



Title: *The Museums of the World and I. My Museum Experience in an Eastern European Country*

Author: Irina Nicolau

Translated from French by: Anca-Maria Pănoiu, and Ioana Miruna Voiculescu

How to cite this article: Nicolau, Irina. 2018. "The Museums of the World and I. My Museum Experience in an Eastern European Country." *Martor* 23: 73-92.

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

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-23-2018/>

Martor (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Journal) 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 Journal* is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Interdisciplinary and international in scope, it provides a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for academic and non-academic readership. 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:

CEEOL, EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Anthropological Index Online (AIO), MLA International Bibliography.





**Study Corner.
The Antidote Museum 25 Years On**



The Museums of the World and I My Museum Experience in an Eastern European Country*

Irina Nicolau

Translated from the French by:

Anca-Maria Pănoiu, and Ioana Miruna Voiculescu

ABSTRACT

In the context of the major changes that the the Museum of the Romanian Peasant is currently undergoing, we decided to publish an extraordinarily daring article written by Irina Nicolau in 1994, at a time when the “young” MRP she had co-founded together with Horia Bernea was experiencing another era of change and challenges as it made a fresh start after the fall of communism.

With the bright reflections of young PhD candidate Dominique Belkis serving as her mirror, as in a dialogue between master and disciple, Irina Nicolau tells her story about the scars left by the communist decades on Eastern European countries and, more specifically, on Romanian culture. Being aware of the necessity to rethink the past in order to stage it in a valid discourse for the present and for the future as well, the ethnologist—who relies on intelligent emotions—speaks of mother-like museums in opposition to father-like ones, of the absent museums of her adolescence and the imaginary bridges she built in order to reach them, of the thirst for knowledge under a rigidly prohibitive political regime.

More than twenty years old, Nicolau’s and Belkis’s reflections prove to be as valid and as topical in the present. But what would an antidote museum look like today? And, above all, could the Missionary Museum of the MRP’s early days be a visionary one?

KEYWORDS

Eastern European museums, (post) communism, transition, mother-like/father-like museums, absent/imaginary museums, antidote museum, Missionary Museum, subjectivity.

* Irina Nicolau. 1996. “Moi et les musées du monde. L’histoire d’une expérience muséale dans un pays de l’Est.” In *New Europe College Yearbook 1994*, ed. Vlad Russo, 13–42. București: Humanitas and New Europe College.

• • • • •

Prologue

IRINA: “Belkis, I am convinced that Schliemann owed his discovery of Troy to Homer. Books nowadays no longer push people to such adventures. Ethnology is carried out without curiosity and wonder. Prudishness and academic rigour keep us from expressing our feelings. I am supposed to think about the museum, write about the museum, or even do my museum work, without letting anyone know how much I love it. And I would be even less allowed to talk about my indecision. For I had to make quite a lot of choices! I did not decide to tell the story of my museum experience, or to write it down in such an unconventional style, for that matter, in the twinkling of an eye. It took time to make such decisions. And I finally settled for this maenad’s labour as I

reckoned that an ethnologist’s confessions on the topic of communist everyday life might prove more useful than other remarks I could have made about the museum. You are young, Belkis, and you have a good education. This is why I have chosen you for a mirror; can you accept to partake in this kind of ‘ethnology’? Can you accept the fragility and the informal style that I have openly embraced, this iconoclastic outburst?”

BELKIS:¹ “Not only do I accept them, but I believe they are prerequisites in our discipline. Because in the end, is it not true that ethnology stems from a sensitive and subjective approach to a particular world, even if ethnologists themselves often fail to acknowledge it?”

“All the elements that make up its specificity—qualitative research, participant observation, long-term fieldwork, etc.—

1) BELKIS alias Dominique Belkis, PhD candidate at the Faculty of Anthropology and Sociology at Université Lumière – Lyon II, France. She had been working for three years in Romania and in the Balkans, carrying out research on the Megleno-Romanians (approximately 30,000 people at that time).

2) In the spring of 1994, while in Bucharest, Jacques Hainard expressed the same partiality for bric-à-brac.

correspond to choices that the researcher must make as she participates to her object of study and she becomes as much a subject of her research as the researched group. Failing to integrate this dimension in the analysis, failing to account for this bias imposed by the researcher's personality and choices, on the one hand, and by her presence in a foreign environment, on the other hand, is to falsify the research. I don't mean to say that ethnology has no scientific legitimacy, on the contrary. For so long, ethnology has perceived itself as inferior to the 'hard' sciences, and even to other 'soft' social sciences, struggling to achieve recognition in the science-dominated world generated by the Enlightenment and to apply principles, patterns, and systems borrowed from the natural sciences.

"Nowadays, having overcome its obsession for all sorts of 'isms', ethnology seems to increasingly own up to its specificity and multiplicity, which constitute in fact its richness. What ethnology assumed to be its weakness for a long time has nowadays become its strength, and this, at least partly, accounts for its current popularity. Due to its flexibility, it has a word to say in all the social domains, whether geographically close or remote, rural or urban.

"Therefore, it is the duty of ethnology to question the museum—and museology—as one of its most faithful, even 'traditional' partners, as their histories are intimately linked. And this is even more crucial for Eastern European countries where the museum has been one of the favourite vehicles of communist ideology.

"The approach you are proposing here, any academicism aside, is perhaps just a simple way—albeit a courageous one—to give human experience the place it deserves within ethnological research and to put forward a vision of the museum which is at the same time lived, alive and worth living.

"For is it not your ultimate goal to make the reader go to the museum to gain a better understanding?"

• • • • •

In My Mother's Museums

I owe my love for museums to my mother. Her interest in museums lacks a discourse. She simply goes there. Some love animals or plants, she loves objects: all of them. The time she spends in a museum, at an antique show, in a flea market or any other shop is a happy time.² She was a stay-at-home mum, so I used to go with her everywhere when I was a child. This is how I became familiar with museums at a very early age. With few words, she taught me what one is allowed to do and what is forbidden in there. During our visits, I never asked questions. Every now and then, she would say: 'Well, well!' or 'Look at that!,' which generally meant there was a visual lesson there to be learned. But as a general rule, each of us would focus on the things that drew our attention. After the visit, we never discussed the things we had seen. The tickets were cheap enough for us to return as often as we pleased.

Nowadays she is the one who accompanies me during my visits to museums, but for different purposes. The research I carry out calls for a partner who hasn't yet lost her common sense.

"You know, Mum, I read today some articles on the topic of spaces in museums especially arranged for children. You can drop your children there and then go on with your visit."

"And what about the children?" my mother asked.

"The children stay there and play. There are people trained to draw them into all sorts of educational activities: modelling clay, drawing, and so on."

"What about the museum? This way the children don't get to see the museum!"

"They might be too young for that."

"If they are too young, then I don't like the notion of leaving them with strangers. As soon as they can walk, I take them with me to visit the museum."

"But they might get bored. It is better for them to play."

"If the museum is that boring for them, then we don't go there anymore. We can do something else."

"But listen, you will eventually go there, I mean the children will go there later on, with their class. They have to learn how to do group visits."

"And what about visits with their mother? When do they get to learn that?"

I accepted her argument. She was right. I promised her never to work on programs dedicated solely to children. Children's museums—yes, why not? These are places where children can be initiated to the codes of the museum. But in other museums, children are just like the rest of us: someone who looks at the objects.

*

Modern societies are increasingly oblivious of the institution of the "mother." There are other institutions competing with it. By targeting the children directly, such institutions alienate their mothers, without anyone being aware of the danger. An ecology of traditional human relations should challenge the brutal intervention into the mother-child-object relationship. A short reference to traditional cultures is helpful in understanding this relationship. In such cultures, mothers, assisted by specific agents commissioned by the community, reveal the world of objects to their children. Teaching is secondary here as explanations are almost absent. The relationship mother-child-object is informed by a rich symbolism. Objects are introduced to the child, and the child is introduced to objects. 'Baby, this is the door; and you, door, meet my baby.' Very often, such two-way introductions take place in a ritual setting. All the while, it is a fact that traditional cultures ignore objects as museum exhibits; the children are introduced to the objects used by the society they live in, objects which they will use one day themselves.

Much more permissive in this respect, urban societies do accept the objects of

others. Their attitude is not at all gratuitous, as the objects of others work for the very societies that "cannibalize" them. In a way, these objects belong to them. Some of the objects of others are kept in museums, where they are taken care of by trained people. By taking charge of children, museums both win and lose—even if it is a fact that parents lack special training, their role cannot be easily erased.

Here is an anecdote that sums up a child's visit to a museum, accompanied by her parents. It is intended as a borderline case.

Mother, father and child spend a Saturday morning in a museum. Every time the child discovers an unknown object, she asks questions to her father who follows his all-encompassing "I don't know" with a dreadful swear word. After a while, the mother comes in and scolds the child:

"Enough with your questions!"

"No, let the child ask questions, this is how we learn!" the father then objects.

This anecdote reveals the existence of a second type of museum, the father-like museum. If we consider the anecdote an illustration of the tension established between the two patterns, the mother's intervention 'Enough with your questions!' might be interpreted as her attempt to pull the child out of the father-like museum towards which he was gravitating. In contrast with mother-like museums, which are all about the encounter with unknown objects—that the child appropriates nonetheless—father-like museums explain, reflect, and educate. In the borderline case above, the father never waivers in his respect for asking questions, even those questions that he has no intention whatsoever to answer.

Mother style vs. Father style." Museums have always favoured the "father style." Now, by "mother style" museum work, I do not mean turning museums into nursery schools. As I see it, the "mother style" means two things: greater security ('Don't be afraid to look, mum's with you.') and an even greater freedom of reception ('Nobody will hold it against you if you don't learn

"In English in the original.
(Translators' Note)



the lesson this museum is trying to teach; we can always come back another time and you'll make your own choices'). The "mother style" works as an antidote to the hypermnesia that is forced on us not only by father-like museums, but by society as a whole. Another aspect needs to be highlighted here: the mother-like museums provide the first definition of the museum.

"We are going to the museum."

"What is a museum?"

"A place where you'll see objects which you'll like."

In spite of being simple, the definition is indeed substantial. The museum is a place. Going to a place involves the right to go there; one cannot simply show up at a place one is not welcome at. We cannot look at objects unless someone shows them to us. In certain societies, going to see objects is an unknown practice.

*

Some people go to museums without actually knowing why. Tourism feeds the museums that appeal to this type of public. Let us only think of the Athenians who have never climbed up to the Acropolis, or the Parisians who have never set foot in the Louvre, but who, when they travel abroad, queue to enter all sorts of museums, the "museums of others." We have already emphasized the huge threat that looms over the museum, namely to become nothing but an appendix to tourism (Davallon 1986: 209).

Another share of the "general public" consists of those who accept the museum as just one more leisure activity. To accept means neither to love, nor to know. The museum thus becomes the equivalent of an ice-cream, a drink on a fine night out, a walk in the park, or a film at the cinema. That is to say, not a lot.

And then there is a third type of public: children. And museums seem to go to great lengths to attract them. They design special programs for them. The museums

are expected to sacrifice the fatted calf, because the children of today are the public of tomorrow, hence their being taught to sell their attendance expensively and to demand a great number of quality services in exchange for the price of a ticket. American museums were the first to establish this type of submissiveness: our visitors, our bosses. André Maurois (1946) was surprised to see that American museums taught their visitors how to look at the work of art. And this happened back in 1946; at present, the whole of Europe follows this pattern. "The public comes first" was G. H. Rivière's principle (qtd in Desvallées 1992: 20). In turn, the museums in communist countries developed their own ideological way of teaching a public constrained to go to the museum as part of the compulsory cultural activities of every production unit.

The 1993 issue no. 178 of *Museum International* included a thematic dossier titled "Visitors." Sentences such as: "Visitors have thus become a major force on the museum scene and their needs and requirements play an increasingly preponderant role in the way museums function." and further, "methods and attitudes aimed at making museums an educational environment where communication with the public is a top priority" (M. L. 1993: 3) are illustrative of the kind of doublespeak and narrow-mindedness of this particular visitor-centred approach. C. G. Screven's article particularly struck me with its insistence on warning us that the public does not want to waste any time decoding the message of an exhibit (1993: 4-5). Why are people who visit museums in such a hurry? And why are they so demanding, irritable, impatient, and superficial? I don't like the public that Western museums create.

A dream within a dream might seem a little too pretentious. But this is how I sometimes tackle things that I have a hard time representing. To dream of it is to see it with my eyes closed. So I dream of a museum open day and night, no entry fee, no custodians. Someone told me he once entered

a museum during night-time together with a friend, the museum's director. It was a French museum of medieval history. Both of them held lit up candles in their hands. He could never forget that night. The objects had got back their shadows. That night, he became aware of the great loss that is the absence of the objects' shadows in a museum.

Last but not least, there is the category of aficionados—few but loyal visitors who reflect on the exhibits but are unlikely to be targeted by the museum for fear of not being accused of elitism.

But good museology cannot be that driven by fear. Jacques Hainard had the courage to engage in a dialogue with the so-called “accursed elites.” According to him, “A true exhibition never dictates; it conveys a message that each visitor must read, translate and adapt to his knowledge and sensitivity. If the approach is elitist, this does not make it any less democratic, as it respects the visitor, turning him from a passive believer into an active follower” (Hainard 1989: 29).

I wonder what would have become of chamber music in particular, and classical music in general, had they been constrained to make themselves loved by everybody? And similarly, what would the museum have looked like, had it been able to address more the connoisseurs than the children, the passing tourists, the cleaning women, the specialists, the students, or the workers? Georges-Henri Rivière distinguished between a museum's actual public and its potential public, postulating that the goal of the museum is to embrace the potential public (1975: 123). I repeat: What a chance for classical music not to be constrained to neglect its own public and to become diluted trying in vain to seduce indifferent people!

The museum aficionado has to put up with many things: the clamour that surrounds exhibits in the name of an often populist education; the excesses imposed by the laws of conservation; the drifting of the institution towards entertainment; and the indifference shown to him.

As an ethnologist, I regret the loss of the myriad definitions and thoughts that the aficionado could have provided. In disregarding them, museums are limited to the definitions provided by the three textbook categories: the bureaucrats, the artists, and the scholars.

The bureaucrats' definitions are the least subtle. They express in a brutal way what the society they live in decides that the museum must be; for each society makes whatever it wants out of the museum. One might think that what these definitions lack in subtlety, they make up in endurance. This is false, as illustrated by two definitions of the museum provided by ICOM (International Council of Museums) at thirteen years' distance.

Any permanent establishment, administered in the general interest, for the purpose of preserving, studying, enhancing by various means and, in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction groups of objects and specimens of cultural value: artistic, historical, scientific and technological collections, botanical and zoological gardens and aquariums. Public libraries and public archival institutions maintaining permanent exhibition rooms shall be considered to be museums. (*ICOM Statutes II*, 1, 1956)

ICOM shall recognise as a museum any permanent institution which conserves and displays, for purposes of a study, education and enjoyment, collections of objects of cultural or scientific significance. (*Status II*, 3, 1969)

Those who go searching for definitions of the museum end up getting entangled in its history. The bureaucrats' definitions often lay hidden within the founding texts of museums. Let us consider, for instance, the Act of Parliament that established the British Museum in 1753 and the Decree of the National Convention that did the same for the Louvre in 1793. They couldn't be anymore different! One spoke in the name of a power that granted the museum to its people, the other, in the name of a triumphant people who transformed the



treasures of the rich into national heritage. The museum as a favour vs. the museum as a right.

The history of museums is a babel of accounts. If you take a look at my notes, you will see that this one claims that the first museum was the *Museion* in Alexandria (third century B.C.) (Lafranco, Giovanni 1989), that one that the first museum was the Shōsō-in temple in Japan (756) (Girandy, Bouillet 1977), and yet another one that the original museum was Pope Sixtus IV's Capitoline Museum (1471) (Pomian 1990). I have even more notes according to which the first museum would go even further back to the age of pyramids, of temples. There is a lot of confusion. The historians of museums are not endowed with the gift of differentiation, so they mix up treasures, collections and museums. Let us try to amend that.

Ethnology singles out birds and animals such as magpies, ravens, or stoats that have a natural tendency towards "collecting." Already during the Stone Age, we can trace a taste for possessions as evidenced by the collections of objects unearthed by archeologists. But both examples are unrelated to future treasures, collections, and even less to museums. The inventory of tombs, regardless of their age or shape, can be interpreted according to a logic of burial beliefs, namely that the deceased needs a stock of objects to be used in the next world. Once again, nothing to do with my topic.

Treasures are always related to a religious or a princely power. The objects which constitute a treasure are not significant in themselves. The vocation of treasures is to remain hidden most of the time. Occasionally, they are taken out and paraded as part of power and wealth displays. The treasures of churches and monasteries used to be visited by pilgrims and certain privileged people. This is however irrelevant. What if Aladdin had shown his treasure to someone, would that qualify it as a museum?

The dawn of collections goes back to the fourteenth century.³ Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,

collectors were humanists interested in antiques and contemporary paintings. During the sixteenth century, the categories of collected objects became more diversified as collectors also turned to stamps, coins, natural curiosities, and exotic objects. During the seventeenth century, the bourgeois were already to be found among collectors. The eighteenth century gave way to local antiques. Those two last centuries represented the "age of curiosities"; the collections were displayed in specially designed places called, depending on the country, cabinets of curiosities, *chambres de merveilles*, *gabinetti di meraviglia*, *studiolo*, *Wunderkammern*, *Wundercabinets*, *Schatzkammern*. The nineteenth century saw the discovery of the documentary value of such collected objects. The collections opened to visitors. While the treasure communicates by means of its silence, the collection is talkative. The collector finds pleasure in presenting his objects as well as the knowledge which is beginning to accumulate around them. Carefully inventoried and sometimes even studied, collections produced scholars, and the scholarship of objects became a profession. But no matter how permissive a collection proves to be towards the visitor, its private status makes it so that its success depends on the owner's permission as the visitor has no actual right over it (Hudson 1975).

Some historians distinguish between a prehistory of the museum—treasures amassed by piety or plunder, i.e. stocks of religious offerings and booties; a protohistory—collections created out of mere curiosity or a passion for heritage; and a history—that starts in 1471, when Pope Sixtus IV made a donation of Roman statues to be displayed on the Capitoline Hill, or the second half of the eighteenth century, with the dawn of the notion of national heritage (Deloche 1989: 32). If the museum was indeed born in 1471, then its origin story was one of money and power, as Pope Sixtus IV opened the Capitoline Museums as a statement of the papal monopoly on

3) For the history of these collections, see Pomian 1990 and 1992.

the antiques market (Lafranco, Giovanni 1989: 22). If it was born in 1753 in England or in 1793 in France, those were also stories of power. Regardless of the nature of its genesis (whether popular, commercial or revolutionary), behind the more or less innocent aficionados and their cultural agendas, there are stakes that only a political history of the museum can unveil (Pomian 1990: 186).

What artists think about museums is even more a mystery than the definitions of bureaucrats. It is hard to find a common thread. Dadognet's book (1993) is of great help for those interested in this kind of reflection, though it does not pretend to be an exhaustive account. Barbey d'Aurevilly, Kafka, Proust, Rilke, Valéry, Alfred de Musset, and so on, each and every one of them expresses his dissatisfaction in his own way. For artists are dissatisfied with the museum. It tires them; it saddens them; it kills them. They overdose on the excess of museums. They cannot breath. Nevertheless, even if they do it grudgingly, artists keep coming back, because the museum is the only place where they can see certain things that they like. What they abhor is the code of the museum.

Scholarly definitions of the museum are so numerous and contradictory that after reading dozens of them, I realized that it would be much easier to summarize them in the form of a kaleidoscope: the church museum, the school museum, the forum museum, the media museum, the machine museum, the ways-of-looking museum, the rupture museum, the art museum, the society museum, the treasure museum, the collection museum, the hospital museum, the cemetery museum, the court museum, the holistic museum, the global museum, the identity museum, the open-air museum, the soil-grown museum, the ecomuseum, the community museum, the environmental museum, the active museum, the neighbourhood museum, the blown-up museum, the site museum, the space museum, the time museum, even the

brothel museum, and so on.⁴ In fact, the definitions are a faithful reflection of reality, namely the polymorphism of museums and their ever-varying goals. We should all stop using the singular, always the plural in speaking of museums. To answer Dadognet's question, "Which museums for the future?" (1993: 13): *all of them*.

And out of "all the museums," which one to choose for Eastern European countries, since here we have been given the chance to make a fresh start?



Belkis's notes inspired by In my Mother's Museums

BELKIS: "The mother-like museum, the father-like museum; a sensitive approach, a sensible approach; an informal code, a highly formal code?

"Indeed, the child needs both the mother's and the father's model in order to flourish. So, I wonder, without aiming to replace the parental institution, shouldn't the museum consider both models in its not-unique vocation: discovery, knowledge, making contact with the beautiful, the rare, as well as with the ordinary, the representative. All combinations are possible, with the only invariants being the place and the presence of objects; do they speak for themselves? We might find them beautiful or ugly at a first glance, but is this enough? Don't we always need a mediator in order to discover and understand?

"No matter who this mediator is, father, mother, teacher, guide, or text, it is their duty to establish the relationship between the visitor and the museum.

"In certain social environments—not necessarily the poorest or the 'least educated'—the child's access to the museum will never be mediated by the parents. In this case, can we blame the school or the museum for their attempt to fill this gap? Undoubtedly, their version of the museum

4) "Nothing seemed to me more similar to a brothel than a museum. A brothel understood as something that refers back to the Antiquity in what concerns its slavery market, its ritual prostitution" (Dadognet 1993: 159).

will be a father-like one, but still, it will provide an encounter with the museum.

"Does the democratisation of museums necessarily imply the thinning out of their message?"

IRINA: "I'm afraid so, Belkis."

• • • • •

The Absent Museums

I was very young when I found out that I would never get a chance to travel abroad. People have a hard time accepting the kind of impairment that the Iron Curtain stood for. But in the end, they do. For instance, I used to say that I would only need three bridges departing from my bedroom: the first to the Louvre, the second to the British Museum, and the last one to the Hermitage. Even if I often mentioned this story, I would never elaborate on it: How would I cross the bridges? How often? How much time would I spend in each museum? It was enough for me to imagine that a relationship had been established between me and the three museums.

"And how did you come to choose these three museums?" my friends used to ask. "There are so many of them in the world."

"Because of my interest in Greek antiquity, Mesopotamia and Egypt."

"Then why don't you want to go to these countries?"

"Because I am not allowed to."

Back then I was just beginning to grasp the difference between dreaming and wishing: we are free to dream whatever we want, but we have to confine our wishes within the field of possibilities. I invented the story of the three bridges in 1960, when I was fourteen.

In those days, there was a joke going around in Romania about the blind man and the crippled. One day, the two meet, and the crippled says:

"Well, today I drank a glass of milk and it was wonderful."

"Can you imagine," replies the blind man in a sad voice, "I don't even know what milk looks like."

"Well, it's white."

"White?"

"Yes, white just like a swan."

"And what does a swan look like?"

Trying to help him, the crippled took the blind man's hands and put them on his arm which was amputated a little below the shoulder.

"See, the neck of a swan is like my arm, then comes the body, like this, then the two wings, then the hind feet... Do you understand?"

"Thank you, my friend, now I know the colour of milk."

Using the blind man's logic, I have visited many museums which I will never get to actually see.

I remember my astonishment when I found out that one of my classmates had been to Egypt, where he had seen the pyramids. The trip hadn't left any traces on his face.

"Are they big, these pyramids?" I asked him.

He wanted to tell me numbers—to me, whom I had read all the books I could find on Egypt.

"Not like that, I want to know if they make you feel awe, if there is something going on deep within you when you are close to them."

I forgot his answer, which by the way, disappointed me. It happens very often that people don't know how to describe to others something they have seen.

My classmate's trip was the more amazing as exceptionally few Romanians got to travel abroad in the 1960s. To put it more clearly, Romanians fell into two categories: those who had travelled abroad before the war and experienced the charm of museums, and those who hadn't. The former could be divided into two further sub-categories: those serving prison sentences and those who, having been dispossessed by the communist regime, could now barely make



ends meet. As for the latter, those who had not travelled abroad before the war, they were either the “big bosses” who had sentenced to prison the former, or the “sons of the people,” workers and peasants, who lived a life as pitiful as those dispossessed by the communist regime.

From time to time, the “big bosses” “got out,” i.e. travelled abroad, to meet their counterparts in other Eastern European countries. Now and again, some people managed to get through to the other side of the Iron Curtain, fleeing to the West. They invented the kind of traveller who departs with only a small suitcase, penniless or with very little money, and comes back riding ten suitcases—we see this kind of miracle happen quite often these days, a phenomenon familiar to all the countries in the East. On their return, the “big bosses” would take up the role of civilizing heroes, bringing back with them classical music records, art albums, photographs, etc. Their offspring were thus trained early to get a taste for travelling. And indeed, after 1964, they were the first to travel abroad. This privileged category provided people who didn’t travel with the stuff of their dreams. Their stories, as well as the memories of those who had travelled before the war, nourished our imagination. For the young people whose parents didn’t travel or hadn’t travelled, the world was much smaller and more abstract. This is why in my dream, there were no more than three bridges.

*

The ethnology of the road and of the traveller...

An overview of the reasons why people travel during all ages and on all continents...

A discussion of the words: *road, road trip, traveller, way, wayfarer, guide, itinerary*.

A reflection on the meaning of *to depart, to return, and to return no more*.

I remember a poem by Ungaretti where he claimed that Ulysses never came back to Ithaca. How horrid!

The cultural trip was known as early as the antiquity, but not until the nineteenth century would group cultural pilgrimages develop as a general practice in Europe. During the first half of the twentieth century, people moved a lot, even more after the Second World War. But this was not the case for Eastern European countries. In Romania, before 1964, the only ones allowed to leave the country were the *big bosses*. After 1964, the borders became more permeable. But we lack a history of this process of permeabilisation.

In a one-party state, there was a single travel agency, the National Tourism Office (NTO), which practised a kind of *intra muros* tourism: to Romania and other Eastern European countries. Plus China.

This institution organized holidays to seaside and mountain resorts, as well as tours around the country: the monasteries of Moldavia and Wallachia, the cities of Transylvania, the Danube Delta, etc. We were surely not spoilt for choice. Those who accepted these group holidays would apply to the NTO for such services. Every now and then, the groups of Romanian tourists were accommodated in the same hotels as the groups of foreign tourists, having to face the difference between the services paid for in lei as opposed to foreign currency. In addition to that, I should mention the ban on establishing contact with “capitalists,” which was further tightened after 1980. Moreover, to know one’s country was perceived as a patriotic duty. When applying for a passport to travel to a Western country, the Romanian applicant would invariably hear the following question: “Have you already seen all the Romanian sites?”

The NTO trips to Western countries were few and very expensive, and the main eligibility criterion for such a trip was to have a “clean file.” The communist regime liked to keep its enemies confined within national borders. At the stock exchange of trips, the best rated were those to southern USSR—Samarkand, Bukhara, or Tbilisi— followed by China and, for those who intended to flee



the country, those to Yugoslavia and, for a short span, to Hungary.

Very quickly, the cultural trips turned into “business” trips for some. This kind of petty trade capitalized on the non-homogenous nature of Eastern European markets—that is to say that the shortages in each country were different. In Hungary, Romanians could sell alcohol, salami, embroidery threads, cotton underwear, and leather goods and buy coffee, tea, and pepper. From Bulgaria they used to come back with leather coats and gloves, having traded them against hand-towels and curtains. For Eastern Europeans, the Soviet Union was the “promised land” of photo cameras, radios and gold jewellery. In exchange, the “promised land” would welcome clothes, especially blue jeans. The same trade-oriented tourism was practised by other people from the East who came to the Romanian seaside or mountain resorts.

I have never been on an NTO trip. It seemed to me that the “business” aspect undermined the pleasurable aspect. I didn’t have the courage to travel to the Soviet Union—Leningrad, Samarkand, Bukhara—even if it was the country which most appealed to me. I refused to let myself absorbed by a country where one could hear the phrase “the groups of Romanians from Siberia” spoken during a routine political event. Moreover, no itinerary dedicated to Leningrad more than two and a half days. Only two and a half days in Leningrad! I would rather use one of my bridges.

Some Romanians travelled abroad for work-related reasons. But they were not that many. The “clean file” requirement applied all the same. The same ten suitcases on return. Some turned the work-related trip into a cultural one. Others adapted it to the model of the trade-oriented trip. The latter were probably most likely to emigrate eventually.

After 1964, Romanians were allowed to travel to the West on condition that they had a letter of accommodation and some “hard currency” (ten dollars at first, then fifty, and finally one hundred). The “clean file”

prerequisite remained. If you happened to have wealthy parents or friends, you would come back with a lot of stories. If you didn’t, you would still come back with stories but you would pay dearly for them. In order to see the museums of Europe, hundreds of Romanians would sleep in their cars, eat the same food they had brought along for weeks in a row, wash whenever they had an opportunity, in parking lots or public toilets. They only spent money on gasoline and museum entry fees. They would return from trips to Italy without even having tasted ice-cream, from Germany without having drunk a bottle of beer, from Greece without having bought one *souvlaki*, or from Turkey without having eaten one *baklava*. Undeniably, such journeys had a heroic side, which would be expressed by means of a phrase borrowed from the mountaineers’ code. Climbers would say: “I did that summit.” Romanian tourists would say: “I did that country.”

On their trips, they would take loads of photographs, some of which they would later turn into slides. I have no idea what Japanese people do with their photos, but Romanians invented a special kind of get-together with friends dedicated to sharing their photos. Each would present his or her trips, share memories, thus enabling many others to visit those places without actually travelling. Malraux (1965) would have been surprised at the richness of our imaginary museum, our capacity for symbolic appropriation, our intimate relationship with the absent reality.

Absent museums have no showcases, no wall panels, and no museum discourse. The object is the thing. The museum thus becomes an address where Mona Lisa or some other chimera lives. The objects known from photographs are accompanied by all sorts of stories. Before visiting the Louvre, I knew that The Victory of Samothrace was displayed on a stairway. Which is true. I also knew that Mona Lisa occupied an entire hall of her own. Which is false. From far away, we were actively involved in the misadventures of stolen or vandalised objects. Gazing at the photos, we dreamed.



*

In bookcases all over Romania, art albums were the centrepieces. Displayed in the proximity of music records, they became a subject for jealousy and a source of prestige. Albums and records were borrowed with extreme care.

During my youth, four types of albums were to be found in the bookcases of Bucharesters: the “ancient” ones (most often nineteenth century editions); those edited in the Soviet Union (which could be bought at reasonable prices, but one had to go there in order to purchase them); Romanian albums (not many before 1965); and “foreign” albums (even fewer before 1965, relatively affordable in the 1970s, and crazy expensive after 1980). The “ancient” ones had rich bindings, beautiful reproductions protected by sheets of Japanese paper, an exquisite scent, and an antiquated look. The Russian albums brought colours into our lives, but as far as most Romanians were concerned, the texts might as well have been written in Chinese; anomie had worked so effectively that, after learning it for eight years in schools, Romanians could not read Russian. Romanian albums, usually printed in poor conditions, and therefore often despised, were nevertheless much browsed. Seldom available but reasonably priced, we were able to buy all of them. But when it came to the market of “foreign” albums, Russian, French, German, or Italian, we went through the torture of having to choose; they were so expensive that we had to make our choice carefully.

The ethnologist who is interested in researching art albums should waste no time, for soon there will be no more witnesses to testify on certain issues. One such issue is the transformation that “ancient” albums underwent during the first decade of the communist regime.

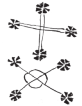
After 1945, for political reasons, many of those who owned art albums—intellectuals and artists—were forced to leave their homes: the men would go to prison, while

the other members of the family would move into a single, shabby room. Houses or big apartments were to be vacated within twenty-four hours. In retrospect, many people who were imprisoned then often declared that the true victims were those who stayed, even though they kept their freedom. Within twenty-four hours, they had to carry out the miserable task of sorting, dividing the inventory of the house into three categories: things to be transported to the new home; things to be stored away in the cellars, garages and lofts of friends, if they had any; and things to be abandoned in the old home. No one will ever be able to know the fate of those abandoned objects, nor estimate the extent of the damage caused by storage in the cellars, garages or lofts of friends, where the objects would rot away, be stolen or burnt in stoves during winter by the other residents.

Speaking to people who had lived through such experiences, I would ask them about the books. The question irritated them. To them, it signalled that I had failed to understand the true dimensions of their tragedy, the problem of priorities. ‘It was just as in a fire,’ a lady once told me, ‘you didn’t save the things you loved, but the assets: title deeds, jewellery, works of art, furniture, carpets, fur coats. Then, there were the basic, everyday objects: clothes, sheets, dishes, etc.’ Even if they did not feature in the accounts, books were saved nevertheless. It was the women’s task to make the selection, as most of the men had already been imprisoned. We will never know what a selection made by the men, the actual owners of the libraries, would have looked like. But the women chose the expensive books, the richly bound great editions. In so doing, they didn’t only save the art albums, but they saved their families, as the albums were later sold for good money.

Behind the Iron Curtain, we loved art albums passionately. If we couldn’t find them in our own homes, we would seek them in other people’s homes or in public libraries.

When I was a child, we had a dozen



of them in our home. Even before I could browse the books, I learnt their stories. Half of them belonged to my mother, Romanian art albums: paintings, monasteries, folk art. She had received them as prizes during secondary school. The title page of each book bore the stamp of the donor, *Foundation Carol II*. For fear of a police search, my mother had torn the pages bearing the royal crown. I have never seen those pages, but I knew their stories and I was very proud, as I kept thinking that those books were a present that the King in person had given to us. I wanted to tell my friends about them, except that I had been told not to because it was too dangerous.

The other half, my father brought them home one beautiful morning, telling us that he had bought them from a lady who was forced to sell them to buy food. Even today, looking at those books makes me feel uncomfortable. The ten albums in our home and the twenty more albums which I found in my French teacher's library were enough to stir my interest though.

During my studies, my passion for art albums only grew. We were all so starved for images. I bought everything I could, but people of my social class could only buy Romanian albums. Before long, I discovered that my bookcases were crowded with albums of painters I was not interested in, but lacked those of painters I loved. Apart from that, good foreign albums made me realize the extent to which mine were miserable. I felt manipulated and cheated. And so my decision was made, I would stop buying albums. I began visiting museums, much more reliable, in order to see real objects.

*

I stare at the twenty kilos of publications on the topic of museums, which I gathered during the last four years, while in France. All of them are interesting but still there is something I find embarrassing about them. They are too friendly, too stereotyped, and too impersonal. If I compare a museum flyer

to a hotel flyer, the difference is not that big (the museum publication is the one that needs to change). I couldn't say what these twenty kilos of publications would have meant for us during the Iron Curtain years. I venture to say: maybe not that much. In these publications, the object has ceased to be the star.

With this suspicion in my heart, I read the mischievous instructions provided by Umberto Eco for the preface of an art catalogue. Without giving it too much thought, I chose the following excerpt: "... the golden rule for the WIAC is to describe the work in such a way that the description, besides being applicable to other pictures, can be applied also to the emotional experience of looking in a delicatessen window." (Eco 1985:199).

I believe that museum catalogues are not what they used to be. We can no longer rely on them to build imaginary museums.

• • • • •

Belkis's notes inspired by The Absent Museums

BELKIS: There are societies that have museums, societies that do not have them, and societies that are deprived of them.

Would we be able to understand, from here, in France, what cultural deprivation might feel like? And even worse, could we imagine a world where culture is despised and targeted as the enemy? How could such a void be filled? By means of dreaming, imagining and reading, as well as using the experiences of others—as it turns out, the thirst for knowledge is inversely proportional to the ease of access to it. I remember how incredibly stupid I felt the day I took to the Louvre a Romanian friend who had never been to France before and, as we passed by each masterpiece, I listened to her describe it to me just as well, if not better, than a professional guide might have done it.



If Malraux's imaginary museum is precisely this capacity for symbolic appropriation that does not require a material support, then the Eastern European countries are full of such museums. And the three bridges that link Romania to different parts of Europe are evidence of that.

• • • • •

Aunt Helen from Athens

In 1972 I made my first ever journey abroad. I had to wait for six months to get the passport. I even had to go for an interview to the Passport Service of the Securitate (Romania's communist secret police). The interview with the officer was overall humiliating. He asked me the "classic" questions: Why travel abroad when I hadn't yet visited all the Romanian sites? Why wouldn't the person who invited me come see me instead of inviting me to go there? In fact, the discussion was rather stupid. And what made me feel most humiliated was that I was afraid the whole time: before going there, during the interview, and after it. For different reasons, but I was afraid. A passport application was the preferred lure by means of which the Securitate recruited its informants. Luckily, I presented no interest to them.

There were three reasons why this trip to Greece was so important to me: first of all, I wanted to "get out." For many Romanians, "getting out of the country" had become an obsession. I knew persons who would apply for a passport every year, without ever receiving one. This made them mad. Then, the trip to Greece touched on all sorts of identity issues for me: I wanted to visit my mother's country, my "motherland." Finally, there was my fascination with Ancient Greece, the one I had dedicated one of my three bridges to.

When I finally received the passport, it was too late. The prolonged waiting, the interview with the officer, and then another

waiting period had killed my excitement about the journey. Apart from that, I didn't find in Greece the "motherland" I had been dreaming of; I didn't like the consumer society engrafted on the Balkan spirit. So I decided not to visit any museum before I could improve my mood. I stayed in the house of my aunt Helen and tried to do what the Greeks generally do: go to bistros and ignore museums. I used to wander in the streets a lot. From time to time, I gazed at the Acropolis. Every time I would tell it: "Don't lose hope, I'll come; I am just not ready yet." Δεν ἔμε ἐτιμῖ. I talked to the Acropolis in Greek. Two weeks since my arrival, I made the climb. The only memory I keep of that is that for all the time I was up there, I had tears in my eyes. There were all kinds of tears; I don't feel up to interpreting them here.

Ten years later, I went back to Greece. Same passport issues, even harder to overcome this time. If you belonged to the category of those who didn't travel abroad, you were supposed to stay that way. Obtaining a passport was becoming increasingly embarrassing.

A single day in Crete, from sunrise to sunset. Quick, to the Heraklion Museum to see the Snake Goddess with my own eyes. What a huge disappointment! So small! I hadn't paid attention to the actual size when I looked at it in the albums. Bitterly disappointed, I started to circle it. Time passed. It took me a while to understand that I simply couldn't get away from it. I tried go on with my visit, but each time I would retrace my steps back to it, to gaze at it once more. It took a lot of fighting to free myself from its spell. Right there, in Crete, I became aware of the power of objects, both their own and the one we attribute to them.

I spent the rest of my trip (thirty days) in Athens. It was late September. I felt like I was there for the last time. What better way to spend my time than going up to the Acropolis? Every morning. Almost every morning. I would walk up there and



sit outside the walls, under a tree, reading a book. A book by Cassirer that I have never finished. I didn't learn anything during my two visits to the Acropolis. Any Japanese tourist having seen the site could trot out the "lesson" better than myself. For the price of the tickets, very expensive for me, I earned the right to go round the Kriophoros, the Korai, and the Owl. I circled them for a long time, just as I had done in Crete with the Snake Goddess. I even wonder if, among the museum aficionados, there might be a category of "circling visitors."

*

I have recently read an article which denounced museology's "sensual nostalgia" and what the author called its "madeleines of reminiscence," to which she claimed to prefer "the austere joys of reflection and theory" (Weis 1992: 3-4). This is funny, for everything I experienced in the Greek museums had to do with the most pure sensuality and "madeleine-ness." Would it be that hard to conceive of a sensual reflection, of thinking madeleines, or intelligent emotions?

• • • • •

France, Sweet France

To assess an episode in one's life, one needs to first put it between brackets; having thus erased it, one only has to calculate its consequences. Often enough, the results are shattering. For instance, when I think of my own competences as a museologist, the French experience was so important that if I erase it, I mean if it hadn't happened, there would be nothing to tell about said competences. The three contacts I was able to make with the world of French museums have had the effect of a triple cataract surgery on me.

Of all the museums I have visited in

France, there are the ones I love, the ones I am interested in, and the ones that I honestly find boring. I feel bored in those small museums that lack commitment, correctly designed by bureaucrats to make them comply with the logic of the ready-made, ready-to-eat, ready-to-look-at, the product suitable for everybody and for nobody. A big museum is almost by default an interesting one; good or bad, it will most certainly raise issues. My absolute favourites were the personalised museums of Mistral and Obereiner. The former is the fruit of the writer's romantic love for the world of Arles, and because it became the museum of a museum, it was lucky to escape the fury of museological trends. The latter was born out of Jean-Luc's knowledge, so often derided, and his mastery of the game; he knew the destabilizing force of culture and the havoc it can cause, but as an engineer, he also knew how to harness such forces for the benefit of his museum.⁵

But I found that the most subtle issues were raised by ecomuseums. I visited some of them in 1990. This was the third generation of ecomuseums, and I knew positively nothing about them. In Romania, there have been no ecomuseums so far. I took my time to read, to look, and to think about them. To the *coup de foudre* that I felt for the ecomuseum when I first encountered it, I oppose today a conclusion in the form of a Romanian proverb: "*Cine-l are, să-i trăiască, cine nu, să nu-și dorească.*" ("He who has it, may he rejoice in it, he who doesn't have it, may he never wish for it.")

Born out of a school of contestation, as a European version of the American neighbourhood museum (1967, Neighbourhood Museum of Anacosta), the ecomuseum claimed to be the new language of museums, an alternative way to communicate with the public. No more collections preserved for their own sake, no more custodians lasciviously in love with the objects, no more esoteric knowledge of the spatial arrangement, "but a natural and cultural environment to be perceived as a

5) An excellent description of the museum in Cuzals can be found in Obereiner (1991: 71-74).

whole passed on to us as heritage, which we are to appropriate, preserve and eventually pass on along with an awareness of the ways in which it has been transformed by human creative and destructive forces.” (Desvallées 1992: 222)

In the name of *development*, some practitioners and theorists, such as Hugues de Varine, often citing Mao Zedong and Lenin, opened the gates of the museum for the Cultural Revolution in an attempt to deliver humankind from the narrow concept of culture that had been forced on it by the aristocrats and the bourgeois (de Varine 1969: 57). The focus of the museum is no longer the artefact, “... but Man at his fullest” (de Varine 1969: 59). As they read that, some people from the East start to hiccup. Thanks to André Desvallées’s anthology, I became acquainted, by means of selected texts, with the “pioneers,” the “masters,” and the “founders.” Several pages in that book baffled me. I was equally baffled when I visited Antigone, this horrible building in Montpellier. Before I saw it, I believed a certain evil to be exclusively Romanian, the product of Romanian communism, that is. I realize that my rejection of ecomuseums is partly accountable to the literature that supports them. Visiting the ecomuseums, one does not grasp the full extent of their claim to be the alpha and omega of museums. I was surprised by their ambition to be acknowledged, to get organized; their haste to write their own history has also made me question their endeavour. Great culture, true culture is never so practical, so well organized.

But other things, less subjective, can also be reproached to ecomuseums. They claim to oppose the “fetishized fragment”⁶ typical of the traditional museums, but all they do is to replace it with another fragment, a larger one, a context which becomes text for another absent context.⁷ Born out of frustrations, they generate frustrations. They aim to be a mirror for the community that governs them. But for how long can we actually gaze at our own reflection? And

what’s more, how many of these mirrors maintain their good faith in time? There are also lying mirrors, just like the evil queen’s, which perpetually reflect back young and beautiful faces.

The most insightful and critical account of ecomuseums in French literature comes from François Hubert (1978; 1983). He distinguishes three sequences in the history of ecomuseums: the beginnings in the 1960s, as part of regional natural parks; the 1980s, a period when the ecomuseum discovered its historical and participatory dimensions; and, finally, the “post-1980,” when all sorts of pitfalls threaten to drive it off course. First generation, second generation, third generation: “Will there be a fourth generation?” the author asks himself. The answer is yes, but on condition that the ecomuseum avoids the pitfalls. Of all the listed dangers, I retain the danger of becoming a stage for all sorts of micronationalist phantasms. There is also the risk of drifting into ridicule: in its efforts to avoid becoming too dusty and old, the ecomuseum might become “too funny,” thus failing its preservation role and instead becoming trapped into that of entertainer. Another line of reasoning cited by François Hubert makes me even more apprehensive. I hadn’t noticed to what extent this museum, born out of a protest movement, failed to be subversive. I could even call it submissive. Power holds no grudge against it, and it holds no grudge against power. It cultivates an attachment for a glorified past. Its favourite themes are work and celebrations. I am beginning to understand my attitude of rejection.

*

Is there any future for the ecomuseum in Romania? For the sake of imitation, certain open-air museums will claim the title of ecomuseums, if only because they open a restaurant and provide some make-shift interactive experiences. There won’t be any community involvement or any

6) “...the museum is the place for a fetishist enjoyment of partial objects” and ‘An ecomuseum is an anti-museum... It is a museum in which the fantasies of the partial object are refused in an effort to retrieve the joy of the total object’ (Clair 1974: 521-522).

7) “While the ecomuseum remains ‘a Procrustean bed’, in that it never reaches the true dimensions of either reality or pure invention, it still opens a breach in conventional museography” (Bomberger 1992: 89).



neighbourhood volunteers, and wouldn't this be indeed more sensible? The community gets tired and eventually abandons its own museum. Those who stay are the outsiders, the specialists. And this is probably the biggest failure of the ecomuseum. This brings to mind a joke about two friends who offered to accompany a third to the train station to make sure he got on the train. While having a last drink at the train station's restaurant, the two realized that the train was about to leave so they jumped on it while the third one, the one who was actually supposed to leave, looked on from the platform, missing his train.

• • • • •

Belkis's notes inspired by France, Sweet France

BELKIS: It is true that when it started out, the ecomuseum made claims against the establishment. It is also true that it has failed in its ambitions simply because people are indeed willing to make an effort to look at daily life, but at that of others, not at their own. Apart from that, the visitors cannot appropriate an ecomuseum; it is the ecomuseum which dictates a new way of inhabiting a place, a natural setting, a collective memory. Paradoxically, the ecomuseum depends on the modernisation process, because without it, the critique it produces would have no reason to exist. The ecomuseum is not anti-establishment, but a social climber.

• • • • •

Torches, Dynamite, Barricades

Training workshop at Béziers, lots of people: philosophers, researchers, writers, custodians, students. I tell them about Romanian museums, stressing that the kind of work we aim to do there requires

huge quantities of dynamite. I explain to them that for a very long time, the ideal of any Romanian museum was to prove the Romanians' continuity in the space bordered by the Danube and the Carpathian Mountains—beginning in the Stone Age and ending in Ceaușescu's era—in order to glorify it. I insist on the fact that communist propaganda had turned the museum into a cultural broth suitable for the most pathogenic and fierce lies, and that now, in order to sanitize it, one has to bring in the "heavy machinery." I claim that there is an opportunity for the museum in Eastern European countries to make a fresh start and that, at this early stage, it will play a very important civic role; therefore, it will have to take sides—a serene and neutral attitude being out of the question—it will have to turn into a battlefield, a spectacle of torches, dynamite and barricades. Someone interrupted me and tried to dissuade me from using the word "dynamite," or the idea of a brutal intervention which would likely destroy the good things that communism had left behind. I answer him that if I were a Jew recently freed from a concentration camp, he would think twice about trying to convince me of the utility of the roads the Nazis had built so well.

After the experiences of the past years, I reduced the amount of dynamite, as I became aware of the danger represented by residues. We cannot demolish everything, we have to find a way to drain the infection, to bring in antidotes.

*

I work in a museum established in 1906. After 1950 the building was misappropriated as the headquarters of the Museum of the Romanian Communist Party. This was a prevailing practice in Eastern European countries: communist parties would act like cuckoos, leaving their eggs in other people's nests (Unfried 1982: 23). In 1990 the collections of the ethnology museum returned home. But

during the first two years, we struggled to dismantle the communist scaffolding. The costs were very high. Dynamite was used in tiny doses. The resulting material was distributed among history museums. Now, five years on, we still fight against residues: panels, showcases inherited from the former museography, which have become unusable. What should we do with them? We are too poor to throw them away. I wonder if the Phoenix could be reborn and still keep its old feathers? Are we doomed to drag along all these residues? And this is not only about old panels and obsolete showcases, but also persons and mind-sets. I believe we are! This is part of the circumstances of our current lives. Bordered by a blemished past in the north and a shapeless future in the south, it is our duty to build the structures of our present.

*

After 1989, there was a lot of talk about a museum of the Revolution. We eulogized the martyrs, and the museum was supposed to sanctify them. Increasingly controversial, the history of the Revolution is not yet ready to be staged in a museum. Apart from that, no one is really interested in it. This is something for the future. For the time being, we can only gather the scraps of it: empty cartridges, objects bearing the seal of the Communist Party, blood-stained clothes. If this museum is to exist one day, it will be a paper museum. There has also been a lot of talk about a museum of the communist prisons. We haven't yet given up on the project.

For five years now, the authorities have remained passive, they have done nothing to put the museums to good use. All they do is try to repress initiatives by promoting as heads of museums their own acolytes, persons who will never challenge the political leaders. This means that the museum has the ability to challenge the establishment, and the authorities are aware of it.

*

The antidote is a specific remedy. There is no such thing as a principle for a universal antidote. The Romanian museum faces a two-fold crisis—first, because of the after-effects of communist ideology and second, because of the danger of wrongly assimilating Western museology. The two diseases share their formalism: one is morose, the other's like a rose. To that, there is only one antidote.

The Antidote Museum (A. M.)

A user's manual

1. The A. M. is recommended during periods of cultural, social and political convalescence (times of transition).
2. The A. M. doesn't allow for one-size-fits-all solutions. It owes its success to its diversity and adaptability.
3. We don't go to the A. M. as we would go to church, to school, to court, to the hospital or the cemetery, but as we would go to the museum.
4. The A. M. is the museum of 'Look at this!' Its elliptical presentations are meant to free the object from all commonplaces, from all stereotyped connections.
5. We come to the A. M. to see objects. To see them again or for the first time.
6. In the A. M., the visitor has only one right: to look at objects.
7. The object presented by the A. M. is nothing but an object (not a witness, not a commodity, etc.)
8. The A. M. is not meant to seduce. It doesn't trade in memories, it doesn't nurture. It doesn't pamper babies. It makes one tired.
9. The A. M. unveils and hides at the same time. It is meant for people who are ready to invest (time, imagination) in it.
10. The A. M. treatment can last from one up to three years.
11. After remission, the A. M. must be taken occasionally in order to prevent the B. M. syndrome (Blasé Museum).



The Museum of the Romanian Peasant worked as an *antidote museum* for two years. Seven small temporary exhibitions, four exhibitions of the Missionary Museum. The seven exhibitions were given names like Durandal. They were called Maria, Anastasia, Ion. Mary had the simplest structure of all. It made people say things like:

"Look at this!"

"Woow!"

Look at that chair! Look at that mask! Look at the painted eggs for Easter! A foreign ethnologist who was visiting during *Marie des Oeufs* (Mary of the Eggs) asked us if the exhibition was based on prior fieldwork, on a bibliography. It was May 1990. We had just moved into the building. We answered him no. His surprise left us no choice but to give him further explanations. "Here, dear sir, celebrating Easter was almost prohibited for forty-five years; everybody would dye their own eggs red and eat them at home in secrecy. This exhibition is meant as a gesture—'Look at the egg!'—that for us holds a very deep significance." *Marie des Chaises* (Mary of the Chairs) was about bringing out all the chairs from the storerooms. Nothing but chairs. No explanatory labels.

The Missionary Museum produced happenings in the street, starting from particular objects. It provoked the residents of Bucharest to reappropriate the world of the peasantry. Communism had used peasant culture as packaging for its own ideological messages. As a consequence, the intellectuals had overdosed on it, while the "less intellectual" had appropriated the products of folklorism.

After two years of the Antidote Museum, the Museum of the Romanian Peasant opened with an exhibition on the theme of the *cross*. Bucharest was buzzing with rumours. Why the cross? Why not?

We heard the question even from people who were not necessarily hostile to Christianity. The signs that the former communist regime had used for self-representation hadn't yet relinquished their monopoly of the most visible positions. Communist

insignia, even marginalized, defaced or violently removed, continued to wage war against the symbols of others. Blacklisted during forty-five years by the communists, the cross will continue to be harassed for a long time by the ghosts of the books we have burnt, the statues we have pulled down, and the rites we have abandoned.

The museum can adopt an equidistant attitude, withdrawing into the wisdom of a work impeccably done, dealing with dead topics, or it can choose one side of the barricade and fight.

• • • • •

Belkis's notes inspired by Torches, Dynamite, Barricades

BELKIS: Can the museum be anti-establishment?

Aren't "museum" and "anti-establishment" antithetical terms?

The museum will always remain an institution and, in this capacity, part of the system that governs the context that has produced it.

If it wants to challenge, then it has to find another means of expression. The museum is the first stage in the process of taming savage, marginal cultures. Jack Lang understood this very well when he introduced the graffiti (a practice of young people from poor suburbs) and the tag into the institution of the museum.

Here (in France), the museum seems to be a means to channel violent forces before they become uncontrollable, and that goes on with the acknowledgement of the public. Can we say that the museum plays another part in the present circumstances of Eastern European countries?

The example of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant seems to provide a positive answer, but it also begs the question: Can an anti-establishment museum survive the transition that Romanian society is currently undergoing?





Epilogue

BELKIS: “When I arrived in Romania in 1991, the Museum at 3 Kiseleff had already been renamed the ‘Museum of the Romanian Peasant’—as illustrated by the banner hung above the entrance. But the interior had not yet been redone, the corridors were still scattered with busts of Lenin and Marx, as well as panels praising Ceaușescu’s achievements. I wandered through vast, half-empty halls, wondering how the team at the Romanian Peasant Museum would go about reclaiming in the name of the Romanian peasant a place so permeated with the symbols of the former regime.

“In 1992, I also visited the History Museum in Bucharest. Just as you said, history is presented there along a horizontal axis leading from the Stone Age all the way to Ceaușescu’s era. A vision of an uninterrupted, logical, infinite progress. When I visited this museum, the last halls dedicated to this view of Romanian history were locked, hidden away, as if the museum had the capacity to erase memory just as it erased the space. Was this intended to obliterate the image of an official history, one dictated by those who held the power, which had nothing to do with research work and testimonies, but only with propaganda and the Single Party? Nothing to criticize here, of course. This is expected after a ‘revolution.’ But such exhibitions, even if they told nothing about the historical realities of the last forty years in Romania, they still told a lot about the means used by the rulers to manipulate history in their desire to shape peoples’ consciences to fit their purposes.

“You say that you must fight against the residues of the old system, but what about reusing them? Couldn’t this be a solution? I don’t believe in the lessons of History—the present is proof enough that this is nonsense—but still, should we give up the fight against oblivion? The museum works

as a vector in the collective memory of modern societies, and I don’t think that it is the role itself that we should question, but rather the way the museum fulfils it.

“An exhibition is never objective, it is always contingent on choices—whether they belong to its designers, or they are imposed by the social and political context in which the exhibition is born. In this respect, it cannot avoid being ideological—whether it is an exhibition about the greatness of the Romanian Communist Party or an exhibition centring on the cross. Only values change, and the danger is to be unaware of this.

“The Museum of the Romanian Peasant is a barricade in itself; it defies and challenges; it fights nonsense with common sense. I can’t see how a museum in France could take up such a role; the museums of the former socialist countries of Europe have to be civically engaged; the transition period that these countries are undergoing assigns them a militant role. In France, and in the West generally speaking, the museum is content with being the guardian of History and social values. Even the most daring and original museum experiments do not question the museum’s privilege to be a high-brow *lieu de mémoire*.

“For all these reasons, the dialogue between specialists working in Western museums and those in what we call Eastern Europe can only be advantageous and desirable. For too long, the Western museum has defined itself and reflected on its role only through self-observation. It should therefore show higher consideration towards Eastern European museums, which could work as mirrors. And mirroring is a two-way process.”

IRINA: “You are right, Belkis, and I am aware of the mirage of mirrors, but at the same time I am afraid our eyes are not yet ready for this. Our eyes are often cloudy. First we need to find a fresh gaze.”



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bomberger, Christian. 1992. "Ecomusées et espaces bâtis: des formes architecturales aux significations culturelles." In *Territoire de la mémoire. Les collections du patrimoine ethnologique dans les écomusées*, ed. M. Augé, 67-89. Editions de l'Albaron.
- Clair, Jean. 1974. *Du marteau-pilon à l'écomusée*. Vagues.
- Dagognet, François. 1993. *Le musée sans fin*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon.
- Davallon, Jean, ed. 1986. *Clacqmurer, pour ainsi dire, tout l'univers. La mise en exposition*. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou.
- Deloche, Bernard. 1989. *Muséologica. Contradictions et logique du musée*. Mâcon: M.N.E.S.
- Desvallées, André. 1992. *Vagues, une anthologie de la nouvelle muséologie. Textes choisis et présentés par André Desvallées*. Mâcon: Éditions W. et M.N.E.S.
- Eco, Umberto. 1994. *How to Travel with a Salmon and Other Essays*. Transl. from the Italian by William Weaver. New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Giraudy, Danièle, and Henri Bouilhet. 1977. *Le musée et la vie*. Paris: La Documentation Française.
- Hainard, Jacques. 1989. *Objets en dérive pour le «Salon de l'ethnographie», Le Salon de l'ethnographie*. Neuchâtel: Musée d'ethnographie Neuchâtel.
- Hubert, François. 1978. *Les écomusées après vingt ans. Ecomusée en France*, Actes des premières rencontres nationales des écomusées. Agence régionale d'ethnologie Rhône-Alpes, Ecomusée Nord-Dauphiné.
- Hubert, François. 1983. *Dossiers écomusées. La muséologie selon Georges-Henri Rivière*. Dunod.
- Hudson, Kenneth. 1975. "Entry as a Privilege," "Entry as a Right." In *A Social History of Museums: What the Visitors Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hudson, 8-30; 31-47. London: Macmillan.
- Lafranco, Binni, Pinna Giovanni. 1989. *Museo. Storia e funzioni di una macchina culturale dal cinquecento a oggi*. Milano: Garzanti.
- M.L. 1993. "Editorial." *Museum International*. 178 (2), p. 3.
- Malraux. 1965. *Les musées imaginaires*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Maurois, André. 1946. *Journal, États-Unis, 1946*. Paris: Éditions du Bateau Ivre.
- Obereiner, Jean-Luc. 1991. "Cuzals. Musée de plein air de Quercy: tourisme profane ou anthropologie sacrée?" *Musée et société. Actes du colloque*, Mulhouse, Ungersheim, June: 71-74.
- Pomian, Krzysztof. 1990. *Musée et patrimoine. Patrimoine en folie*. Paris: Édition de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.
- Pomian, Krzysztof. 1992. *L'Anticomanie: la collection d'antiquités aux 18^{ème} et 19^{ème} siècle*. Paris: EHESS.
- Rivière, Georges-Henri. 1975. *Bibliothèques et musées (Colloque)*. Neuchâtel.
- Screven, C.G. 1993. "Visitor Studies: An Introduction." *Museum International* 178 (2): 4-5.
- Unfried, Berthold. 1982. "La Muséification du «socialisme réel»." *Communications, "L'Est: les mythes et les restes."* 55 : 23-42.
- Varine de, Hugues. 1969. *Le musée au service de l'homme et du développement*. Vagues.
- Weis, Hélène. 1992. "Collections... collecte..., Hommes et société." *Revue des musées d'anthropologie*: 3-4.



