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On Ruination: Piercing the Skin of Communism in 1990s Romania

Abstract:

This article discusses the relation between aesthetics, politics and ethics in the case of the making of a new display

in the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, following the demise of the communist state in Romania. It shows how the museum's innovatory aesthetics of display, believed to be 'escaping history,' is shown to be in fact the very product of history. The new aesthetics of display in the museum aimed to objectify and externalize 'communism' from the lives of people and institutions in Romania. Going beyond the stereotypical denominations 'communist' and 'anti-communist,' this article aims to explain that demonizing the communist past and building in opposition to its aesthetics, leads to actually incorporating and integrating communist values and modes of doing within the present display.

Introduction

This article discusses the juxtaposition between aesthetics, politics and ethics. It describes the radical transformation of a major communist institution in Romania, the Museum of the Communist Party, into an overtly anti-communist one, the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant (hereafter NMRP).This event took place in the early 1990s following the collapse of the communist state. I argue that the spectacular change of the display in the new institution, which won the *European Museum of the Year Award* in 1996, represented an attempt to materialize the ethical principles of the new political order by using aesthetic forms. In order to achieve that, the artistic management of the NMRP had to literally erase the ethical principles of Communism in Romania and to make visible 'anti-communism.' While similar radical changes may accompany political changes in different parts of the world, what was particular in the NMRP's case was that such strong anti-communist discourse happened in a context in which political and economic changes at the higher levels of Romanian society took place much more slowly. It is argued that in Romania, as in some other states in Central and Eastern Europe, a second echelon of communists came to power and many state institutions (museums included) remained un-changed (Tismăneanu, 1999) therefore lustration laws were adopted relatively late and were limited in scope (Verdery, 2012; Stan, 2013).

In the case of the NMRP, the purification and the exorcism of an objectified and reified form of communism combined strong symbolism and sensuous approaches. Importantly, this process also involved a political positioning aimed at locating the museum within the continuity of ethnocentric right wing ideas dating from the inter-war peri-

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od, as well as recognising and building on its history beyond the communist period. This ideological positioning was manifested in the avoidance of openly and explicitly discussing modern history: no open discussions on communist and fascist totalitarian regimes took place at a time when peasant objects were exhibited for their inner beauty and force (Bernea, 1993). My ethnographic research in the museum shows that this positioning entailed a specific communist-free ethos.[i] During the 1990s, this ethos was channeled and distilled down into a set of ethical and aesthetical guidelines that were articulated in opposition to an objectified Communism. For example, the new labels were hand written in colored inks and used fonts of irregular sizes and shapes, as opposed to the previous labels which were printed on small white paper rectangles. As Figure 1 indicates, the new museum display aimed to rediscover the materiality and physicality of clay, wood and mortar. The use of these materials was meant to indicate that the new museum décor wanted to follow inter-war exhibition techniques and their use of organic materials and installations. [ii] The new display also wanted to contrast the communist museum surfaces that were white or grey and flat and which formed a sterile backdrop on which to display socialist achievements (Nicolescu, 2016a).

In more general 'anti-communist' circles 'communism' and the adjective 'communist' in general was described as 'dead' and flat, and was associated with dullness and stupidity (Solomon, 2008: 104). Such stereotypical references were associated not only with a certain aesthetics of the past, but also with bureaucratic and standardized practices and modes of doing that were once pervasive in Romanian communist society. In this context, we can understand why the decision taken by the first director of the NMRP, Horia Bernea (along with his team of researchers and artists who held anti-communist political views), was to dispose of most of the objects connected with communist propaganda. They also reclaimed the collections that had to do with folklore and rural traditions from the former Museum of National Art.[iii] These acts were part of the greater ambition of the new team to display in a way that would simply eliminate any traces of Communism and go back to reflect a pre-Communist social and cultural order. Communism was seen, as in many 'anti-communist' circles, as a malign force (evil itself), a parenthesis in Romanian historiography (Nicolau and Huluţă, 1997) and as a veritable 'black hole' (Bădică, 2010).

This article contains four parts. In the first two I discuss aesthetics and the curatorial conflict within the NMRP. I show that opposition against the communist/ modernist whiteness, plainness and so called 'simplicity' was

achieved in the NMRP's aesthetics by physically scratching, incising and distressing the surfaces of the walls, painting them in vivid colors and using powerful visual symbols. Following this part, the article shows that some of the employees in the museum reacted to the political and ethical implications of this 'innovatory' display. In the third part I discuss politics and Bernea's attempts to 'escape from history' as profoundly political. Here, my discussion is contextualized by references to Mircea Eliade and the myth of the 'eternal retour'. In the last part, I discuss the ethical implications of art production by looking at the trope of the artistic hand at work, and the material implications of artistic projects.

Despite many artists, including Bernea himself, claiming that the art they produced in the museum was an art for art's sake, with no political and ethical implications (Liiceanu, 1983), this article suggests that the 'new' display in the NMRP was in fact profoundly political. I argue that the new ethos of display, not only used opposition to socialist modernity to position itself as 'healing' and 'live' (Nicolau and Huluță, 2001), but also it subtly integrated the 'communist' past in the new aesthetics by incorporating bits and pieces retrieved from that past. Famously, anthropologist Yael Navarro-Yashin used the term 'ruination' to describe the process of incorporating difference and opposition - a tactic which is recurrent in social life and also in the way human knowledge is built. Building on this concept, I show that the art of display in the NMRP was in fact the result of the objectification and reification of the communist past, while, by contrast, the metaphoric and visual discourse was to annihilate it. Therefore, this article contributes to the re-interpretation of recent Romanian history and shows that much creativity and innovation of the 1990s represented a very particular assimilation of the 'communist other.'

Against the white of modernism

In February 1990, Horia Bernea realised that the new museum he was about to create, needed to be constructed

in opposition to the former Museum of the Communist Party and to the general 'communist' aesthetics which

had been physically inscribed on the body of the city of Bucharest (Bernea, 2000). In just two years (1986-

1988) 485 hectares of historic buildings were totally demolished in Bucharest city centre to create space for tall

white and grey blocks of flats, large boulevards, and the massive House of the People (Iosa, 2006),[iv] - changes

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to which Bernea reacted on his own terms. He attempted to destroy the display in the Museum of the Communist Party and created a school of muzeography which was based on sensuous aesthetics, a return to spirituality, to colour and materiality.

As a precept for young curators, Bernea advised: 'A young person who would like to curate displays (…) needs to be aware of the characteristics of the institution where he/she does the display, of the place that the museum has in the city, and even of the type that city is.' He concluded: 'one needs to surprise the *genius loci*.' (Bernea and Nicolau, 1998: 238).

Neat white walls, easily cleanable glazed surfaces and dirt repelling metal structures were all employed as markers of the new minimalist plain and simple socialist aesthetics, the ones meant to be understood and lived by the masses in socialist regimes. In their accounts of socialist realities, cultural theorist Svetlana Boym (1994) and anthropologist Victor Buchli (2000) identified numerous discourses related to cleanliness in association with morality – getting rid of the old *byt* – old life style, which was also materialized through a careful selection of the objects that surrounded people. In 'Common Places: Mythologies of everyday life in Russia' Svetlana Boym explains how, in the desire to turn the aesthetics of the communal spaces into proper socialist spaces, any trace of the bourgeois life-style was banned. This is why elaborate and decorative furniture was banished, why walls were always painted in white, and why even the rubber plant was considered 'decadent' and banned from communal flats by both avant-garde artists and the Bolshevik fraternity. Buchli (2000) and Boym (1994) show how different waves of cleaning which took place inside the socialist regimes themselves were markers of political and ethical decisions, and how, ultimately these led to the general perception that socialist modernity can be related to a demise of materiality, and to a profound preoccupation with immateriality (Buchli, 2015).

In accordance with this way of enacting (socialist) modernity, Horia Bernea and his team emptied the museum's vast rooms, tore-off the white plastering to reveal the original architecture and ornaments of the building. Figure 2 shows how walls looked after re-decoration. Curators also started to scratch, re-work and alter the wall-surfaces which had been painted white by the communists: the white was replaced with organic colours. Such vivid displays and the re-interpretation of the display space itself were intended to contrast

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sharply with the ubiquitous neutral white containers more usually associated with modern and contemporary museum spaces since the opening of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1939 (Klonk, 2009: 138, 155). The French anthropologist Gerard Althabe, who visited the museum in the mid-1990s, described Bernea's aesthetics as 'a means of creating a difference from the 'realist illusion' and its whiteness, namely the modernist communist style of exhibition making' (Althabe 1997: 158). Even when white walls have been re-painted in white, the NMRP's white was considered by artists and researchers different from the neutral modernist whiteness. The new white was the white of the Mediterranean culture, linking both the classicist antiquity and the peasant origin.

Most of the artists and researchers in Horia Bernea's team came from artistic and philological backgrounds and were heavily influenced by post-modern conceptual displays of ethnographic objects, such as those promoted by Jacques Hainard (curator of the Ethnographic Museum of Neuchâtel during the 1980s and 1990s), but equally by the early stages of exhibition aesthetics as encountered in curiosity cabinets, where objects were presented close to the public, and where the display techniques were meant to appeal to various senses. In some rooms curators brought in handmade wooden cases for display, old student desks and church chairs and even a whole wooden traditional house from Gorj county, a small wooden church from Hunedoara and a water mill from the Neamț county (to be later exhibited on a floor finished in lacquered gold leaf).

After few years of using plastic models for displaying folkloric costumes, Horia Bernea and the artist Ioana Bătrânu carved new mannequins. Figure 3 shows one of these mannequins, sculptured and painted by the two artists following geographical typologies. Together these actions were meant to disrupt socialist modernity's insistence on standardized displays – qualities   perceived by the new curators to have produced 'boring displays' (Ochi in Ochi, 2001). In the NMRP's case too, the post-modern displays also included the use of sensuous aesthetics and a return to organic materials, colours and shapes (Buck-Morss, 1992).[v]

In particular, Horia Bernea and his team's use of practices and understandings of material objects, as encountered in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, is closer to oriental forms of religiosity and their uses of objects, images and senses. Horia Bernea and the artists and researchers in his team affirmed that their muzeography

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was 'aphophatic' and 'negative' and it 'meant to exclude the obvious and the explicit (…) by negating usual combinations among objects, and the common places' [Bernea, 1993: 8]. The new muzeography in the NMRP was meant to touch on peasant objects 'in weak, gentle and fragile forms,' (Bernea, 1993: 7) for fear that the classical process of muzeification would 'dry down the objects' (Bernea, 1993: 8). Art historian Andrei Pleşu described Bernea's art in the museum as being based on 'a courageous idea, at the limit of the scandalous, to bring together the Holy Liturgy and jazz' (Pleşu, 2016). This should be understood in a context in which Horia Bernea's art of the 1980s subscribed to the 'neo-byzantine' style which proposed an 'aesthetic alternative to the modernist aporias, but also an existential alternative to totalitarian constraints' (Cârneci, 1999: 100). Bernea saw similarity in the vernacular of antiquity and of the orthodox rural churches. Figures 1 and 2 show the painted and inscribed walls of the museum, for which Bernea took inspiration from both the antique site of Pompey and the ancient walls of orthodox rural churches. In public viewings of the pictures he produced in France and Italy he always intertwined images from rural Romania. Such images, collected by Bernea in his trips around the country, repeatedly referred to the common Christian roots of Europe, and the importance of the Mediterranean space which Romania was believed to be connected to via its peasant roots.

In such understandings of the role of the museum, the NMRP was described by those who were making the display in the 1990s as a 'living museum' with a 'healing muzeography' (Nicolau and Huluţă, 2001).[vi] But I argue that the entire philosophy of display in the NMRP in the 1990s also represents a ceremonial search of the aura of the objects, so famously discussed by Walter Benjamin (2011 [1935]). Bernea searched for the aura of the objects because he believed that the taste for authenticity, subjectivity and a certain perception of the world have been lost during communism. If in communism, exhibitions had been produced and re-produced almost mechanically, recycling the same glass cases and the same objects (Anonymised, 2016a), under Bernea's direction the exhibitions had momentum and looked completely different from one another. In his attempts to bring back the aura, Bernea invented 'live' displays which stood against any possibility of reproducibility. But at the same time, art historian Dario Gamboni argues that any construction of the 'living' seems to demand a complementary location and construction of the 'petrified' (Gamboni, 1997: 51). In the case of the NMRP, the

'petrified' is the 'dead' communist past and its objects, practices and ways of looking at the world (Cristea and Radu-Bucurenci, 2008). The religious metaphors that surrounded the new aesthetics of the NMRP served as a means of marking the more profound layers of ethical and political distinctiveness that were embedded in the new form of display, and furthermore, they also reified the communist regime into an idol, whose skin was pierced through the breaking of its norms, forms, and functionalities.

In an Indian context, anthropologist Christopher Pinney saw the tension that exists between a restrained visual and detached use of photography, and a more ritualistic multisensorial use, whereby photographs are touched, kissed and pierced – treatments he understood as 'piercing the skin of the idol' (Pinney, 2001). In the Romanian case, I argue that the idol and the demon of simplicity, plainness, seriality and similitude was retained and reified into 'communism' (and, sometimes modernity in itself). Where former displays were made out of bland industrially produced materials such as melamine and considered to be exemplifications of 'communist' bad taste (Manolescu, 2007), piercing the skin of communism was literally achieved by transforming display surfaces into sites of multisensorial, spiritual and colourful encounter with various organic materials such as clay, rope, wood and paper. Importantly, the piercing was also achieved by inscribing the walls, dismantling all the old glass walls, and 're-sacralising the space of the museum itself' (Titu, 2003:192).

Describing the events that led to the division of Cyprus, anthropologist Navarro-Yashin (2009), explains how Cypriot Turks were co-opting Greek houses and material possessions in order to construct their own identity. She introduces the term 'ruination' to suggest that vestiges of the past cannot but be integrated and re-interpreted within newly created orders, structures and identities. Therefore, she shows that identities in opposition are not static, but dynamic.[vii] Building on this observation, I suggest that the very process of piercing the communist surfaces presupposes the preservation and usage of communist aesthetic forms and practices.

Other voices in the museum

Despite the strong anti-communist discourse, not all the NMRP's employees shared Bernea's ideas. My ethnographic material shows that, after the deaths of Horia Bernea in 2000 and of his main collaborator Irina Nicolau in 2003,

museum curators trained during communism in the tradition of historical materialism managed to close three rooms of the museum, in order to free space for what they believed to be 'proper museum displays.' This group of curators dismantled some of the displays installed by artists and researchers and were about to re-paint the walls in white. As a reaction to these room closures, supporters of the researchers and artists from beyond the museum world who were involved in the cultural and political life of Bucharest, protested outside the museum for several days and started to 'rescue' as many objects they could, mainly by photographing the displays that were closing down. Researchers and artists also took action in the press (Passima, 2005; Anghelescu, Caraman and Cazacu, 2005). Under pressure from the important intellectual elites of Romania (Brăileanu, 2005) the director who allowed these room closures resigned. In 2005, after a new director was nominated, the three exhibition rooms were re-opened in a form 'similar' to the original. When researchers and artists could not faithfully reconstitute the actual displays, they literally wrote: 'Here was an inscription. We no longer know what it said!'[viii]

I argue that this search for the original valuable display, functions like a territorial and symbolic inscription on the body of the museum, and it is reminiscent of a search for a valuable fetish. As Pietz states, 'fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is, above all, an 'historical' object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event' (1985: 12). Pietz affirms that fetishes have four attributes: historicisation, territorialisation, reification and personalisation. The display as it looked in the 1990s was, for many researchers and artists and for their supporters outside the museum, a fetish because it incorporated many of their personal values and because it possessed an 'activatory' and 'agentic' nature (Miller, 2005): it stood for innovation, 'live' display and momentum within the context of the 'dull' muzeography encountered both in communism and in many other classical western museums. It was a space dedicated to an aesthetics of freedom, joy and creativity, a search for the sacred, and for the roots of the nation, projected into the purified image of the peasants. Last but not least, the display in the NMRP was a reification and an objectification of the triumph of an anti-communist institution replete with its own highly visible anti-communist aesthetics, over a very communist one. This triumph was intended to be deeply affective for the whole of Romanian society. Because of his development and use of the exhibition style described above, Bernea was characterised by a prominent Romanian sociologist as a 'shaman of his generation,' a person with charisma,

capable of interacting with both orthodox priests and contemporary Romanian artists (personal communication, Rostás, 2011).

This section shows that art can be a form of lustration, which is always disputed and tends to reflect the ideals of the current political system. Anthropologist Katherine Verdery (2012) points to how lustration laws in various so called 'post-socialist' countries are also manifestations of purification rituals – lustration meaning cleaning, ultimately. However, my ethnographic material suggests that in reality, art, like lustration, can also antagonize people and divide societies. In the following section of the article I show that the art of display in the NMRP does not simply represent a reflection on such antagonistic positions, but also a very particular attempt to escape history.

Escaping Communist History

Art theoretician Klara Kemp-Welch (2012) shows how, as a form of resistance to communist politics, Central and Eastern European art of the 1980s deliberately avoided entering into political debates. This approach was also adopted by Romanian artists, including Horia Bernea. During communism, Horia Bernea painted archetypal forms of cultural and natural landscape such as columns, crucifixes and hills (Oroveanu, 2004). The early displays in the NMRP should be understood as a continuation of these artistic ideas, but in this context they reflected a more nuanced a-temporal stance. The ground-floor of the NMRP contained the rooms *The Beauty of the Crucifix*, *The Crucifix - Tree of Life, Icons I and Icons II* and *Windows*. These themes were thought of as being transcendental, and therefore beyond history. The only room which dealt with the issue of history and temporality was *The Time Room*, mainly curated by Irina Nicolau and other artists and researchers in her team.

This room, as shown in Figure 4, had on one wall a handwritten list of the most important events in Romania's history. For the communist period, the list only included the year when the regime started and the year when it officially ended. It made no reference to the Peasant Revolt of 1907 nor to the collectivisation period. I argue that these omissions are a response to the fact that both events had been extensively discussed during the communist period and to the general idea among self-styled 'anti-communist' circles that the communist past needed to be pre-

sented as being outside of Romanian history (Bădică, 2010). The few references to historical events were integrated in a more general representation of time as cyclical. The display represented time cycles (the seasons of the year and the myth of regeneration, or the stages of the life of objects in the museum, charting their degradation). As part of this cyclical representation of time, peasant realities were represented as 'still.' In this room, a toy rocking horse, made out of cheap white plastic, was transformed by Nicolau into a museum exhibit, an object that could indicate repetitive movements, ancestral rhythms. In a similar way, the work of the peasants was represented as repetitive, obedient to the cycles of nature. These ideas, were also inspired by the work of the famous historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, and by the Romanian ethnologist, Ernest Bernea, Horia Bernea's father. Their works influenced an entire generation of artists and researchers, including those working in the NMRP.

Ernest Bernea was a social scientist with right wing political views (Rostás, 2003). Trained in sociology and philosophy by three important Romanian thinkers, Nicolae Iorga, Nae Ionescu and Simion Mehedinti, and by Marcel Mauss and Martin Heidegger in Paris and Freiburg respectively, Ernest Bernea held different administrative positions during governments which collaborated with various fractions of right wing totalitarian regimes. Because he had held these positions, he was briefly imprisoned under two different pre-communist governments. Then, in 1948 he was sentenced by the communist regime to 14 years imprisonment with hard labour (Rădulescu, 1990). After his release from prison in 1962, Ernest Bernea managed to secure employment for another 10 years in the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore in Bucharest and in 1985 he published *Cadres of Folk Romanian Thinking: Space, Time and Causality.* This work took place in the context of a general return to nationalist ideas during Ceaușescu's rule of Romania (Iosif, 2008). His work had a profound influence on his son Horia Bernea and on many intellectuals and social scientists leading them to understand peasants as following pre-established 'cadres of thinking,' acting and ordering their lives in accordance with a metaphysical reason (Tatulici, 2000: 89).

Mircea Eliade also exerted an influence over the museum: since the NMRP's official opening in 1993, the exhibits have featured a gallery of portraits of eminent thinkers of pre-modern and modern Romania whose images are engraved on the walls of the entrance hall. Some of them, such as the historian of religion Mircea Eliade and the sociologist and philosopher Mircea Vulcănescu used their writings and political affiliations to support far right

movements during the inter-war period in Romania. The interviews I conducted with museum employees who worked with Horia Bernea show that the ideas of these inter-war thinkers were influential to the philosophy of display in the NMRP. These employees, and Horia Bernea himself believed that the influence was restricted to the fields of philosophy of culture, social research and history of art, and that the political and ethical consequences of these writers' works were of little consequence.

One of the most important ideas Horia Bernea took from Mircea Eliade was that of 'escape from history.' Eliade's early personal and professional trajectory is revelatory in this sense. After supporting far right ideologies in Romania, Eliade, while he was a cultural attaché in Portugal – like many western journalists and politicians of the early 1940s – was impressed with the political regime of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. As a result, Eliade published *Salazar's Dictatorship of Love* in 1940. After leaving Europe for the United States, Eliade published *Cosmos and History* (1954) in which he advanced the ideas of escape from history, and the embracing of cosmic and cyclical time. Eliade argued that historical time is oppressive and limitative, while cosmic and cyclical understandings of time leave space for constant renewal. Throughout his entire career as a historian of religion, Eliade revised his previous views. It is not by chance that Eliade advocated escaping history. Commenting on Eliade's work, anthropologist Beverly Butler (2007) suggests that escaping history and forgetting political involvement was the reaction of many writers and visual artists who fueled their work with the horrors of the Second World War that they had witnessed. [ix]

Returning to recent times, historians argue that the fall of the communist regime in the 1990s in Eastern Europe was used as a moment of liberation and as a catalyst for a return to old passions and preoccupations associated with the inter-war period (Bădică, 2010; Stone, 2012). My ethnographic material suggests that the demonization of Communism by Horia Bernea and his team fueled the impressive creativity and effervescence of their art. According to the senior Romanian communist leader and political scientist, Silviu Brucan, who became a major post-communist publicist, the 1990s represented not only a moment of eruption and anger against communism, but also a moment when:

> Old grudges and conflicts from as far as the Habsburg and Tsarist empires, marvelously preserved in the communist

freezer, are floating to surface with the thawing of the Cold War and the lifting of the Stalinist coercion and repression. Territorial, religious, and ethnic claims long suppressed are striking back with vengeance, while national liberation, succession, and declarations of independence are coming first on the political agenda. (Brucan, 1993: 7)

As a painter and museum curator Bernea was fighting against such a 'memory war,' which was played out through omissions and through constructing genealogical links with the inter-war period and even with Antiquity. In the 1990s MNRP, the only mention of the communist modernization was presented as a 'plague' which devastated 'the order of traditional life,' while any discussion on the fascist's use of peasant symbolism was totally absent. At the opening of the exhibition room *The Plague, Political Installation* in 1997, the exhibition catalogue presented some of Bernea's opinions on the Communist regime. The text says:

'Communism is: a disease of the society and of the spirit, opposed to life; communism is an 'ideal' foolishness, oriented completely against life; a damaging atheist sect; (...) an absolute hatred, affirmed with no reservations; an attempt to destroy all the multi-millennium effort for spiritualisation; a sinister utopia (...)' (Nicolau and Huluță, 1997: 1)

Rooms like *The Triumph* (opened on the second floor (see Figure 5)) could be seen both as a work of art in curatorial terms, and as the epitome of an a-historical vision of Romanian peasantry. While such representations may be common in other parts of the world, I argue that in the Romanian case, it opposes the official discourse of the Communist party which was essentially historical and materialistic. *The Triumph* is thought to represent the triumph of peasant transcendental life and order over the vicissitudes of history.

At the same time, I argue that *The Triumph* also represents a certain intellectual project to show the connection between traditional peasant culture in Romania and elsewhere in Europe. In the 1990s, when Romania seemed never to manage to get into the European Union, Bernea together with philosopher and the future minister of Romanian foreign affairs, Theodor Baconsky, attempted to reinforce Romania's Latin and Roman past with the help of artistic metaphors. The two authors published a volume called *Roma caput Mundi* which contained a series of images and commentaries from the trips they made to Italy: in it they showed the similarity between the two civilizations - Roman and Romanian. This project represented yet another attempt by Romanian elites to escape the faith of their 'minor culture' and align it with more central forces. In such attempts, it is possible to see a certain poetry of marginality that includes symbolic and risky returns to various far right ideas.

Hand at work

In order to discuss the ethical dimension in Horia Bernea' curatorial work, this section discusses the claims made by certain artists – namely that they created an art beyond politics, and that they had no ethical commitments. It also problematizes anthropology's use of genealogy when operating with shifting contexts. The art of Horia Bernea needs to be understood in the Romanian context but also beyond it. To illustrate this, I present two stories: the first explains how the EMYA prize was awarded to the NMRP and the second shows the importance of the hand at work, as discussed by Emil Cioran, another important Romanian inter-war thinker.

The NMRP gained the *European Museum of the Year* award in 1996. This prize was a mark of prestige for Bernea's followers. However, the story of how the EMYA prize was awarded, as told by members of the museum staff, demonstrates that aesthetics of display is a field of continuous negotiation and needs permanent translation. The story says that in 1996, the director of the EMYA, Hermann Schaeffer, could not travel to Romania to evaluate whether the museum was worth awarding this prize. Someone else was sent in his place. That official was walked around the NMRP by enthusiastic young and more experienced curators who explained to him the innovation taking place. The jury member was impressed by the atmosphere of creativity and innovation and decided to persuade the EMYA jury to award the prize to this museum. One year later, Hermann Schaeffer arrived unannounced at the NMRP and made an unaccompanied tour of the exhibits. He saw the carved mannequins, pottery exhibited near pottery, costumes with labels written by hand in Romanian only, and all the objects on display presented a-historically. The word among museum's employees was that after completing his visit, Schaeffer exclaimed: 'Why did we give this museum a prize? This type of muzeography was practiced one hundred years ago!'

If the story is true, Schaeffer's reaction is partially justifiable: the carved mannequins, similar to wax models from many 19th century museums looked like plaster busts of racial types. But the story reveals more than that: for Schaeffer the German, revisiting 19th century modes of display was a retrograde act, but in the Romanian context, the strategy was actually indicative of experiment and innovation and, as we have seen, it signified radical divergence from the socialist modes of display. As Hirsch and Macdonald (2005) affirmed, creativity always needs to be

regarded in a historical perspective. More than that, creativity presupposes a good knowledge of the norms existing in a given space and time; these are the ones to be understood and challenged. In this context, the EMYA prize shows that a work of art is not simply the product of an individual but is the result of tastes and values that are socially constructed.

The second story that helps explain the subtle relation between aesthetics and ethics is the story of Emil Cioran, a famous writer and thinker who produced very different kinds of ideas in Romania than he did whilst in France. While in Romania, the young Cioran was influenced by the writings of far-right intellectuals, such as Spengler's, *The Decline of the West*, and Ernst Troeltsch's, *Historicism and Its Problems*. As a result, in 1936 Emil Cioran published an ethnocentric and xenophobic volume called *The Transfiguration of Romania* which fueled fascist ideas among many Romanian intellectuals. After the Second World War, while he was settled in France, Cioran abandoned his far-right ideas and became an acclaimed nihilist writer. In one of the interviews he gave after becoming a respected intellectual in Paris, Cioran was asked how could he produce such xenophobic writing as a young author? His answer was: 'It was my hand which detached from myself, it was the beauty of writing' (Petreu, 2005 [1999]: 295).

Cioran's answer does more than just project his intellectual work into the realm of aesthetics, that is, in a Kantian understanding as being detached from ethics (Kant, 1987 [1790]). Art critics Levinson (1998) and Devereaux (1998) argue that a conjunction between beauty and evil is very much a possibility for art especially when large sums of money and fame are invested in the creation of propagandistic works of art. Cioran blamed the hand for accomplishing this conjunction (and consequently for not thinking it through). He did not question the effects of what he calls 'the beauty of writing.'

In contrast to Cioran, other contemporary philosophers and art historians like Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (2002) and Joseph Koerner (2002) reflect on the idea of detachment of the hand, and argue for a deeper reflection on the relation between the act of producing art and its political and ethical implications. Talking about icons and iconoclasm during the Reformation in Germany, Koerner says: 'The more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image's claim to offer truth' (2002: 93). Looking at Figure 6 we can also re-

flect on Koerner's further thought that the very people who were the most prolific creators of visual images were also those who were responsible for the greatest destruction which they effected in order to make space for their own art.

The literary critic Marta Petreu has a fascinating explanation for why Cioran used the metaphor of the 'detached hand.' She argues that most people who are attracted by power continue to search for power and prestige in whatever contexts they live. So, while living in Romania when the attractive power was in the hands of fascists, Cioran wrote about ethical and religious purification, but claimed that this was a purely aesthetic endeavor. While in France, Cioran became vegetarian and daily walked up the five flights of stairs to his small flat in Montparnasse in Paris. He refused to take the elevator, being genuinely convinced that his contribution added to that of others who wanted to save the energy of the planet. Petreu argues that in France, Cioran essentially employed his earlier idea of purification within a new framework of individuality, vegetarianism, environmentalism, and nihilism.

What we learn from this story is that, even if Cioran presented his hand as 'detached' from the ethical and political implications of his writing, his hand did actually work for the cause of fascism in Romania and, respectively, intellectual sophistication in France. This example shows that certain creators are very sensitive to the intellectual environments they create in, and their responses can become extremely complicated when the environments they work in differ greatly from one another. Consequently, the ethical implications of artists' work need to be seen not only in relation to their professional and social circles, but also as a more subtle response to the political systems in which they create.

Returning to Horia Bernea and his implication in the politics of the 1990s, it is true that Bernea did allow **various** types of employees, with different political and practical backgrounds to contribute to the NMRP. At the same time, for most of the people he inspired, the museum represented one of the few existing institutions and spaces in early post-communist Romania that supported, funded and reiterated opposition to communist values and ideas. Bernea's sensuous and complex appropriation of the space of the museum acknowledged the contribution of Cioran and Eliade's early works to a certain intellectual thinking, which paradoxically perpetuated the idea that art is detachable from politics. Arguing that his art was of transcendental inspiration, Bernea and his followers attempt-

ed to place his art above politics. However, this transcendental perspective was meant to have the effect of radically changing Romanian society, and therefore it was actually highly political. When talking about the difficulty of completing the destruction of the former communist displays in the NMRP, Bernea commented: '[w]e did not manage to demolish this thing [that was touched by communism] not even now... *in the people* [emphasis by the author]' (Tatulici, 2000: 90).

Bernea referred to destroying the communist modes of doing and sense perception ultimately. His aesthetic program in the NMRP was meant to touch on how people would perceive the world ultimately, in a very similar way to how Walter Benjamin described the aim of aesthetics. "During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well" (Benjamin (2011 [1935]): 433). Through the tools of aesthetics, Horia Bernea aimed to change Romanian historical circumstances in the 1990s.

Conclusion

In showing how the art of display in the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant has been inscribed with a particular intention to escape history, and to go beyond politics, this article makes clear the connection between material manifestations of aesthetics and their political and ethical implications. Horia Bernea's aesthetics of display and his constant references to a world pre-dating the Communist regime and opposed to the modernist aesthetics represented a central part of an innovative process of enchantment. Bernea's art of display was built on a constant longing for the a-temporal aura of things and it worked as a reminder that post-socialist Romania needed to be built on the ruins of Communism. By showing the genealogy of ideas supporting 'anti-communist' aesthetics in 1990s Romania, I did not want to imply a direct causality between Bernea's works and early works of Eliade and Cioran. Rather, I suggest that this example makes a strong case as to why Romanian recent history needs careful and critical investigations that will allow the integration of Communist past into the social texture of the present.

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George Stocking (1982 [1966]) shows why we need to judge past actions and ideas in their own terms and not simply in relation to how past regimes ended. The story of how the EMYA prize was awarded to the NMRP shows that the entanglement between aesthetics, ethics and politics is subject to permanent but subtle translation in space and time. Art theoretician Crispin Sartwell suggests that the Left of the political spectrum is more associated with Justice, and that the Right of the political spectrum is more preoccupied with a search for Beauty and the essence of things (Sartwell, 2010: 70). This article shows why this suggestion could be seen as an over-simplification of how politics relates with aesthetics and ethics, at least in the Romanian post-socialist context. Every political regime has a very strong ethical component which is also made visible in aesthetic forms and accentuated by the use of powerful symbols. But the materiality of the art of Horia Bernea and his team articulates an ethical question in regard to how successive political regimes actually build one on top of the other.

In this context, my anthropological investigation into the politics of aesthetics shows that abrupt political changes imply not only different forms of cleansing and re-interpretation of social history but also a very specific use of materials. Fascist regimes and movements, through their recurrent xenophobic approaches, have promoted ethnic and racial human cleansings. The communist regimes operated a class cleansing focused on wiping out the bourgeoisie, including its tastes and modes of wealth distribution. In this sequence, the anti-communism displayed in the NMRP represents a form of cultural symbolic cleansing in a context in which not so many things actually changed in the Romanian society.

At the same time, the article points out that, in practice, oppositional behaviours give strength to the parties who enter into antagonism. The new aesthetics of display in the NMRP had to transform communism into a ruin. Paradoxically, in so doing, it further incorporated parts of communism and turned those parts to creative use. Therefore, the article shows how fragments from past regimes have a central role to play in the innovations of newly emerging ones, but this process of incorporation is very often hidden from view.

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[i]My research in the NMRP took place in 2010-2011. But previously to this period, my knowledge of the NMRP and of the many internal specificities owes much to my previous experience of working in the museum, first as a volunteer (2000-2001) and then as an employed researcher (2005-2006).

[ii] Horia Bernea and his team of researchers and artists studied extensively the work of Al. Tzigara-Samurcaş, who was the curator of the National Museum of Art (1912-1952). For example, Tzigara-Samurcaş created installations where, in the middle of an exhibition room he exhibited pottery on sand. In other rooms, he exhibited on the same wall textiles, wood and canvases (Tzigara-Samurcaş, 1937).

[iii]Over the years, the building of the NMRP had hosted the National Museum of Art (1912-1950), under the auspices of the Royal Family. Later on, after the Second World War and the coming to power of the Communist Party, the museum's building was successively inhabited by institutions such as V.I. Lenin – I.V. Stalin Museum (1950-1955), Marx-Engels-Lenin Museum (1955-1966), The Museum of the Party (1966-1989) (or more exactly, The History Museum of the Communist Party, of the Revolutionary and Democratic Movement of Romania) and the House of the Pioneers.

[iv]As architects like to point out, these buildings had covered an area the size of Venice (Iosa, 2006).

[v]A similar return to a more sensuous materiality and organicity happened in 'post-socialist' Hungary. Anthropologist Krisztina Fehervary (2012), explains this tendency as an opposition to the plainness and seriality of material production during communism.

[vi]One of his collaborators described Bernea's art in the museum in the early 1990s as 'theological freshness' (Manolescu, 2007).

[vii]This relates to Hegel's (1979 [1807]) notion of dialectics seen as a form of integrating negation in any definition of an identity, and consequently, as a process.

[viii] Under pressure that the museum would enter renovation, to keep Horia Bernea' display intact, extensive documentation through photography was carried. Visitors can visit the museum on-line following a virtual tour: http://www.tur.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/. For a shorter video presentation of the display: http://www.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/daca-revii/linkuri-utile.html.

[ix]In a similar way another British famous writer, changed his views in the same period after he left the UK. Aldoux Huxley wrote *Brave New World* while in the UK in 1932, and once he moved to America he corrected his previous writing with a *Forward* (1946) followed by *The Perennial Philosophy*.