



Fig. 1, 2. *Steps to Heaven* monument, October 2008 | Photo credit: Cosmin Manolache.

The Museum of the Unknown City Part I

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses various projects (in the real world or on the social media) to do with creating a museum in and about the unknown town of Mizil. The "Museum of the Unknown Town" is the memory of a non-existent town. This is because most museums reconstruct worlds that have ceased to exist. They reinvent them as part of a utopic exercise applied to the past, despite the overwhelming amount of information that they have at their disposal and which they employ. However, knowledge is not the same as storage, but rather, to an extent that differs from case to case, it is also imagination, which enables innovation. The unpredictable connections between images and the texts of different personal experiences have the power not only to sensitise local visitors to the town's history, but also to make them aware that they are a part of that history, that they can enrich it by cultivating and practising memory. The article argues that the communist past of the town and of Romania in general might be viewed in a more nuanced way, as opposed to the use of clichés and a uniform viewpoint.

The author makes use of creative writing as his technique, drawing inspiration from hand-picked images.

KEYWORDS

Museum studies; recent history; local memory; history as fiction; subjective history; community project; archive in progress; photo narrative.



A Museum Concept: Invisible and Subjective

How it began was paradigmatic. In the summer of 2008, I happened to accompany architect Cosmin Pavel when he met the mayor of Mizil to present designs for plain volumetric markers to replace a monument that had been removed from a pedestrian thoroughfare. After

he was shown a number of versions, the mayor's reaction was disconcerting: "No! Wait a minute, I've got a better idea!" He left his office and came back a few minutes later with a scale model of a monument that was a pastiche of Brancusi's *Column of the Infinite* in Tîrgu Jiu: "We could have it rising from the mound you showed me!"

Martor 26/2021 - Visual Ethics after Communism

During the discussion, on finding out that I work at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, the mayor asked me a direct question: "We'd like to create a museum of our own here. Couldn't you give us some of your folk costumes?" A partnership with such a mayor and local authority would obviously have been difficult, if not impossible. The uncouthness of the episode revealed to us how local politicians conceive of projects for the benefit of the community: in a manner devoid of research, concept, debate. The imposition of his own ideas, a kind of administrative mysticism that was to reach its apogee in his sixth term as mayor, bizarrely combined communist and capitalist modes of action, an infelicitous adaptation of professional reprofiling that is an increasingly frequent practice in Romanian society.

Another pertinent episode that brings to light the dependence of local cultural projects on political decision-making was when Adrian Năstase was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in the Mizil uninominal electoral district. Năstase is a well-known collector and also donor, who as Prime Minister gave the go-ahead for the founding of a number of major museums in the Bucharest cultural sector, such as the National Museum of Contemporary Art and the National Museum of Antique Maps and Books. It was hoped that as Deputy for Mizil he would support the creation of a local museum. Indeed, on his personal blog, he twice recounts being visited at his local electoral office by an aged history teacher, who suggested the museum project to him,¹ a meeting now conserved in the blogosphere.

The two episodes are symptomatic of how the *museum* is viewed at the level of local administration in Romania, an image that does not seem to have changed for decades. Since the inter-war period, the museum has been conceived and perceived as almost exclusively a social connector, in

the absence of any other conceptualisation, but one which has been augmented by the enthusiasm of priests and schoolteachers. In Mizil, the earliest initiative was in September 1928, when a library and museum of "various ecclesiastical, geological and numismatic antiquities" (Popescu 1929: 3) was created in the parish buildings of the church of the Dormition of the Mother of God. The press article announcing this cultural event concludes with an appeal: "As the museum is barely in its infancy, the Reverend Father asks that we support it, requesting that all those who have various antiquities donate them to the museum, which we hope will grow in size, doing honour to our town. Such museums, but larger, can be found in every town in Transylvania" (*Ibid*: 3). It was not the first cultural initiative on the part of Father Lefter. Before arriving to serve as a priest in Mizil, he had founded a library at the theological boarding school in Bucharest, where he was head of the student centre.

A few years later, in 1933, the same weekly newspaper announced that in Buzău, the administrative seat of the county of which Mizil was part, a "regional teachers' museum" had been established, which was to gather together "regional collections, some by donation, others by purchase": "At Girls' Primary School No. 1, a regional teachers' museum has been created, consisting of the following sections: zoology, botany, ethnography, history and the military, religion, numismatics and medals, arts, journalism, the history of medicine, geology, monography, and childhood" (Muzeul regional... 1933: 2). Each section was to be run by an artistic board, while a committee of at least one hundred was to deal with the collection of materials. In the beginning, the museum was financed by the 10 lei fees paid by active members.

A year later, also in Buzău, a Museum of Ethnography opened on 29 July, "in the Sibiceanu buildings on Bulevardul Gării, at the initiative of Mr Costică Dumitrescu,

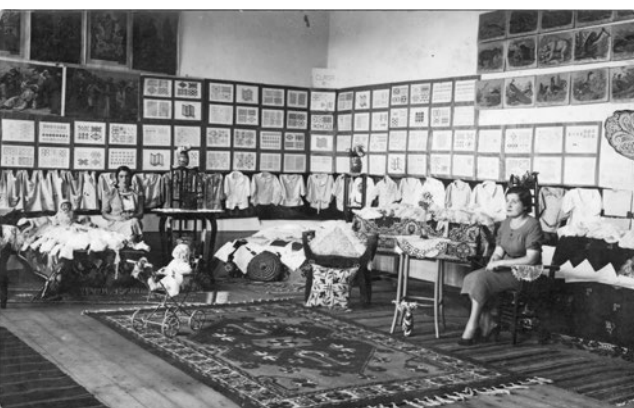


Fig. 3. Exhibition of work and drawings, Girls' Gymnasium, Mizil, 1936-1937 | "Miziliada" Collection.

head of the Boys' Secondary School, and without the material assistance of the school authorities" (Un muzeu... 1934: 4) which was later to become the property of the school.

The emergence of these all-encompassing micro-museums within schools fostered emulation and, we may assume, also competition. The Buzău example was adopted in Mizil, most obviously in the Mizil Girls' School exhibition of work and drawing and later in the school museum that teacher Virginia C. Stoica established "through her own personal contribution and that of her pupils"² at the No. 2 Boys' School, along with a school pharmacy, as revealed by a certificate dated 20 October 1941.



Fig. 4. Museum, Boys' School No. 2, Mizil | ANR.

as it was a threat to a regime founded on exploitation, juxtaposed with the new plan of the village, where the place of honour is held by the school, the culture club, the people's council, the dispensary, alongside the new houses for the co-operative peasants, would be a strong educational factor" (Stoica 1967: 145) The emphasis on school museum activities is interesting, and in principle, they could provide an educational alternative via practical modules that were far more effective in the teaching of various subjects, but also raised ethical issues when it came to the procurement of documents: "We would achieve two important things. The first relates to the instructional-educational efficacy of history, geography and natural science lessons, and the second, to the use of children to help collect documents precious for reconstruction of local history,

After the Second World War, school museums and so-called "museum corners" became a widespread educational practice and method in history departments. In addition to their teaching purpose—that of "encouraging pupils to collect objects" and "mobilising them to make exhibits by hand"—there was also a stated ideological purpose: "As an example of a museum item, this plan of the village as it was in the past, with its mayor's office and gendarmes' station, institutions sited in a place of honour next to the boyar manor house, and its school, abandoned a number of times,



Fig. 5. Museum Corner, School No. 1, Mizil | School No.1 Archive.

which are liable to perish" (*Ibid.*: 146). Explorations in Mizil have revealed the disappearance of many artefacts and documents collected from 1947 to 1989 for school museum corners, one of the main causes of which was the ambiguous status of such items.

This whole micro-tradition was enough to make us decide to take upon ourselves any locally applicable idea or museum/curatorial project. In 2010, the national context began to witness a series of such local initiatives, which were to increase in number over the course of time.

One such project is "The Memorable Town,"³ organised by the Bv-Cv-Hr branch of the Order of Romanian Architects, whose aim is to "cultivate a sense of local identity" through dialogue "between locals and architects on the topic of the evolution of the public space and urban architecture" as part of conventional or street exhibitions, art installations, video screenings, lectures, and publications. There are similarities with the Museum of the Unknown Town project inasmuch as exploration of the town's history is based on images of Braşov from various times, supplied by locals' family albums or private collections. The differences are quantitative in nature: the archives of Braşov are incomparably

larger than those of Mizil, and therefore the potential for realising thoroughgoing historical and sociological studies is significantly less in a small town like Mizil. The advantages provided by the case of Mizil are to do with the exploration of a smaller field, even if this entails the unreliability of official information, and also of a territory of the imaginary, arising both from perceptions of the town and the subjective memories of its inhabitants.

The authors of another initiative, "Memory Loop," are researchers, designers, activists and programmers. They have constructed a digital memory tool as part of the *Memory Tour: Civic Education on the Streets of Bucharest* project, which "enables dialogue between past and present, highlighting the importance of materiality in reconfiguring the memory of historical events."⁴ A series of events from the history of twentieth-century Bucharest are

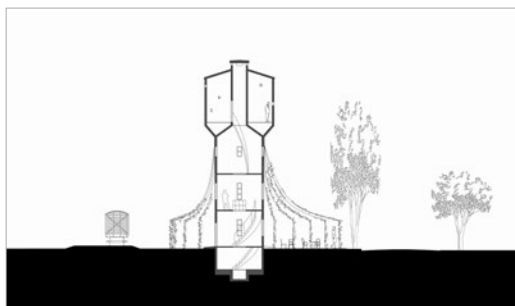


Fig. 6. Container-museum —section of the Water Tower | Designed by architect Cosmin Pavel.



Fig. 7. Container-museum, front elevation | Designed by architect Cosmin Pavel.

contextualised through the presentation of opposing historiographic interpretations and concretisation via “different media of visual and/or artistic expression.”⁵ The proposal has the advantage of exploring the process of memorialisation, including a substantial bibliographic survey, and whose mechanisms are presented to pre-university and university students from Bucharest via digital interfaces and guided tours. In this particular case, the differences when compared with the goals of the Museum of the Unknown Town are greater, inasmuch as the events that took place in the capital, as selected and presented by “Memory Loop,” were of national importance, which has enabled a process of memorialisation and generated a symbolic map relevant to the whole community, regardless of political affiliation. In the case of the Museum of the Unknown Town, the process of memorialisation finds its equivalent in the local architecture and urban fabric rather than in monuments and memorial plaques. In this potential territorial dialogue, the Museum of the Unknown Town is also a museum of subjective memory, despite the danger of resorting to approximations and fiction.

As far as I am concerned, the first step I took was in the autumn of 2008, when I began a blog dedicated micro-histories from my home town, ludically named *Miziliada*, and shortly after that I started writing a column (*mizilicuri* [aperitifs, fig. *bagatelles*]) in a literary magazine. After which I wrote three screenplays⁶ inspired by local histories and published *Etalonul Mizil—ficțiunile măsurătorilor* (Iova and Manolache 2016). At the same time, with architect Cosmin Pavel I worked on designs for a small local museum that would avoid interference from the local authorities. The first proposal, which was bold but difficult to realise, was to assemble shipping containers next to Mizil Station and to convert the water tower, which would have required the approval not of the town hall but rather the Ministry of Transport.

The second, more pragmatic proposal, although not as spectacular as the first, was to use a small building at the edge of town owned by architect Cosmin Pavel, as a space for meetings and storage of a collection of everyday items of local relevance. This proposal, titled *Mizilesque* (Constantin and Pavel 2015), made its debut in 2013 and was developed over a period of two years.



Fig. 8. *Mizilesque*, Mizil, Dallas district | Designed by architect Cosmin Pavel.

The results of the 2016 local elections made it possible for our team to work with the local authorities. In 2017, we proposed our museum project to the new mayor. We envisaged that the museum would be housed in one of the town's most familiar buildings, but which had fallen into disrepair. The building had been owned by the mayor at the



Fig. 9. Old Town Hall (c. 1940) | Laurențiu Bădicioiu collection.



Fig. 10. Old Town Hall (2014) | Photo credit: Cosmin Manolache.

turn of the twentieth century, who had been made famous by a literary text (Caragiale 1900), as well as by his combativeness locally and his prominence in the national press of the time. In 2018, the project was adopted by Mizil Town Hall and put forward for funding via the Regional Operational Programme, Priority Axis 13: Supporting the Regeneration of Small and Middling Towns. Funding was granted in 2020.

from various publications (i.e. *Flacara* [the Flame]), were donated to us or just borrowed to be scanned. Some images were inserted in thematic/ academic articles or in fiction. Most images were posted on www.miziliada.blogspot.com, or on Facebook (#muzeulorasuluinecunoscut)/[#TheMuseumoftheUnknownCity] by specifying the name of the donour or the place from where we have found the image. In this article all the images come from people who donated the images to our online platforms. It is a project to explore the past as an unofficial, semi-obscure, distant and sterile subject, accepting approximations, memories, nostalgies, desires, doubts, expectations, paradoxes, repetitions, exaggerations, astonishments, errors, suppositions, dreams, pains, myths, tensions, hallucinations, justifications, superstitions, reminiscences, equivocations, habits—a space of small miracles, an ocean of subjectivity such as the poetic lode in *Spoon River Anthology*. Such a museum cannot help but be one of forgetting and, inevitably, resignedly, one of incomplete and impossible rediscovery.

“Museum of an Unknown Town” is the memory of a non-existent town. For, the majority of museums reconstruct worlds that no longer exist. They reinvent them as part of a utopic exercise applied to the past, despite the overwhelming amount of information available to them and which they utilise. But knowledge is more than just accumulation. To an extent variable from case to case, it is also imagination, which enables innovation.

The “Museum of an Unknown Town” does not yet exist. Without having a local museum or a consistent monograph about the city of Mizil, the city could have been imagined by means of photography/ with the help of photography and of oral history. Architect Cosmin Pavel and myself found this alternative: to collect images and take interviews to all those inhabitants of Mizil that were willing to sustain our initiative of digging/ exploring the past. The photos were bought from the market, were taken

To paraphrase Montesquieu, we asked ourselves how it would be possible to create the museum of a small town of fourteen thousand inhabitants without repeating the experiences of similar towns and instead providing something new? From the outset we rejected exhibition concepts that combine history and ethnography to the



Figs. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. Sketches for the "Museum of the Unknown City."

exclusion of all else, in a manner that imposes uniformity, and instead we made room for the imagination and intertextuality.

But first of all: What is Mizil and in what way? At the turn of the twentieth century, the town was renowned as a place where nothing happened apart from political squabbling, which often made the national news. It was an eminently mercantile town, which enjoyed a certain prosperity, but which also suffered calamities of varying degrees: a fire that almost wiped it off the map in 1866, followed by three lesser fires; three major earthquakes and other middling ones; occupation during the two world wars, after which the communist regime brought major changes in the structure of the populace and its economic profile.

For more than half a century, the mayors of Mizil competed, through the repetition of clichés, with the image of Le Capitain Cap, the petty aspirant to the French Parliament satirised by Alphonse Allais (2017) in his texts, in a style that looks forward to Caragiale's *A Solemn Day*. The town's mentions in the national newspapers were complemented by its appearances in plays,⁷ humorous sketches, lampoons, and literary reportages. The repeated satire resulted in a distorted image, compounded by the homonymy of *Mizil* and *mizilic* (snack; trifle, thing of no importance), which encouraged the use of the town's name in countless satirical comparisons. The following is an example of geo-social scaling:

Bucharest has its own particular nostalgia and weakness: for Paris. When you think of Paris, you'd even be prepared to walk all the way there, and Bucharest seems to you like Mizil. Because Paris—unlike London and New York, far larger cities—has a spirit of its own, a Parisian one, which is hard to define, but which you can put your finger on straight away, once you're in Berlin. (Aderca 1931: 1)

The same as in *Etalonul Mizil: ficțiunile măsurătorilor*, in the working proposals for

the museum project, we tried to capture the fluid memory of the city that is scattered throughout the official archives, the press, life stories, photographs and artefacts from family collections, and which would counterbalance the image created by the press over the decades. This textual-visual information in all its density was repositioned under the sign of a number of terms/spaces that bring to light a history of the town that is less familiar, even to its inhabitants: *Gauge, Humour, Amour, Monument, War, Politics, Railway Station, Death*, whose connective tissue, in the hiatus between real city and fictive city, is self-irony. The source of inspiration for this curatorial response of ours is Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, in which symbol, metaphor, deliberate lacuna, and the fragmentary shine forth and structure a new narrative, one that is more attractive than the kind of narrative to be found in realist novels or classic museums, and combine with nostalgia and the refined observations of texts such as Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* and *Der Passagen-Werk* or W.G. Sebald's poetic-theoretical texts on memory and destruction.

Inevitably, we found questions as to the purpose and relevance of a museum in a town like Mizil to be unavoidable, and literature and cinema proved to be of significant help in our attempts to investigate, document and theorise the endeavour.

In the much-acclaimed mini-serial *Chernobyl*, the story opens with a voiceover from a character who chooses to tell things as they really are: "What is the cost of lies? It's not that we'll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is that if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognise the truth at all. What can we do then? What else is left but to abandon even the hope of truth, and content ourselves instead . . . with stories." It could serve as a motto for any attempt to write or revisit the past. The history of Pripyat, a town



built in 1970, was cut short by the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in 1986. On site, only fragments of the disaster have remained, but there are also the personal remnants of the town's inhabitants, who were moved to the new town of Slavutych. In a potential futurological exercise, the abandoned city might be regarded as a future museum, perhaps a hundred years from now, a time capsule of the Soviet world, preserved by the unavoidable force of a disaster. A museum would be inconceivable in the absence of official and, above all, unofficial histories of the disaster. The dimensions of such a museum might rival the idea of the map as a representation of the world that Borges proposes in *On Exactitude in Science* by ludic reference to an imaginary author and work,⁸ and at the same time, it might help us practise the impossibility of objectivity as found in a museum that is a perfect replica of reality.

The tragedy of 1986 might be one of the ideas⁹ that on which the dystopia *A Visitor of a Museum* (1989) was based, a Soviet cinema production in the genre of *Chernukha*, whose backdrop is a world forever changed by an ecological disaster. Its ruins constitute the so-called *museum*, an inaccessible place that can be reached only for one week a year, when the waters that cover it slowly recede. Its mysterious pull and the decaying new world it inhabits, in which rubbish, deformities and religion dominate, transform it into a myth hard to fathom or accept, but which is therefore all the more alluring to the visitor who sets off to make an impossible exploration of it, out of dissatisfaction with contact mediated through photography: "— What makes you think the Mound is the main thing? — The Museum is a city first and foremost. A city. — Who knows . . . — The priests in their so-called sacred texts . . . — What? What about the priests? — . . . speak of the Mound, the Museum. And a path shall open from this age to the beginning of time. An ancient city will be revealed with its great mysteries. A mound will stand outside

the city upon which rises . . . and so forth. That's what it says, so the Mound is the main thing. — Enough. How can you take seriously all that nonsense? (. . .) — There was a city here? — Where? — Here. — Maybe. I don't remember."

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the metaphor of the *museum* was employed again the same year, 1989, in another Soviet film, *Zerograd*, a dystopia in which the history of the Russians/Soviets is superimposed on the histories of a small provincial town, and which in a comic, absurd manner uses memorialisation by means of museumisation, ideological ambiguity, surrealism, and postmodern pastiche of national history (Kabanova 2011: 103) through the lens of the glasnost policy, all of which converges in the nightmare of the main character: "Zero City is a city without coordinates, a zero on the world map, existing only as a visual expression of Varakin's inchoate fear." (Lawton 1992: 221-222). The museum becomes an alternative to the desolate landscape of Town Zero (Kabanova 2011).

It may be that such theoretical exercises are possible only in the aftermath of catastrophes such as those that struck Chernobyl and Pompei. It is not only in such contexts that history is rewritten in constant pendulation between scientifically argued truth and the truth politically laid down. Likewise, museums and monographs, as forms that popularise national or local history, have sometimes proven perfect mirrors of a political vision of history and meddling in the writing of history. One example is the Museum of the Romanian Communist Party. In a monograph on Mizil written by history teacher Gheorghe Panait in the 1970s, ideological constraints demanded that more room be given to the period immediately after the Second World War than to that preceding it. Social life prior to the establishment of the people's republic was reduced to clichés and frameworks that purged reality. Between the idea of a museum that perfectly conserves and



reconstructs a world and one that provides an idealised representation thereof, whether intentionally or not, there are numerous possibilities for experiment, the most honest of which seems to us to be to make allowance for imperfectability.

It is in this interval that the “Museum of the Unknown Town” is situated, as an honest attempt to enter into a dialogue with the invisible town, the town of personal memories, of which official history and in particular the history controlled by the communist regime take only selective and self-interested account in their assertion and consolidation of an ideology. The museum we propose is a place for every voice, an inventory of contexts, of observations of irreversible things, of psychological and social awareness, a kind of *Haus der Begegnung*,¹⁰ in which the past— orphaned stories and photographs, but not only—is convoked in order to make visible the infinitesimal, imperfect, but perfectly legitimate history of a community. Such a museum, however, will not be able to be realised by a multiple author, as polyphony is only a source, rather than an authorial element, as Alexandru Solomon argues in the conclusion to his book exploring documentary film as a cultural product dependent on the *use of documentary images* and on *practices of remembrance*, but also at the intersection with new technical possibilities: “But no matter how tempting and seemingly generous the idea of the collective work might be, in which the author fades into the background and acts simply as a catalyst for others’ contributions, it negates the very essence of the creative process. The creative documentary requires an ‘I’, a personality capable of perceiving, judging, reflecting the world through the prism of its own deeper experiences, in defining which the memory plays a central rôle. To understand documentary film’s propensity to the new media as a form of authorial democratisation, as a disappearance of the individual perspective, is a false lead” (Solomon 2016: 216).

The exercise of knowing induced by the “Cities Quartet” card game invoked by W.G. Sebald in *An Attempt at Restitution*¹¹ as a driver of future curiosity in exploring maps, atlases and history, brought interbellum Germany to the dining-room table via symbolic images of cities: cathedrals, railway stations, bastions, squares. Sebald would thereby come to compare the image of Stuttgart station, subsequently rediscovered on a postcard from 1939 sent by a little girl, with the real city that he was not to visit until 1976, asking himself, the same as in many of his other writings, “what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run,” and “why when I take the S-Bahn toward Stuttgart’s city centre do I think, every time we reach Feuersee Station, that the fires are still blazing above us, and that since the terrors of the last war years, even though we have rebuilt our surroundings so wonderfully well, we have been living in a kind of underground zone?” The entire excursus discovers invisible, unsuspected links, constructing a subjective network, a legitimate part of history, woven from fragmentary images of a city viewed through the eye of a writer, who optimistically concludes in favour of open, poetic forms of representation: “There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship. A place that is at the service of such a task is therefore very appropriate in Stuttgart, and I wish it and the city that shelters it well for the future.”

Sebald’s highly personal explorations, alongside those of the other writers mentioned above, are yet another example in whose wake we wish to situate conceptually the “Museum of the Unknown Town.” The unpredictable links between the images and texts of differing personal experiences are capable not only of sensitising local



visitors to the history of the town, but also of making them aware that they are a part of that history, that they can enrich it by cultivating a practice of memory. Even the country's and the town's communist past, problematised in the last thirty years in a manner that has often been cliché-ridden and tended to uniformity, might be viewed in a more nuanced way, through a kaleidoscope of personal, tangible experiences. Obviously, there will be limits to the search for criteria such as the relevance, representativeness, accuracy and precision of such an installation activated by subjectively charged texts and images. It will always be debatable to what extent X, a person with particular features, finding himself in situation Y at moment Z, will put forward a legitimate viewpoint. But there will always be the possibility that any person, through all the information that lends consistency to his biography, might enrich history with his voice and his choices.

The objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy is one of the keys to reading our museum proposal and at the same time the sensitive area that might draw criticism from the ethical standpoint in its use of images and stories from a private person's life. The manner chosen in order to shed light on such a project prior to its construction can affect the memory or private space of the photograph's owner or of those the camera once captured in its frame. But by adopting Walter Benjamin's idea¹² of removing the text from its established spaces and, in our case, imposing it as a reflection of the project on the currents of the present, i.e., social networks, whither it would seem the world has decamped, we are merely extracting the image from the regime of storage in order to integrate it in a living regime of circulation, flux. The image-text assemblage is not a finished product, in the historicising sense that classic museums give it, but rather the element that needs to create a space of dilemmas, choices and revisions, which necessarily interacts with the psychological space of the visitor via activation, immersion.

We therefore regarded as important the significant and complementary presence of text alongside image. The main argument is the *image* of the town generated almost solely by various kinds of text, as I argued above. The production of image and text that has grown exponentially in the last fifteen years—films and serials available online, short films and stories that circulate on social networks—has rapidly altered and shaped sensibilities, expectations, and modes of reception. We therefore have a vast process of self-exposure, self-alterity, with which very many people seem to feel comfortable. It is the reason why we chose a form of promotion adapted to the current global context.

Undoubtedly in its attempt at representation, this procedure can be subject to or ascribed ethical limits, starting with the agreement of the photographs' owners to appear in public and continuing with the juxtaposition of texts that explore and extend the context of the image to a larger extent than mere identification of the characters, the place, and the time. What encouraged us to act in this direction was also enthusiasm on the part of the community, as well as donors, and not merely the enthusiasm of the archive's initiators. It was this passion that erased the dividing line between actor and audience, consolidating the coherence of the project, which finally the new town council did not hesitate to support.



Between Pamuk and Gorzo: Istanbul, Bucharest, Berlin

The "Museum of the Unknown City" is a counter-utopian endeavour (Ghiu 2011), in the sense of the term employed by Bogdan Ghiu, in which the utopia of communism and that of history, both of them collectivised, albeit to differing degrees, are confronted not with a closed/concluded counter-utopia of



Figs. 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23. *The Invasion* (2006), Berlin | Photo credit: Dumitru Gorzo



Figs. 24, 25, 26, 28, 29. *The Invasion* (2006), Bucharest | Photo credit: Cosmin Manolache.

the town within a well-defined story,¹³ such as the museum/novel/installation¹⁴ created by Orhan Pamuk, but rather they are counterposed with the utopias of real subjectivities, which generate, open, multiply the space of performative, participatory memory to the detriment of the contemplative memory.

Indeed, the manifesto of the Istanbul museum closes with an unexpected, even visionary, statement inviting us to produce for ourselves, metaphorically speaking, our own versions of a personal museum: “11. The future of museums is inside our own homes” (Pamuk 2012: 57). Since what needs to be altered is the relationship between community and museographic material, which still functions through authoritarian formulas.

To the autobiographical fictions of Orhan Pamuk’s novel *The Museum of Innocence* are added a twin construct that exerts a different power over the visitor through its unconventional mode of constructing by means of superposing the reality of Istanbul onto the reality of their characters. The dioramas realised in collaboration with a series of artists are collages/installations/assemblages of objects, images and text that go beyond museographic practices are samples of subjectivity with a power of seduction superior to those that are bounded by scientific principles. What is provocative and open to interpretations and criticism, from the museographic as well as the ethical standpoint, is not only the realisation of the dioramas in themselves, but also the provenance and selection of the elements contained therein, whose author is none other than Orhan Pamuk.

Another example of pushing the limits is *The Invasion* (2006) project by contemporary artist Dumitru Gorzo, which puts forward a unique mode of conceiving the connection between local community, memory, and exhibition. Museographic practices are avoided by means of transforming the city into a museum of improbable dimensions, permanently accessible until the copies of

the images exhibited deteriorate.

Hundreds of photographs of peasants from Ieud exhibited in Bucharest and Berlin on lampposts and walkways, in bus stations, on walls, windows and doors, in the form of stickers. Without instructions as to their use, (potential) narrative vehicles for passers-by, and a different, outward-looking viewpoint: they aren’t just exhibited, they visit.

The street museum: there were numerous discussions in the late nineties among artists and in particular among curators about what art museums should look like in the 2000s. There was much talk of a *Museum of the Future*, a museum consisting solely of photographic and video documentation, along with descriptions of works, actions, interactions, and so on. In *The Invasion*, I shook up the idea of a *Museum of the Future* a little—the name is contradictory as long as the museum mainly has to do with conserving the past. To be more exact, treated as documents, the photographs of the peasants from Ieud become active witnesses to their existence. The image/representation becomes an image/presence, an image with a dual meaning: to be seen and to see.

The photographs in question are examples that the photographer from Ieud was unable to sell to some of the subjects attending the events at which he was a permanent fixture. He sold them to me when I told him that I needed a stock of old images for various projects.¹⁵

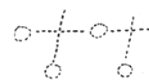
In 2007, I was one of those who were able to discover in both Bucharest and Berlin dozens of the hundreds of such photographs from the seventies and eighties taken in private contexts, reproduced as stickers, and pasted in public spaces. I was familiar with Gorzo’s unconventional paintings of peasants and I had an inkling as to the author of these interventions, which was subsequently confirmed. Among other forms of urban culture, these peasants from Maramuresch made their appearance in a manner that

was bizarre, fresh but with an aroma of old wine. The shock also came from the contrast between the imaginary, the urban trends and trepidations into which these images and their original space inserted themselves, a space intensively cultivated and associated with living, authentic traditions both by the mass media and the tourist industry, as well as by ethnologists, anthropologists, and museum curators. The impact of the provocation was guaranteed, but . . . What connotations might it hold for the passer-by? Is it possible to evaluate such encounters? These peasants from the recent past invading post-communist metropolitan spaces under the cloak of anonymity were transformed into symbols of an exotic world. This was one of the effects. At the same time, the same as in the Pamuk example, by means of a highly subjective artistic act, the author of the interventions is to a large extent released from the exigencies of criticisms from the ethical standpoint.

museography, which, above all else, demands boldness.

Situated on a similar wavelength is the “Museum of the Unknown Town” proposal, which places the visitor in the skin of the co-author, of the archaeologist-constructor of his own life,¹⁶ in the skin of the protagonist of an imperfect narrative, as well as in the skin of him who investigates the social dimension of a partly known world. Whereas in the films of the Romanian New Wave there is a shift from the fictional to the documentary, as Alexandru Solomon (2016: 34) observes, our experiment moves in the opposite direction, pivoting from the documentary to the creative, as can also be observed in the Gorzo and Pamuk.

(Continued in *The Museum of the Unknown City. Part II*, pp. 147-155)



NOTES

1. <https://adriannastase.ro/2008/10/17/despre-demnitare/>; <https://adriannastase.ro/2008/11/04/mizil-cest-moi/>.
2. Romanian National Archives, Ministry of Religions and Public Education Collection, File No. 514/1942, p. 25.
3. <https://orasulmemorabil.com/category/blog/>
4. <http://bucladememorie.ro>
5. <http://bucladememorie.ro/metoda/>
6. *Visul lui Adalbert* [Adalbert's Dream] (2011), *Ultima zi* [The Last Day] (2016) and *Carne de iepure* [Rabbit Meat] (2015) by director Gabriel Achim.
7. *Microbii Bucureștilor* [The Microbes of Bucharest], Paul Gusty's local version of the play *Die Großstadluft* by Oskar Blumenthal and Gustav Kadelburg, National Theatre, Bucharest, 1892; *Romeo și Julieta la Mizil* [Romeo and Juliet in Mizil], George Ranetti, National Theatre, Bucharest, 1912.
8. “In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their

Both examples go beyond contemporary methods of working with and innovating mechanisms to activate memory. None is perfect and in fact we do not believe that there can be perfection in such a fragile territory. The limits of objectivity always go hand in hand with the limits of time or society's constantly renewed rules of representation. Cases of stepping out of the frame are not necessarily to be condemned, but rather they are alternative attempts whose shortcomings and criticisms of which in regard to the ethics of using the images, even if they are to be taken seriously, are nonetheless minimal. As their authors are artists, who by definition break conventions, they are all the more deliberate the more the aim of such interventions/creations is not objectivity, one of the possible reasons that make them liable to criticism, but rather that of exploring the limits of representation and

Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography. —Suarez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658” (Borges 1999: 325).

9. Director Konstantin Lopushansky was the production assistant for the film *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979), and the screenplay of his first film, *Letter from a Dead Man* (1986), was co-authored by famous Russian sci-fi writers Boris Strugatsky and Vyacheslav Rybakov. Film critics have suggested that the Brothers Strugatsky influenced the filming of the productions on which they worked with Konstantin Lopushansky.

10. The Meeting House community centre, founded by Jacob Levi Moreno and Haim Klemmer in Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century (1908-1914), provided voluntary social assistance to refugees, recent immigrants, and the homeless.

11. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/12/20/an-attempt-at-restitution>

12. “[T]rue literary work activity cannot aspire to take place

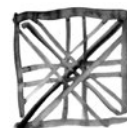
within a literary framework—this is, rather, the habitual expression of its sterility. Significant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment. Opinions are to the vast apparatus of social existence what oil is to machines: one does not go up to a turbine and pour machine oil over it; one applies a little to hidden spindles and joints that one has to know” (Benjamin 1979: 45).

13. “I wanted to collect and exhibit the ‘real’ objects of a fictional story in a museum and to write a novel based on these objects” (Pamuk 2012: 57).

14. “The Museum of Innocence” (Masumiyet Müzesi).

15. Details kindly provided by Dumitru Gorzo.

16. “Not a plan, but a formula, an art of life, an existential technique: people want to construct their own lives, the architectural devices against which, for the most part, they have had to struggle, will have to be brought on their side, in the sense of counter-utopian constructability of life” (Ghiu 2011: 277).



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