckel observes that in post-socialist Romania, to the extent that “labour and production have been used less and less as sources of identities, identities have begun to be constructed around practices of consumption.” These practices characteristic of the “new lifestyles influenced by consumption” have also had “significant effects on homes and modes of dwelling” via “renewal with a series of modern functionalities.”⁴</p> <p>Private Security Firms</p> <p>Bucureşti is one of Europe’s safest cities: compared with other cities, the rates of violent crime (murder etc.) are visibly lower. On the other hand, it is and presents itself as one of the most security-minded cities, illustrating what Stephan Graham would call “military urbanism,” albeit in a tamed local version. A plethora of private security firms operate in all the large and medium cities, and in Bucureşti in particular (where in 2014 there were more than 68,000 private security guards), providing protection services to institutions in the public sector, commercial premises, and private properties. They are a ubiquitous presence in the urban landscape, to be found at the checkpoints of everyday life, for example, the entrances to schools, markets, pharmacies, shops, and train stations. Ceding more and more space to the neo-liberal economy, the state reduces its monopoly on the management of violence to private security firms. Besides providing security, these firms also seem to embody and implement codes of good manners and to reduce the frictions of interactions in the public space.⁵ Some of the large security firms also provide ambulance services, signalling a broadening of their range of services and an enlargement of the concept of security. But besides the iconic image of the <i>bigieşi</i> (lexically derived from the name of the BGS firm) over-equipped with Humvees positioned at large intersections,</p>

⁶ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Vantage, 1961

⁷ David Koistinen, *Confronting Decline: The Political Economy of Deindustrialization in Twentieth-Century New England*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2013

⁸ Stephen Cohen, Andrew Schwartz, "The Tunnel at the End of the Light: Privatization in Eastern Europe," *Berkley Roundtable on the International Economy (BRIE) Working Paper 56*, 2002. [Available online at <http://brie.berkeley.edu/publications/WP%2056.pdf>]

⁹ Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996

¹⁰ David Stark, "Privatization in Hungary: From Plan to Market or from Plan to Clan?" in *East European Politics and Societies* 4 (3): 351–392, 1990

most of the security guards in parks, shops and markets are becoming the perfect embodiment of flexible labour and *public character*, as described by Jane Jacobs,⁶ trustworthy figures ready to provide useful information. This impressive professional cohort is the result of a political economy of de-industrialisation (most of the security guards that throng the parks and markets, as a number of recent studies have shown, are industrial workers who were laid off) or of "decline", as David Koistinen names it,⁷ combined with the emerging services economy that increasingly defines the local capitalist landscape.

Privatisation/De-industrialisation

As a series of studies dedicated to the first years of post-socialism have noted, the defunct socialist bloc left behind it an ideological vacuum that had to be (and was!) quickly filled with a spectacular outpouring of projects and ideas as to how American-style capitalism might be spread in the Second World: "Legions of Western advisers arrived in the wake of the departing Soviet troops to translate the goals of a political democracy and a market economy into an action agenda: 'Democracy' translated quickly into elections; 'a market economy' into Privatization."⁸ Cohen and Schwartz vividly describe the landscape of the period immediately after the fall of the east-European socialist regimes and are not the only researchers in the social sciences whom the "transformations" prompted to employ bitterly ironic metaphors: "Some of the stories of post-socialism describe the knights of Western know-how rushing to save those in peril in Eastern Europe. [...] The rescue scenario has two common variants: 'shock therapy' and 'big bang'."⁹ Verdery also adopts a definition of the transformation of property in the same key, provided by former Polish prime-minister Janusz Lewandowski: "Privatization is when someone who doesn't know who the real owner is and doesn't know what it's really worth sells something to someone who doesn't have any money." If there was a certain amount of consensus in regard to the need for privatisations in order to "move to"/"join" the market economy, the same thing cannot be said of the *means* by which this goal was achieved. There was much discussion in the 1990's of the question of how the *value* of the goods to be sold should be determined. Stark argues that the Adam Smith-style answer: "let the market decide" brought with it at least one problem: "there was no market and the sale was being made precisely in order to *create* one."¹⁰ The inventory of the factors that made privatisations synonymous with unemployment and economic decline was connected with the decoupling of raw materials allocated by the state and the transition, without any preliminary groundwork, to harsh competition for

¹¹ Steven Sampson, "All things are possible, nothing is certain: the horizons of transition in a Romanian village," in *Local Communities in Eastern Europe*, ed. David Kideckel, Boulder: Westview Press, 1996, pp. 159-176

¹² Cristina Coroş, 'Casele făloase'. *Habitat, rudenie şi schimb în satul Şotînga*, jud. Dimboviţa, Sociology Degree thesis, University of Bucharest, 2000

¹³ Daniela Moisa, "Pour une anthropologie de la réussite," *Martor*, 16, 2011

procuring such materials in the new context, and also with ignorance (to put it euphemistically) on the part of the agents who conceived the separate privatisation of independent sectors, a private entrepreneurial vision based mainly on the evisceration of production lines, their sale as scrap metal, and the sale or use of land in real-estate deals. Adepts of shock therapy presupposed that in the case of the former socialist enterprises, left to their own devices within a market economy, the "invisible hand" would do its work by itself. Following the application of this strategy, anthropologist Steven Sampson argued with black humour that the post-socialist Romania of the 1990's could be described as follows: "a lot of shock and no therapy whatever."¹¹

Stately Homes/Houses in Progress

In the summer of 2010, wandering down a road on my way back to Cacica, where I was taking part in group fieldwork, I stumbled across the astonishing sight of a village full of sumptuous villas, a kind of replica of Bucureşti's Pipera district, only hundreds of kilometres away. My first thoughts were connected with the "stately homes" documented by Cristina Coroş¹² in Dimboviţa and by Daniela Moisa¹³ in Țara Oaşului. When I entered the village, any point of comparison was shattered: while the stately homes laid the emphasis on the vertical, using cutting-edge building materials, which made some of them resemble the kind of bank headquarters that are built nowadays, the villas of Cajvana sooner unfolded on the horizontal and the materials tended mainly to be from the *mattoni* (redbrick) register, combined with wood, wrought iron and tile details. The Italian reveries of those who emigrate in search of work – mainly in the building trade – here clad the skeleton of old peasant houses (with a garage standing in for a barn), in an eclectic style in which native rusticity meets the global and in which Renaissance details combine with garden gnomes, countless flowerpots and quaint decorative carts. I decided that I had to come back the following year to better understand the motivations and processes behind the emergence of these structures, and in order to dispel the journalistic myth of the *irrationality* that is supposed to define such practices. When some of the parents of the migrants working in Italy began to answer: "I don't know, go and count them," to the question: "How many rooms does your son's house have?" it seemed to complicate even further any possibility of formulating an explicative model. But after a given point, when the discussions went deeper, the locals more and more frequently expressed the opinion that the migrants built themselves big houses to show "how hardworking they were." The idea thereby took shape of a "battle of houses", as one of Daniela Moisa's

interlocutors from Țara Oașului colourfully described the competition to build the most handsome house, in which labour and industriousness as its social expression are *objectified* in the materiality of the house: “The transition from to *succeed* to *success(es)* is symptomatic, because it points to the shaping of a rich field for study of the practices of material consumption associated with the dynamics of individual and collective values.”¹⁴ Just as in the olden days industriousness was measured by the large number of animals a householder had and how much land he cultivated, today the house becomes the geometric locus of *success* in labour. Ultimately, it is a strategy that makes efforts made thousands of kilometres away visible and acknowledged by means of objectification. Some of the migrants’ houses give the feeling that they are deliberately unfinished, although they are constantly being worked on: this leaves room for future additions/alterations and, above all, investments. To finish a house would thus mean dropping out of the competition...

¹⁴ *Idem.*

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, London: Verso, 1996

The Rustic

First of all, there is the base course of the house, clad in fragments of boulder or granite, which usually matches the fence, unless it is made from a combination of pebbles and wrought iron decorations imitating budding, leafy or flowering branches. The courtyard is where you encounter a lacquered wooden pavilion, with a “traditional” swing seat and a shingled roof; a larger or smaller collection of garden gnomes, a set of flowerpots rough hewn from tree trunks (also lacquered, obviously), and a dog kennel, also with a shingled roof. You open the new metal front door, after you climb the marble steps, with their stainless steel or wooden handrail. You enter a kitchen thronged with spotlights set in the false ceiling, from which stream jets of light onto the crockery displayed in shiny vitrines and onto the flawlessly modern furniture. Then you enter the living room, the best room, for guests or special occasions, where stuffed toys are scattered among the heaps of homespun rugs and the embroidered cushions on the imitation leather sofas. On the walls hang brightly coloured icons. I have seen for myself this kind of house many times, as well as when looking through hundreds, perhaps thousands, of photographs taken by colleagues during field trips. The variables cannot alter very much the essence of what I perceive more and more acutely as the tension between the temptation of modernisation and that of an idyllic past. The textures and objects in the abovementioned domestic inventory have the “value of a sign”¹⁵ in such a case. This is why rather than labelling this world as kitsch, it would be more productive to see how we might read the signs that the whole of this material culture incorporates. I think

the following incident from a field trip can provide a starting point. A hardworking couple had fitted their newly renovated house with a modern toilet, but both admitted that they continued to use the old outside toilet in the yard. The new toilet was intended for guests. It had become a space whose function was sooner one of *representation*. The peasant household thereby becomes a showcase in which the perfect gleam of the unused porcelain is consonant with the stuffed animals placed around to re-domesticate an increasingly public home and also with the ancestral embroidery. The rural domestic space is being colonised (at a pace more rapid than the lovers of the image of the peasant and traditional village are able to accept) with the artefacts of modernity, which descend through the slender wires of the digital antennae in almost every farmyard and through the pages of interior decoration magazines brought by relatives from the city. Likewise, the “noble” signs of the rural space are now to be found in rusticity via accessories bought from the supermarket. The paradox is that the rural is being aligned with the consumer practices that make the city-dweller flee to the countryside in order to taste something *authentically rustic*. The predilection for materials and objects suggestive of a rustic atmosphere in fact comes from the adoption of an urban model. “We’ve modernised: we built something rustic!” Corina Cimporieru recorded these words from a peasant woman in Puchenii. A manifesto for emancipation that begins with making carbon copies of the caricature of you city-dwellers have made.

The Pyramids of Bad Faith: Caritas and FNI

In the autumn of 1993 a boundless frenzy suddenly gripped my family and relatives: they all wanted to deposit their money as quickly as possible in the Caritas “mutual aid” (nice euphemism!) game in Cluj, where they had heard that the dividends paid three to four months later were eight times larger. Although nobody understood what was really going on in the cathedral of financial miracles in Cluj, the rumours on the street tended to augment an increasingly widespread enthusiasm. The sums deposited were the result of creative combinations of loans, the sale of livestock owned by relatives in the country, the withdrawal of money deposited to buy a car, and so on. My father, two of his workmates, and a neighbour from the building where we lived came back from Cluj two days later; they were transfigured. They had seen Mecca and the pilgrims from every corner of the country. Four months later, the four pilgrims went back to Cluj, nurturing faint hopes. They were to return with empty pockets and the promise that in two months at the latest they would be called to collect their money. By July they had given up hope, and in August Caritas officially gave up the ghost.

Before his arrest, Ion Stoica tried to place the blame for Caritas's failure on the banks, which, he said, were blocking the transactions on which the secret algorithm of the game were based.

To recoup their losses from Caritas, for more than two years my family deposited substantial sums in the FNI (National Investment Fund) – my father had gone to work on a building site in Israel – encouraged by the generous interest payments, which they deposited in the FNI as soon as they received them. Once again the recipe seemed to hover in a zone of mysterious creativity. Photographs of Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, the creator of the FNI, appeared in the press so rarely that people began to wonder whether he really existed. At the end of 1999, Romania's television screens were overrun with the famous adverts whose slogan was: "Sleep peacefully, FNI is working for you." The peaceful sleep of the around 300,000 FNI investors was rudely interrupted in the spring of 2000, when the fund collapsed. Games of this kind flourished in the first decade of post-socialism all over south-eastern Europe: Russia, Bulgaria, Albania. Romania was a special case, because the string of failed pyramid games (Gerald-Focșani, Mega Caritas-Pitești) combined with those engaged in by a number of banks, which collapsed as a result of nebulous dealings: Bancorex, the International Bank of Religions, the Turkish-Romanian Bank.

In her article "Faith, Hope, and Caritas in the Land of the Pyramids, Romania, 1990-1994," Katherine Verdery provides an answer to the question of why there was such mass enthusiasm: "Among the reasons were inflation running at 300 per cent in 1993, a 40 per cent drop in real income as compared with 1989, negative interest rates, and problematic access to credit and loans, especially for small producers." She argues that the Caritas phenomenon was, in its cultural and social implications, a crucial moment for the rethinking of money in the early years of post-socialism: "it compelled people to begin thinking in new ways about money; and it focussed their anxieties about the larger processes of Romania's transformation from socialism."¹⁶ Today, Romania has one of the EU's lowest rates of bank deposits and, at the other extreme, it has the highest rate of consumer credit. The financial pyramids – constructed from blindly invested savings – collapsed before Romanians' eyes like houses of cards and were to determine financial behaviour that would be divided between these two extremes. The real culture of "credit on presentation of your identity card" was dented only after the start of the financial crisis, the public became more prudent, and in the last two years rates of saving have grown slightly, while loans have gone into recession.

¹⁶ Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996

<p>016</p>	<p>The Archival Impulse in Romanian Art of the 2000's: Questions of Critique</p> <p>Are there any significant differences between the 1990's and the 2000's when it comes to attitudes toward the legacy of the past and strategies of recording and preserving the memory of the present in Romanian contemporary photography? Can they be approached via a diachronic historical reading, especially since the post-communist period is also an exemplary manifestation of the a-synchronicity and co-existence of multiple modernities and their correspondent artistic languages? How should we instantiate them, to what particular motivations do they respond, what can they tell us about the critical tendencies in Romanian art at the turn of the millennium?</p>
<p>Archival Practices in Romanian Photography of the 2000's: Attitudes, Strategies and Motivations</p> <p>Cristian Nae</p> <p>¹ See Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse", <i>October</i>, no. 110, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004</p> <p>² <i>Ibid.</i></p> <p>³ See my own "Identități Precare. Condiția est-europeană în artele vizuale post-comuniste" ("Precarious Identities. The East-European Condition in Post-Communist Visual Arts") in <i>Identitate de frontieră în Europa largită. Perspective comparate (The Borderline Identity in Enlarged Europe. Comparative perspectives)</i>, ed. Romanița Constantinescu, Iași: Polirom, 2008</p>	<p>A tentative answer to these complex interrogations might proceed from a different question, regarding the motivations of this archival drive or impulse in recent Romanian art. Where does it come from? In other words, why are these artists interested in collecting and archiving? Why have these themes and practices become a constant interest in the Romanian visual arts, given that, although disparate in form, often divergent in their specific interests, and problematic, they can nevertheless be viewed today as a coherent and continuous line of practices linking the 1990's and the following decade?</p> <p>As a general impulse in contemporary art, archival practice is a constant theme, especially in the post-war period, active notably via conceptual and post-conceptual art <i>information structures</i>, <i>serial formats</i> and <i>appropriated images</i>. These artistic formats, which Hal Foster relates to "a will to 'connect what cannot be connected'," belong either to a general drive towards the historical totalisation of a fragmented contemporary culture, or to a specific "will to relate" disjointed cultural items in non-hierarchical spatial terms, in order to "ascertain what might remain for the present."¹ They might be considered to "emerge out of a failure in cultural memory, of a default in productive traditions."²</p> <p>In a similar psychoanalytical reading, we could interpret this persistent interest in the conservation and production of memory in Romanian contemporary art as a response to a general need to overcome the (dual) traumatic constituency of Romanian identity after 1989.³ Its traumatic self-representation is the result of an inherent contradiction in our cultural memory, of the equally destabilising coexistence between a shameful past and an uncertain present, of the constraints of a necessary reinvention of the self in transient conditions, and the will to suppress this image as</p>

the former “other” for the West.⁴ Therefore, the recovery on the one hand and the critical re-evaluation of the communist past and its effects on the other turn the archive into a working theme as an obsessive question. However, this situation also implies a series of necessary critical questions: how to define and approach the archive? Whence are we, both artists and art critics, speaking? How to perform archiving as an artistic and critical cultural practice?

⁴ See Edit András, “Blind Spot of the New Critical Theory. Notes on the Theory of Self-Colonisation”, in *European Influenza*, ed. Marius Babias, exhibition catalogue, Venice Biennial, Romanian Pavilion, 2005

In fact, the question “where are we talking from?” (in other words, what is the context corresponding to the speaker’s point of view?) and “whom do we address?” (what are the concrete conditions of reception for our discourse?) are both included in the “how do we relate?” question. Consequently, if there is a palpable change in critical awareness towards the ways of constituting the archive in Romanian artistic practices, it results from a different approach to their above-described “post-communist” condition. It stems from an attitude more interested in what socio-cultural, political and economical projects of societal redefinition and self-reconstruction we are involved in, and in how to disclose the conflicting systems of representations we borrow from the West and implement on a still unclear communist past, which is itself the result of a discursive construct.

After the nineties, when the processes of elaborating Romania’s European identity became more and more important, working on the concept of archive acts, first of all, as a strategy of self-recognition, as a necessary remembrance of our present being, trapped within a now identifiable “in-between”. Therefore, the archive is linked within this geopolitical and cultural space to a larger questioning of identity and to the uncertain memory of the past. Secondly, the anxiety caused by rapid and sometimes unintelligible changes in socio-economical field due to its neo-capitalist redefinition causes contemporary artists to make special use of strategies of documenting a present which becomes more and more an illusory point of reference. Thus, they work to preserve the common existence of a social body. An archive gives coherence to the individual’s fragmentary existence in understanding the economic and political decisions that shape the “transition” period. It turns it into a steady object of reference and representation.

At the same time, archives are proved to be necessary in critically uncovering the demagogical speech that homogenises the disjointed, sometimes contradictory realities they highlight. Thus, the practice of archiving tries to perform a necessary cultural operation – that of *filtering* reality to provide a presumably steady point of reference – a trace of

the past. In this respect, they try to supply the historical necessity for documentation, but they also inherit from the past a suspicion towards official records as an obsessive social surveillance strategy.⁵ This suspicion has now gradually shifted for artists to become a question of media manipulation and chaotic or irresponsible actions, given Romania's neo-capitalist, spectacular social reality⁶.

⁵ This particular question of the "Securitate" archives became after 1989 of national interest, leading to the foundation of GDS (Group for Social Dialogue), an institution concerned with study of the archives and opening access of citizens to their own dossiers.

⁶ I am referring here to Guy Debord's influential term used in *The Society of Spectacle* (Black & Red, 1977) to define "the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life." The "spectacle" defines for Debord "a social relation among people, mediated by images". Human relations are regarded as "mere appearances" replacing the authenticity of social life, where "everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."

⁷ Jean Baudrillard, "The ecstasy of communication", in *Continental Philosophy. An Anthology*, ed. William McNeill and Karen S. Feldman, Wiley Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp. 441–445

In general terms, one might claim that the former anxiety of ideology has turned into a strange anxiety of hyper-reality, an overabundant reality "more real than the real itself".⁷ This new type of anxiety manifests itself as a growing suspicion towards the very materiality of the archive and its structuring principles. It is materialised, on the one hand, in archives that collect and document the new consumerist ideology cheerfully embraced after 1989, working with signs and traces of its contextual expression, worthy of note being the *Cheap* fanzine edited by Vlad Nancă and Ștefan Tiron, or in the critical exposure of public space by means of collected and compressed debris in the artist book realised by Daniel Knorr and published by IDEA in 2007. On the other hand, it has been reflected in the general attitude towards cultural and societal transformations, at the level of the changing dynamic of the urban space and its representation, which forms the object of my inquiry in the present text. Thus, Romanian art practices in the 2000's manifested an increasing interest in preserving a hopelessly decomposing memory and found themselves working with an unstructured or unreasonable and contradictory reality that eluded being fixed through representation. They faced rapidly shifting conditions, overabundant information and material embodiments of irrationally divergent but peacefully co-existing directions of "development".

Concerning contemporary artistic practice, the attitude shift I am instantiating presents an increasing focus on the part of many artistic projects on their own medium of choice and on the particularities of their own visual language. As a narrative, it may be presented as a transition from early attempts to resist its alienating effects in private life, where visual archiving was employed as a means of expressing one's temporal cohesion, to artworks oriented towards dismantling the material traces of the traumatic collective memory of communism and supplying it with an alternative, suppressed memory. This process is not restricted to art: on the contrary, it is particularly noticeable in art history and the more general production of knowledge and critical discourse. When oriented towards the present and intended to analyse it, recording its relevant features for a future viewer, contemporary artists have increasingly questioned

the conditions governing decisions as to what is relevant. Art projects have also addressed the question of the transparency of representation. In this respect, Romanian photography has shifted from simply exposing the inconsistent memory of an uncertain present, with an uncertain identity, and producing narratives of specific, inherently contradictory spaces and superposed temporalities, towards a critical treatment of the real and the devices employed in constructing the archive itself.

Art, History and the Archive

I should clarify at this point the sense in which I am using the manifold and slippery concept of “archive”, to what I refer when talking about its figure in Romanian art of the last decade. On the one hand, the term “archive” may be understood as the result of the practice of writing art history and its theoretical, art critical and institutional devices employed over a given period of time. In this critical sense it is also used in the passive sense of the word employed by Boris Groys to cover the totality of what *has been recorded* as the cultural heritage up to a given moment.⁸ Thus, artistic research may also produce archival knowledge. The salient feature of the archive in this respect is its dynamic constitution and its temporariness. What is recorded is the result of a historical configuration and is subject to re-evaluation.

In a narrow sense, it may be employed as an oppressive figure of the aesthetic and artistic legacy of the communist period, materialised in artistic canons and constraints on knowledge. It may be materially understood as a *corpus* or the material body of the archive, comprising “the things actually uttered or written.”⁹ In the art world, this particular signification of the concept of “archive”, as both an object of art historical discourse and its result, corresponds to the virulent responses of artists to their immediate social conditions in the early nineties, which rejected the past in its entirety, and to more recent projects oriented towards producing a different kind of knowledge.

On the other hand, the term also covers the artistic strategies and techniques employed in order to build up the archive, such as selecting, collecting, documenting, reporting, etc. In this sense, the archive is understood as an active principle structuring knowledge and discourse. It is the positive image of an immaterial historical *a priori*, “a condition of reality for statements,”¹⁰ limiting the materiality of what is said by judging what can be said. It stands for “the general system of the formation and transformation

⁸ Boris Groys, *Despre Nou. Eseu de economie Culturală*, Cluj: IDEA, 2003

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, “The Archive and Testimony”, in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether, London: Whitechapel and MIT Press, 2006, p. 38

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, “The Historical *a priori* and the Archive”, in Charles Merewether (ed.), p. 26

of statements.”¹¹ “It is that which, at the very root of the statement event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset the *system of its enunciability* (...) that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is the *system of its functioning*.”¹² These very strategies and their corresponding techniques become the focus of critical use and the point of artistic reflection in the recent questioning of a larger problematic, interested in the following general issues: how to record our present? How to mediate what is relevant about it? How to produce our future memory?

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–31

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 29

However, I am using the term “archive” to refer more generally to the *preservation of memory and the process of memorising*. In this sense, I am taking into account artistic strategies employed in order to construct a meaningful archive of *collected data*, although they present themselves as *already interpreted* historical fragments, traces of a certain historical condition materialised in societal changes and relevant for understanding their own history.

Broadly speaking, in this text I am therefore interested in pointing out several major tendencies of recent Romanian artistic projects, which include the above-mentioned types of artistic strategies and techniques such as collecting, documenting and recording. I will attempt to classify their disparate tendencies and to instantiate the major differences in their attitude towards the issue of recording of the present and the question of preserving the historical and socio-political memory of the times, several of which I have already suggested above in general terms.

Four major approaches to the archive in contemporary Romanian art can be identified. Firstly, there are practices approaching the archive as an object of analysis and, consequently, performing a discursive intervention upon it, often in institutional terms (such as *subREAL*’s work with the *Arta* archives under the name of AHA (Art History Archive) or Lia and Dan Perjovschi’s CAA (Centre for Art Analysis/Contemporary Art Archive)). Secondly, there are practices that take the archive to be a *corpus of chaotic materiality*, performing a documentation and critique of the neo-capitalist consumerist superabundance of objects and signs, especially in art installations and video art. Thirdly, one may identify artistic practices that regard the archive as a visual diary, employed as a *strategy of subjectivation* and resistance, recording and recoding private life. While Ion Grigorescu’s body of photographic works from the seventies remain an exemplary reference, more recently, Ioana Nemeş’s *Monthly Evaluations* project may be a case in point. Last, but not least, one may note practices that *photographically record* urban landscape and

the public space as depositaries of collective memory. I will focus here only on the last of these artistic directions.

Photography and the Visual Archive: Heterotopias and Heterochronias
The Transparency of Representation

To turn specifically to photographic approaches towards the archive, a difficult problem concerning the medium itself and its visual devices now arises: how to preserve the memory of the present, since the neutrality of the strategies and the process of recording is itself acknowledged to be problematic? What type of reality are we preserving by means of photography? To what reality are we referring? To what memory are we granting access? Is it possible at all to record a transitory present in an uncertain space?

Concerning practices of visual archiving, it is important to note that the question of representation itself and its relation to reality has gradually come into focus lately, particularly due to its doubtful transparency and objectivity. In this respect, it is also important to observe that photography as a privileged recording device is more and more employed as a conceptual tool for critiquing representation. In practices of visual recording, the critique mostly uses framing as a conceptual device with its own performative capacity to influence the construction of meaning in the semiotic field of the picture and to condition the possible structures of an archive. Secondly, it makes use of *superposition*, *repetition* and *decomposition* in order to create divergent spaces and temporalities inhabiting the same representation.

Concerning the favourite motifs, topics and representational contents, particularly common and relevant to archiving projects using the photographic medium in Romanian art of the 2000's is an approach to urban, everyday landscape as a persistent inscription of historical effects, or as the material depositary of memory. In this respect, performing an architectural reading of the space as a semiotic field is a common strategy. Photographers often make contradictory statements about the meanings of the pictured space.

All these artistic projects could be ascribed to what Michel Foucault called "heterotopias of space,"¹³ existing spaces where different symbolic readings of the same place collide and different spaces coexist by contiguity. They sometimes create disruptive spaces in the fabric of reality by means framing and extraction. Inconsistency of representation contrasts its reality of living spaces, since, unlike utopias, heterotopias actually exist in reality as Foucault reminds us. But they might also, at a pinch, be ascribed

¹³ Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres", in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, Paris: Gallimard, 1994, pp. 752-762

to the category of “heterochronias” or so-called “heterotopias of time”, such as museums, cemeteries, and festive places,¹⁴ where the same space contains different temporalities at the same time.

Heterochronias

The questioning of the construction of memory by means of representation and its attempts at critical dismantling has already proved remarkable in the *subREAL* group’s well-known projects that expose the structuring devices of the communist visual archive, such as *What does a project mean?* (1996). Staged as an obsessive museum, the pictures cut out of *Arta* (the official art journal during communism) were arranged in a hall of small sculptures, monumental appearance but tiny in scale, chaotically juxtaposed in a semblance of order. The photo-installation playfully inserted photographs as sculptures into the “white cube” of an imaginary museum. Not only did they expose the *structuring function* of the museum, as a strategy of collecting and sorting relevant items of historical value and as a necessary modernist device for creating the illusory space of eternal value and immutable, endless memory; they also simultaneously questioned the stability and reality of the archive, potentially equating the white rooms with a blank, passive “sheet of paper” on which memory is inscribed. On the other hand, they questioned the museum’s internal structuring principle, used in the classification of objects, by means of a seemingly ordered juxtaposition of items similar to Borges’s topologically absurd “Chinese encyclopaedia,” cited by Foucault.¹⁵ By all these means, they ultimately staged the function of the museum as a *mausoleum*, the depositary of spatially juxtaposed “dead” objects, speechless monuments, historical signs of a time deprived of their meaningful context, embodiments of history without historicity.¹⁶

The archival impulse also works on collective fears as part of a neurotic present, instantiating their material symptoms and fixations in spaces that therefore appear totally unrealistic, the mere figment of an obsessed mind. *The Very Best of Red, Yellow and Blue* series of works produced in 2002–2005 by Duo van der Mixt collect and instantiate the marks of the paranoid claims of nationalistic obsession. They construct a visual archive of a specific period in recent history and preserve the memory of a specific collective pathology. Their series of photographs of red, yellow and blue nationalistic marks from the public space are supplemented by a material accumulation of disparate objects whose single principle of association is their nationalist symbolic representation. Thus, they archive symptomatic collective chauvinist

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. XVI

¹⁶ Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995, pp. 44–45

fears of the (Hungarian) other, translating perhaps a deeper anxiety with no definite object: the hollowness resulting from the need to reconstruct national identity and its rhetorical effects.

Although photography is not their preferred medium, Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor are worthy of mention in this context thanks to their particular approach to spatialised temporality. The artists record fictional, non-habitable spaces of ephemeral memory in a conflicting multi-layered timeframe of the same viewing sequence. Sometimes, they break down into diachronic layers the compressed temporality spatially inscribed within the architectural landscape of Bucureşti, as in the *Persepolis* series of photographs (2005), acknowledging the fact that “Bucureşti contains superimposed patterns of constructed utopia.”¹⁷ *Persepolis* builds up an archive of present and past in a space similar to “an architectural war front, a site of collisions or tense juxtapositions between disjointed urban fragments.”¹⁸ The existing city thus comprises multiple emergent cities, whose formation cannot be recorded by means of an illusory totalising gaze or by the infinite accumulation of fragments and details. The impossibility of “keeping in mind” the architectural process of the city’s constant re-construction and the recent neo-modernist flotsam is perhaps best described in *The Rain*, a video where the attempt to draw from memory the outline of the communist block-of flats in which the artists live is ruined by a heavy downpour – a metaphor for defying the order of both communist serial architecture and present-day urban (un)planning.

Recording Heterotopias

Related to Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor’s approach, a symptomatic trait of the analysis of the present by means of documenting and recording the socio-economical and historical “transition” of Romanian society is represented by the quest for inconsistencies in visual and discursive motivations and readings of the same representation. Such collections of specific places question the economic and political ideological statements and descriptions of a contextual situation. The crisis of specificity thus translates the crisis of its recent discursive definition, which ultimately results in a blurring of the boundary between *documentation* and *fiction*. The growing suspicion towards visual representation as historical document also corresponds to the already blurred boundary between the objectivity of the *document* as recording device and the exemplary status of the *monument* as an instrument of symbolic commemoration, mentioned by Paul Ricoeur in the construction of the historical archive.¹⁹

¹⁷ See Mihnea Miran, “Mona Vătămanu & Florin Tudor”, in *Photography in Contemporary Art. Trends in Romania after 1989*, ed. Aurora Király, Bucureşti: UNArte, 2006, p. 202

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222

¹⁹ For the distinction between document and monument used in this sense see Paul Ricoeur, “Archives, Documents, Traces”, in Charles Merewether (ed.), pp. 66–70

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006

This specific trend in the recent artistic attitudes of Romanian photographers and video-artists took the form of a cinematic staging of reality in *Motion Parade*, the show Alina Șerban curated at Vienna's Photogalerie in 2005, which included Matei Bejenaru's *Electric Wonders* photographic series, a visual archive of Romanian railway stations as symbolic representations of transition (2005). His subtle, ironic comments on the bitter reality of Romanian economic changes operate with the contrastive coexistence of symbolic signs of historical change and the utter persistency of the poor economic conditions of the communist past. Bejenaru chooses railway stations to provoke dream-like, cinematic sceneries, where bright light boxes contrast with their environment as surrealist phantasmal objects. They look like clips from a familiar movie, which have been reinserted in the wrong scene, producing a puzzling effect. In the context of the representation of found fragments of reality as *non-places*, it is also worth mentioning Raluca Paraschiv Ionescu's investigation of existing spatial contradictions in what she visually instantiates as kinds of simultaneously divergent readings of the same space. *Train stations* (2008) series of photographs exhibited within the framework of the R0_Archive project create a burlesque *mise-en-scène* of assisted ready-mades, surrealistic juxtapositions of otherwise separate objects. For instance, the waiting room of a railway station appears simultaneously to contain a deserted church, documenting a strange coexistence of sacred and profane. Michelle Bressan's early photographic series *Passato Prossimo* (2005-2010) and *Vita, Morte e Miracoli* (2005-2011) are themselves the result of an acute sense of patient observation capable of finding singularity and revealing exceptional, often uncanny readymade situations concealed within the banality of everyday life. Bressan's approach to the marginality of ordinary urban life borrows the redemptive approach to history common to Walter Benjamin's figures of the *flâneur* and the rag picker.²⁰ Likewise, Bressan seeks profane illuminations in what look like the ruins of history, in its material traces and ordinary human gestures. Focusing on the obsession for the occult, the mystic and the religious in Romanian society since 1989, *Vita, Morte e Miracoli* (continued in his series *Pilgrimages*) reveals the conflation of these attitudes with poverty while performing a visual study in cultural anthropology.

Photography shares similar strategies of reading the urban space with other new media practices such as video art. The strategy of ironically producing fiction-like documentaries, by transporting the reality into a familiar scenery projected by the viewer, or by recording disrupted, juxtaposed spaces as symptoms of historical and economical

changes, is also used in the video-pieces *Bahlui by Night* (2004) and *Reconstructionscapes* (2005) by Dan Acostioaei, for whom urban landscape is both a temporal structure and a historical condition. In Dan Acostioaei's last mentioned video work, the unfinished buildings erected in the city of Iași and its surroundings during a recent chaotic process of urban reconfiguration become the epitome of the unfinished process of reconstructing post-communist identity, trapped within an endless transition. Visually archived by the artist, these urban signs of historical change are less documents of a certain time than monuments of specific condition, where site-specificity is displaced and dismantled from within. Architectural language is thus decollated from the historical speech wherein they are inscribed, revealing a schismatic contradiction at the heart of their visual structure. The chaotic associations and superposition of urban edifices and styles, of glass reflections and silent concrete, of impenetrable surface and silent, unreadable depth of image, suggest a historical demise of reason. They replace timeless monuments with deconstructive symptoms of an ultimately historical failure, despite their "modernising" allure. Unfinished, the temporary structures presented superpose their symbolic and universalising meaning of "erection" upon a divergent contextual reality, acquiring consistency as indexes of a new ideologically empty speech and pathetically eroded heroism.

Simulated Places

Iosif Király employs a remarkable representational strategy in his longstanding photographic series *Reconstructions*. In this project, the same pictorial frame is analytically decomposed into different time-sequences and synthetically recomposed so that a single space contains multiple perceptions belonging to different perceptual conditions, different moments (sometimes situated several years apart), and possibly also belonging to different viewers. Like the above-mentioned artists, Király also chooses the urban space as a depository of meaning and memory, focusing on the dialectics of change and permanence as a version of the non-dialectical pair of repetition and difference. The narrativisation of the framed space superposes historical layers in a continuous elliptical process of reading every-day life. The result is a vanishing reality, the *representation* of the un-representable itself. He creates personal memories of affectively charged places, which topologically draft spatial memory, and temporally records past moments in the present tense of the image.

As *Reconstructions* already points out, there is also significant mistrust when it comes to the definition of photography à la

²¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera luminoasă. Însemnări despre fotografie* (Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography), Cluj: IDEA, 2005. For a different reading in the same Barthesian key used below cf. Anca Mihuleț, "Iosif Király. Reconstructions", in *Photography in Contemporary Art. Trends in Romania after 1989*, ed. Aurora Király, București: UNArte, 2006, pp. 158-169

Barthes as "something that was here."²¹ Rather, by exploring "what was there", photography is meant to produce a representation that could not have *reasonably* been there, or which cannot be *perceived*, as such, in the past tense. Consequently, the last phase of doubt concerning the act of recording is represented, in my narrative, by various attempts to *simulate an archive*, in order to provoke the structuring principles underlining its visual representations and the meanings the viewer projects upon specific contemporary places.

In this regard, we might also mention Alexandra Croitoru and Ștefan Tiron's project *Another Black Site* (2006). The two photographed ambiguous deserted industrial and post-industrial places, empty offices, panoramas of framed places suggested as suspect no-man's lands, in order to impose an atmospheric perception of them as possible secret American military bases. Their project stages reality as the result of paranoid tendencies in collective perception nourished by media manipulation and speculations. Thus, the images reveal the historical collective tension created by the expectancy of a new American rescue plan. They mimic the language of the documentary in order to instantiate and criticise a historically determined perceptual framework.

In the same vein, but with a different focus and with different results, Bogdan Bordeianu's *Perifeeric* photographic series collects images of București's peripheral spaces, presented in the doubtful, ambiguous condition of being both centred peripheries and peripheral centres, spaces of continuous industrial extension and subjects of corporatist will with a constitutively temporary status. The photographs build up a cinematic narrative where the image, glamorously approached with ironic distrust, is manipulated so that it surpasses the very possibility of framing. It is as if the subject-photographer and the camera as the technical prosthesis of his gaze cannot supply the historical slippage, transforming what seems to be a periphery into an unstoppable wave of industrialisation. Thus, his project also manifests the inherent impossibility of the archive, and approaches it as a failed project from the outset, as if a constitutive failure is inscribed at its core. The objectivity of a report becomes the temporary effect of various contextual and sometimes contingent forces.

The above-mentioned artistic projects acknowledge that the practices of recording visual memory also record the continuous process of erasure that is inscribed in the architectural urban space and our everyday-life. At the same time, they perform, by various means, a subversive reading of representation, acknowledging that mere documentation is nothing

²² Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital", in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 359–360

but a discursive fiction meant to reinforce hegemonic readings of reality, since there is no neutrality of representation. The elementary photographic act of framing and choosing the object is already embedded in relations of power and control, which decide *what is and what is not worth* archiving.²²

For this type of photographic project, pointing to a referential reality seems bound to create counter-fictions in order to construct history, instead of naively recording it as presumed testimonies of a certain time and space. They produce multiple readings of the pictured space in order to challenge collective projections, representations and prejudices.

The Archive as a Principle of Doubt

All the photographic projects I have examined so far share the special use of archiving practices. Concerned with visually recording the Romanian post-industrial landscape as a depository of historical memory and societal changes, these fabricated images consider the archive to be not a principle of objectivity and memory or a distorted reality and fictionalised past, but rather a *principle of doubt*. They create doubt in order to dismantle the viewer's prejudices concerning his recent condition and critically to distance reality and representation, the former being an effect of the latter. It is this awareness of the constructedness of historical representation that I believe to be the major characteristic of the post-nineties decade regarding the concept of the archive and its artistic strategies in Romanian contemporary photography.

Its own structuring principles are viewed as strategies to *produce doubt*, strategies that should be questioned as objective *reports* in the very act of their use. At the same time, its own construction is regarded as a temporary field of power relations that condition what we can see and what cannot be visualised. The loss of the neutral point of view of the speaker, largely acknowledged through acceptance of the label "post-communist situation", seems to go hand in hand with what might be called the "death of the reporter" as a neutral subject of an enunciative field, involved in the mere collection and recording of data.

Last but not least, such archiving practices clearly manifest different attitudes towards the communist legacy and its traces. The uncertainty of the post-communist reality and identity construct is affirmed, while artists become increasingly aware of the distorting potential of their own artistic means. They have developed a subversive strategy for analysing the informational content of an image as a doubtful

speech act, meant to preserve the "principle of reality." Constructing an archive containing decipherable signs of a certain historical condition while being situated within it is already an impossible and doubtful endeavour. But it serves the better to analyse and understand it.

Ultimately, the concept of the archive itself manifests a perceptible change in meaning. What if all we can do is hope to inscribe a memory already forgotten in the act of collecting? What if all we can do is not to hope to discover objective signs that preserve the archive as a totalised corpus of memories *transparent* for the future, but rather temporarily and locally escape the illusion of totalisation by exposing its inner contradictions, eventually using visual signs in order to provoke divergent readings? We might be on the point of exploring the sense in which the archive itself might ultimately be nothing but a necessarily comforting fiction of its own, producing and reproducing itself as art.

Bios

Bogdan Andrei Bordeianu (b.1983) lives in Dublin (IE). He holds an MA in visual arts, and is currently a doctoral student at the Bucharest National University of Arts. He participated in national and international exhibitions and was selected in the Musée Elysee's *ReGeneration2* project. The main concern of his works is the transformation of the landscape seen as an indicator of the society's level of understanding of the environment. With a non judgemental view on whether shaping the landscape is bad or good, he places himself as an observer of *land-ship*, a mutual shaping of people and place. Most of the times the periphery is where he finds most of his subjects, but sometimes he includes incursions inside the city, or subjects that appear far from urban places.

Michele Bressan (b. 1980) – Recipient of the 2009 ESSL award for photography, and nominee for the Henkel award in the same year. In 2010 he won the Constantin Brancusi fellowship at the Cité Internationale des Arts Paris. His works are present in private and public collections: ESSL Museum collection, collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest, Museum für Photographie Braunschweig collection. In the last few years his works were exhibited in several solo and group exhibitions, including: *Inventing the Truth*, Romania participation at 56th Biennale di Venezia, Italy (2015), *Life is Beautiful* Atelier Van Eck Dusseldorf (2015), *The Source Collage*, Tate Britain, London, UK (2014), *Les Rencontres Internationales*, Gaite Lyrique and Palais de Tokyo (2014) Paris, *Recorded Memories* Museum für Photographie Braunschweig (2013), Centre Wallon d'Art Contemporain (2012), ViennaFair The New Contemporary (2012), Les Rencontres d'Arles Festival (2011), Musée d'Art Moderne Saint Etienne (2011), Gate11 – international departures, Fondazione Fotografia Modena (2011), Biennale di Venezia, Padiglione Italia nel Mondo (2011), Mois de la Photo (2010), National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest (2009-2010), Performance Art Institute San Francisco (2010), ESSL Museum Wien (2009), Neuen Museum/Bauhaus Universität Weimar (2009).

Valentin Cernat (b. 1988) studies at the Bucharest National University of Arts, Department of Photography and Time Based Media Art. The main focus of his photographic observations and the core of most of his works are represented by the social context of the identity, seen through imaginary communism and post December 1989 experiences. In direct relation to contextual mental constructions, the artist combines performance art, installations and photography in order to develop personal projects.

Simona Dumitriu (b. 1978) works, as an artist and writer/curator, at the intersection between memory, archive and language, and prefers collaborative practices and queer perspectives. She is part of the artist collective that ran, between 2010-2015, Platforma project space in București. Since 2014 she has been working with her partner in the duo Simona&Ramona and as the drag king duo Claude&Dersch. She taught at the Bucharest National University of Arts, Photography and Time Based Media Art Department (between 2009-2013) and she was part of the R0_Archive research and documentation project between 2008-2011.

Dani Ghercă (b. 1988) is a visual artist working with photography. In his works he attempts to comprehend ways in which visually perceived social and political events shape the reality in which we live. His current interest lies in the mechanisms through which information is disseminated. He also questions the balance of power which is distributed between the organisations that collect and deposit information and the subjects of said information.

Bogdan Gîrbovan (b. 1981) lives and works in București (Ro). Graduate of the Bucharest National University of Arts, Photography and Time Based Media Art Department in 2008. He had personal exhibitions in București, Timișoara and Paris. Participant in several group exhibitions in București, Madrid, Zurich, Prague, Paris, Istanbul, Swansea.

His photographs were published in contemporary art magazines such as *The Postbox*, *Punctum*, *NYArts Magazine*, *Fotografija*, and *IDEA*.

Bogdan Iancu has a PhD in anthropology and ethnology at the Università degli Studi di Perugia and is a researcher at the Romanian Peasant's Museum. He has participated in formation and research stages at Université Libre de Bruxelles, Paris – X Nanterre, Università degli Studi di Perugia, Swedish Biodiversity Centre – Uppsala. He has also participated in field researches which pinpoint post socialist transformations of the commodity culture present in the domestic local environment and the social effects of deindustrialisation in Oltenia, Danube Delta and North Bucovina. He is currently involved in an international interdisciplinary research project charting the reconfiguration of traditional agricultural practices in the context of funds access prefigured by the Common Agricultural Policy. He is the author and editor of volumes such as *Dobrogea. Identities and crises* (coord. Paideia, 2009), *My first voyage abroad* (coord. Art, 2010), *New Cultures. New Anthropologies* (coord. together with Vintilă Mihăilescu and Monica Stroe, Humanitas, 2012), *At the table with Delta's people. A map of gastronomic practices* (coord. together with Monica Stroe, Coresi, 2012), *The Material Culture (Re)Turn in Anthropology: Promises and Dead-ends* (coord. Humanitas, 2013). He is a member of the lead council of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Society (SASC), organiser of the annual national conference of SASC from 2009, member of The European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) and member of The American Anthropological Association (AAA).

Iosif Király (b. 1957) lives in București (RO). He holds an MA in architecture and PhD in visual arts. From 1990 onward he has participated in various art projects, independently and in the artist group *subREAL*. Since 2000 he has collaborated with a team of architects in photo-documentary projects on the changes in daily life and urban environment in post-communist Romania and in 2007 initiated RO_Archive. Király is a professor at the Bucharest National University of Arts where he has taught since 1992 and co-founded in 1995 the Department of Photography and Time Based Media Art. He has an extensive international exhibition record and has participated in numerous biennials.

Andrei Mateescu (b. 1988) – Being raised in the syncretic and often troubled urban space of București, Romania, he became preoccupied early on with the delicate relationships and dichotomies present in contemporary urban landscape. A trilogy series (*Multilateral*, *Hyper* & *Residential*) stemmed from these concerns. The artist has chosen themes such as the collective communist housing estates, the new consumerist architectural layer of malls and hypermarkets and the new layer of residential housing estates, often built in problematic or peripheral parts of the city. His subject matter of interest has moved on from the macro urban landscape level to the micro level – choosing in his latest projects to focus on aspects such as the power struggle between public space and private space and the types of identity and behaviours associated with each of these.

Vlad Mihăilescu (b. 1988) lives and works in București. He has a BA at the Department of Photography and Time Based Media Art from the Bucharest National University of Arts and currently is developing his MA studies in the same place. His early works are portrayals from personal experiences that are rendered in an abstract manner. In his last year at the university, after he met Belgian photographer Bernard Bay, photographer with an experience of over 30 years in industrial photography, he decided to start documenting the mining sites in Romania. This endeavour resulted in the project *Last Miners*, for which he received the UNArte award for best bachelor degree project.

Cosmin Moldovan (b. 1982) graduated in 2005 with a Bachelor's degree in Visual Arts. Working since 2002 with photography, video, VJ-ing, graphic design and computer

generated imagery – looking to inject humour in social and cultural commentary on various themes: the individual facing consumer culture, the body as commodity, remixing & mashing up cinema etc. He has also worked as an independent curator for several exhibitions in the Bucureşti scene between 2005 and 2009. Moldovan is currently a VFX artist for film and also a motion graphics artist for the number one television channel in Romania. He has been working in the VFX field for the past 8 years.

Cristian Nae is Ph.D. Associate Professor in the Department of Art History and Theory, George Enescu University of Arts, Iaşi (Ro). He was the recipient of several research fellowships and coordinator of research projects granted by Erste Stiftung, "New Europe College" Institute for Advanced Studies and the Getty Foundation, and The National Council of Scientific Research. He is a member of AICA, College Arts Association (CAA) and the European Society for Aesthetics (EUROSA). He participated in the editorial board of Vector, Artmargins and META journals. His research work operates at the intersection between exhibition studies, identity politics, visual aesthetics, and art historical accounts of critical art practices in Romania and the former Eastern Europe after 1960's. His studies were published in international journals such as *Zivot Umjetnosti*, *Estetika. The Central European Journal for Aesthetics*, *META* and *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* (forthcoming) as well as in critical anthologies (*Curating Eastern Europe and Beyond: Art History through the Exhibitions*, Peter Lang, 2013). He has also contributed to monographs and surveys of Romanian art such as *subREAL* (Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Nürnberg, 2015) and *Romanian Cultural Revolution* (Hatje Cantz, 2010). His most recent book is *Moduri de a percepe. O introducere în teoria artei moderne şi contemporane* (*Ways of perceiving. An introduction to modern and contemporary art theory*), Polirom, Iaşi, 2015.

Raluca Oancea Nestor is a lecturer at the Bucharest National University of Arts where she teaches Aesthetics and New Media Art. She holds a degree in computer science and one in philosophy of culture, together with a master of fine arts. She also holds a PhD from the Bucharest National University of Arts. Her doctoral thesis examines the connection between new media and contemporary art and the presence of classical and new aesthetic categories in the field of photography, cinema and new media art.

Raluca Paraschiv Ionescu (b. 1977) lives and works in Bucureşti as an artist and lecturer in Cultural Management and Communication Studies at the Bucharest National University of Arts. She holds an MA in Media and Creative Enterprises at the University of Warwick, UK (2004), and is a graduate of UNArte, Photography and Time Based Media Art Department (2001). She works as artist (photography, installation) and theorist (received her PhD in Visual Arts at UNArte with a thesis on the subject of the relationship between art and public space, 2011) and is involved in projects that research the multiple facets of contemporary society and the role of art in this investigation.

Larisa Sitar (b. 1984) lives and works in Bucureşti. In 2008 she graduated from the Department of Photography and Time Based Media Art, Bucharest National University of Arts. She holds an MA Degree at the same university since 2010. Selected group exhibitions: *Inventing the Truth. On fiction and reality*. Romanian National participation at the 56th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia (2015), *WHAT ABOUT Y[OUR] MEMORY*, The National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest (2014), *Transformation. Romanian Sculpture 25 Years After the Revolution*, Museum Beelden aan Zee, The Hague; *PASAJ*, The National Museum of Contemporary Art – Annex, Bucharest (2014), *Care Crisis*, Futura Gallery, Prague (2012), *Essl Art Award CEE, Winners Exhibition*, Essl Museum, Klosterneuburg/Vienna (2011), *Zoomania.Ro*, The National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest (2010), *Start Point Prize*, NTK gallery, Prague (2010).

AGRICULTURE	MINDRIFTY	MALL	MOYORWAY
NATURE	ETHNIC GROUP	HYPERMARKET	WAREHOUSE
HUMAN INTERVENTION	ROMA COMMUNITY	FLEA MARKET	HANGAR
PALACE	JEWISH COMMUNITY	OLD TRADES	HIGHWAY
HOUSE	COMMUNISM	BUTCHER SHOP	PETROL
FIELD	CAPITALISM	CORNER SHOP	TIRE
CROP	ROMANIA	MALL	BRIDGE
TREE	ROMANIAN FLAG	BOUTIQUE	VIADUCT
RIVER	NATIONAL HEROES	OWNER	PUBLIC
SEA COAST	BANAL NATIONALISM	BANK	TRANSPORTATION
RURAL ENVIRONMENT	TOURISM	LOAN	PERIPHERAL
RUSTIC	LEISURE	INFORMAL TRADE	LANDSCAPES
SOIL	HOTEL	URBAN ANALYSIS	INDUSTRIAL
VEGETATION	RESTAURANT	DWELLER	LANDSCAPE
ECOSYSTEM	MENU	BILLBOARDS	COAL MINE
MEADOW	SWIMMING POOL	NEIGHBOURHOOD	RUINS
FARM ANIMALS	FISHING	STREET	WATER TOWER
SHEPHERD	PUBLIC BATH	CAR	WORKER
FARMER	PENSION	AUTOMOBILE	MINING AREA
VETERINARIAN	BARBECUE	LORRY	EUROPALLETS
AGRICULTURAL	PANFAIR	PUBLIC SPACE	SIGNS
ENGINEER	CARROUSEL	PRIVATE SPACE	PLACARDS
TRUCKS	FAST FOOD	TRAFFIC	STLD
RELIGION	TRADITION	DOUBLE GLAZED	WAGON
CULTS	CUSTOM	WINDOWS	PIPE
CHURCH	SPORTS	(THERMOPANE)	MACHINERY
SYNAGOGUE	HEALTH	APARTMENT BLOCK	MOTOR
TORA	FOOTBALL	ADVERTISING	WORKING BAND
GRAVEYARD	BICYCLE	BILLBOARD	SHIPYARD
MINISTER	SPORTS FIELD	URBAN FURNITURE	QUARRY EXPLOITATION
PRIEST	HOSPITAL	CROWDED AREAS	CONCRETE SLABS
CROSS	PACIENT	FAIRS	PRIVATIZATION
CONFESSION	TREATMENT	FLEA MARKET	INDUSTRIAL PARK
OBJECT OF WORSHIP	PILLS	PARK	MINER
CATHEDRAL	SANITATION	PLAYGROUND	EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
THE CATHEDRAL	PHARMACY	OWNER	
OF NATIONAL	DRUGSTORE	TENANT	
REDEMPTION	SURGERY TABLE	PERIPHERAL ROUTES	
PARISHIONER	SANATORIUM	RAILWAY STATIONS	
RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY	DOCTOR	TRANSPORTATION	
MONUMENTS	NURSE	GAS STATION	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	COMMERCE	BUS STOP	
MARKS OF TIME	TRADE	ROAD	
HISTORY	CRAFT	"DACIA" CAR	
MEMORY	SURVEILLANCE	TOURIST	
STATUE	SECURITY	TRAIN	
WAR	GOODS	ENGINE	
GOLDIER	MERCHANDISE	TRANSIT	
CULTURAL VENUE	SHOP	COMMUTERS	
CITY HALL	STORE	PARKING LOT	



































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WAR	GOODS	ENGINE	
SOLDIER	MERCHANDISE	TRANSIT	
CULTURAL VENUE	SHOP	COMMUTERS	
CITY HALL	STORE	PARKING LOT	





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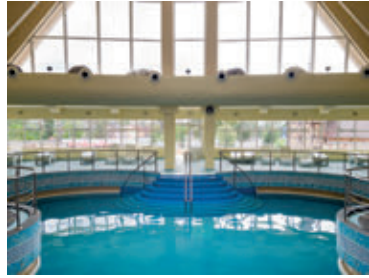
































































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CULTURAL VENUE	SHOP	COMMUTERS	
CITY HALL	STORE	PARKING LOT	





















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IMPLOR PENTRU AJUTOR VA
ROG SUFLEIESTE AJUTATI MAI
VIATA MEA ESTE IN MARE PERICOL
DANA DANA DANA SPERANTA MEA
ESTE LA DURA!!!



deschide
și savurează
fericirea



















































