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## The museum's lexis: driving objects into ideas

### Keywords

anthropology, exhibition making, innovative research methods, politics of aesthetics, postsocialism

### Abstract

This article discusses how exhibition making can be seen as a creative method for building anthropological knowledge. Situations of conflict between social classes, curatorial practices and disciplines remind us of the existence of a very subtle and enduring museum lexis which governs how political ideas are put on display. Research was conducted in tandem with an exhibition the author curated in the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant 21 years after the collapse of the communist regime in South-Eastern Europe. Reflecting upon this process, the author shows how museums use a specific lexis that is based not only on existing practices but also on contingency. These facets each engage two different notions of temporality: while practice involves repetitiveness, predictability and continuity over different historical periods, contingency creates unexpected groupings of things, settings and meanings. It is the balance of the interplay between practice and contingency that dictates how the audience engages with museum discourse.

### Introduction

This article reflects on the freedoms and constrains of current ethnographic displays by looking at a series of objects from the stores of a museum. I explore this through the process of making of an exhibition at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest (NMRP) in 2011. The exhibition, called *Connections: Objects in Relation and Context*, was part of an anthropological exploration of the abrupt shift from monarchy to communism and the ensuing of the post-communist order in modern Romania through the analysis of the multiple transformations that have occurred in the NMRP (Nicolescu, 2015). The argument of the article is that the curation of this exhibition prompted the continuous re-positioning of objects throughout the 20th century to support the different successive ideologies and work practices and, more particularly, the re-definition of the ethnographic object based on the concepts of contingency and historicity.

Ethnographies of exhibition-making show how exhibitions work to assimilate and explain conflicts as processes, rather than as ends in themselves. Where Paul Carter has described the process of exhibition making as collaborative and integral to knowledge construction (Carter, 2004: 11-13), I argue that exhibition-making indicates the limits of collaboration between different museum workers and exposes important conflicts over what each professional group considers that 'correct' practice should be. This leads to a refinement of anthropological knowledge in the sense that exhibitions actually talk not only about the objects on display but also about the people who prompted them and the ideologies at work. Cultural theorist Alexandra Schüssler explored the commonalities of everyday life in different parts of Europe while curating the exhibition *Villa Sovietica* in the Ethnographic Museum in Geneva, Switzerland in collaboration with numerous European researchers and artists (Schüssler, 2009). Similarly, social scientists Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel arrived at the theorisation of iconoclasm during the process of curating the impressive exhibition *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image-Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, in Karlsruhe, Germany (Latour and Weibel, 2002).

The years from 1980s to early 2000s have been seen worldwide as a period of intensive growth of new museums and the re-organisation of old ones, described by some authors as 'a museum boom' (see Burton and Scott, 2007; Starn, 2005). Increasing numbers of anthropologists have conducted anthropological research in museums and heritage institutions (Macdonald, 2002a; Sansi-Roca, 2007; Butler, 2007; Harris, 2012; Joy, 2012) and collaborated in the actual making of exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> Their position as anthropologists involved in making displays allows them to not only show the 'behind the scenes' view of public engagement, but also provide insight into the actual outcomes of the impact and dissemination of anthropological knowledge taking place in various types of museums. The dual role of participant academic means that the relationship between theory and practice, and

the ways they inform and reinforce each other, has become an important concern.

Anthropologists need to refine their understanding of how knowledge is produced and assimilated in museum practice. For these researchers, conflicts in museums are to be regarded not only as political struggles,<sup>ii</sup> but as processes of constructing differences between different groups, social disciplines and ultimately, sensibilities displayed publicly.

In this context, we could see the NMRP as a ‘typical’ ethnographic museum because this term has come to reflect the complex interplay of ethnology, anthropology and folklore, the three very close competing and often overlapping social disciplines co-existing in Europe (e.g. Buchowski, 2012; Green and Laviolette, 2015). The term ‘ethnographic’ comprises all these disciplines and allows them to enter into a non-hierarchical conversation to each other. As I argue elsewhere (Nicolescu, 2016), in the Romanian case the terms – and artefacts – comprising ‘folk art’ and ‘ethnographic object’ are interchangeable, mostly because Romania’s social research was funded to conduct research only within the national borders. Furthermore, between 1950 and 1970 sociology was marginalised and ethnology carried fascistic connotations so ethnographic research was even more subsumed to folkloric research. After the collapse of the communist regime, urban anthropological research appeared as an innovation and was conducted also by researchers from the NMRP’s Research Department. However, the collaboration with anthropologists from Western Europe was the privilege of a small and highly visible group of the museum’s employees while the rest were very much associated with how social research was conducted during communism. This distinction was part of the forceful curatorial conflict existing in the NMRP since the fall of the communist regime in 1989.

The two main groups of museum employees had opposing ideas as to what a museum was and how to engage with objects on display. On the one hand, there were the *muzeografi* trained in a ‘vulgar’ understanding of historical materialism during the communist period.

Their role corresponded with the Soviet model of cultural workers and technical bureaucrats that emerged following the Second World War. On the other hand, there were artists and social researchers (ethnographers and folklorists) who had no training in communist-era museology and who assigned to lead the museum in the post-communist era. This group projected a more transcendental image of the Romanian peasant, an image arising from their self-named 'anti-communist' political and aesthetic views. Some of them were also preoccupied with innovation and deconstructing the *muzeografi*'s way of thinking and making exhibitions. In the early 1990s, 'anti-communists' fancied displaying objects without cases and labels, taking a sensuous, playful and almost surrealist approach to interrogating the nature of objects. They started to denominate objects on display as 'peasant art,' which contrasted to how *muzeografi* called the same objects as *artă populară*, a term which can be only partially translated as 'folk art.'

These two factions corresponded to a distinction existing in the Eastern European society at large, as formulated by Konrád and Szelényi (1979) that during communism the intelligentsia was constituted of two main groups: the technocrat intelligentsia and the humanist intelligentsia. Technocrats were a product of the 1960s and 1970s, possessing technical and bureaucratic expertise, whereas, the humanist intelligentsia originated from the former aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and were in control of more liberal professions and arts. In Romania, during the late 1960s, many of the marginalised intelligentsia of the 1950s were re-appropriated and supported by the communist regime. After the fall of the communist regime, these two kinds of elites co-existed within the museum space and their different views on what an ethnographic museum should be about used to collide frequently.

In this context, curating an exhibition in the NMRP was always likely to be a problematic and unstable venture. This was precisely the reason why I thought that my role as an exhibition maker and anthropologist could disrupt and make visible the competing

fractions in the museum itself, and in Romanian society at large. This dual role aided in revealing the insight into the role of the lexis in practice and the contingency of the ethnographic object. When arranging my period of research at the NMRP, I strategically planned curating my own exhibition in collaboration with the two fractions presented above as a practical component within the larger research agenda in order to understand this conflict by placing myself at the heart of it. Art theoretician Brian Holmes (2006) describes exhibition making as a device, as something that transforms itself in the process of making, and not as an end in itself; it is this transformation, Holmes argues, that captures the attention of the public discourse. The concept of exhibition as process and device helped in my exploration of the freedoms and constraints of the museum's lexis, and its dependence on when, where and by whom it is produced. The type of exhibition which allows for such processual analysis is what Macdonald and Basu (2007) refer to as 'exhibition experiments,' and what other curators, such as Carter (2004), define as 'material thinking.'

Differently from Holmes' understanding of the exhibition as a device in permanent transformation, the notion of lexis draws more on a grammar and/or text-like interpretation of exhibitions and their elements. I use the term lexis not just because it incorporates the idea of structure and transmission based on practice, but also because of its relation to the notion of temporality as introduced by film theorist Christian Metz (1985) and developed by anthropologist Christopher Pinney (1992). Metz argues that photography has 'no temporal size (...) is better fit, or more likely, [is] to work as a fetish' (Metz 1985: 81). Pinney shows how, in contrast, film engages profoundly with the issue of temporality. He argues that different visual forms have particular lexes that can be deconstructed into 'units of reading' (Pinney 1992: 28). Following this line of thought, I suggest that museum displays operate with both these understandings of lexis and their particular uses of temporality in order to convey meanings. Museums do so by employing two main notions that are seldom in

conflict: practice and contingency. The practice of working with museum objects and curating exhibitions assumes repetition and continuation of certain things learned in the past, in a similar way Metz and Pinney discuss the fixity of photography. Museums operate mostly in a fetishist way because they take objects out of their lived world and display them in a manner suggesting a fixed point in time. In contrast, contingency opens new possibilities of association between objects and ideas and consequently creates alternative and more dynamic temporalities. The interplay between these two orders of perception rests in the degree of free association with which museum curators allow themselves to operate and, by extension, the degree of the same to which the visitor is subjected.

In planning the exhibition, I thought of a name that might appeal to both groups in the conflict. Since 1993, in the museum there had been a tradition of organising an exhibition on the Day of the Children (celebrated in many socialist countries on 1 June). Since nobody was organising anything for the subsequent June, I proposed *Big and Small* as a neutral theme and as the initial name for the exhibition that I curated. *The Big and Small Project* was accepted by everybody in the museum: 35 employees (*muzeografi*, artists and researchers) participated in semi-structured interviews and in lengthy discussions on what to include and how to make the display. During the selection of the objects, and in response to my intention to also look at how audiences perceive the museographic discourse, I soon realised that the name *Big and Small* was too directive. I also wanted both visitors and museum personnel to be able to select some objects and make their own exhibitions with photographic replicas of the objects, knowing that access to the stores was a topic of dispute. Therefore, I changed the name of the exhibition to a more abstract one: *Connections: Objects in Relation and Context*, which I thought to be more inclusive. It was a name that included the dichotomy presented in the initial proposal for *Big and Small*, but also made visible the contingent nature of museum objects of which I was beginning to become aware. This contingency manifested itself

through the multiplicity of meanings that could be created by making objects create contexts for one another.

In total, the exhibition included 107 objects. Each was carefully photographed, and each individual photograph had its background trimmed and was then mounted to a magnetic strip. Figure 1 shows how these ‘magnetic’ replicas of the three-dimensional objects were placed, together with short descriptions of the objects’ histories, in a cupboard near each of the real objects on display. In order to create the intended form of participatory exhibition, each visitor was asked to choose a selection of images of objects (preferably at least three) and make their own small exhibition on two metal sheets positioned at the entrance to the gallery.

**Insert Figure 1. Objects with no labels; explanations placed in wooden drawers**  
Source: Personal archive, photograph by Răzvan Nicolescu

### **The historicity of ethnographic objects**

Kenneth Hudson – a critical voice in the museum world and the founder of the European Museum Forum – argues that ‘ethnographic museums collect widely but do not dig deeply’ (Hudson, 1987: vii). In his book *Museums of Influence*, he did not mention any ethnographic museum among the first 200 most significant museums in the world over the last two centuries. Rather, he seems to suggest that ethnographic museums constantly fail to pose important questions for humanity. Instead, their displays are constrained by the kind of objects that exist in collections, as well as by the exclusive knowledge and specific epistemological paradigms in which their curators work. I found this to be very much the case in the NMRP, wherein the nature of the post-socialist ethnographic museum maintained rigid rules concerning curatorial management of collections and their organising logics. During my research, *muzeografi* considered the stores they cared for during communist times as ‘theirs.’

They restricted access to outsiders and forbade changing either the content or categories of these stores. All *muzeografi* seemed to have been united by a common way of dealing with objects in the stores and by a common faith in the same principles which included rigorous rules for indexation inherited from the communist times and considered to be ‘scientific.’ In contrast, they saw artists and curators as having negligent and ‘all over the place’ approaches to exhibition making. I argue that this attachment to a certain methodology of curating and displaying objects clearly indicated *muzeografi*’s belonging to a certain discipline and to a certain era of curation.

As a result of the contentious nature of control and the *muzeografi*’s methodology of work within stores in the museum, I selected objects and documents from a multitude of stores in the NMRP in order to diversify the impact and representation within the exhibition. I used objects from three different permanent collections: the official stores of the museum that contained mainly antique folk art objects; the semi-official store *The Archive of the Present Tense* created in the 1990s by researchers to introduce challenging understandings of the ethnographic object including everyday objects from urban and rural areas; and the unofficial store containing objects linked to communist propaganda that was established in the first years of the communist regime also by researchers and artists.<sup>iii</sup> This also meant that advice from various museum specialists, who had very different positions in the curatorial conflict inside the museum, was sought in the curatorial process. This produced, at times, contradictory information. For example, in one case the different pieces of advice gave rise to the situation such that antique folk objects selected were exhibited alongside recent communist paraphernalia. This allowed the unexpected result that folk objects came to represent a specific time period and take a politically active role within the exhibition narrative and curatorial process.<sup>iv</sup>

**Insert Figure 2. Objects displayed in *Connections: Objects in Relation and Context* (NMRP 2011)**  
**Source: Personal archive**

Figure 2 shows 88 of the 107 objects included in the exhibition *Connections: Objects in Relation and Context*. The objects represent an assemblage of the very different stores NMRP has accumulated in its tumultuous past: antique folk items, modern interpretations of folk objects (*artizanat*), representations of peasants in propaganda posters or in black and white photography, items received from other European and non-European collections, as well as mundane objects, such as a lollipop candy and car seat upholstery. This assemblage shows not only the high degree of diversity corresponding to the diverse collections in the NMRP, the historical mix of institutions, fragments, deletions, people and practices, but also the potentiality of ethnographic objects to relate to history.

The narratives constructed by the stores themselves were ‘distorted’ by the new associations created within the exhibition space. Susan Crane (2004) remarked on the potentiality of objects to represent not only the certainty given by the collections of which they are part, but also to create ‘distortions’ in the way the public has related to them in the recent past. Through the use of replicas and personal involvement with the objects on display, I tried to see the extent to which these distortions could serve not only to critique the current museographical discourse, but also to invite the public’s active participation.

I now explain how this assemblage created by the exhibition *Connections: Objects in Relation and Context* talks about the complicated history of this museum institution and how both museum employees and visitors related to the objects on display.

**Insert Figure 3. Ceramic bowl from the national art contest held in 1906**

The **ceramic bowl** in Figure 3 was recommended to me by a *muzeograf* responsible for the *Ceramic collection*. The bowl won a prize at a national art contest organised in 1906 in

Bucharest. This contest was held under the patronage of the Romanian Royal Family and coincided with the official opening of the Museum of National Art in Bucharest in what was to become an imposing red brick building built in the Romanian national style of the early 20th century. This series of events was related to the consolidation of the Romanian nation state. However, the Museum of National Art had a rather short life: in 1951, four years after the end of the Second World War when the Communist Party came to power in Romania, museums, like most public institutions, changed completely. This institution's collections were split mainly into two smaller ones and handed over to two brand new institutions created by the new political regime. This very same ceramic bowl was sent to the newly opened Museum of Folk Art that was established by the new communist regime in the former palace of the aristocratic Știrbey family in the centre of Bucharest. Simply by changing its store and host institution, the bowl was re-branded from a national art object to folk art.

After the ceramic bowl was installed in the new location, its old location, partially destroyed by the bombardments, attracted the attention of the new state authorities. The red brick building appealed to the communist leaders: in 1955 it became the Lenin–Stalin Museum. In this context, the painting showing engineers in the crops, depicted in Figure 4, was exhibited for the first time.

**Insert Figure 4. Painting showing engineers in the crops. The image was used to express the collectivisation process, from the Image Archive of the NMRP/ Fonds the Museum of the Party**

In 1966, following a nationalistic turn in the communist regime in Romania and the coming to power of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Lenin–Stalin Museum became the Museum of the History of the Communist Party, of the Revolutionary and Democratic Movement of Romania (known popularly as The Museum of the Party). The painting representing engineers in the crops was removed from display in this latter museum and relegated to one

of the unofficial museum stores situated in the basement of the building, together with early communist propaganda items. While these Stalinist works were hidden in the stores, it was time to praise the achievements of the Romanian communist regime of the time: among others, the painting of babies and obstetricians was exhibited.

**Insert Figure 5: *Babies and obstetricians*, from the Image Archive of the NMRP/ Fonds the Museum of the Party**

It was 45 years after the inauguration of the Lenin–Stalin Museum and 20 years after the inauguration of The Museum of the Party that the communist regime descended into bloodshed and Ceaușescu was killed on Christmas Day 1989. During the same cold winter, most of the communist items (but not all) were distributed to other institutions.<sup>v</sup>

The collection of folk art objects was returned to the red brick building, much augmented and re-categorised by the meticulous work of *muzeografi* trained in communist times. But the folk art collections did not find their way back to the red brick building alone. In February 1990, the artist Horia Bernea was appointed director of the newly created institution and *muzeografi* brought to this institution to continue to take care of the collections as they did during the communist times. The red brick building was now renamed for the fourth time in the last century as The Museum of the Romanian Peasant (more than a decade later, the post-socialist authorities added ‘National’ to its title). The return of the folk objects to the building where they were collected for the first time marked a strong continuity with the ideology that preceded the communist regime and included representation of the Romanian identity through recourse to a particular romantic and idealised image of peasants (Mihăilescu, 2011).

My ethnographic material suggests that both *muzeografi* and the self-named ‘anti-communist’ artists and researchers used the more evident contrasts between them in order to contrast two opposing idealised identities which included different conceptions about how objects and ideas should be put on display. This contrast was made even more visible by projecting these ideals over the same set of objects. The reason why objects really differed was because they were already regimented into different categories, represented by the stores, unofficial collections, permanent displays and exhibitions. Classic works on collections (Stewart, 2001 [1993]; Baudrillard, 1994; Derrida, 1996) suggest that these tend to be profoundly embedded in an internal logic established by the initial founder and perpetuated by the subsequent contributors to these collections. Other more recent biographies of collections and stores in European museums might indicate the opposite. For example, Tythacott shows how collections of Chinese objects underwent re-classification in European museums (‘art,’ ‘archeology’ or ‘antiquity’) according to ‘changing regimes of ethnology, art history, archaeology (...) of how Chinese objects have been classified in the West’ (Tythacott, 2012: 88). Similarly, Elliott discusses the meaning of a collection of plaster heads donated to the Cambridge museum by a British artist. Understanding of this collection ranged from ‘highly prized visualisations of anthropological data to embarrassing anachronism or unwanted junk’ (Elliott, 2012: 216). Even if these two examples show how the re-categorisation of objects in collections indicates a certain desire to break the logic of collections, the aim does not always succeed.

Curators from both sides of the conflict were at the forefront of stretching and challenging such practices and legacies. They all actively restricted access to certain objects or the use of certain curating methodologies only to people within their group. The aim was to reinvigorate the distinction between both curatorial camps. I contend that through the act

of curating, museum practitioners attributed themselves to certain cultural identities or ideologies which were materialised in objects and practices.

### **The contingent object of folk art**

Folk art is generally defined as ‘the work of ordinary men and women’ and as having a universal and timeless appeal (Hill 2002:6), despite folklore specialists insisting that only very talented individuals would produce the best aesthetic pieces.

The tradition of folkloric studies in Eastern Europe dates as far back as the end of the 19th century, following a German cultural model of nationhood based on a Romantic view on peasants and peasant objects. Even so, the preoccupation with folk objects, the opening of dozens of new folk museums or folk sections in regional museums reached a totally unprecedented scale during the communist regime (Nicolescu, 2016). Similarly, other communist states used folkloric research and the display of folk art collections to create very specific readings of the past and present social transformations. Anthropologist Deema Kaneff (2004) shows how in communist Bulgaria folklore helped to dislocate the past from the present so that the socialist state could appropriate ‘tradition’ for its purposes. In the Romanian context, it has been argued that the obsession for folk art collection and folkloric research during communism was related to the methodological dis-interest in the social context (Hedeşan, 2008) or to the continuation of the nationalist populist model during communism (Gilberg, 1990). The communist regime did not collect folk items to show the realities of peasant life, but developed them as a metaphor for a-temporality.<sup>vi</sup> In the exhibition a little more than 70 of the objects on display could be categorised under the label of folk art: they are handmade objects crafted by peasants, such as wooden spoons, cradles, chairs, ceramic pots, leather belts, sandals, boots and decorated textiles belonging to different regions and ethnic minorities in Romania.

As a response to the use of folk art during communism, artists and researchers in the NMRP innovated in collecting everyday objects and grouped them into the newly instituted and semi-official storage *The Archive of the Present Tense*.

**Insert Figure 6. A tiny green ceramic ballerina from *The Archive of the Present Tense Collection***

The collection of the green ceramic ballerina, shown in Figure 6, symbolised a turn towards pop / hybrid cultures, situated somewhere at the intersection between rural and urban, between valuable and non-valuable, very similar to uncanny surrealist encounters with objects.<sup>vii</sup> At the same time, objects like this one represented a clear demarcation from the official stores and from *muzeografi*'s definition of folk art and their understandings of the peasant world.

**Insert Figure 7. Ceramic tractor**

On the one hand, objects like the ceramic tractor (shown in Figure 7) were considered by the same researchers and artists as kitsch because they belonged to the category of *artizanat*. This term embodies modern interpretations of folk art that was produced for mass consumption during the communist era. Some of these objects were produced by peasants working in cooperatives (*cooperative de producție*) that had been arranged in the state's attempt to 'modernise' peasants. Typical examples are the ceramic tractor and the plate with the hammer and sickle. I included these objects in the exhibition against the background of their exclusion from displays since the early 1990s. This exclusion had to do with their ambiguous position in-between tradition and modernity, which was at odds with the way most post-socialist regimes in Eastern and Southern Europe tended to present peasants in different romantic guises untouched by modernity (Herzfeld, 2004; Mihăilescu, 2008).

Therefore, in the exhibition's economy of meaning, the selected folk objects marked a very particular temporality: they talked about peasants in the process of modernisation and thus let peasants be perceived as historical subjects.

The self-named 'anti-communist' researchers and artists were extremely critical of *artizanat*, as an industrial, forced production of readymade items, and considered them unauthentic replicas of the genuine folk objects that used to be handcrafted by peasants. Differently from them, *muzeografi* appreciated and massively collected *artizanat* and considered the ceramic ballerina as being non-valuable. These reciprocal accusations talk about the contingency of kitsch, and how notions of authenticity and value are socially and historically constructed in the same space and time by different groups of people. For *muzeografi*, the tractor meant *artizanat*, which was related with the bigger project of turning peasants into workers. For artists, the ballerina represented an exotic return to naïve art and pop culture that they had not experienced in the communist Romania. Despite both groups working with adaptations of antique traditional folk objects to various types of modernity, I believe the various groups kept the stores separate from one another as a way of keeping the many distinctions between them alive. The distinctions in taste, class and political values between these two groups of museum workers indicate their faith in two contrasting types of modernity which are based on notions of either more egalitarian, or more hierarchical social organization.

However, despite the collections' distinctive logics, internalised by both groups in conflict working with these separate collections, visitors seemed not to care about the distinctive provenance of objects and their initial political affiliation as the following examples show. One young visitor recollected his deceased father when he saw the replica of the painting showing the engineers in the crops, although most of the curators in the NMRP believed that this particular painting was just a typical object of Stalinist propaganda. For this

visitor however, the familiar beret of the engineer, the same courageous look, had very personal meanings and the picture's political connotations appeared to be of much less importance to him. Instead, what was really important was the possibility to integrate these objects into his personal life history. Another woman grouped together on the metal board the replica of a pair of Korean shoes from the *Foreign Countries Collection*<sup>viii</sup> with the image of babies and obstetricians and the figure of the national poet, an assemblage which alluded to her childhood in the countryside. The actual provenance of the objects seemed again not to matter at all. Every item on display had its own unique story, and this grouping outside their respective stores led to new meanings: Romanian folk objects that had strong nationalist connotations before and during socialism were put in a larger perspective when displayed together with items from Congo (gifted by a museum in Belgium), Mexico, India, Vietnam, China, and Korea.

Although the director of the museum was disappointed with my selection of a woven textile showing the portrait of an important national poet, two retired textile artists spent almost an hour looking at this item. Their initial characterisation of this *artizanat* item as 'kitsch' was soon replaced by a minute analysis of the technicalities of the production of the textile. They concluded that the impressive piece of work had been executed by a trained and very skilled textile artist and not by a peasant.

These examples show the changing meaning of an object or its replica. I suggest that the same object, enacted in the space through curatorial free-association, created different images for different viewers, whereby each visitor—such as those shown in Figure 8, using the metal board—was able to reinterpret the meaning of the object at hand, escaping the rigours and confines of the usual directive museology.

**Insert Figure 8. Visitors using the metal board**

In a critique of the anthropology of the image, Hans Belting (2004) argues that an image is not something universal, but rather a product of a relationship between a thing, a medium and a body. The body stands for the visitor's engagement with the museum's lexis by means of his / her senses and thoughts.

Images happen between us who look at them, and their media with which they respond to our gaze. They rely on two symbolic acts which both involve our living body: the act of fabrication and the action of perception, the one being the purpose of the other. (Belting, 2004: 5)

Both groups of museum specialists spoke about peasants as if they were located somehow outside of history. This view of the peasant as being outside of time was maintained even in the face of objects that clearly indicated the historically inscribed nature of the Romanian peasant. Most of the images that had been on display during both the communist and the post-socialist period showed peasants, peasant costumes, and everyday peasant objects as belonging to pre-modern times.

**Insert Figures 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17. Nine images present in the exhibition: the first seven taken by Iosif Berman (the Image Archive of the NMRP/ Fonds Iosif Berman/ Images B-5495, B-521, B -5427, B-6460, B-5398, B-5514, B-5390; the scribbled image, by Bădescu Irena (the Image Archive of the NMRP/ Fonds Bădescu Irena/ Image B.I. 8527; the last one, by Constantinidis Iulian**

The photographs shown in Figures 9 to 17, from the NMRP's Image Archive, were taken by three professional photographers, Iosif Berman, Irena Bădescu and Iulian Constantinidis in the first half of the 20th century in rural Romania. These images captured during field trips are in stark contrast to the stereotypical pre-modern representation of the peasant. I decided to insert them among the objects on display because they capture Romanian citizens, including peasants, *in* the process of modernisation: Romanian kings, fascist leaders, petrol wells, people having lunch in a restaurant, a postcard showing a couple (a soldier and his fiancé or wife wearing traditional folk dress) or soldiers reading newspapers. These images have always been in the museum's archive, but were never actually used in the displays. Displaying them together with objects from other stores

reframed peasants as historical actors. This contrasted to the tendency of ethnographic displays and collections to ignore the historical dimensions of folk art/ ethnographic objects. But it was the strong reaction of a young visitor that triggered the sense that however deep curators engage with collections and try to innovate, visitors are very effective in showing how limiting collections actually are.

One early afternoon a young couple entered the temporary exhibition: he had long hair in a plait and was dressed in black; she was not very talkative. They looked around as if in search of something familiar. From all the objects on display, the young man picked up the replica of the ceramic tractor and asked: ‘Where is the *alpaca* spoon?’ *Alpaca* is a copper alloy with nickel and often zinc, a very soft, light and cheap metal, from which cutlery used to be made in the rural areas of Romania before 1989. He continued confused and a little annoyed: ‘How can you exhibit peasants without including a pair of rubber boots, an iron plate or the *basic alpaca* spoon?’

This kind of reaction represents a popular critique to the fact that a most prestigious institution like the NMRP lacks the ‘salt and pepper’ of everyday peasant life. The *alpaca* spoons, the rubber boots, modern cloth or radio transistors were completely forgotten by all museum employees who were preoccupied with projecting peasant images into the synecdoche of the nation. However, this tendency to extract meanings and project ideals, starting from peasants and ending with the nation, is specific to the entire Southern and Eastern European space (Herzfeld, 2004; Mihăilescu, 2008; Verdery, 1991; Kligman, 1988; Cvetković, 2008).

Curating this exhibition, I realised that the internal conflict in the museum is not visible to most visitors.<sup>ix</sup> This is why I qualify the aesthetics of display as subtle: the two groups in conflict fight over differences that are mostly invisible, and at other times are difficult to communicate to a popular audience. All three successive political regimes in

Romania in the 20th century (pre-communist, communist and post-communist) that decisively marked the NMRP's current appearance, equally represented the Romanian peasant as an ideal that corresponded to their respective internal ideas and constraints. As the visitors' feedback suggests, by handling objects and their replicas, visitors take the presence of the object for a 'present' tense reality and integrate objects into a family story.<sup>x</sup> This association of folklore with family could be also the effect of more than a century of building up the image of the nation via propagandistic uses of peasant images and folkloric objects (Verdery 1991). In the particular case of the NMRP, I suggest that the curatorial conflict could be explained as a struggle between two sides to impose their own lexis as the official discourse of the museum. It is this pretention to exclusiveness and cultural and aesthetic intolerance that renders visible the contingent nature of folk objects. In this context, the two lexes not only mediate between objects and audience, and facilitate the transmission of knowledge between producers of the particular media and their audiences, but also charge the same apparently neutral objects on display and collections with the specific political and cultural ideas of each side of the curatorial conflict.

Within this sometimes ambiguous setting however, it is practice that structures the museum's lexis. As Nicholas Thomas (2010) suggested,<sup>xi</sup> museographic knowledge is embedded in the methods and practices used within the institution. Practice makes the relationship between *muzeografi* and most of the objects in the museum extremely repetitive and predictable. At the same time, researchers and artists, being freed from this repetitiveness and relatively new inside the museum, are creative because they have had no time to find and exercise their own practices. Therefore, their relative freedom and creativity is a result of the lack of most of the constraining practice that objects inside official collections require.<sup>xii</sup>

Artists like Hans Haacke, Fred Wilson and Grayson Perry expressed institutional critiques in classical museums by grouping objects outside the logic of collections which

constrains most of the permanently-employed curators (see Buskirk, 2003: 165–189 and Wilson, 2001). The reason is that employed curators are usually responsible for a limited number of collections and their work is highly regulated by the museum. Buskirk affirms that museums' rigidity in categorisation allows such artists to find their 'artistic authorship based on the process of categorisation' (2003:186), or, better, re-categorisation. It is sufficient for these artists to cause a change in categorisation to have their work valued as art.

This also elucidates the subordinate relationship between permanent displays and temporary ones. Very often, temporary displays in museums are supposed to challenge the permanent ones (Rivière, 1989). The NMRP case shows that the 'temporary' displays proposed critically by the artists not only challenged the displays done in the past by *muzeografi*. Rather, the artistic displays became the norm, a fetish in itself and resisted to several attempts of dismantling between 2003 and 2016 (Dumitrescu, 2010). Therefore, I argue that the NMRP lexis is actually the result of a dynamic interplay between two different ways to think and practice museography.

### **When 'the sensible' wants to reach public visibility**

While mounting the exhibition, I asked advice from museum employees from both sides of the conflict about the selection of objects and finding a proper way to display them. Negotiating between their very different curatorial approaches, I ended up presenting quite a conventional exhibition. I placed objects near to one another, at regular distances against the white walls. Some stood directly on the floor, and others hung on their old hangers or on the wall on nails left from previous exhibitions.

My display method combined old small glass cases, newly painted by researchers and artists, with hangers found in a pile in an old museum store. I follow Rancière (2004) in suggesting that, for any innovation in the museum display, one should know the past of that

institution and the cultural context, in order to innovate. He argues that the sensible can be distributed so that it establishes a 'system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it' (Rancière, 2004: 12). In other words, a 'distribution of the sensible' represents the capacity of any museum to put together multiple discourses and sensibilities. From this perspective, exhibition-makers, be they *muzeografi* or researchers, are the distributors of parts of the museum's lexis. Both *muzeografi* and artists were extremely active in indicating what to include in my exhibition and how to show it; they actively engaged in the 'distribution of the sensible' and constructed a discourse to be consumed by the public. As we have seen, the nature of this 'sensible' is subtle, various and very political. Exhibition-makers create certain 'forms of visibility' and not others; their selection in fact decides what story is to be told about the past, and by doing this they also influence present and future readings of particular objects. I argue that this very subtlety and the process of continuous tuning of ideas and sensibilities make the process of curating resemble the anthropological production of knowledge.

At the same time, this exhibition showed that practice and contingency correspond to two different, and often contradictory, notions of temporality. If practice presupposes repetition, typisation and continuity, it is the new combinations of objects and of logics of collecting which create new meanings and therefore new lexes. However, it is on this delicate balance between practice and contingency that the museum lexis is permanently constructed: if practice dominates, the lexis seems more like a text, and it tends to be directive and objective and formulates claims to universalism; whereas, if contingency prevails, the audience can have a more personal relationship with the particular displays and, therefore, can actively contribute to the actual production of knowledge.

By controlling and limiting access to various museum stores, the different groups in the museum influence this balance by imposing ideas about exhibitions and replicate their own views on the wider society. It is the visitor, however, who is keen to actually engage critically with the multitude of stories on display: the quasi-random selection and association of objects in the exhibition, not only those that escape the logic of collections, but also those that put visitors in a critical position towards the dominant curatorial discourses. This is obviously not the initial intention of an exhibition, but rather the result of visitors' anxiety when they are not provided with any coherent lexis.

## **Conclusion**

It was during the process of curating *Connections: Objects in Relation and Context* that I realised the extreme ability of objects in collections to constrain people who work in museums. Caring for objects requires repetitive everyday tasks, strict procedures to follow and a very predictable way of approaching objects. Curators are trapped in these everyday practices of a binary ideological distinction and seem to adhere to the previously established principles of the collections they are in charge. In so doing they restrict their imagination to the limits of their collections despite cases when cross-cutting of categories occurs. Therefore, when a critique to these principles arises within the same institution – as in the case of researchers and artists in the NMRP – the very rationale of the museum is challenged. At a theoretical level, this is done by proposing a new lexis, and, at a practical level, this new wave brings new objects, possibly new collections, and a series of internal disputes over the right to control the objects.

However, this liberating ethos, whereby one can take objects out of their collections, associate them in new ways or collect new items, will eventually turn into a constraint and norm once the new ideas are established within the museum. My ethnographic material

suggests that people put so much passion into curating objects because they actually want to say so much about different ideologies of being in the world in a post-socialist context. The mass of objects in the collections have the capacity to do that: they could be re-ordered to express political and social ideas, but, once they do that, the curators find themselves obliged to duly respect the new ideas materialised by the re-interpreted objects. Therefore, liberty turns into new forms of constraint. This is the case, for example, with the current fetishist obsession of the museum management to preserve untouched the rooms curated by the artist Horia Bernea and some of his followers during the 1990s.

This continuous sway between liberty and constraint, as well as the requirement for compromise between all forces at play whenever a display becomes public, give museums a particular porosity. This is not due to lack of continuity or any kind of inconsistency, but rather is determined by the simple fact that the interstices between the finite material objects on display and the expanded world of ideas are, actually, quite huge. As this paper demonstrates, it is this space that the audience is invited to fill. The museum's lexis is not simply a technical issue, but also defines how much space curators leave for interpretation and indeed dreaming.

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<sup>i</sup> Rebecca Empson participated in the *Assembling Bodies: Art, Science and Imagination* (2009-2010) at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Inge Daniels played a decisive role in *At Home in Japan: Beyond the Minimal House* (2011) exhibition at London's Geffrye Museum of the Home, and Daniel Miller was involved in *The Power of Making* (2011), which was very well received at the V&A Museum.

<sup>ii</sup> For a famous description of such a conflict in Musée du Quai Branly in Paris see for example Price (2007).

<sup>iii</sup> I prefer the label of communist rather than socialist because it corresponds to the everyday use of people in Romania. Romania was a People's Republic (1947–1965) and a Socialist Republic (1965–1989). These historical periods were marked by the fact that the single political party was always called The Communist Party of Romania since its establishment in 1921. It is true that the official state ideology claimed throughout its rule that Romanians were living under Socialism, whereas Communism represented a more distant ideal. However, Romanians always referred to the society they knew both before and after 1989 as 'communist.'

<sup>iv</sup> Maybe the major critique of ethnographic displays is that these are a-temporal, out of history, and display certain perennial beauties (Foster, 1996; Marcus and Myers, 1995; Enwezor and Oguibe, 1999).

Anthropological and ethnographical museums could even use the expression *art objects* to mask the provenience of certain objects, as well as their trajectory in the museum's stores (see the famous case of Musée du Quai Branly that at its opening in 2006 presented all the objects on display as art objects – for a critique see Price, 2007).

<sup>v</sup> For an ampler analysis of the fate of these objects dating from communist institutions, see Ilie (2010) and Bădică (2011).

<sup>vi</sup> The effects on the manipulation of museums while collecting peasant/ folk objects as items of the under-classes was critically discussed in other European contexts by Bennett (1995) and Macdonald (2002b).

<sup>vii</sup> Most of the main researchers and artists had strong affinities with the Dadaist, Surrealist and Avant-Garde movements in both Romania and France. Romanian–French artists like Tristan Tzara, Victor Brauner (brother of the famous Romanian folklorist Harry Brauner) and Eugen Ionescu were among the mentors of the anti-establishment researchers and artists during communist Romania.

<sup>viii</sup> This collection was constituted from gifts received from other ethnographic institutions during the 20<sup>th</sup> century when ethnographic displays were used as diplomatic gifts between different states around the world.

<sup>ix</sup> French visitors were the only visitors to sense the innovatory lexis of the NMRP, without knowing and being part of the curatorial conflict.

<sup>x</sup> I am aware that the handling of miniature replicas leads to narratives of 'fantasy and fictiveness' (see Stewart, 2001 [1993]: 69), but museums do not yet allow accessioned objects to be handled.

<sup>xi</sup> Thomas suggests the distinction between theories and questions as framing the academic project and 'the practical project [in museums, which] tends to start from, and stops with the object' (Thomas, 2010: 7).

<sup>xii</sup> It is mostly for this reason that throughout this article I referred to the items existing in museum stores as objects and not as things (see also Dominguez Rubio, 2016).