



III. Connecting Communities

Double-page spread from Beata Bartecka and Łukasz Rusznica's 2021 book *How to Look Natural in Photos*.



Connecting Communities: “From Near to Far. Visual Cartographies of the Spaces 2 Mai and Vama Veche”

Exhibition organized by tranzit.ro/Bucharest. Curator: Iuliana Dumitru.

Exhibition design: Alex Axinte. Exhibition presented at the Romanian Peasant Museum, Tancred Bănăţeanu Hall, 15 October–15 November, 2020.

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ABSTRACT

The *Visual Cartographies of the Spaces 2 Mai and Vama Veche* exhibit brings together works of visual art in multiple forms, from different artists, spaces, and historical periods. Artefacts from established artists and villagers are displayed together to explore the connection between two seemingly different communities and the enduring charm of Romania's poshest summer destination.

KEYWORDS

2 Mai and Vama Veche; community; culture; artefacts; images; history.

The villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche have been landmarks of the Romanian socialist space. The physical and geographical elements, such as the border and the sea, constructed a space of marginality, populated by a variety of ethnic groups, which served as a place for political, social, and economic experiments in both modern and communist Romania. Situated on the fringe of empires and later, at the very edge of the southern part of the country's territory, the villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche were both different micro-experiments within the larger demographic, social, and economic laboratory that the province of Dobrogea became from the moment of its incorporation into the Kingdom of Romania until the fall of the communist regime. The development of tourism infrastructure on the Romanian side of the Black Sea coast was the last of these experiments, but the communist state's concern with border security spared these

villages from the development that occurred in other seaside resorts. The sea, the borderland, a multi-ethnic local community, and special state policies were key factors in the development of niche tourism, a process that started in the early twentieth century, reached its peak during the communist era, and, arguably, continues to this day.

The fascination with the villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche and the communities that developed around them over several decades had its starting point during the interwar period. The first summer guests to 2 Mai were those too shy or too young to have made a name for themselves, artists and intellectuals, such as Alexandru Paleologu, who avoided the fashionable summer destination of Balcic and chose instead the beautiful, large, secluded beach and equally “oriental” atmosphere of the small, old city of Mangalia and its neighboring village, 2 Mai (Paleologu, Iorga 2012: 159-160).

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Some, such as Nina Cassian whose poetry inspired the title of the exhibit, reached the village accidentally in the summer of 1954 and continued to visit every year from then on—until her departure to the United States in 1985 (Cassian 2010). By the late 1960s, the village had become famous and even too noisy for others, such as Ion Ioanid who complained that Bucharest holidaymakers disturbed the patriarchal charm the village had once fostered (Ioanid 1996, v. 5: 227-229). Gradually, as the number of tourists grew, and the socialist project of Mangalia Shipyard swallowed a large portion of the beach, many took refuge in the neighboring, southernmost village in Romania, Vama Veche. A summer camp for the employees of Babeş Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, which ran by renting all available rooms from the locals, had opened there in 1962. Together with the canteen which the university opened in 1973, it was the only development that Vama Veche experienced until the fall of the Iron Curtain. Concern for border security coupled with Nicolae Ceauşescu's increased paranoia and his obsession for the urban planning scheme designed to turn villages into urban industrial centers led to the decision to demolish the villages of Hagieni and Vama Veche. Their inhabitants were to be relocated into new apartment buildings in Limanu. When the decision was reached, in 1987, Vama Veche had thirty-two households and no restaurants, pubs, cafes, or stores. Had it not been for the Revolution of 1989, the village would have been erased, as the demolition works started in December that year.

The beach in Vama Veche remained therefore untouched and continued to provide inspiration to artists, such as painter Silvia Radu and her husband, sculptor Vasile Gorduz, Simona Runcan, Ovidiu Marcu, Cristian Pepino, Anamaria Smigelschi, Constantin and Ion Pacea, or Nicolae Comănescu. The list is by no means exhaustive, just as this exhibit also does not encompass all art forms that developed



Fig 1: Prayer pillows and a rosary made by villager Olga Naum. They were sewn and woven from scraps of textile material and used in the Lipovan church. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru, curator of the exhibit.

on the sandy beaches or in the courtyards of the two villages. Theatre and musical performances are absent, while literary creations and films are merely hinted at. Books, novels, memoirs, academic works are sampled and rest quietly on a shelf, barely visible, and with good reason since *From Near to Far* is first and foremost an exhibit about visual art forms. These include the ephemeral installations that Simona Runcan created on the beach in Vama Veche in the 1980s, the hundreds of sketches graphic artist Anamaria Smigelschi drew, the pastel drawings of puppet theatre director Cristian Pepino, the drawings and paintings that Geta Brătescu and Constanța Stratulat created in 2 Mai, the photographs taken by Viorel Simionescu to illustrate how the location of 2 Mai and Vama Veche became a junction between the natural and industrial space, the old slides with portraits of friends that Irina Crivăț made, or the photographic dialogue between son, Alexandru, and father, Adrian Maftei, a tableau vivant that mother and wife, Lucia Maftei, complemented with a ceramic depiction of a snail inspired by the seascape (Dumitru 2020).

On display were not only works from established artists, and it is this point, hidden in plain sight, that constitutes the strength of



the exhibit. Artefacts from villagers mostly designed to embellish the domestic space of the house and yard, but also souvenirs, or agricultural tools, traditional Romanian and Tatar weaving, macramé, Lipovan objects used in church rituals, wooden benches and tables, painted chairs, sculptures were also exhibited. Lenuța Sandu offered a blue vase which she adorned with sand and seashells. Alexandra Naum offered a rosary and the pillows used in church for the head and knees when the Lipovan worship ritual was performed. Ainur Velișa opened the chest with things sewn or received as dowry by his mother, Saide, some of which date back to the early twentieth century. Elena Dumitru offered two old, metallic, restaurant chairs which were once in use at Dobrogeanu Restaurant and which she had painted over and turned into art objects that no one dared to sit on anymore. Itu Constantin, an electrician by trade, agreed to share with the curator some of his own stone and walnut wood sculptures. Liliana Ivan offered old photographs made by Mr. Stancu, the village photographer. Silvia Cubaniț offered a bag of macramé she had made during long winters, and Maria Ghelbere agreed to display three pieces of handmade, colorful tapestry.

These objects can be framed into the naive or popular art category, argues the

curator, but under closer scrutiny they tell the viewer more than one story (*De la aproape către departe* 2020: 4). The agricultural tools, for instance, include a pair of shears which were used by one of the village shepherds, an old occupation practiced continuously from when the village was first established until the end of the communist period, and one that offered a certain degree of autonomy even during the communist period. The prayer pillows used in the Lipovan church were sewn and woven from scraps of material left from various stitching pieces of cloth and thus speak about a time of scarcity but also of faith and centuries-old traditions that endured even in communist Romania. At a closer examination, the visitor discovers that Saide's weaving and Maria Ghelbere's tapestry share common motifs, a subtle indication that the old ethnic communities of the village did not live in isolation from one another. Most strikingly, the sculptures that Itu Constantin made out of old stones and wood that he found around the village and Elena Dumitru's painted chairs tell a story of mutual influences wherein villagers adopted forms of artistic expression from their guests and thus bridged the worlds of high and popular culture. Viorel Simionescu's photos purposely juxtaposed the industrial and rural setting while showcasing a pastoral world that still found its place, albeit awkwardly, among tents and factories. Ada-Maria Ichim's poetic movie *2 Mai Evening* recreates the atmosphere of a typical 2 Mai evening by the beach, while Miruna Tîrcă's documentary *Slack Time* offers an insight into the lives of the villagers after the end of the tourist season. No matter which direction visitors turn their heads, they are exposed to multiple worlds which come together in more ways than one, although this can be seen more clearly during the summer months.

The villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche have been the subject of academic research ever since the early 2000s (Guga 2006, Tîrcă 2004, Vasile 2011, Mihăilescu 2005, Tașcu-



Fig 2: Ceramic depiction of a snail inspired by the seascape, by artist Lucia Maftei. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru, curator of the exhibit.



Fig 3: Right hand corner: photos by Viorel Simionescu juxtaposing natural and industrial landscape followed by smaller photographs made by the local photographer of 2 Mai village, Mr. Stancu. Left hand corner: portraits of local people, part of an artistic dialogue between father, Adrian Maftei, and son, Alexandru Maftei. In the corner, a blue vase made by Lenuța Sandu with sand and seashells. Center: Tatar weaving and macramés sewn by Saide Velișa. In the background, a TV screen showing the film 2 Mai Evening made by Ada-Maria Ichim. Photo credit: Iuliana Dumitru, curator of the exhibit.

Stavre 2017). The theses and monographs were, in large part, based on their authors' firsthand experience with the two villages either as long time vacationers, like Mihăilescu, or as young anthropologists fully immersed in the study of the community, the case of Guga, Tîrcă and Vasile, or as social activists turned political scientists, like Tașcu-Stavre. All of them spent extensive periods of time in the villages inside and outside of the summer season and based their studies on oral history interviews with both locals and tourists. They all sought out ways to understand the present and offer solutions for a sustainable development through a thorough exploration of the past. Though intertwined, all have looked at time, place, space and people as separate entities. The focus was more often than not on the outside and the relation between guest, host and environment, while the inner workings of village life were analyzed partially and only in connection with the subject matter

of the research. As a result, the binary opposition between past and present is at the core of the narrative and divides the audience: a friendlier reader experiences a feeling of nostalgia for the remoteness of fringe seaside socialist landscape in which living conditions were dire and youthful exuberance at its peak. In turn, disillusioned readers still embroiled in condemning the communist past point towards a totalitarian system in which everything was either controlled or lacking and a still muddier present in which touristic infrastructure and living conditions whether in urban or rural settlements are still highly problematic. Assessing past and present with its various threads and the ways in which they connect and coexist is a challenging enterprise for professionals, academics, researchers, sociologists, or activists, and even former tourists. For professional and local artists, cultural production and everyday life were lived experiences, embodied locally.



Iuliana Dumitru, the curator of this exhibit is an insider. Born and raised in 2 Mai, she experienced postsocialist transition firsthand. She had her first job at twelve, preparing coffee for tourists on the camping grounds that her parents managed. Hers was no ordinary childhood. Having been socialized with tourists from a young age, she kept in touch with many of them, developed friendships which turned into networks that later on encouraged her to develop an academic career centered on the village that was once a hub for artists, writers, and actors. Her special position allowed her to move freely between the worlds of the artists and locals, explain the connection between them, and make the visitor privy to the aesthetic intimacy of both.

The villages of 2 Mai and Vama Veche were not artistic colonies in an institutionalized form, but rather places where many free spirits, some of whom were professional artists, congregated in the summer to relax, exchange ideas, and find inspiration for future works. What attracted them here was a particular mix of mostly visible elements (remote, pastoral location, the sea, the border line, an ethnically mixed local community) alongside a deeper sense of shared, hidden, ingrained history. Snippets of this history became visible at times in old worn-out stones, gold-threaded sewing, and dusty paintings. Whether 2 Mai and Vama Veche served as a continuation of the "Romanian Barbizon" that was once Balçic during the interwar period is a question not yet answered. What is certain though is that artists and villagers made use of the means available to them to make life a little more bearable under the strenuous modern, socialist, and postsocialist period. Taken together, the images and material displays ground an in-depth narrative about different histories, times, people and spaces that made a successful transition from a convoluted past to a challenging, slightly more settled present. The visitor's and the tourist's gazes may well be eschewed by nostalgia and

summer vibe, yet the embodied art that developed over decades on both sides of apparently separate worlds testifies to the connection between the past and the present, continuity and change, high and popular culture, creating a spectacular narrative that continues to fascinate Romanians.



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