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POSTFACE

Exhibitions as Tools to Think With: On Impact and Process

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Unlike the introduction, the postface to this catalogue is in the pleasant position of addressing those who have already looked at the images and who have read the entries, and who presumably found them interesting enough to make it this far. But this postface is not about the end of a book or of a project but rather about a beginning. Of what? One can wonder. In this postface, I want to talk about how research projects that include exhibitions in their making allow not only for knowledge to be built collaboratively and in an interdisciplinary way but also about a continuation of the impact of the research, the exhibition process and the way stakeholders look at things after the end of the funding.

In February 2018 I came into contact for the first time with the materials accumulated by members of the Hidden Galleries team. I remember I came to visit Cork and, in the company of most of the members of the research team, I was shown, projected on a big screen, anti-religious propaganda movies from Soviet times and images found in the many archives in Romania, Hungary, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. While I was listening and asking questions about the stories of repression from twentieth century Central and Eastern Europe, I realized how fascinating this collection was. The visual and non-visual materials contained many paradoxes relating to what kind of information one can find in the archives and the complex and fragmented nature of the stories told. My contribution to that early meeting took not only the form of questions and suggestions, but of introducing to members of the team the idea, which I have explored elsewhere (Nicolescu 2016), that exhibitions can work as devices that can be used in situations of conflict and that they have a processual nature.

Seven months later I was employed to work on the project as Curatorial Lead, being in charge of using the collected materials to design four exhibitions in four different venues: the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania; the Open Society Archives in Budapest, Hungary; University College Cork, Ireland; and The National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History in Chișinău, Republic of Moldova. As a curator and visual anthropologist who has experience of doing research in archives, I started to look not only at the images collected, but also at what researchers in the project found "shiny" while spending months and years in the archives. This was the same principle used by Kathy Ferguson (2008) in her description of the research process in the archives: that while searching for illuminating things, meaning those things that stir up the imagination, those who enter the archives are provoked to make their own connections and to dream. Together with James Kapaló, we gathered recurrent themes and recurrent types of images, which later were transformed into curatorial concepts that were used in constructing the displays. With the researchers, we drew on their ethnographic encounters with members of the communities they researched, asking questions about the usefulness of revisiting archives, or of making their stories public; we asked for other images or objects that could be used for the displays.

The project team's ethnographic work also resulted in the presence of communities in the exhibition. In the images you see here, there are members of the Calvinist choir from Ocna Sibiului and Old Calendarist Orthodox monks from various monasteries in Romania, all of whom participated at the launch of the exhibition in Cluj. Some saw their presence at the launch as a symbolic reparation of past traumatic events. Others, with whom research was conducted, preferred to step back. All these encounters with people and objects, documents and memories helped us explore ways in which different stories could be made visible, but also ways in which difficult or problematic visual material could be shown in more subtle ways, or only referred to while not displayed at all. Questions of authenticity, partiality, trust, the ethics of making visible (and public) different specters of reality were recurrent in our discussions, especially in the context of our exhibitions, which bring new and different forms of visibility than the published work you hold in your hands.



In the making and opening of the exhibitions, the reality of exhibition as process became more evident. As researchers Cindrea, Hesz and Șincan underlined above, while having the images blown up on the wall, a different encounter with the visual material took place. Differently from a printed book, an article or an on-line posting, large (or smaller) prints on a museum wall allow for a bodily proximity and for a new type of knowledge to emerge. In the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, visitors were able to notice the facial expressions of people in the photographs (be it pain, joy, or nonchalance when the camera was hidden and they had no clue they were being photographed), to experience similitude with relatives that came to visit the exhibition, to see more closely the bare feet of some peasants, a missing finger, the recurrence of the same cheaply produced paper icons on a wooden altar. All these details, presented closer to their and our eyes, made both visitors and researchers understand new and fresh things. We aimed to let the images speak for themselves, but we also introduced some labels, both long and short, about icons in museums, underground spaces and hiding techniques (encountered both among communities and the secret police), police aesthetics and last, but not least, a difficult cultural patrimony: the images and objects confiscated from some religious groups and never returned. When we did not know the answer, we were not afraid to ask questions.



Exhibition *Hidden Galleries: Clandestine Religion in the Secret Police Archives* at the Museum of Art in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. © Hidden Galleries project. Photo by Roland Vaczi.

To continue the idea of exhibitions as processes, the exhibition making was paralleled by a series of film projections, lectures, seminars and collaborations with high schools and universities, and by an online presence through various social media. Different reactions from members of the public, collected in discussions but also through feedback cards, helped us realize the innovatory dimension of the project and of the materials shown, but also point to where improvement could be made. Ideas on how to create impact once the exhibition was closed made us re-think the borders of the museum. From the encounters with different publics, we learned. It is exactly this aspect that makes us realize that the impact of the project is not yet finished, but only just started.

I end this postface by drawing on Derrida's (1998 [1995]) ideas on the two paradoxical forces that co-exist in archives (love and death). On the one hand, looking at this catalogue's entries or visiting the exhibitions, we witness how archives and archivists preserved and cared (voluntarily or not) for some stories to reach us in the present; the materials are still with us, and in the present we can reinterpret their many layers. On the other hand, one can witness how archives themselves were (and very often still are) instruments of power in the hands of all those who control them or have access to them. In the past they worked as proof and the tool for the destruction of certain people, or of entire religious communities. In many of the entries in this catalogue and in their display in the exhibitions one can find both forces at work. This catalogue is a catalogue of the digital archive, but through permutations and associations, it is also a catalogue that can be associated to any re-making of the exhibition in different venues and contexts. It allows for re-visits and for new interpretations. It is in this paradox that the power of the project resides. The idea is to make readers and visitors curious and allow them to search for more information in and beyond catalogues, archives or gallery spaces.



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