

MARTOR



Title: "Displaying the Undisplayable: *Nameless in the World. An Exhibition on the Pro-Natalist Policies of the Ceaușescu Regime*"

Authors: Gabriela Nicolescu, Lila Passima, Corina Doboș

How to cite this article: Nicolescu, Gabriela, Lila Passima and Corina Doboș. 2015. "Displaying the Undisplayable: *Nameless in the World. An Exhibition on the Pro-Natalist Policies of the Ceaușescu Regime*". *Martor* 20: 181-192.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/768-2/>

Martor (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Review) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor* review is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Its aim is to provide, as widely as possible, a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for scientific, educational and (in)formational goals. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

Martor (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

Martor is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.



CEI DIN LUME **FĂRĂ NUME**

POLITICA PRONATALISTĂ A REGIMULUI CEAUȘESCU



Displaying the Undisplayable: *Nameless in the World.* *An Exhibition on the Pro-Natalist Policies of the Ceaușescu Regime*

Gabriela Nicolescu

Associate lecturer in anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research on the politics of display and representation includes fieldwork in the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

Lila Passima

Curator and visual artist. She is in charge of the museum's education department from the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

Corina Doboș

Historian working at the University of Bucharest and "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest on bio-politics in Communist Romania.

Cei din lume fără nume. Expoziție despre politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușescu // Nameless in the World. An Exhibition on the Pro-Natalist Policies of the Ceaușescu Regime is an exhibition organized by the Institute of the Communist Crimes and Memory of the Romanian Exile (ICCMRE) in partnership with the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (NMRP), displayed at the NMRP Headquarters (Foyer Room) in October - November 2012.

Concept & curatorship: Lila Passima and Cosmin Manolache (NMRP)

Documentation: Florin S. Soare and Corina Doboș (ICCMRE)

Virtual tour (<http://politicapronatalista.iiccr.ro>): Mihai Bodea & Youngminds

GN: I remember that the idea of making an exhibition on the theme of abortion in socialist Romania, in the last decades of the socialist regime, came to me and Corina in London in 2011. Back then, I had suggested to Corina that it would be an interesting project to make. My concern was how to create exhibitions not starting from objects, but the other way around, starting from a theme / concept and having available plenty of research material to work with. Corina, in your case, I know you have coordinated an important research on the theme of abortion in communist Romania at the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania and Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMRE), whose results were synthesized in two volumes: *The Pro-Natalist Policy of the Ceaușescu Regime. Vol I. A Comparative Perspective* (2010)¹ and *The Pro-Natalist Policy of the Ceaușescu Regime. Institutions and Practices* (2011)². The first volume compares the Romanian pro-natalist policies with the pro-natalism practices in other six Eastern European countries and France, while the second volume focuses on the institutions and practices of Romanian pro-natalism.

I know this research and these two volumes were made in collaboration with other people from the IICCMER (*note*: Florin Soare, Luciana Jinga, Cristina Roman). A wonderful piece of work resulted and I was interested in finding out how this kind of material could be displayed in an exhibition. So, are there any differences between the book and the exhibition?

CD: You know, before the two of us discussed in London about the exhibition, Florin Soare had come to me and told me that he was thinking of somehow doing an exhibition based on our research. So, when you proposed the same thing to me I said: "All right. Let's do it". So, after our talk, I contacted Lila Passima and Cosmin Manolache and the four of us, together with Florin, worked together to set up this exhibition. I would say there are important differences between the book and the exhibition, and, at the beginning, this was quite difficult for us (me and Florin Soare) as historians... We gave Lila and Cosmin the two volumes and lots, lots, lots of documents and photos. It was huge. So Lila and Cosmin told us: "OK, this is a huge deal, and it's better to talk a little bit about what happened there,

1) Corina Doboș (coord.), Florin S. Soare, Luciana M. Jinga. 2010. *Politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușescu*. Vol. I: O perspectivă comparativă. Iași: Polirom.

2) Florin S. Soare, Luciana M. Jinga (coord.), Cristina Romana, Corina Doboș. 2011. *Politica pronatalistă a regimului Ceaușescu*. Vol II: Instituții și practici. Iași: Polirom.

you know?" So, we tried to explain to them what had happened in a much simpler way. We tried to give them some kind of shortcuts into the thought process behind the books, and the pictures of hospitals from the '60s-'70s which Florin found in the archives; these pictures proved to be very important for the exhibition. Cosmin, for example, had memories of the medical office his mother was working in as a nurse, and said: "Oh, I know what a medical office should look like, you know? Because I remember from my childhood how everything was laid out in a medical office."

We had visited many exhibitions on historical themes in Romania (I participated in the organization of some of these, so I am quite familiar with this "concept")... and they were boring because there were lots of documents on the walls for one to read. We didn't want to do this. In fact, Lila didn't want to do this. So we said: "OK. Let's try to keep it more visual. So, we focused on visuals – we had the hospital pictures Florin found in the archives of the Ministry of Health, and these were quite important. We had some wonderful letters, handwritten by citizens and addressed to the Ministry of Health... and this is important too; this is, I think, the main difference between the book and the exhibition. The book is historical research, written by historians and addressing mainly historians. Historians write mainly on laws and institutions, not on individual stories. And when you write about this, you write a book. When you want to put this on display, first and foremost, you have to make it more visual. Secondly, you make it more personal –that is why you use the personal (hi)stories more.

GN: Why did you choose for this exhibition this museum (the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant)?

CD: Well... in the first place, it was because of you: you put me in contact with Lila and Cosmin. And secondly, because I really like that museum – it was the obvious choice for me.

GN: Why do you like this particular museum? What exactly do you like so much about it?

CD: I think it was the first one I visited when I came to Bucharest, after I graduated in Cluj-Napoca. And... I remember visiting the permanent exhibitions and I was surprised there was not much explanation written under the objects. You had to be more engaged with the object you see, as the information on that object was not just simply delivered to you. You had to find out for yourself. And I liked this.

GN: Now, to come back to the curators working in the museum. Lila, how was your experience of curating this exhibition?

LP: This exhibition was a challenge for me. I did not know much about pro-natalist policies except for the well-known Romanian expression: "**children of the decree generation**" – a generation I was part of, being born in 1967, despite my parents telling me I was a wanted child. By chance or not, I was subliminally and anonymously one of the thousands of hundreds of victims pertaining to this phenomena. My personal experience became part of the concept of the exhibition.

GN: How did you decide on the narrative centers of the exhibition?

LP: The exhibition centered on two powerful narrative centers: **the medical examination room** with the gynecological bed and the torture instruments and **the domestic space**, where I wanted to introduce visitors to the material life of the 1970s lifestyle. The first space was often reluctant to understand and hear the personal drama and the real causes which led women to such experiences. The second space had all the aesthetic and material elements of a flat in 1970s' Bucharest. I operated an autobiographic scenery, I moved my own library and books, as well as all the objects I could find from that epoch: magazines, dollies, porcelain *knickknacks*, displayed in glass cabinets, on the bed frame or on the TV set. I have included the ever-present glass fish and the Gloria radio, the telephone, also displayed on a dolly, the carpet, the nylon curtains with sewed colorful flowers, the sofa and the dolly put on display, all integrated in the museum scenography to make the exhibition

space look real, inhabited and warm. We invited the audience to read the books on display and to watch a documentary entitled **The Children of the Decree**, directed by Florin Iepan. The audience was invited to become active participants, challenged to relate with the subject on display in a different quality: not as a spectator, but as a participant. The personal space of the domestic space was supposed to oppose the traumatic, empty and painful medical space.

One of the connection elements between the two spaces were **the empiric instruments used in amateurish methods of abortion**: the kitchen table and its plastic cover, on which such practices took place; the vinegar and alcohol bottles used for (irritant) internal irrigations, hand-made “perfusion-tubes”, helped, one way or another, evacuate the embryo / fetus from the uterus. Directly on the floor, I exhibited instruments which contributed to the breaking of the uterus: the knitting needles and the spindle. All of these, together with some other empirical methods that made use of “natural” poisonous substances, such as those contained by the pelargonium flowers or by oleanders, very often caused irremediable traumas and even the mothers’ death.

GN: How was it to work and to make an exhibition together with two historians? Did you ask them information that they were not ready to give out? I am thinking about interviews with people or about certain objects. I remember you told me you worked with various types of visual materials.

LP: Curating this exhibition was one of the rare experiences I had – in fact, the second one – where I worked inter-disciplinarily with historians, directors, students and experts in communication. The first time I did that it proved to be an awkward experience, somewhere in the heart of Siberia, in 2001. It took place at the Tomsk Regional Museum, one of the “three-in-one” museums – where history, archeology and art were displayed in the same place. I had been invited there to curate an exhibition on the theme of *Exile in Archives* as part of a Museum Biennial. The subject of Siberian deportations was very local, not yet discussed publicly and never put on display. As I’ve said, I worked together with many other people in an interdisciplinary way, by combining curatorial work with presentation workshops where we explained the concept to the audience. I mention this example because it was one of the first exhibitions I curated and also because it was a project in which I collaborated with historians.

I usually choose the concepts for the exhibitions I curate, or, if not, I discuss these concepts with Cosmin Manolache [curator at RPNM]. I collaborate with art historians, philologists, ethnologists or anthropologists and musicians. Corina Doboş and Florin Soare’s invitation was a real challenge. The subject was very sensitive, complex and based on an impressive corpus of already researched material. After having a first meeting with them, I realized I was free to build the exhibition concept, which was good for me. The fact that they had not imposed on me the approach or the manner of display of their historical material (with printed cardboards, too much descriptive information to display the phenomenon) excited me even more. The title of the exhibition, *Cei din lume fără nume*, was decided following a conversation we had with Ruxandra Grigorescu, a colleague of ours. She remembers that in 1980s’ Bucharest, the [Orthodox] Church was also praying for the aborted kids. Because they had not been baptized, the Church called them *the children with no name* which in Romanian is a very poetically rhymed expression³.

During some of the meetings we had, I realized what kind of materials I needed: from personal letters written by women themselves addressed to the Ministry of Health, to personal objects, testimonies from archived files, to official documents and laws of the pro-natalist politics, articles from newspapers, propaganda literature where the role of the family and of procreation were emphasized. I realized I needed to work with various types of images to create a complex visual discourse for this theme. I also realized I needed some powerful objects to render the drama of the phenomena visible to all. The gynecologic table, the surgical instruments and, in contrast, the medals given to heroic mothers. An important place in the exhibition was given to the so called “lethal” objects, those which triggered the mothers’ death through informal, amateurish practices of abortion. Next to these, death certificates printed in black and white were exhibited, in addition to the anti-abortion law.

3) “Cei din lume fără nume” can be literally translated as “nameless in the world”.

GN: So many images...What do you mean by "various types of images"?

LP: I wanted to give the impression of a state of conflict. The visual frame helped me to do this by putting together different types of realities; the fact that women and the officialdom were two separate entities, with no communication in-between, in a state of... disjunction. The black and white image of Romanian hospitals [during last years of the communist regime] acted as an image of poverty and brutality, devoid of the human element and the predominant state is one of absence, emptiness. This image was supposed to work as omnipresent and troubling subliminal pain. In contrast, the colorful postcards from socialist cities or touristic destinations were meant to represent the image of a happy society. Other types of images of beautified reality with advertising images from magazines and newspapers, such as *The Woman* (with the face of a happy woman capable of being a mother and an employee simultaneously) were counterpoints to the black and white images mentioned before. Images of women were meant to be prompts for happy families, communist childhood and successful, multi-developed society – because the family was the basic / vital unit of the communist society. There were some other recurrent images in that era: the image of the falsely protective, utterly demagogic and misleading totalitarian couple [Nicolae Ceaușescu and Elena, his wife] – always surrounded by youngsters, Communist "pioneers" and the Homeland's "falcons", showing unreserved care for the future of the country – the kids of the Golden Era. To stress the disjunction between how individuals suffered because of this law (which was, in fact, controlling and punishing their private life) and the official standpoint, I added the emotional element of personal histories, painfully re-embodied through re-collection: women's voices. We used three such audio installations to put on display the voice of women telling their painful traumas of their induced abortions, as well as that of the medical personnel involved in such situations and forced to abide by the law.

GN: Now to come back to Corina and at the relation between the exhibition and the books. If you wrote the book again, if you were to coordinate the two volumes, now, after you've participated in the curation of the exhibition, would you write them differently?

CD: No. No, because I think you can do the personal – or the microhistory – approach only if you have done the first one, only if you have done / researched the big chunk of history, where you sort things out, chronologically and institutionally. For me, I wouldn't know how to write a history book starting from these personal stories. But you know, because I had written this book historically, objectively and institutionally, and blah blah blah, I did not feel pleased with myself as a woman, you know? Because the book(s) weren't so much about these tragic stories that happened that I became aware of when researching for the project. These tragic histories do not come from the book. And I did not feel at ease with myself, that was the main thing. So I said to myself: "Let's do this [exhibition]!"

GN: That's very interesting. So the tragic story did not come from the book.

CD: Not really. Because, first of all, the research is huge and mainly institutional, with laws and things like this and there is not enough room for these little, personal stories that show you the tragedy of what happened on a personal level. So I felt I was somehow guilty, especially as a woman, of not bringing these stories in.

GN: Is the book more informative than the exhibition? Does the book explain better what the context was and what the similar laws in other countries were? What does the book say about abortions?

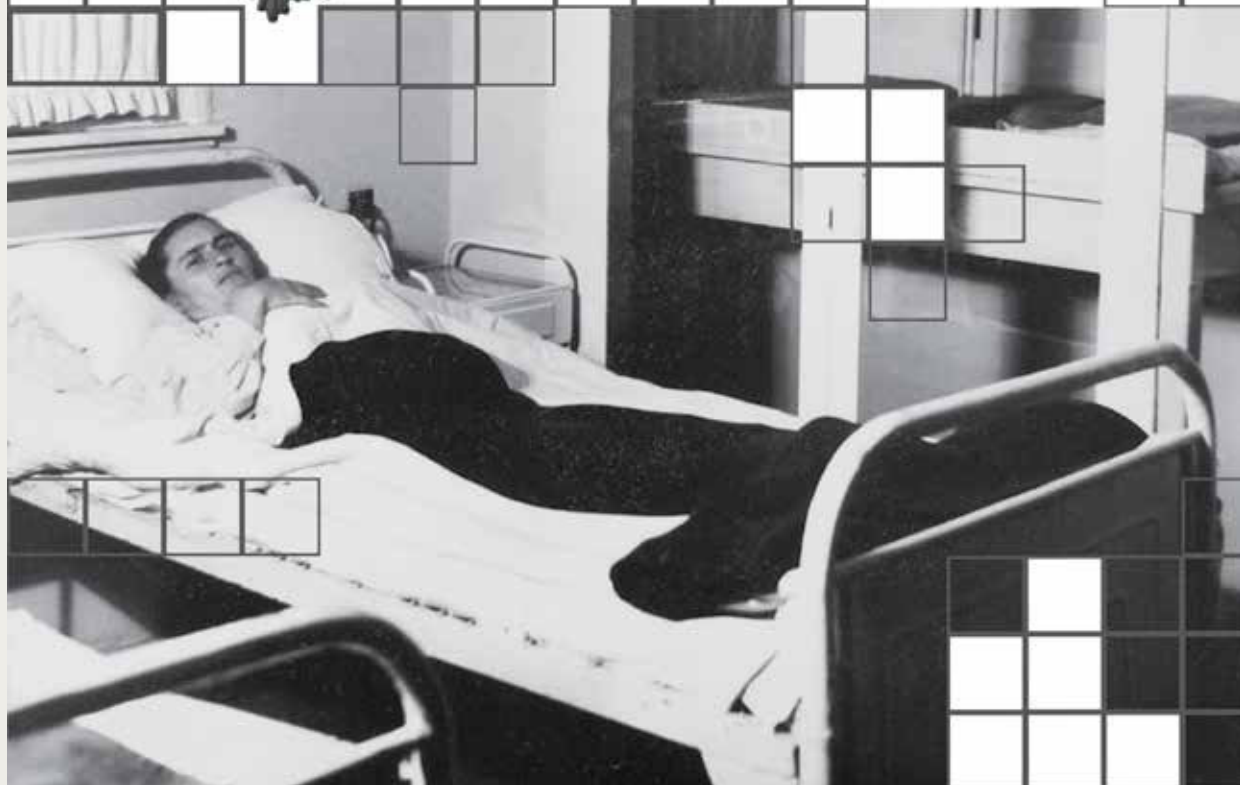
CD: About abortion in Romania, it says... it was a stupid policy. Not that it was a tragic policy, but a stupid one. Especially if you compare it to what the other countries around Romania were doing at the same time and in the same situation. In terms of the type of the pro-natalist measures taken and in terms of their results. It was a stupid policy and a stupid decision.

VEGHIND CU DRAGOSTE COPILII
ȘI VIITORUL LOR FERICIT



CONCLUZII :

Incetare a-o datorat stării deprimare
unui' coast supero - septa l iv-a cu detar
vizuale avind ca punct de plecare evident
Pe organele genitale externe și interne
constată lezuni' traumatice, crește un exclu
arostului ptm Manopere mecanice abstr

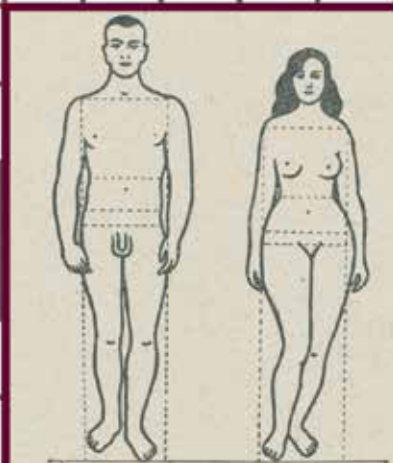
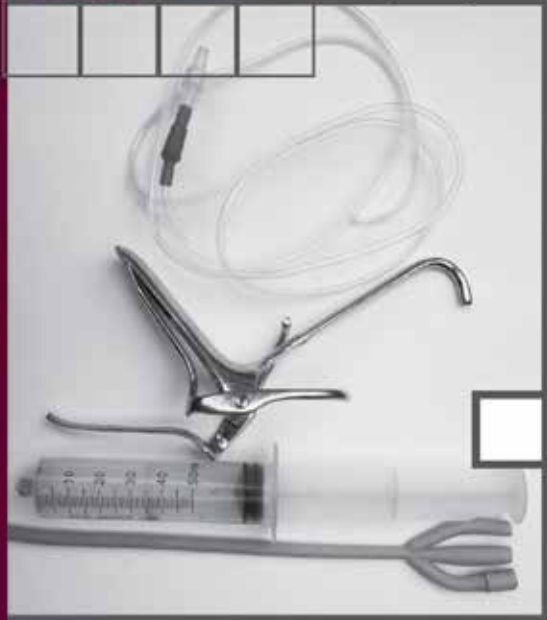


**URMĂRILE
FATALE
ALE
ÎNTRERUPERII
DE SARCINĂ**

*consentimânt
scris pe
scrisoară
de producerea
e cuprinse =*



MEDICINA PENTRU TOȚI
69
VASILE IANCA
Avortul
provocat



Cîteva diametre corporale ale unor tineri normal dezvoltati (vezi și tabelul din pagina precedentă).

GN: In terms of numbers? Was there an increase in natality?

CD: Yeah, there was; there was a very high birth rate in the first three years after abortion was almost prohibited in Romania, and, afterwards, the numbers decreased... The birth rate was a bit higher than that of the other Communist European countries, but it was not that high, you know? If you compare what they wanted to do to what they had actually achieved, they had not achieved that much. The Western demographers were very interested in what happened in Romania, as they wanted to know if the increase of birth rates was sustainable over the years... And they arrived at the conclusion that no, in the long run, it was not. Changing the law does not make it easy to change people's behavior. This was the thing.

GN: Is there any relationship between Romanian peasants and your project?

CD: Hmm...it might have a connection with the research project, but not with the exhibition. There was this idea of somehow differentiating – in the exhibition – between the urban space and the countryside, to focus a little bit more on the rural space, but we did not have enough visual material to do this. We have some interviews made especially for this exhibition; Florin managed to get some interviews with women from the countryside, which are included in the exhibition, but the story we told, or most of it, was an urban story... because I believe that the main scene for all these tragic stories was the city, the urban areas, not the rural ones.

GN: This might have to do also with the fact that so many peasants moved to the urban areas during the Communist decades... so it does have to do with peasants, but with peasants that became urbanites...

CD: Yeah, and I guess, it has somehow to do with a tradition that is lost. And with those social connections which are lost by moving from the village to the city. Abortive practices had existed in Romania before (Communism), but in the village it was a totally different story – you knew someone [an old woman] who could help you... but when they moved to the cities, to the factories, it was more difficult for women to get to know someone who could help them get rid of an unwanted pregnancy. Hearing all these confessions, I came to realize how lonely these women were. I mean, they did not talk to anyone. They wouldn't tell not even to their husbands or partners, they just kept it to themselves... and they were quite young – 20-22 years old, something like this... [Pause] and they kept this burden on their shoulders. To conclude, I think that one of the causes which led to this tragedy was the lack of social connections in the urban areas.

GN: What object or piece of the exhibition, or installation, or a corner, or a label, or something struck you? Anything that made you feel something powerful?

CD: Let me think.... I guess it was that installation with the obstetrical bed / table and with the lights on it (see <http://politicapronatalista.iiccr.ro/krpano/index/3>). It looks like a space made for interrogation... A space supposed to be a space for healing which, instead, becomes a place for scrutiny and interrogation of the body. Looking at this bed, I realized what happened in those years: the medical space became a policed space. The women coming there were not first saved and afterwards interrogated, but the other way around.

GN: A question to both of you: do you know how many visitors entered the exhibition? What kind of feedback did you receive? Did you receive any criticism? This is a difficult topic to put on display, especially in contemporary Europe where birth rates have been going down and where different governments supported especially by the Catholic Church have increased....

LP: Almost four hundred visitors. It is a high number of visitors, if compared to other temporary exhibitions in the museum. It was good to see that, other than people aged 40-70, who were

directly interested in the subject on display, many young people came, kids born after the fall of the communist regime. Some of the people who lived through those years had real moments of happiness in discovering some of the vintage objects which seemed to attract more attention than the subject of the display itself and anything that had to do with the trauma. Overall, I think the exhibition left the visitors with some thoughts and made them reflect more on the meaning of the objects on display. The display was free of constraints: we did not tell visitors what to think...

CP: I don't have a feedback: even if we made and left some questionnaires there, to be filled in by the visitors, they did not write anything. We even bought pens for them, but still, they did not write.

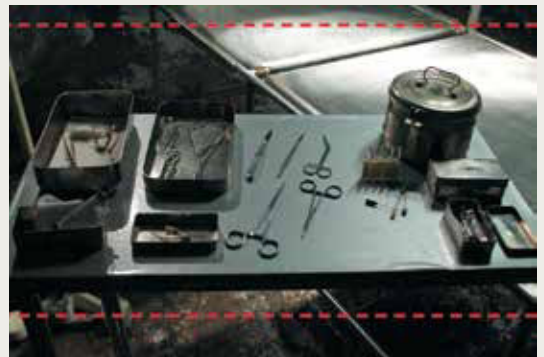
GN: Stubborn visitors... Maybe it was a very sensitive theme or maybe the public that comes to the temporary exhibition is an elitist audience...

CD: I don't know about that, but the students that participated in a workshop we organized were highly interested, smart and informed, and they knew a lot of things about abortion in communist Romania. During the exhibition, IICCMRE organized a workshop on abortion in Communist and post-communist Romania in partnership with two NGOs working on sexual education and women's rights: Societatea de Educație Contraceptivă și Sexuală (SECS) and Centrul Euroregional pentru Inițiative Publice (ECPI). During the workshop, the show "FĂRĂ URME", by Bogdan Georgescu and Irina Gădiuță, supported by AFCN, was presented. It brought into focus the project of the so-called "psychological counseling" that was supposed to be mandatory before each abortion on request, a controversial project that was discussed at the beginning of 2012 in the Romanian Parliament. The dialogue between Bogdan and Irina, played in the Communist living room set up in the exhibition (<http://politicapronatalista.iiccr.ro/krpano/index/1>), was a dialogue inspired by a real situation, showing how this kind of counseling ran on. Their show, reproducing a real-life counseling session, gave the participants an idea of how tough this "psychological counseling" could actually be, as it was not meant to help, but to frighten.

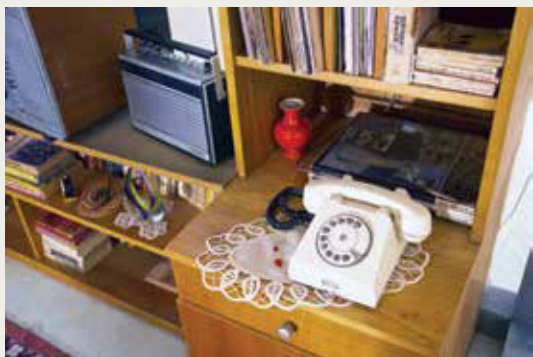
You know, whenever you have a significant drop in the birthrates, the easiest thing to do is to blame abortion practices. It was the case in the 1960s and it's been the case since the 1990s. But abortion in itself cannot cause this drop. It's always a symptom of something that is actually much bigger. As in the '60s, the main causes for the low birthrates were the accelerated industrialization and urbanization, while between 2009 and 2010, the economic crisis, poverty and migration of the young population caused this significant drop in natality. And it was so easy to blame abortion, not poverty, for this. But the number of abortions in the current decade has significantly dropped in comparison to that of the '60s and of the '90s. And that's a good sign, as it means that the present generations are in control of their reproductive lives.

Anyway, anyone can find more about this subject by visiting the virtual tour of the exhibition (special thanks to Mihai Bodea for the wonderful photos, and to Youngminds for the virtual tour), which can be accessed and explored online at <http://politicapronatalista.iiccr.ro>. It is easier to get all this information with one single click, by simply sitting in front of the computer. The miracles of technology – you have more documents, more explanations, if you want to. Just a click and you'll find more – the information does not just pop up, it's for you to access it. And it's more comfortable to hear the interviews thematically displayed in the virtual tour than in the real exhibition.

LP: In hindsight, I personally believe that the wisest and most responsible attitude of an open society is to try as much as possible to protect its citizens from irremediable traumas by civic, cultural and educational means, directed against the artificial juridical constraints against someone's own body, against the relationship with the other, against freely consented unions. At the same time, society has to promote the respect towards those members who reject abortion for religious reasons, as well as to fully inform everyone about the dangers, risks and the possible physical and mental consequences caused by aggressions against one's own body.



**DECRETUL
770/1966**



Cei din lume fără nume

