

## The laboratory-museum: Explorations for a museum of the communist period in Romania

At the end of 2011 The Romanian National Museum Network<sup>1</sup> made public its intention of launching a project for a museum of the communist period in Romania. The starting point for this endeavor was the idea of a laboratory-museum, a concept which goes against the traditional museological practice in Romania where for the most part the museum is still seen as an authoritative and monolithic institution. The point of this project is to work towards a museum format that allows for ideas (both in terms of new historical research and in terms of up to date museum strategic planning) to be tested and openly discussed while they are being implemented. The laboratory-museum is therefore not a temple (it does not propose or attempt to fixate a narrative for our recent history), but a place that welcomes experimentation and takes a grassroots approach towards building an institution that takes seriously its potential audience. The laboratory-museum does not attempt to transform our recent history in a museum object but aims to facilitate a process of coming to terms with this sensitive time in our past.

### The format

Although the museum brings to mind the unchangeable it is possible to refer to a different, parallel institutional format that allows an ongoing dialogue centered on existing debates about our recent history with the public: the *kunsthalle*. Even if at first glance this institutional configuration can seem too adventurous for showcasing contemporary history, its inception and evolution shows that its laboratory like potential<sup>2</sup> proves greatly relevant when it comes to making public the idea of a fluid and participatory image of the communist past.

Without the fixedness of a permanent exhibition but with the possibility of continuously amassing a collection while discussing acquisitions through its exhibition program, the laboratory-museum will share its findings and engage in an open dialogue with community. The laboratory-museum is intended as a space in which to discuss and to show problematic topics that remain opened to inquiry as they are exhibited. As a space that houses exhibitions as work in progress, it will hopefully create an intellectual ground where to seek advice and criticism from historians and from the public alike in order to allow a consistent and constructive dialogue to take place. The laboratory-

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<sup>1</sup>The Romanian National Museum Network is an institutional network consisting of private and public institutions active in the museum area. <http://www.muze.ro/romania/ro>.

<sup>2</sup> For the *Kunsthalle* as a laboratory see Gerald Matt, "The Vienna *Kunsthalle*: Its Future in the Museum Quarter," in special issue "Museums of Social History," *Museum International* (UNESCO, Paris) 53, no. 1 (2001) and Thomas Eller, "Does Berlin Really Need a Permanent *Kunsthalle*?" *Art Newspaper*, no. 202, May 2009, published online April 29, 2009, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/issues/202>. For a history of the institution and its relation to the museum see Helen Meller, "Hamburg and Marseille: Cultural Institutions, Civic Exhibition and City Development 1890–1930," in *New Directions in Urban History: Aspects of European Art, Health, Tourism, and Leisure since the Enlightenment*, eds. Peter Borsay, Gunter Hirschfelder, and Ruth E. Mohrmann (New York and Munich: Waxman, 2000), pp. 147–176 and James J. Sheenan, "From Princely Collections to Public Museums: Toward a History of the German Art Museum," in *Rediscovering History: Culture, Politics, and the Psyche*, ed. Michael S. Roth (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 169–182.

museum can thus become a site that reflects on the processes of interpreting the past by constantly placing it in the current context.

Such an approach can be fruitful if we consider that the process of remembering, of dealing with the past, is very hard to reduce to a preestablished narrative and a clean cut conclusion since it is “unfinished” to quote James Mark<sup>3</sup> and as such it resists traditional museum emplotment. The laboratory-museum can be a solution for the central predicament of curating recent history in Romania. We want to have a museum that doesn’t lecture, but a traditional museum cannot exist without a permanent exhibition that mirrors the collection. We want to exhibit but we don’t know precisely where the artifacts might be and if they are in any condition of being exhibited when and if we find them. We want to bring more attention to the issues at hand but we lack a conceptual framework that goes beyond victimization or constitutes a basis for learning for those who don’t remember or have not experienced this particular time in our history.

### Project Context

For the last 20 years Romanian memory activists have been concerned with recuperating the victimizing aspect of the communist experience. But the idea of violence perpetrated by the communist regime extends beyond the labor camps and prisons of the 40s and 50s to an all pervasive state violence that was present at all levels of life. If one considers this perspective, it becomes obvious that the prisons or state-engineered, violent reeducation processes are the extreme cases of this state violence. However, in Romania, there seldom is a dialogue between the regimes of memory focused on outward terror and those centered on other aspects of life during the communist regime (e.g., the everyday or that of modernization). An entire civilization relying on the idea of the creation of a *new society* and of a *new person* was imported, adapted, and carried out through diverse violent and transformational methods for 40 years in Romania. The society’s reaction to this process of implementation is however as important as the utopian idea itself and, in truth, action and reaction cannot be separated. Up to this point however, Romanian memorial actions were concerned only with its most violent criminal aspects. The communist regime itself was officially condemned by the Romanian head of state in December 2006.

Nevertheless, the present public discourse addresses fragmentarily the divergent regimes of memory currently existing in our country. In fact the discursive practice on communism in Romania today is rather synecdochic (a part tries to reflect the whole). Those who consider the communist regime to be criminal and lived through the horror of the prisons do not, however, represent a majority of population. Many respond negatively to this discourse because they feel left out. In a series of 4 opinion-polls carried out by the ICCMER<sup>4</sup> throughout 2010 and 2011 issues such as the importance of being able to access the Securitate files, the nature of the Communist regime, of suffering during communism and the necessity of a museum about the period were brought up in the questionnaires. The results are revealing for this idea of a discursive practice that only

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<sup>3</sup> James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution Making Sense of the Communist Past in Eastern-Europe* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2011)

<sup>4</sup>Intitute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of Romanian Exile (ICCMER) is a state institution that has the mandate to research the communist past. For more details see <http://www.crimelecomunismului.ro/en/>

refers to a fragment of the population. The majority, as it is revealed by the polls is in contrasting conflict with the victimization discourse. To take just a few examples, the polls feature high percentage of those that believe communism was a good idea carried out badly 47% (August 2010) , 44% (Octombre 2010) and 43% (April 2011). Even a higher numbers of respondents, with 74% (August 2010) and 83% (October 2010), declared that they did not suffer during communism. The polls are signaling the fact that at this point in time, when it comes to the understanding and representing communism in Romania, we are faced with all sorts of hiatuses that are not addressed. There are those who consider the communist regime to be criminal (those who internalized the anticommunist discourse) and then there is the young generation under 20 who recuperates artifacts and instances from the communist past as trendy and cool, lacking the knowledge or the environment where to learn about the communist regime in its entirety, to understand its mechanisms and failings as an utopian civilizational project. This form of postmemory and prosthetic memory (produced via societal intermediaries) comes on an almost sterile ground. The recuperation of the traumatic memory for the past 20 years left gaps that are nowadays filled with memory scraps giving way to a patching up process of recollecting/representing the communist period. There is also an important part of the population who is nostalgic identifying various periods of the communist experience with their youth, with social/professional promotion, with building families, with perceived 'national greatness', etc. At the same time, in the context of economic crises, life within the parameters established by the dictatorship seems more preferable for some because of its predictability.

This situation is also mirrored in a series of focus groups<sup>5</sup> organized by NMNR as part of a first visitor study related to the Laboratory-museum project. Although these first inquires focused on the younger audience (from 20 to 29), they amply showed that, despite heavy mediation, their memory about our recent past reflects the same mosaic of divergent regimes of memory which are reflected in the surveys. Furthermore their representational expectations mirror multiple life experiences in communism from forms of opened repression to forms of individual and social accomplishment. Furthermore, the audience we concentrated our first series of focus groups on seems hardly aware of actions such as the condemnation of communism or memorialisation sites such as the Sighet Memorial of the Victims of Communism and the Resistance. Their reference to the past is mainly mediated through the visual medium (films, television) and their encounter with memory is met with suspicion and distrust. Although, some visited temporary exhibitions on the subject, or saw museums of communism in other east European countries they found them rather uninteresting. However, their disinterest towards the subject is connected to the persistence and fixedness of the traditional museum format which they connect to an inability to engender curiosity (they return to the same exhibition expecting the same thing). The majority of the respondents favor direct contact with the artifact from the period and with a voice identified most often with an expert guide that could explain any queries about it. This is reflective of an effort to

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<sup>5</sup> *JLABORATOR [explorari pentru un muzeu al comunismului in Romania]* carried out from September through November 2012 by the *The National Museum Network* ([www.muzee.org](http://www.muzee.org)) in collaboration with the *Centre for Research in Communication* ([www.codipo.ro](http://www.codipo.ro)) is a first installment of a larger visitor study, that attempts to map the representational expectations and learning habits of a museum audience potentially interested in recent history.

make sense of all these mediated regimes of memory which more than often are highly conflictive. The closeness/contact to the document or object suggests a desire to bypass the confusion they engender.

Since 2007, with the opening of Romanian Archives to the public, historical knowledge about the communist past is slowly being uncovered, functioning as a corrective for all these regimes of memory. However, despite the opening of more and more depositories and archives to researchers, this new scholarship still remains at a specialized level, unable to reach these regimes of memory as it were. Moreover, the pools of reemerging artifacts are in need of filing, documenting and, more often than not, urgent restoring.

For a long time these artifacts from the communist period were considered unworthy, neglected as signs of a past that we wanted to forget. Their almost clandestine resurfacing takes place without a cohesive discursive backdrop on the matter. They are usually bought as memorabilia and seen as trendy, remaining without the possibility of being properly put into context. This situation leads most of the time to a superficial, nostalgic understanding of the past.

Therefore, although 20 years have passed since communism's demise, in Romania there is no narrative framework that can constitute an organic backdrop for a learning experience about the entirety of the communist experience from 1945 to 1989. As we have seen, a majority of the population is left out from this discourse on remembering the communist regime. In this context, the synecdochic approach to memory is hard to avoid. Museum enterprises about the communist regime in Eastern Europe are selective in their approach to represent the past, focusing either on the victimizing discourse or on a marketable and entertaining experience for their audiences.<sup>6</sup> In this larger memorial practice context the discourse surrounding the necessity of a museum of communism in Romania, ranges from the need for a traditional institution such as a typical history museum to not having one at all. We have an argument for a totalizing narrative and the need for a coherent story, the argument of museumizing who goes against the ossification of a still living phenomenon and last but not least the argument of an already existing museum of the period, the Sighet Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance (at the former Sighetul Marmatiei prison). The latter argument, equates the memorial with a successful attempt to represent the entire communist experience reducing the debate between the previous two parties to a superfluous quibble: a museum of communism already exists why make another? With maybe one exception<sup>7</sup> the museum work in itself is not even part of the discussion. The workings entailed by such a project are disputed among the proponents of a traditional museum, almost in their entirety historians and their critics who accuse them enacting a pre-existent historiographical narrative. Although valid, this later aspect falters if one considers the state of many repositories and archives, which a museological initiative,

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<sup>6</sup> On issues of victimization and selective recovery of the communist past in representation, see James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 27–92, 213–221.

<sup>7</sup> Vintila Mihailescu, 'Muzeul comunismului dincolo de bine si de rau', *Critic Atac*, published online, September 5, 2011 (<http://www.criticatac.ro/9721/muzeul-comunismului-dincolo-de-bine-si-rau/>) - last accessed May 26, 2013). Professor Mihailescu also discusses both the necessity of having a memorial for the victims and the imperative to move beyond the unilateral focus on such memory practice after more than 20 years since the fall of the communist regime.

even if traditional, would have to take into account. We are simply not aware of the state of many repositories and the necessity of preserving this past before attempting any retrieval, emplotment or commemorative action. Contrary to some beliefs these objects exist and the work needed to archive and document them is quite painstaking<sup>8</sup>. The museum is about the object and as we have seen in the focus groups, even very young ones are very acutely aware of this.

## Proposal

In this context the *Laboratory-museum of communism* proposes an approach to representing communism that starts from a theoretical framework grounded in historical specificities coupled with responsible museum practice. The *laboratory-museum* aims to address various regimes of memory engaging in a dialogue with the civil society and the institutions that hold archives and repositories on our recent past. In this sense, we propose the *laboratory* metaphor as an overarching concept that can accommodate both the nature of the communist historical experience in Romania and a museum project methodology.

The representation of the Romanian communist historical experience should reflect the specificity of its ideology as the latter was fundamentally based on scientism and radical transformism. A complex of policies and narratives that rest on the premise of *socialist society seen as a laboratory* where the possibilities for achieving utopia are tested again and again seems to be a viable theoretical framework. Moreover it seems to be relevant for connecting the inception of utopia (the utopian ideals of the “founding fathers”) with the process of its implementation and the society’s reaction to it, the process of negotiation as it were. Going back to the origins of the idea in describing Lenin’s approach to the building of a future glorious society, Gorky compared the “great leader” with a chemist that worked in a laboratory. However, unlike the chemist, Lenin was working with living material, the working class. In his turn, Stalin always preferred practical observations to abstract theories and went as far as employing the laboratory metaphor in order to describe the new civilization that was constructed in the ‘first workers’ state’. Communists claimed to create an entirely novel civilization, but they worked toward it by suspending any moral conditioning as nothing could be above the achievement of building socialism in one country. Under the circumstances, the entire country became a laboratory.

If we consider the framework of the Stalinist civilisational project being transferred to all the former communist states as a premise for the laboratory –museum project, we can see our much discussed historical specificities in an organic context.

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<sup>8</sup> The process of documenting one of the most successful socialist realist paintings from the early 50s, *Grivita 33*, took for the most part 2 years. Although many copies were created (4 of them were found up to this point), the original (a 14,8 square meters painting) seems to have simply disappeared, lost (to be read destroyed) in the transition from Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej’s to Ceausescu’s rule (the two communist dictators of Romania). *Grivita 33*, created by Gavril Miklossy in 1951, seems to have had an important representational role in the development of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej’s personality cult. It was also central in the establishment of a canon in terms of socialist representation. This is, however, but one example of a documentation process needed for an object. It is also an example for the potential of the artifact to take us beyond an illustrative approach (illustrating an already known narrative) in the representation of the communist period in Romania.

Maintaining the Stalinist agenda for 40 years, going from a new man and a new socialist society to a new Romanian in “multilaterally developed socialist society” (Nicolae Ceausescu’s version of state socialism), Romanian communism can be framed in a larger narrative that connects the history of communism in Romania to the period before 1945 and why not to one after 1989.

Seen from this angle, a socialist undertaking such as the *Canal*, a domestic Stalinist project, in early 1950s, that aimed to build a channel to connect the Danube with the Black Sea, which became one of the most notorious labor camps in Romania, can be seen as a site for memories of extermination and trauma. At the same time, it can also be explained as an extreme example of radical transformation that, in fact, permeated all levels of life from the learning and health systems to economy, industry and art. In this reading, the *Canal* was a site where the new civilization and a new type of person turned into reality, but it is also a visible sign for the persistence of Stalinist values throughout the regime since the Canal project was re-launched during Ceausescu’s time. It becomes a referent for the new man’s project to change nature itself, for the new society’s triumph of science and reason, for what were the actual results of attempting the experiment. It does not only refer to trauma but also to the optimism of the regime in its drive to transform society and to continuously test the utopia in order to do so. If we consider the communist experiment from this inclusive perspective we allow for a more nuanced view of the communist experience in Romania from 1948 to 1989. The idea of communism in Romania seen as a laboratory for achieving a true socialist society can relate to a wider public because it relies on a myriad of experiences, from forms of open repression to forms of individual social accomplishment. By taking into consideration the possibility of representing communism in Romania in all its stages of development while also taking into consideration ethnic, cultural, religious and even gender minorities under communism from 1948 to 1989, the project will set aside the idea of a representation that only victimizes the Romanian population.

In terms of actual objectives the Laboratory–museum aims to launch a comprehensive visitor study project (which started in September 2012) that will focus on uncovering the learning habits of a visitor interested in the recent history. Also, *we* will start a process of gathering evidence of artifacts, preparing a feasibility study for what could constitute a future collection and a program of temporary exhibitions that will make this collection visible to the public. We will store all this documentation on a site, a first step towards a virtual repository, thus giving the public the possibility to *re-visit* artifacts that comprised the subject of past temporary exhibitions. We will constantly update information on former temporary exhibitions with up to date scholarly references and information on newly found artifacts in a process of recalibrating past projects to current developments. We aim at being transparent with our knowledge and museum practices by making public the entire process of amassing a collection. We aim to engage and include the public in a democratic process where their voices can be heard.

*The laboratory-museum of communism* is in fact a first stage in a process of strategic planning for an institution that centers on the representation of the communism period in Romania. It will developed on two wide levels: a preparatory level (conducting visitor studies, collecting, documenting, restoring and sharing the ongoing process with the public through temporary exhibitions) and the development of the actual museum

structure (adapting the criteria of strategic museum planning to the discoveries of the preparatory project).

The *laboratory-museum* was first presented at the Central European University in 2011 and 2012 within a series of workshops of the project *Re-visualizing the Recent Past: Museums of Communism and Recent History in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, a project of Pasts Inc. Center for Historical Studies, part of the Eunamus Project (European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European citizen), coordinated by Linköping University, Sweden and financed by FP7 program of the European Union. 2010 - 2012. (<http://www.eunamus.eu>)

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