Museutopia

Ilya Rabinovich is a Dutch-Moldovan photographer, internationally acclaimed for his unique photo projects. Rabinovich is based in Amsterdam, where he graduated from the Rijksakademie in 2000. In 2008 he travelled to his birthplace Chişinău in Moldova to photograph the exhibitions in its national museums. Here he encountered a remarkable process, which led to the photographic project *Museutopia*. The country, formerly known as Moldavia, was annexed by the former USSR in 1940 and remained under Soviet rule till 1991. This period of its history has become distorted or totally erased in the national museums. Each museum orchestrates its own ideal image of Moldova.

On Rabinovich's photographs, the exhibited museum artefacts appear in the midst of curious wall paintings, models and display cabinets, as if they were from a mythical world, rather than documents of the national historical past. In themselves, the photographs are pleasing to the eye and appeal to the viewer with their nostalgic traces. Yet, they also reveal an entirely different narrative to those who allow themselves to be guided further by the sensitive eye of the photographer. In what ways do these museums contribute to the formation of new cultural and national identities? Ultimately, Rabinovich's work encourages us to rethink the influence of historical canons and shifting cultural policies in post-1989 European museums.

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Huub van Baar and Ingrid Commandeur

Contributors:
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Huub van Baar, philosopher and cultural scholar
Stefan Rusu, artist-curator
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A Photographic Research Project by Ilya Rabinovich

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Museutopia

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Foreword

Ilya Rabinovich's artistic research into Moldova's national museums initially left me feeling estranged as a viewer. The heterogeneous nature of the photographed museum galleries and displays appeared obsolete to me, an impression no doubt reinforced by my limited knowledge of Moldova. I gathered from Wikipedia that Moldova is one of the poorest countries of Europe. From my perspective of an outsider, I was inclined to associate this poverty at the margins of Europe with 'obscurity' and 'obsoleteness', terms easily employed in characterizing a country that came across to me as being confronted with its decaying cultural institutions in its bid to modernity. However, a careful look at Rabinovich's work revealed to me that things are more complex. His photographic work presents Moldova beyond the tradition-modernity binary and shows that the country's museums are involved in complex processes of transformation. Rabinovich's photographs make us witness how the country's national museums have ambivalently contributed to producing an image of Moldova as a modern, independent state with a distinct national identity.

It is widely recognised that museums are instrumental in developing and reinforcing processes of national identity formation. National history is profiled not just through one museum, but rather through many outlets that might distract from the official nationalist agenda. In the Netherlands, for example, this phenomenon has confrontationally manifested itself through the rise and fall of the short-lived Museum of National History. In 2006, this museum project was officially founded through parliamentary law with the aim to create better public awareness of Dutch national history. Since its first official announcement, however, the museum became the focal point of numerous heated debates about whether such a museum was actually needed, and how it ought to be conceptualised and realised. If these debates clarified anything in particular, it was probably that one cannot introduce the idea of a Museum of National History in a society grappling with its tense status as multicultural, without also discussing the risks and fears related to materialising and disseminating a national identity. In 2011, the museum project was cancelled during the first sway of budget cuts following the credit crisis. If the museum would have been realized at all, it might have given us the opportunity to analyse how a nationalist agenda materialises in a museum institution. Probably, this would have revealed all the incongruities and paradoxes troubling the initiative in the first place.

Rabinovich's work is a welcome invitation to decipher the hidden and implicit agendas of museum collections and displays. No matter how sophisticated the display and arrangement of objects, subjects and ideas is, museums always conceal other, more delicate and political issues that only become discernible to those who are carefully looking out for them. Seen from this angle, the artworks shown and analysed in this book are honest in not obscuring the complex representational matter that lays at the basis of any museum and its processes of transformation.

In its current *Project '1975'*, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam puts specific interest in the question of what is (still) concealed in contemporary art institutes in the age of post-colonialism. The further we move on in an allegedly post-colonial era, we find out that we better not take seemingly past events for granted, especially when the artefacts or artworks related to colonial pasts and presents look 'obsolete'. Though some seem to believe that colonialism has gone, its mentality, fortified with the logic of capital accumulation, on its conspicuous consumption of cultural products, and on notions of political and cultural domination, persist in even the smallest details. This book, probably the best possible format for putting together display, subtext and analysis, reveals the complexities and contradictions of representing a nation state, its histories and transforming identities. Although the situation of the national museums in Moldova might not be enviable, Rabinovich's project illuminates that it is amply worthy of close attention.

Jelle Bouwhuis, curator Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam

A Photographic Inquiry into the Power of the Past

Editorial

Huub van Baar and Ingrid Commandeur

Museutopia: beyond organized forgetting

A few years before the fall of Communism, the Slovak dissident Milan Šimečka suggested that Communist regimes surprisingly well succeeded in organizing a kind of collective forgetting. The Communists celebrated not only a 'fake history', he suggested, but they also repeatedly shifted the version of history to be celebrated. The generations of Communism 'witnessed a shift (...) in the interpretation of history so frequently, that they have become effectively immune to the moral aspects of history'.[1] The permanent shifts in what had to be celebrated as the official version of history and the related scepticism of ordinary people toward whatever version the regime promoted had indirectly resulted in a form of organized forgetting. It prevented people to develop alternative visions of who they are, for it made it difficult for them to judge their present in relation to these censored and alternated pasts. Black holes, Šimečka suggested, have appeared in their understanding of their recent and distant pasts.

Ilya Rabinovich's project *Museutopia* can be considered an artistic inquiry into the ambivalent consequences of forms of organized forgetting that appeared under Communism in Eastern Europe. Rabinovich has photographically mapped the representations of history that have appeared in post-Communist national museums in Moldova's capital city Chişinău. His

images tell us not only a story about how history and national identity have recently been rearticulated and reshaped in attempts to come to terms with the Communist past. They also tell a story about the ways in which the 'black holes' that have been hit in the past have ambiguously but powerfully created the ground for new forms of cultural nationalism. In *Museutopia*, Rabinovich illuminates how, on the remains of centuries of imperial domination, the newborn country Moldova is hesitantly building a new national identity. Silently but powerfully, Rabinovich's work shows how this new identity is afflicted with the legacies of Soviet museology, a form of 'organized forgetting' and the ideological uses of history. At the same time, the numerous photographs that make up Rabinovich's art project do not simply tell a story about Moldova's identity struggle and inability to free itself from its past.

Ilya Rabinovich's *Museutopia* is an art project about contemporary museums and the cultural and nationalized spaces (*topoi*) they create, as much as it is about past and present-day utopias and the ways in which museums embody and facilitate them. *Museutopia* is about the muses of the arts and sciences, as much as it is about the ways in which the arts and the sciences have jointly contributed to developing new institutional and ideological surroundings to present national histories and identities. Last but not least, *Museutopia* is about 'musing EUtopia' and involves an artistic inquiry into the boundaries of Europe. *Museutopia* is a journey to Moldova, which represents both a border region and a liminal space of the current European Union.

Rabinovich is one of those extraordinary artists who forage around places where destruction and devastation have historically played a crucial role and where, at the same time, something new and ambivalent is arising. But while some choose to set down, for instance, the ruins of former Communist industrial aggregates, the poverty that emerged after Communism, or the megalomaniac ghosts of Soviet realistic architecture, Rabinovich puts his camera's lens on ruined Communist cultural institutions, the poverty of history and the relics of museum infrastructures. Entering the world of *Museutopia* is a confrontation with the desolate cultural territories where Communist high modernism, Soviet ideology and the nationalization of history once came devastatingly together. Yet, Rabinovich's work shows us that these places are not a kind of no man's lands between the past and the future or between the 'no longer' and 'not yet'. His work tells the multiple stories about what has started to grow on and between these ruins. Rabinovich shows that the past is still and powerfully haunting, while new museal spaces are shaped, novel identities are constructed and new utopias are in the making.

Overview of the book

This book brings Ilya Rabinovich's photographic research project *Museutopia* together with a series of essays that engage with and reflect on his work. The book opens with a conversation between the Russian curator and art critic Viktor Misiano and Ilya Rabinovich. In their dialogue, the *Museutopia* project is put in the context of Ilya Rabonivich's other artworks and his biography. Rabinovich, who was born in Moldova under Soviet rule, who grew up in Israel and who is currently living and working in Amsterdam, tells about his personal and professional motivations to return to his country of birth to undertake his new art project. Misiano invites Rabinovich to reflect on his work as an artist 'in exile' and on how notions such as the gaze and nostalgia have influenced the content and aim of *Museutopia*.

In his conversation with Ilya Rabinovich, the Dutch philosopher and cultural scholar Huub van Baar makes a virtual tour along some central parts of the *Museutopia* project. Together with the artist, Van Baar reflects on Rabinovich's method of 'reverse engineering': his way to critically and artistically unravel the narratives of national identity and history that are constructed in Chişinău's national museums. Van Baar and Rabinovich discuss the ambivalent ways in which the museums address delicate parts of Moldova's recent history to highlight the impact of issues, such as victimization, oblivion and exhibiting techniques on the vanishing of old and the emergence of new forms of nationalism.

In the third contribution to this book, the Moldovan artist and curator Stefan Rusu looks at Rabinovich's work from the angle of the historical changes of the museal and political landscapes of Moldova's capital city Chişinău and of the country more generally. Rusu takes us back to the Communist past to inform us about the ways in which Soviet rule has influenced the histories and infrastructures of the museums that Rabinovich photographed.

In the last contribution to this book, the Romanian philosopher Bogdan Ghiu presents Ilya Rabinovich's *Museutopia* in the context of critical museum studies. Ghiu productively brings *Museutopia* in conversation with the works of prominent museum scholars, such as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Tony Bennett. Ghiu analyzes the museum, considered as one of the central socio-cultural institutions that emerged in modern history, at the time of the crisis of the modernity itself. In his philosophical essay, Ghiu suggests that we can read Rabinovich's *Museutopia* as an artistic inquiry into the limits of the museum institution itself and of how it has historically supported and facilitated pedagogic, political and nationalistic aims. Yet, Ghiu does not claim that *Museutopia* primarily confronts us with those limits. At the same time, it explores the new and uncertain conditions under which the museum as institutional form is transforming in our post-modern age and at the time of a deepening crisis of representation. Thus, though *Museutopia* artistically questions the way in which the fall of Communism has generated new forms of cultural representation, it simultaneously develops new grounds for the future of the museum. This book contains not only several reflections on *Museutopia*. It also embodies the final part of the *Museutopia* project itself. Final as the project is, this book invites its readers to engage and re-engage with the unfinished and ongoing stories that Ilya Rabinovich's images tell us.

NOTES

1. Milan Šimečka, 'Black Holes', 1988 [1985], in: *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 17, No. 5, p. 52.

Ilya Rabinovich, *I will be your image*, 2007, passport photograph of Ilya Rabinovich in 1977

The Gaze, Diaspora and Trauma

Interview with Ilya Rabinovich

Viktor Misiano

Viktor Misiano: At first glance, your work comes across as being based primarily on the experience of 'the gaze'. You often make use of photography, which is your main medium, but you use it in an unconventional way to address something you witnessed. While presenting your works, you try to stress a certain public visual tension. A good example of this is the installation *Rear Window* (2008).[1] In this installation, you display printed photos in the dark, forcing the viewer to search for them using only a hand-held lamp. Your installation *I will be your image* (2007), made prior to *Rear Window,* is based on a complex geometry of gazes.[2] For this installation, you used old photos of relatives shot posing before the camera and staring into the lens. Thus they look at you, while you are gazing at them. When you show your family photos as an installation, your act of looking is inevitably reflected in the family album. It seems to me that the family album is also an institution that imposes specific norms, which was always in the field of your interest. Could you reflect on the role of the experience of the gaze in your work and how this has developed over the years?

Ilya Rabinovich: I have lived in many places and experienced what might therefore be considered a 'fragmented' life. My photographs spring from my desire to bring these fragments together through introspection, reflection and projection. They have become milestones in my search for personal reference points and contexts, because each of these photographs inherently points towards a specific time and place. I look for a mundane spatial arrangement of objects in a particular place; one that

can be transformed into a generic image. I pick out those images that have the quality of being at odds with and somehow detached from reality. I am interested in both the 'silent' social relations that such spaces forge and how these created spaces interact with the public in a kind of unspoken dialogue.

Between 1990 and 1991, I photographed my parents at a time when my mother was wasting away from cirrhosis. The pain of knowing that she would pass away soon and not being able to decide what to do with the photographs I had taken of her, led me to stop photographing people for a few years. Taking my mother in and out of hospital strengthened my understanding of our inextricable dependence on institutions – to the point where institutions take precedence over the individual. The constant moving from one place to another, from my mother's bed in our living room to the hospital and back again, made me realize that pain also has a place, in the sense that it relates to specific places. That is one of the reasons why I started photographing the interiors of social and cultural institutions, most of all museums. Photographing both private and institutional spaces was, in a way, an attempt to deal with my and other people's ambivalent struggles to cope with existing institutional frameworks.

In 1973, our family migrated from the Socialist Republic of Moldavia to Israel and lost almost all connection with the relatives who continued to live in Chişinău. For years, my parents' family album was lying on a shelf next to a Pentacon camera. It was the camera that drew my interest. But when I looked through the album, I realized that the memories of my relatives had almost entirely faded away. A peculiar thing about some of the old photographs was that on the back there was a line that went something like, 'For everlasting memory, remember me in the year xxxx, place.' The photographs were used as a kind of memory stick in the hope of preserving the beloved image forever. The photos anticipated the possibility of a future exchange of gazes. Seen from that angle, the vain aim of a family album is to try to be an object able to re-evoke all the desires related to the photographed events.

I think that my installation *I will be your image*, based on my parents' family album, does more than what you suggest it does. The installation encourages the viewer to navigate playfully through a dark space using only a lamp. It is a playful situation in which the viewer is neither a passive visitor nor bound by the rules of a game invented beforehand, but an active explorer who needs to find her or his own way in the setting of the installation. This playfulness is in keeping with my aim to develop new models for understanding the active interplay between the medium of photography and its spectators. I consider it as one of the meanings of an artwork to provoke a reflection on the contexts and reference points to which

artworks are related. Since the Internet boom and the digital photography revolution, the photographic image has lost much of its former privileged position. Everybody has become a photographer and the boundary between virtual and visual reproduction has been radically blurred.

VM: In *Museutopia*, you look at permanent museum exhibitions that represent the official, institutionalized 'national story' of your country of origin. As you have already done in some of your other works, in *Museutopia* you are again exploring social gazing apparatuses. It seems to me that the gaze reflected in most of your photos has one remarkable quality: it is a passionless gaze in which the artist himself seems to be almost entirely absent. For me this has come as a surprise, for your work has nothing to do with the tradition of objective photography dedicated to the meticulous reproduction of phenomena, such as water towers or Amazonian aboriginals. Usually, you focus on the places with which you have a clear emotional connection and which you really wanted to see: 'This is Chişinău, my native city, to which I finally returned after many years... This is Jerusalem, the first city of my exile, where I spent my childhood and to which I often return... This is Amsterdam, which I have chosen as the best place to live...' How do you perceive this shift in your recent work?

IR: *Museutopia* focuses on the representation of Moldova's national identity in museum exhibitions in Chişinău. In a previous installation setting, it entailed eleven large-scale panels with images and texts.[3] These panels resemble information posters in an educational institute. The viewer can get a general sense of the work at first glance, but, in order to appreciate the full story, he or she needs to read the texts too. Besides the search for identity, each of the works discussed could be characterized by its attempt to engage the viewer in an active and reflexive process of viewing. The viewer has to engage with an intense reading process in order to unravel the Moldovan identity puzzle. In my most recent work, I am looking for the socio-cultural frameworks and means that make those museum places the way they are. I feel forced to do so. I try to find traces that are related to the period of my childhood in Chişinău. Hence, by means of my artwork, I try to track traces of the past. They are still there, but they are hidden and need to be revealed and recontextualized carefully.

As a child, I migrated from Moldavia to Israel and even though those years are a relatively small part of my life, I am still haunted by unanswered questions about those days. What would have happened if my family had never migrated? How would my life have been? What would I have become? What would have been my identity? It is a Sisyphean task, but I still feel the need to bridge this unbridgeable gap between past and present. At the
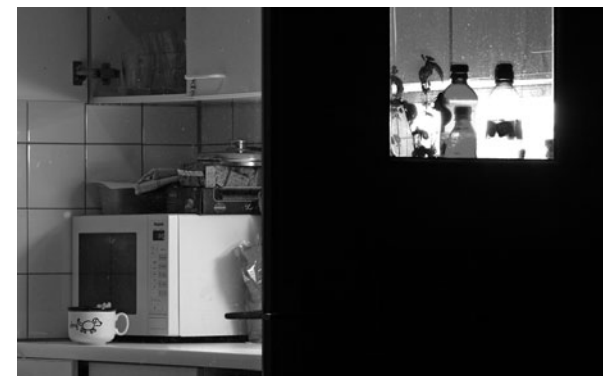
P. 18 and 19: Ilya Rabinovich, photographs from *Rear Window*, installation at *Be(com)ing Dutch*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, 2008

same time, however, I tell an alternative story about Moldovan national identity. Photographing museum exhibitions from the angle of the pasts they hide, I try to tell the ambiguous story of a transforming Moldovan national identity and to challenge the official narrative of the country. My hope is that by sharing the process I have been going through, others might get another, more ambivalent and less unproblematic picture of the places where they live.

Only recently, I realized that my first exile started after the first migration in 1973. My works are an attempt to create continuity, a history and coherent identity for myself, by reflecting upon the strangeness of the places where I have lived. The process of making art relates to the pain of being uprooted and it creates ideas about a phantom identity, one that will never exist. It is important for me to participate in contemporary debates about identity formation, exile and diaspora because they enable me to share my experience with those who have similar experiences. I am convinced that the difficulties I am facing are symptomatic, not only on a personal level but also on a national one. During most of its history, Moldova has been under one occupation or another. Now that the country is an independent republic, it is not surprising that Moldova is facing huge difficulties in presenting a coherent picture of its own national identity.

VM: I would like to link your remarks about exile, identity, diaspora and pain to my interpretation of your work as an expression of what I call 'the passionless gaze'. My hypothesis is that the incapacity to gaze passionately at the places that should provoke your passion is, in fact, consciously or unconsciously, one of the basic topics and qualities of your work. I consider the passionate gaze as a highly reflective approach to reality and as a particular quality of those who have been displaced for one reason or the other. Paradoxically, people such as migrants – who are often understood as marginal in the context of mainstream society – could fulfil a crucial role in challenging established systems of meaning. Often, they experience this reflective attitude in a more radical and conscious form, because, for them, it goes together with pain and suffering.

To understand the impact of your work, it might also help to approach the passionless gaze from the perspective of the diasporic character of your work. I think that we often appreciate artists who have lost their original 'habitus' and who are displaced from, for instance, their country of origin, because of their ability to reflect upon our 'natural' social and cultural phenomena from another angle. The coordinates of our worlds are not theirs; they are, so to say, surrounded by the unknown. For them, the gaze is the only available medium to explore the new system of coordinates and meanings in which they are living. I consider this diasporic, passionless

gaze, which is the result of trauma, a privilege. Those for whom gazing is passionless usually have only one engagement: observing themselves caught in the moment of gazing. In other words, the diasporic gaze is not primarily focused on the seen object, but on a subject who sees. From this displaced, yet privileged position, the artist is able to confront us with the limits of our own self-understanding and perception. What do you think of such observations?

IR: After my migration to Amsterdam in 1998, I travelled to Israel to start a new project. Between 1998 and 2001, I made photographs in Ramot, the neighbourhood in North Jerusalem where I grew up between 1976 and 1984. I also photographed the Pat neighbourhood in South Jerusalem, where my late father moved after the death of my mother in 1991. I printed the photographs only after returning to Amsterdam. For me, the most shocking experience was to realize that I couldn't relate to the photographs made in Ramot. This was the neighbourhood where I grew up. I expected that the photos would elicit certain emotions and memories, but this was not the case.

Your remarks about trauma and the passionless gaze help to understand what probably happened to me while I was looking at the Ramot photographs. I have never been able to talk with my parents or immigrant friends about the migration process from the perspective of trauma. Trauma was virtually a taboo subject. The Israeli culture in the 1970s and 1980s did not encourage this discussion either. Israeli society was busy creating its own navel-gazing culture. As immigrants, we were expected to forget, ignore or deny our past and to assimilate in order to become the desired 'true Israelis'. For me, it is still painful to remember the moments when we mocked and ridiculed newly arrived immigrants who were struggling to mask their Russian accent while talking in Hebrew. I only became aware that I had a trauma when I talked with my psychotherapist at the age of 17.

I consider trauma to be a process with a time frame of before, during and after the traumatic event or events. One of the main characteristics of trauma is the inability to talk about the painful experiences and to go back to the chain of events that led to the traumatic episode. This does not mean that the traumatized person is emotionally detached, but, rather, that he or she is unable to go back to the traumatic event and relive the moments that abruptly changed his or her life. I think that the pain that accompanies this blockage does not necessarily result in a detached observation of the new place, but causes a feeling of losing your grounding. It is like skydiving into an unknown system of coordinates. Let me explain what I mean by telling a story about one of my first experiences in Israel.

Ilya Rabinovich, *I will be your image,* installation as part of *Zapping*, StrijpS, Eindhoven, 2007
Photographs from Ilya Rabinovich's parents family album
Top: The family of Ilya Rabinovich's mother at her parents' house in Kagul, Moldavia, 1965
Bottom: Ilya Rabinovich's parents in their apartment in Ramot, Jerusalem, Israel, 1989

Ilya Rabinovich, *I will be your image,* installation as part of *Zapping*, StrijpS, Eindhoven, 2007
Photograph from Ilya Rabinovich's parents family album
Ilya Rabinovich's father with a cousin on a trip to Odessa, 1956

I remember a warm day in 1973, a few days after we migrated to Israel. I was taken to an immigration centre in Nahariya, a town in Northern Israel. I did not speak Hebrew at the time. One of the other immigrant kids said that Ben Gurion had died, but – since I was only familiar with Russian – it sounded to me as if 'Agurtzik' [cucumber in Russian –ed.] had passed away. I leaned against a low stone wall and noticed a tiny snake crawling between the stones. This chain of events did not make sense to me at all. For me, gazing passionlessly means a process of 'playing with matches while sitting on a barrel filled with explosives and watching the people pass by'. The 'passionless gaze' perfectly describes my obsession with how different fragments related to my identity correlate with my incapacity to express what is bothering me. In most of my works, there is no protagonist and no event, but an empty space waiting to be filled with new players in an anonymous movie. The photographs suggest that there is a hidden story, but the viewer is actually the one who needs to actively create the framework.

VM: In what way could we understand your experience as motivated by nostalgia? It seems to me that your work is also inspired by your search for nostalgia. You intentionally visit places, such as Chişinău, in the hope of being touched emotionally. Yet, you are always gazing at these places and unable to be really touched. You are nostalgic – or, to put it more accurately, your work seems to be characterized by nostalgia for nostalgia. However, even if your memory is short, in *Museutopia* you appeal to history! The Dutch historian and philosopher Frank Ankersmit has also used the term 'passionless gaze'. According to Ankersmit, an emotional distance and an inability to connect characterize our relation to the past.[4] Traumatized by the drama of modernity, we are only able to observe the large panorama of unconnected historical facts. As you reveal in *Museutopia,* this phenomenon raises the question: How instrumental is any attempt to build up a coherent picture of the historical past? Could you explain how you see your work in relation to this question and the theme of nostalgia?

IR: In 1999, working under a fellowship at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, I made a collaborative project with Luan Nel, a colleague who came from Johannesburg. This project was entitled *Ilya Rabinovich–Luan Nel. Kisheniev–Johannesburg.* It grew from a dialogue between us in which we tried to understand how childhood memories have affected both our identities and artistic practices. Part of the project was to travel to Chişinău and Johannesburg and to try to see what kinds of memories would pop up. First, we went to Chişinău. It was a devastating experience. Moldova was in the middle of restructuring its economy, trying to operate on the basis of a free market economy, but everywhere we looked, we found poverty with a capital 'P'. With Luan, I went to the places where I used to play as a child, around the apartment where we lived before we left. I remembered so little of that period. I was sad, angry with myself, shocked and feeling as if part of my personality had been removed in an obscure process. My only comfort was a kind of light shivering prompted by returning to places where I had been before. Seen from that perspective, I cannot permit myself the privilege of sinking into my memories, because I immediately want to cry. My conscious memories are mostly of the last few moments. The rest I have put aside. I do not consider this a particularly nostalgic attitude. It's not that my memory is short, but it is too painful to remember details from the past. After a certain time, when I was about 30, I stopped remembering things in an active way. I assume it is a survival mechanism that I am using.

In 2008, while working on the *Museutopia* project, I was searching for remote traces related to the Soviet era. To my surprise, I encountered a process resembling the denial or even erasure of their recent national identity, a process I am familiar with from my own migration to Israel. The devastating effects of this denial can amount to blocking any ability to create a reasonable picture of the nation itself.

For me, art is a healing tool. With the aid of the works I make, I try to recreate or fix parts of my phantom identity, the parts that were amputated in the process of becoming who I am now. I hope that this publication can also contribute in some way to helping those coming from Moldova understand what the dangers are when identity is hastily recreated and what might be the consequences of ignoring their own recent pasts.

NOTES

1. For *Rear Window* (2008), the title of which references to Alfred Hitchcock's famous film, Ilya Rabinovich took photos with a telephoto lens to peep into rooms of neighbours, taking photographs of the scenes he would find. The installation *Rear Window* was first shown in the exhibition *Be[com]ing Dutch,* Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 24 May through 14 September 2008. Upon entering the space, visitors received a small light with which they had to 'discover' the installation. A large number of photographs in various sizes were spread around a dark space, waiting to be spotted and contemplated. The photographs were printed using a silk-screen technique, a particular aesthetic that created a layer of unresolved tension. An image that seemed sharp enough from a distance became obscure on closer inspection. In the accumulative process of encountering new photographs and realizing their collective nature as 'rear window peeping photographs', the participant was faced with an essential theme of the installation: the reflexive notion of voyeurism and its relation to the other.

2. *I will be your image* (2007) was first installed as a photo installation at the former Philips factory building in Eindhoven in June 2007.

3. This installation was shown in *Subliminal Dialogues. Made in Arnhem Invites,* Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem (MMKA), 12 September through 15 November 2009.

4. See Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

Viktor Misiano (Moscow, Russia, 1957) is an art critic and curator. From 1980 until 1990, he was Curator of Contemporary Art at the Pushkin National Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow and, from 1992 to 1997, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Moscow. He curated the Russian participation in the Biennales of Istanbul (1992), Venice (1995, 2003) and Valencia (1999) and took part in the curatorial team of the *Manifesta I* in Rotterdam in 1996. He is a co-founder and chief editor of *The Moscow Art Magazine* (since 1993) and of *Manifesta Journal* (since 2003). In 2005, he curated the first Central Asia Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Viktor Misiano is an honorary doctor of the Helsinki University for Art and Design. Photo: Helmut Newton.

Out of Place: Haunting Pasts, Withering Presents

Huub van Baar in conversation with Ilya Rabinovich

Ilya Rabinovich, *Ilya Rabinovich–Luan Nel; Kisheniev–Johannesburg project*, 1999
Kitchen in the apartment where Ilya Rabinovich grew up in Chişinău before he immigrated to Israel in 1973

Huub van Baar: Your *Museutopia* project grew into a large artistic interrogation of Moldova's national museums. What inspired you to undertake this project?

Ilya Rabinovich: I consider the project important on both the personal and the public level. Initially, it was primarily an attempt at investigating my own identity and the place where I was born. Before I actually saw the museums in 2008, I expected to find material that could shed light on the situation in Chişinău during the mid 1960s and early 1970s, the period when my family and I lived there. My parents were Jewish, born in Moldova when it was still part of the Soviet Union. Yet, they never spoke about Moldova as a nation or about what it meant to be Moldovan. For me, however, the latter became a vital issue. I largely grew up in Israel and found it painful to have no history related to my family's Moldovan background. I wondered whether traces were left of my family's history in Chişinău, not only during the Communist period, but also before it. Some of my relatives were intellectuals, others were in business. I was particularly interested in what happened to my father's parents. He once told me that they were killed in the 1930s, long before the Nazis occupied the country. Visiting Moldova and particularly the National Museum of History and Archaeology, was an attempt to deal with these personal questions of identity. Yet, while visiting this museum and the other ones, I was faced not only with the difficulty of entering my own life story, but also with the confusing histories and identity politics propagated by the national museums. I started to focus on these political contexts. At this point, the project also

became more than just an individual venture. Confronted with how the National Museum of History and Archaeology was organized, I realized that it would be tremendously difficult to artistically reflect on its representation of history. The exhibitions released diverse kinds of emotions and elicited reactions ranging from denial and cynicism to disbelief. I simply could not believe what I saw: the Communist era was far from absent. Contrary to my expectations, it was highly present, although in the guise of a ghost. If we are to believe what I saw in these museums, Moldova's Communist past haunted – and continues to haunt – its present.

HvB: Why did you decide to turn these museums into such an extensive art project?

IR: Through making photographs, I tried to raise questions about the representational parameters of the exhibitions and about the impact of the manner in which artefacts, displays and the like were combined. What, for instance, did it mean that these museums still mobilized the same techniques of display, the same structural design and the same kinds of aesthetics that were used during Communism? The content of the museums has changed, but most of their representational frames haven't been touched at all – even though these museums were revised after 1989. My project grew into a large endeavour, as I began undertaking a kind of 'reverse engineering' meant to unravel the lost, yet still present ideology of these museum installations.

HvB: How exactly did you undertake this 'reverse engineering'?

IR: I felt the need to engage with these museum exhibitions in order to establish the way in which they contribute to the making of Moldova's current identity. These museums present Moldova in stereotypical ways that are contradictory yet compelling. Moldova's supposed origins, for instance, were that of a wealthy, rustic society. At the same time, the exhibition techniques are related to the Soviet past and tend to turn everything upside down. As a visitor, I was in limbo about this confusing and incredible logic. As an artist, however, I saw an opportunity to productively deal with these ambivalent encounters between the visiting spectator and these identity-making mechanisms. My work has often dealt with estranging encounters in liminal spaces, such as these national museums. By using the photographic medium as a tool to reflect upon the museums' exhibitions, I intended to invert the gaze. In so doing, I wanted to encourage the spectator to focus on the context of how things were done, rather than letting her or him accept and repeat the narratives of

the exhibited artefacts. The other part of the 'reverse engineering' was to photograph all the sites where the Communist Party's ideological museums used to be and research the archives where the exhibition and documentation materials of the former ideological museums are preserved. I wanted to confront today's reality with recent history.

The way history is manipulated to create a 'different' present has always intrigued me. In Israel, I have become familiar with this well-tried mechanism. In the *Museutopia* project, my aim was not to look for some ultimate truth or for a true historical representation – of course, these do not exist. Rather, I aimed at analyzing the terms and conditions that made those institutes choose their particular strategies of representation. I wanted to challenge the stories they tell and the identities they create and put them in more complex contexts.

HvB: Could you tell us more about these stories and identities?

IR: There are a number of questionable storylines. Let me give some examples. In the past, the contemporary territory of Moldova was lengthily occupied. Actually, Moldova had almost always been part of colonizing powers, such as the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Nazis and, most recently, the Soviet Union. And even today, now that it is an independent country, Moldova uncomfortably balances between the geopolitical interests of Russia on the one hand and those of the European Union on the other. In any case, the National Museum of History and Archaeology tells little to nothing about the consequences of having been occupied so lengthily, for instance, in terms of language, population, lifestyles and the like. History remains very abstract and the issue of territorial and cultural changes is largely neglected. In a way, you could probably compare the situation in Moldova to that in any other country belonging to the East Bloc between 1945 and 1989. Moldova may have had no alternative but to collaborate with the Soviet regime. Yet, neither its relation with the Soviet Union nor its role in the Soviet system are articulated.

The way in which Communism is compared to Nazism is even more delicate. Without explanation, pictures of a Nazi concentration camp are placed next to a prisoner's uniform from a Soviet Gulag camp. In a caption at the entrance of the exhibition room dedicated to the 1940s, the history of the twentieth century is presented as follows:

The history of mankind entered a century of epochal scientific discoveries, but also of big human tragedies. It was the century of two devastating world conflicts resulting in the death of millions of people and causing incommensurable material losses. The Second World War and the political repressions

of the Stalinist period represent two of the most dramatic episodes in the history of mankind.

However, the exhibition does not at all inform its audience about what happened in Moldova during the 1930s and 1940s. Nothing is said about [See p. 98] what happened to the Jews. Nothing of all these tragedies is told.[1]

HvB: Several of your photographs show the empty metal frames in which some of the museum's artefacts are incorporated. Your work suggests that these frames of the Communist past are not just relics. They are not simply the outdated frames made during Communism, for we see much of the history that the museum addresses through these representational frames of the former Communist era. What kind of story do these frames tell?

IR: They symbolize the inability to make a clear break with the recent Communist past. The frames represent the visual unawareness of the museum's personnel. I could relate this issue to what I just told about the comparison of Communism with Nazism. Personally, I believe that, if Communism was such a big disaster and if you could compare it to Nazism, you should not use the frames from this period to tell these histories. I find it contradictory. The comparison between Nazism and Communism also relates to something else that I have tried to address in *Museutopia*. In one of the museum's captions, Communism is presented as 'one of the [See p. 98] biggest disasters' in the history of Moldova. Thus, Communism is represented as abusive and harmful and, at the same time, as something that came from outside.

HvB: This point seems to refer to something that I have seen more than once in Central and Eastern European national museums. The 'true' nation is defended against the 'foreign occupiers' who terrorized the country in the past and made it difficult to let the nation flourish. Those who harmed the nation are externalized and seen as foreign forces, whereas those who were oppressed are victimized. Such a nationalistic representation of history makes it difficult to address, for instance, issues of collaboration. Do you mean that the museum victimizes Moldova as a nation, while representing Communism and Nazism as intrusive acts undertaken by others?

IR: Yes, I found it outrageous to see how the museum tends to put Moldova in the victim's role. Of course, it was not really like that. Throughout Moldova's history, there were acts of collaboration that nobody wanted to talk about. The Moldovans are represented as victims who played a passive,

innocent role in their country's history. The problem with victimization is that it makes any change for the future impossible. Once you victimize yourself or an entire country, you cannot do anything to turn history in another direction. You consider yourself as utterly helpless.

HvB: Does this victimization result in a kind of oblivion of the most delicate parts of Moldova's history?

IR: Yes, the selection and framing of artefacts by the museums' curators creates such a situation of oblivion. Without suggesting that a true representation is possible, we could at least say that this selection and framing tell a story about the country's past that is far from accurate. To some extent, putting yourself in the role of a victim is a very 'comfortable' moral position. You simply do not need to take any responsibility for what happened in the past.

HvB: I want to relate what you say about victimization to those parts of your work that focus on the destruction of churches and on the environmental disasters that took place during Communism. Your work on the [See pp. 80–85] National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History shows that these human and ecological catastrophes are represented as the impact of meteorites, coming from another and extremely hostile world. Religion and nature are presented as eternal values and as the cornerstones of Moldova's national identity. Communism brought much trouble to what seems to be seen as the 'eternally surviving Moldovan nation'.

IR: The presentation of Christianity as an antipode of Communism is a common feature of both the history and the ethnography museums. This representation is not restricted to the situation in Moldova. Rather, it is a widespread practice in all of the former Soviet republics. Institutionalized religion has become a key element to lean on emotionally in times of enormous economical insecurity. People are seeking forgiveness and trying to give their lives new meaning.

HvB: But your work does not merely point to the return of religion in Moldova's daily life. It problematizes the way in which the country's national museums have mobilized religion in order to construct a disputable version of Moldova's national identity. In the ethnography museum, the ecological disasters, the destroyed churches and similar kinds of things that occurred under Communism are placed next to cosmological murals [See pp. 62–67] depicting Moldova's history. Deformed mummified animals, pictures of crop failures and remnants of churches are exhibited around a large

painting of a tree that gets violently entangled in its own branches. The disasters related to the Communist era are represented as a kind of evil that ultimately resulted in a situation in which nature itself derailed. And, then, this evil state of affairs is juxtaposed with what seems to be considered as the true, idyllic nature of the Moldovan nation.

IR: Surely, both museums are promoting a national identity that is far from secular. It is an identity that is fundamentally connected with roots in the ground and that is spiritually fully Christian. You might even consider it as based on a kind of romantic idea of the natural connection between the folk and the land. In this process of representation, Communism is described as only a transitory episode in the process of returning to the soil. For more than one reason, that kind of representation is highly problematic. It singles out the Communist era as the one and only evil period. But, as said, there were so many times throughout history in which Moldova was occupied. In fact, Moldova almost never existed as an independent territorial or political entity. So, to what kind of nationalism does the museum refer? What kind of nationalism does it promote? History is also totally de-personified. Who were the founders of the nationalist movements? To all these kinds of questions, the museum exhibitions do not give an answer. Rather, they obscure them.

HvB: Your archival inquiries into the various pasts of the museum historicize the representation of national identity. Whereas your archival work focuses on the 1950s, it also tells something about how the ethnographic museum was organized at the moment of its founding in the nineteenth century under the Russian Empire. Like so many national museums established in the nineteenth century, it taught the masses about the evolution of human and non-human nature, while, at the same time, it served to incorporate the people and their histories into the national idea. As, for instance, the work of the British scholar Tony Bennett eloquently shows[2], Darwinist evolution theories and diverse kinds of nationalisms came together in complex ways in influencing how museums throughout Europe were constructed in those days. As Bogdan Ghiu's and Stefan Rusu's contributions to this book clarify, issues of natural history and national belonging also played a vital role in the history and construction of Moldova's national museums and identities. Your archival inquiries into this history focus on the moment when, shortly after the Second World War, late Stalinism profoundly influenced this hybrid mixture of natural history, evolution theories and nationalist pedagogy. In those days the ethnographic museum was called The Republican Study of Land Museum (Respublikanskii Kraevedceskii Muzei). Thus, also in the 1950s,

the relation between the nation and the land was far from absent. Due to the socialist glorification of agricultural and industrial work, it was most of all related to the issue of progress through labour, rather than to religion. Was this something of relevance for your archival work?

IR: The photographs from the museum's archive show that really everything was enormously politicized. A Moldovan museum researcher told me that Stalin's statue was placed everywhere, in all cultural and state institutions. It was required to be at the entrance of every single institution. As one of the archive photos shows, a statue of Stalin made out of marble was standing in the entrance to the main hall. In the background, we can also distinguish a carpet displaying the shape of Moldova. However, the country is floating in an empty space; the emblems of the other Soviet republics surround the free-floating nation. Symbolically, Moldova was completely incorporated into the Soviet universe. The entire museum was built on such representations. Charts, diagrams and maps dominated them. There were only a few concrete objects present, because they were supposed to have no controllable meaning. To depict the relation between Communism and its materialization, everything was represented in terms of scientific progress. Charts and diagrams visualized how labour, both agricultural and industrial, allegedly turned the 'land' productively into common goods.

HvB: The Sovietization of the museum is in sharp contrast with the current representation of Moldova, which is what most of your work on the ethnography museum focuses upon. Yet, the exhibition is still preoccupied with the country's natural resources.

IR: In one of my photographs, we see display cases in which different kinds of minerals and agricultural products are brought together. We see samples of typical landscapes of Moldova, including their crops. These artefacts represent another mechanism to connect Moldova's cultivated and idyllic landscapes with the utopian idea of the Moldovan nation. It is almost cynical how, in the next exhibition room, these idylls come together with the display of a wide range of extinct predators, which currently are no longer to be found in Moldova.

HvB: Two exhibition rooms are part of the first influential revision of the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History after the fall of Communism, opened in 1994. This permanent exhibition, entitled *Nature – Man – Culture* (*Nature – Omul – Cultura*) is one of the most amazing features of Moldova's current national museums and also comprises a

large part of your photographic work. The central room of this exhibition includes four large murals in which we see one huge cosmological landscape, divided into various scenes covering the four walls of this room. Whereas in the archival materials of the 1950s the politicization of the museum was all over the place, in these scenes any direct link with political changes has totally faded away. Yet your work draws scrupulous attention to these scenes for its political subtext. Could you tell more about your motivation to dedicate a substantial part of your work to this part of the exhibition?

IR: When I first entered the central room with the four murals, I was amazed. There were no scientific or cultural artefacts, but, instead, these highly detailed murals. Somehow, I could not understand how a scientific museum could include such an exhibition. It was as if any realistic representation had been dropped in favour of a fantastic picture of the world. In order to better understand the background and context of this exhibition, I had a conversation with Antonina Sârbu, a local researcher. She emphasized the importance of taking into account the moment at which the idea behind the room was developed. The permanent exhibition and the central room were designed and produced in the period 1987–1994, thus, in the years when Moldova gained its independence. The concept of the room was developed in collaboration with various governmental institutions affiliated with the National Academy of Science. The period of the development of the exhibitions coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The political changes made it possible to break with the prevailing representational rules. The aim of the central room was to show the problems that the human race is facing. The concept of *Nature – Man – Culture* was based on the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. The convention's key idea is to recognize and conserve sites that have particular significance for representing humanity and its history. The central room represents nature as the environment of every human community. Culture is seen as a reflection of that environment and the murals are a comprehensive attempt to represent the natural environment. By showing the evolution of Moldovan communities and cultures in different historical periods, the murals would show the relation between 'Man' and 'Nature'.

HvB: The murals bring several important moments of the universe – such as its creation and the Apocalypse – together with some icons of the Greek and Egyptian civilizations. Yet these moments and icons are fully incorporated into the cosmological development of human and non-human life and, at the same time, into a landscape that you recognize as Moldovan. These murals radically strengthen the de-personified version of history

we discussed in relation to the destruction of churches and environmental disasters that took place during Communism. But here, Moldova's identity seems to be represented as a kind of organic growth of the nation resulting from the cosmological development of the universe. How does your work reflect on this organicism and the specific form of nationalism that it seems to represent?

IR: In the murals, the Moldovan nation is set as an example for humanity in its global process of development: the murals go beyond the representation of nationalism; rather, they seem to represent a common belief based on Judeo-Christian ideas about the Apocalypse. My work tries to challenge the supposed symmetry between the allegories of the murals and Moldova's history. Do the murals represent a particular 'moment in time' in the history of Moldova and the development of the Moldovan nation? Do the parts of the exhibitions dedicated to the ecological disasters that happened during Communism represent the depicted Apocalypse? Are we really facing a new Genesis, as the murals seem to suggest? More generally, is it not highly problematic to try to represent the story of humanity via the national history of Moldova? How is it possible at all that an ethnography museum comes up with such proposals?

HvB: The highly ambivalent relation between nationalism and the use of organic, cosmological, mythic and religious representations in both the history and the ethnography museums brings me to discussing the role of archaeological excavations in museums. Let me explain what I mean by giving an example. In 1993, when the Czech Republic and Slovakia became independent, Slovak museums started to use archaeological excavations to 'prove' that the Slovaks lived on the current territory of the country long before the Hungarians started to occupy it. Like Moldova, Slovakia is one of those recently emerged nation-states that have a long history of occupation. As we have seen more often in the history of modern European museums, archaeological excavations are mobilized to support nationalism. Do you think that there is a particular reason for small, new countries, such as Slovakia and Moldova, to 'upgrade' archaeological excavations?

IR: My Israeli background has made me more than familiar with this rhetoric and nationalism. It is a way of saying, 'We belong here, since our ancestors have always lived on this soil.' It is a way of 'proving' their belonging to the nation. We see something similar in the Moldovan national museums. Yet to some extent, it is even more extreme. First of all, it is interesting to mention that about 60 per cent of the entire exhibition in the

history museum is made up out of archaeological materials. These materials play a crucial role in the narrative of the museum. The oldest displayed archaeological objects in the history museum are prehistoric tools that were used for hunting. In the hall in which these tools are exhibited, every display is dedicated to a successive period. In this way, Moldova's history is represented according to a linear timeline. What is more, the way in which the artefacts are arranged suggests that Moldova progressively transformed from a nomadic society to a hunter-gatherer society and so on and so forth.

HvB: You have called your project *Museutopia*. This name has various connotations. First of all, it connects the world of museums with a utopian, non-existing world. If you take the word 'utopia' literally, it means something like 'no place', 'out of place' or 'beyond place'. How do you relate these meanings of the word to the way in which Moldova's history and national identity are currently dealt with in the national museums?

IR: One possible meaning of 'utopia' is its reference to an ideal society that possesses a perfect socio-economic system. Starting in the late eighteenth century, public museums have been established and they can be characterized by their attempt to represent knowledge in an encyclopaedic way. I photographed various museum exhibitions in Chişinău in 2008 and had several discussions with the curator, Stefan Rusu and others about my Moldovan experiences. This was also the time when I started to realize how immense the discrepancy is between Moldova's identity crisis on the one hand and what these national museums represent on the other. The name *Museutopia* is a reflection on this huge discrepancy. *Museutopia* represents both an ironic and a critical response to the current situation in Moldova.

NOTES

1. The section dedicated to the 1940s does not present the major events of Moldova's Second World War history. Instead, four dissimilar periods and events are confusingly brought together. The personal belongings and uniform of a Red Army soldier, for instance, are displayed next to a Romanian soldier's personal belongings and uniform. The next display case exhibits objects belonging to prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau together with the clothes and personal belongings of a Moldovan sent to a Stalinist repression camp. On the other side of the wall, one can see the personal belongings of people sent into exile in Siberia in the 1950s. Ilya Rabinovich: 'By bringing all these artefacts together in the same room, this section of the museum suggests a kind of moral correspondence between the four different historical events that these artefacts represent. At the same time, the way in which these artefacts are put together articulates the perspectives regarding these events in a misleadingly neutral way. These exhibition rooms with an interior design inherited from the Soviet times call to mind the times when the museum still housed the Museum of Military Glory. Then, the exhibited artefacts reflected a Communist monoculture. The present situation hardly manages to escape the effect of that one-sided, ideological representation of Moldova's history.'

2. See Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995) and, Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

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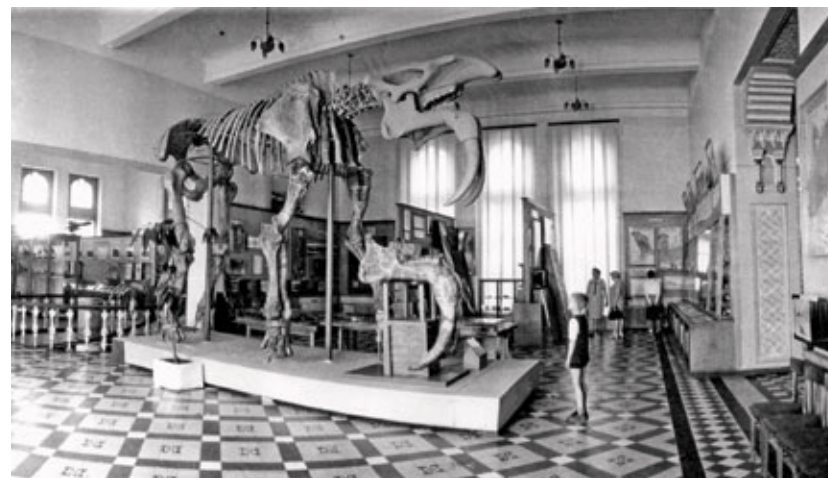
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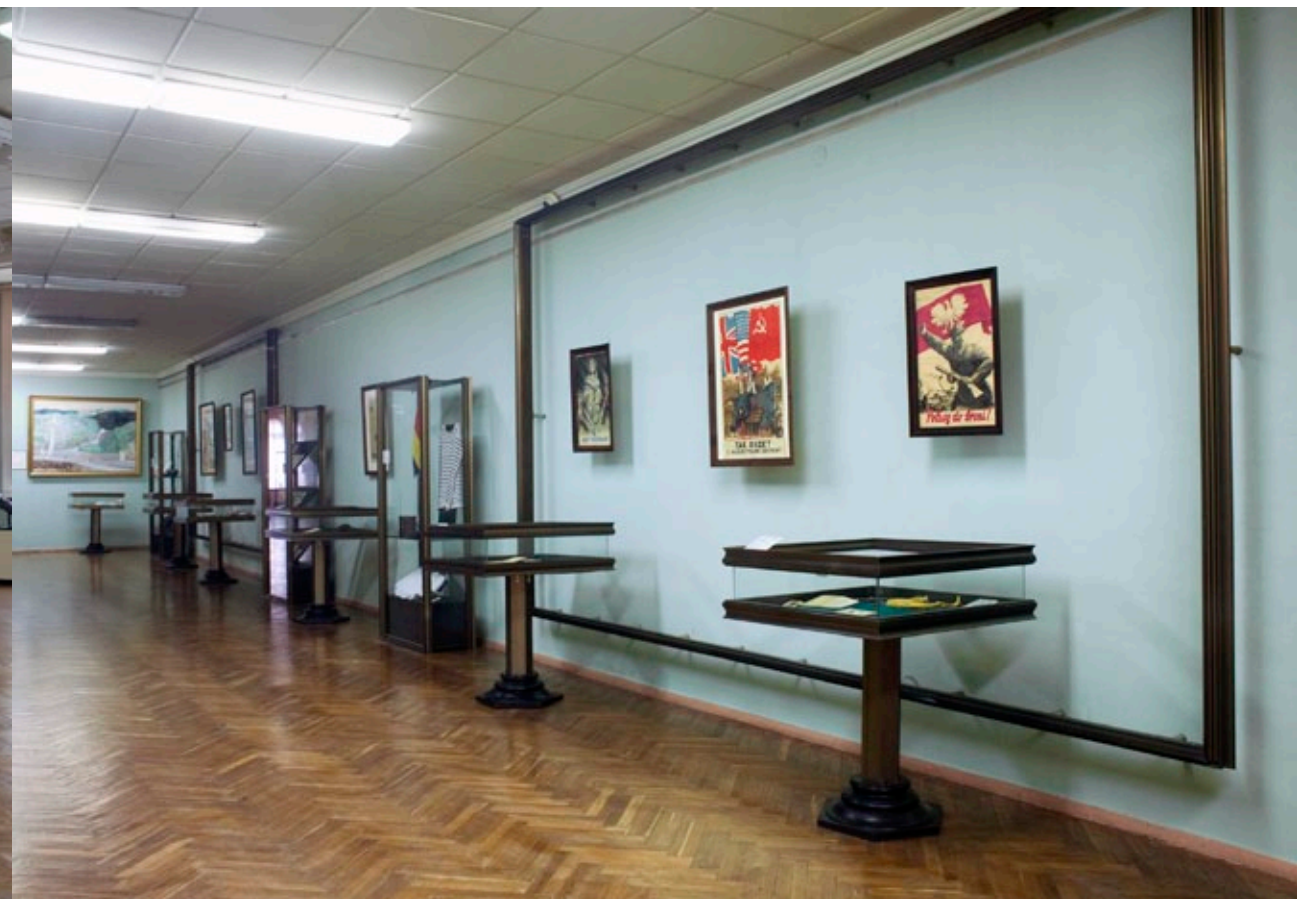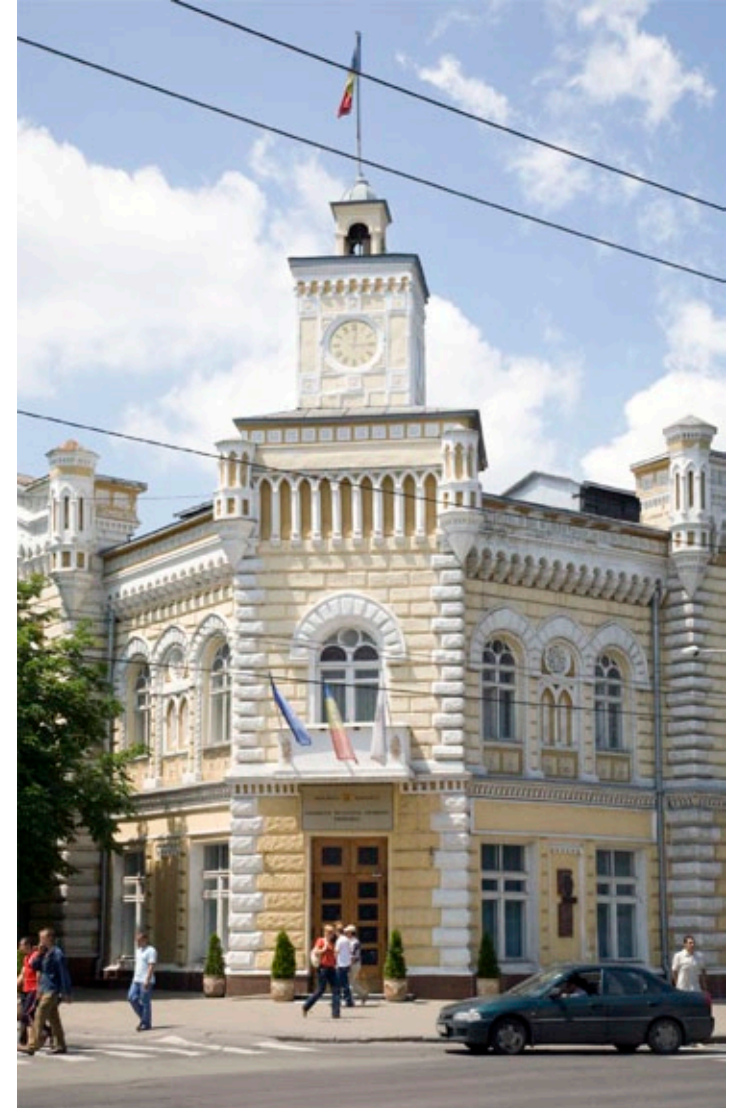ДОХОДЯЩЕЙ ДО КРИТИЧЕСКОЙ ОТМЕТК
ИНТЕНСИВНОГО ПРИМЕНЕНИЯ ХИМИКАТО
ПРИВЕЛИ К ДИСБАЛАНСУ В ПРИРОДЕ:
ЧИСЛЕННОСТЬ ВРЕДНЫХ ВИДОВ ЖИВОТ
РЕЗКО ВОЗРОСЛА. А ПОЛЕЗНЫХ - СОКРАТ
НА ГРАНИ ИСЧЕЗНОВЕНИЯ
НАХОДЯТСЯ 40% ВИДОВ НАСЕКОМЫХ,
Ю ВИДОВ РЫБ, Ю-ЗИМНЕВОДНЫХ
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IS-ПТИЦ И II ВИДОВ МЛЕКОПИТАЮЩИХ.

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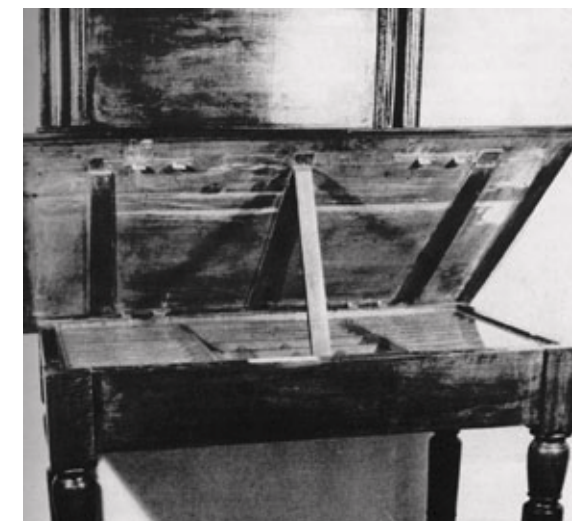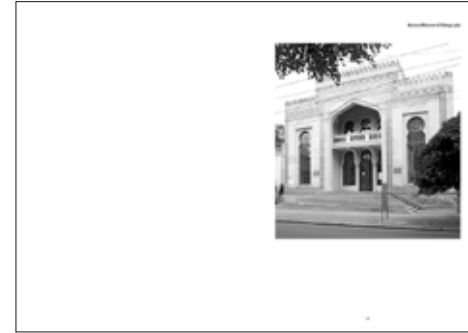
41 ►

Façade, National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History, 2008

The National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History was founded in October 1889 with the opening of the first agricultural exhibition of Bessarabia, at the initiative of Baron A. Stuart. The museum was originally named the Museum of Zoology, Agriculture and Handicrafts of the Bessarabian Zemstvo. The Amateur Naturalist Society of Bessarabia, founded in 1904, supported the scientific development of the museum. The museum was renamed several times: Chişinău National Museum of Natural History (1926); Regional Museum of Bessarabia (1937); Republican Museum of MSSR (1940); The Republican Study of the Land Museum (1957); National Museum of the Study of Local Lore (1983). Finally, following Moldova's independence in 1991, the museum acquired its current name. The museum is housed in the original complex designed by the architect V. Tzeganko in 1905. The building is unique in Moldova, being constructed in Neo-Mauritian style; it resembles a mosque without minarets. After its opening, the museum quickly became an important scientific and cultural center, known throughout but also beyond Europe. Featuring exhibits in the fields of geology, paleontology, zoology, entomology, archaeology, ethnography and numismatics, the collection includes almost 135,000 specimens from the Moldovan region.

◄ 42

Entrance hall featuring Tree of Life by R. Safarova and S. Codrescu, 1994

The permanent exhibition of the Museum of Ethnography and Natural History is entitled *Nature – Man – Culture*. Originally conceived in 1988, the construction of the exhibition coincided with a new era of freedom brought about by the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The design was revised and updated and officially inaugurated in 1994 under the guidance of the museum's director, M. Ursu and its main curator, L. Burman. The exhibition is based on the UNESCO convention that protects 'the common natural and cultural heritage of humanity.' The exhibition uses local experience as a foundation to reflect upon the relationships between man, nature and culture. The central element of the exhibition is the sculpture *Tree of Life*, created by R. Safarova and S. Codrescu. The *Tree of Life* is an internationally recognized symbol, which represents the spiritual continuity of biological life that exists in eternal regeneration. The sculpture is the linking element between four groups of windows positioned around it, in the shape of a cross.

43 ►

View across the entrance hall of the Republican Museum of MSSR, 1955

Photographer unknown, National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History Archive.

◄ 44

Entrance hall of the Republican Museum MSSR featuring a statue of Stalin, 1953

This photograph was taken in 1953, the year in which Stalin died. The exhibition portrayed the first successes that the Soviets achieved. The marble statue of Stalin formed the centerpiece around which the emblems of various Soviet Republics were placed. Directly behind the statue hung a carpet showing a map of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). The exhibition presented a 'Sovietized' version of Moldova and was curated by the Ideology and Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The exhibition included descriptions like 'The early days of Soviet power' and 'The meeting of the Soviet Liberators'.

45 ►

Entrance hall of the Republican Museum MSSR featuring a statue of Lenin, 1952

With the establishment of Soviet power in 1940 and the creation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Regional Museum of Bessarabia changed in line with Soviet principles and became the Republican Museum MSSR. A statue of Lenin stood at the entrance of the museum. In 1957, four years after Stalin's death, the institution was reorganized again and renamed The Republican Study of the Land Museum. The exhibited collection of historical materials was chosen to improve political and cultural standards and to educate the masses in the spirit of Soviet patriotism.

◄ 46

Some of Franz Osterman's biological preparations from the early twentieth century

Osterman's work became the basis of the museum's permanent exhibition *Nature – Man – Culture*. This exhibition is dedicated to the museum's founders Alexander Stuart, Baron Franz Osterman, Paul Gore, Nicholas Florov, Joseph Lepsa and Nicholas Moroşanu. The National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History was short listed for the 'European Museum of the Year Award' in 1998.

47 ►

A view of Franz Osterman's laboratory, 1903

Franz Osterman was a scientist of Austro-Hungarian origin who became the founder of the Museum of Zoology, Agriculture and Handicrafts of the Bessarabian Zemstvo. He died in 1905, shortly before the museum opened at its current location. Osterman was also the founder of the Society of Naturalist and Nature Lovers Sciences. He contributed enormously to the study of Bessarabian flora and fauna and created large collections of biological preparations, which earned the museum Europe-wide fame.

◄ ► 48–49

A painted mural showing the verdant banks of the Dniester River in central Moldova

The 'Nature' hall concept at the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History was developed between 1989 and 1990 as part of its permanent exhibition. The hall is dedicated to illustrating what was perceived as the rich diversity and beauty of the Moldovan natural landscape. In reality, however, the hall represents a picture that belongs to the past. For example, the various animal species exhibited in this hall are now mostly extinct. The four murals in the hall depict four geographic regions of Moldova, the most important being the Dniester River Steppe and its surrounding mountains. A team of commissioned Ukrainean painters, V. Zikov, P. Belogorțev and A. Buliciov, carried out extensive research in the Moldovan countryside in order to recreate the landscapes accurately.

◄ ► 50–51

A mural portraying the Prut River forms the backdrop of a three-dimensional topographical exhibition

In the middle of the second hall stands a glass case exhibiting a topographical map of the Republic of Moldova in a three-dimensional model. I. Belenky and E. Costiuc made the model. It shows the geographical location of Moldova's natural ecosystems. It also illustrates the extent to which clearing forests to make way for farm land has changed the environment. On the wall, behind the map, a typical Moldovan landscape can be seen. This mural depicts the Prut River delta with some of its common wildlife.

◄ ► 52–53

A mounted eagle stands out against a mural of the Dniester Steppe. The display cabinet at the right includes examples of bird life that have become almost extinct

The murals exhibited throughout the museum show places that are central to Moldovan folklore and literature. Many Moldovan folk melodies begin in the woods or at the banks of the country's main rivers (Dniester, Prut, Răut). More recently, these places inspired Bessarabian literature, such as Ion Druta's 1963 novel *Ballads of the Steppes*.
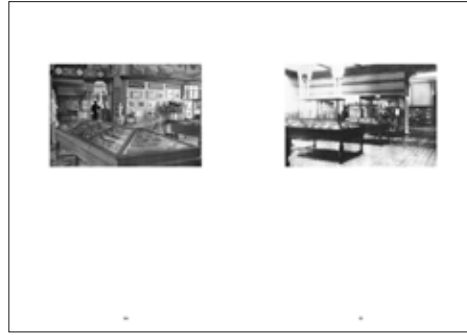
◄ 54

Moldavian agricultural products on display in one of the halls of The Republican Study of the Land Museum, 1957

In 1957, after the museum was reorganized again, an historical exhibition about everyday life in the Moldavian SSR was opened. The collection was comprehensive and included about 700 displays of folk art, such as ceramics, clothes, carpets, wood and metal works and musical instruments. In 1983, The State Museum of History was founded in Chişinău. Then, the Republican Study of the Land Museum decreased its concentration on historical exhibitions and began to focus on the sciences, on agriculture and ethnography in particular.

55 ►

Overview of a part of the first exhibition in the Museum of Zoology, Agriculture and Handicrafts of the Bessarabian Zemstvo, which was opened on 30 April 1906

According to an article in *The Scientific Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History*, the museum's first ever exhibition was diverse. One hall was dedicated to the growth of vermouth silk, ceramics and other items of the domestic industry. Another two rooms were dedicated to agricultural exhibitions. Visitors could also descend a spiral staircase to the basement where the Road Construction Department had a collection on show.

◄ ► 56–57

Exhibition hall 3 of the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History exhibiting a geological display on the richness and diversity of Moldovan soils

The map in the image above depicts the 750 varieties of soils found across Moldova. The main aim of this exhibition is to demonstrate the deterioration of agricultural ecosystems due to pollution. Soviet mega projects, such as giant orchards, which saw pesticides spread over thousands of hectares of the Moldovan countryside, are the main culprits in extensive soil degradation. The hall was constructed for permanent exhibition under the scientific guidance of N. Dimo and V. Dokuchaev from the Sciences Academy.

◄ 58

A hall in The Republican Study of the Land Museum that features displays about Moldovan agricultural products, 1957

59 ►

Detail of exhibition hall 3: a map that displays the division of land in the village of Durlesti, near Chisinau

The model shows how agricultural land has been divided up for different purposes. The heavy use of pesticides during the Soviet era has dramatically impacted on both the fertility of the land and the wildlife in the area.

◄ 60

Mounted animals on display in exhibition hall 4 of the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History

This exhibition hall is also called 'The Red Memorial Room', since most of the mounted animals in this room have become extinct.

61 ►

Image showing a display related to the so-called Oligocene Period (35 to 25 million years ago) in Moldavia, as exhibited in 1956

◄ ► 62–63

An exhibition room of the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History showing a section of one of the four murals painted by Ion Daghi

Daghi's intention was to paint the evolution of the earth's biosphere and the development of life on earth in order to remind the viewer that the 'biosphere belongs to all inhabitants of the Earth' and that '[its] protection is the duty of every human being.' The murals bring a local dimension to the international UNESCO convention that protects the common natural heritage of humanity by using typical Moldovan landscape elements to portray the earth's evolution. Whilst the depicted creator painted above the entrance conforms to traditional Judeo-Christian iconography, on the right wall is a garden scene depicting what is easily recognized as the Moldovan countryside.

◄ ► 64–65

One of the four murals painted by Ion Daghi: the cultural achievements of humanity

This mural depicts some of the cultural achievements of humanity by highlighting the famous architectural monuments of several civilizations. We see, for instance, Egyptian hieroglyphs, a Greek temple, a Western European cathedral and the façade of the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History in Chişinău. A 'God' figure is ruling over the landscape; he looks out at the viewer. The valley is typically Moldovan and, since its depiction comes immediately after that of the Garden of Eden in the previous mural, a logical connection seems to be made between Moldova and the Biblical garden.

◄ ► 66–67

One of the four murals painted by Ion Daghi: planet Earth

This mural represents planet Earth in the present. The depicted buildings are made out of metal and concrete. The trees in the forests are dying due to the excessive use of pesticides. Instead of a 'God' figure (see the previous image), a watchtower now oversees the highly polluted landscape. According to an explanation in the visitors' guide, the mural suggests that an imbalance between civilization and nature results in an apocalyptical future. The represented natural landscape being portrayed is based on Moldova, giving a peculiar view of Moldova as the epicenter of the earth's destiny.

◄ ► 68–69
An exhibition hall dedicated to the so-called
Cenozoic Era, which began 66 million years ago
The exhibition highlights the fact that, as the
result of several deposits from the Neogene period,
Moldova is considered to be a kind of Paleontological
outdoor museum. V. Rodzevik painted the murals in
this exhibition hall.
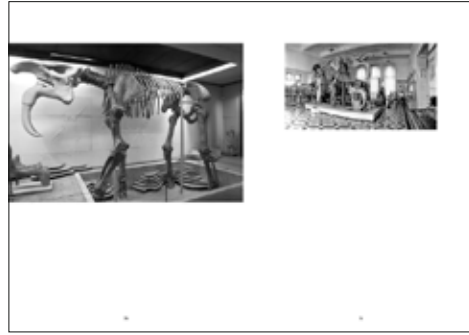
◄ 70
The complete skeleton of a Deinotherium
Giganteum, also called the Hoe tusker, which was
a pre-historic predecessor of the elephant

71 ►

An archive photograph of the complete skeleton of
Deinotherium Giganteum, a mammoth that lived in
the region of contemporary Moldova seven million
years ago
This unique exhibit was discovered in the village
Pripiceni-Răzeşti, Rezina district, in 1961. The exhi-
bition was entitled *The Evolution of Cenozoic Era*.

◄ ► 72–73
Exhibition hall 7 showing a display devoted to the
so-called Mesozoic Era
This exhibit presents Paleontological maps, fossils,
rocks and animal bones that illustrate the evolu-
tion and diversity of the organic world during the
Mesozoic Era (250 million–65 million years ago) in
the Moldovan region. A. Golicov painted the murals.
They allow visitors to get a sense of the proportions
of the prehistoric animals, most of which were
wiped out by repeated climate change.

◄ ► 74–75
Exhibition halls 12 to 15 are dedicated to the
development of the Moldovan feudal state from
the fifteenth to the nineteenth century
The concept of these exhibition rooms was devel-
oped over the period 1977–1994. The collection
represents the three major areas of Moldova (north,
south, central) during the late medieval and into
the early modern era. The map on the wall in the
center of this image depicts the medieval citadel
of Old Orhei. The mural, painted by P. Belogorţev,
illustrates the legend of Prince Dragos Voda, who
supposedly founded the State of Moldova. The two
busts are of Prince Stefan the Great, known as the
defender of Christianity and Dimitrie Cantemir, who
was a philosopher, linguist, historian, composer,
geographer and twice crowned Prince of Moldova.
All the tools, archaeological pieces and written
documents on display, including a bible and old
church gates, provide evidence of an early European
state centered on Christianity.

◄ ► 76–77

A display of agricultural and horse ranching equipment used in Northern Moldova

The aim of these halls is to illustrate the interaction between man and nature in the development of traditional culture and the creation of a Moldovan identity. Exhibits of equipment, such as homemade ceramic tools, are therefore on display. Traditional crafts, like the winemaking and coffee drinking adopted by Moldova's central region, are also represented. Unifying the displays is a mural depicting Moldova's founding legend, painted by P. Belogorțev. In terms of the architecture of the exhibition hall, the circular structure of the room is meant to promote the idea of one entity that is bigger than the sum of its separate elements and also reminds one of the natural recurrences of history. The overall idea is to demonstrate the integration of work, custom, ritual and nature that took place during the establishment of the Moldovan state.

◄ ► 78–79

Exhibition hall 16, also known as 'The Big House Hall', shows figures who are taking part in a traditional Moldovan wedding

The exhibit depicts a wedding in the village Vărzărești, Nisporeni district, in the central region of Moldova where the majority of the population is Romanian. The guests are dressed in traditional festive clothes specific to the area. According to the museum's guide, each person has an important role to play in a Bessarabian wedding, which is based on Christian ritual but heavily ritualized. The Romanian minority adheres to strict traditions when it comes to marriage that is recorded as law in some areas of Moldova. Hămuraru Philemon, a member of the Artists Union of Moldova, painted the background mural.

◄ ► 80–81

The circular staircase in the center of the photograph connects the basement exhibition halls 12–15 to the exhibition halls 16 and 17

The physical act of ascending embodies the conceptual move from the feudal state of the fifteenth to the nineteenth century to present-day Moldova.

Hall 17, the so-called 'Crisis Hall', contains four displays that tell the story of the modern day regression of the Moldovan state. The first exhibit illustrates how the introduction of cheap industrial knitted products in the early twentieth century ruined Moldova's home knitting industry, which could not compete economically. The second display shows the negative impact on the environment caused by polluting the air, water and land during the Soviet era. The third display, partially visible in the background of the photograph, records the demolition of 187 Christian churches and monasteries that took place during Communist rule in Moldova. Only 17 churches in the entire country remained intact. 'The Crisis Hall' attempts to demonstrate the destruction of harmony and balance in nature as a result of environmental and ethical degradation.

◄ ► 82–83

Exhibition hall 17, 'The Crisis Hall'

The exhibits in this room document the destruction of the balance between civilization and nature in the Moldovan region. The excesses of urbanization and industrialization are shown to have caused a negative change in society's attitude towards the natural environment. The illustrations and photographic works were done by V. Penighin, whose aim was to warn humanity about the danger of destroying natural life through reckless attitudes. The displays show the irreparable destruction that has occurred in Moldova, particularly in the realms of tradition, culture and ecology and also on a spiritual level. For example, degraded samples of folk art and the remains of churches destroyed as a result of atheism form part of the exhibition.

◀ ▶ 84–85
Exhibition hall 17, detail
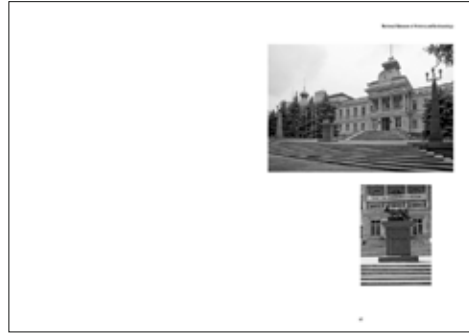
87 ▲
Façade of the National Museum of History and Archaeology of Moldova, 2008

The State Museum of History of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was established in 1983. It was housed in the restored Boys First Regional Lyceum, the former location of the Museum of Military Glory, which was severely damaged during the earthquake of 1977. In 1991, the museum was renamed the National Museum of History. In the same year, the following museums were closed by government decree (their artifacts were transferred to the patrimony of the National Museum of History): Museum G. I. Kotovsky and S. G. Lazo; Museum of the History of the Communist Party of Moldavia; Museum of International Friendship Among the Peoples; Museum of Scientific Atheism; and the Museum of the Chişinău Underground Publishing House *Iskra*. In 2006, the Museum of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences was incorporated into the museum and renamed as the National Museum of History and Archaeology of Moldova.

87 ▼
A she-wolf statue on display at the National Museum of History and Archaeology, 2001

In 1991, Romania gifted a replica statue of the *Lupoaica Romei* (Roman Wolf) to the Republic of Moldova. It was taken down for restoration in 2005 and only returned to the exhibition after the regime change in 2009. The statue is significant to Moldovans because it represents their Latin ancestry.

◀ ▶ 88–89
'The Red Hall' displays landmarks in the evolution of material culture from the Paleolithic to the Bronze era, particularly in the region between the rivers Prut and Dniester

The permanent exhibition at the National Museum of Archaeology and History of Moldova was designed in 1997. Its purpose is to highlight the development of society and culture in the Moldovan region. For example, in 'The Red Hall', the central element is a collection of jars that represents 'the evolution from nomadic hunter-gatherers to settled civilizations' (paraphrased from the website of the museum).

◀ ▶ 90–91
Corridor documenting Moldova's history from the second to the fourteenth century

Because of the strategic location of the Moldavian region on the former trade route between Asia and Europe, it suffered from repeated invasions by the Goths, Huns, Avars, Bulgarians, Magyars, Pechenegs, Cumans, Mongols and Tatars. To the right are the busts of two Dacians (ancient inhabitants of the Moldavian region) wearing Roman togas. The busts, made in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, are marble replicas of second-century statues, presently exhibited in Rome. To the left are ceramic objects from the Roman epoch (fourth century), which were part of the Santana de Mures culture. The quiet corridor hardly gives the viewer a sense of the troubled history it represents.
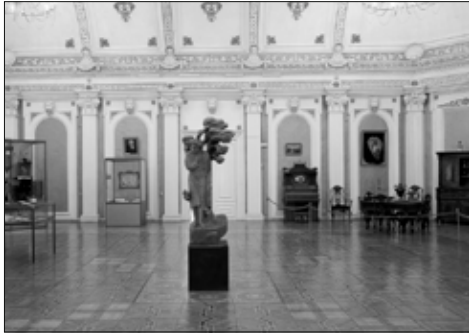
◄ ► 92–93

'The Bronze Hall' is dedicated to the period 1812–1900, during which the Russian Empire annexed Bessarabia

The museum informs the visitor to this hall as follows: 'As a result of the Russian-Turkish war (1806–1812), part of the principality of Moldavia – the territory between the Prut and Dniester rivers – was annexed by the Russian Empire and named Bessarabia. The "Russification" policy and forced isolation of Bessarabia destructively impacted on all spheres of life, from education to civil administration to the Church.' Despite this explanation, the artefacts exhibited in this hall fail to adequately address the consequences of the Russification process. At the centre of the hall, for example, stands a statue of M. Eminescu (1850–1889), a famous Moldavian poet, who had nothing to do with the political change. Similarly, the exhibited furniture, which belonged to local elites, does not relate to the Russification process. The only artefacts that directly connect with the Russification policy are probably the documents that describe the socio-economic transformations of Bessarabia during the Tsarist occupation (1812–1918).

◄ ► 94–95

This corridor connects the hall showcasing the thirteenth to eighteenth-century history with 'The Bronze Hall', dedicated to the period 1812–1900

◄ 96

This hall exhibits artefacts found in the Moldavian region from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century

A collection of arms and military equipment, such as chain mail armour, helmets, halberds, swords and cannons are exhibited to show that, during this period, the Moldavian state was constantly at war. The ornaments, ceramic utensils and coins on display originate from the Orhei and Costese regions and provide proof of prosperous urban settlements. Though there are many artefacts, the exhibition mentions only two significant leaders of this long period of time – Stefan the Great (fifteenth century) and D. Cantemir (seventeenth century) – leaving the visitor with a de-personalized and truncated version of history.

97 ►

Part of the exhibition dedicated to Moldavia during the 1940s and 1950s

In the image can be seen Second World War Red Army rifles, Soviet posters declaring the war against the Nazis and, at the end of the corridor, a shirt and the belongings of a Moldavian prisoner who was sent to a Stalinist Gulag camp. A clear comparison between Stalin's regime and Nazi rule becomes evident through the choice of the curated items. When the artefacts on the other side of the corridor (p. 98) are taken into account as well, the viewer acquires a disturbing picture of the Moldavian people as powerless victims.

◄ 98

A display from the Second World War era

Surprisingly, the major facts relating to Moldavia's role in the Second World War are not represented in this exhibition. Instead, the display is very simplistic, exhibiting the personal belongings of Red Army and Romanian soldiers, as well as of prisoners from Auschwitz-Birkenau and a Stalinist repression camp. This exhibition hall, which memorializes the victims of the Stalinist era, is somewhat ironic considering that the National Museum of Archaeology and History of Moldova is housed in what used to be the Museum of Military Glory, built in the Soviet era. However, the items on display have not been diversified much since the Soviet era, leaving the viewer with a rather one-dimensional historical perspective.

99 ►

An archive image of the exhibition "Stalinism and the Destination of the People", 1990

The purpose of this exhibition, designed and curated by V. Golub and V. Tzoi and featuring 372 items, was to highlight the consequences of Stalin's regime in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic.

◄ ► 100–101
A diorama entitled 'Iasi – Chisinau Operation', 2008
Inaugurated in 1990, the diorama (a miniature replica of an historical scene) was painted by N. Prisekin and A. Semionov over a period of eight years. It is 45 meters long, 11 meters high and illustrates the battle between the Red Army and the Germans in the summer of 1944, near the village of Leuşeni on the banks of the Prut River.

◄ ► 102–103
Detail of the diorama 'Iasi – Chisinau Operation'
The total size of the diorama is more than 800 square meters. The diorama is made out of authentic objects, including anti-tank cannons, bullet racks, guns and ammunition.

◄ ► 104–105
Entrance to the diorama exhibition hall, featuring munitions used during the battle.

◄ ► 106–107
'Life in Twentieth Century Moldova: A View of the Universe of Personal Belongings'. Temporary exhibition, 2008

◄ 108
'Civilization and Communication: Telephony and Telecommunications in Moldova'. Temporary exhibition, 2008

109 ►
'Civilization and Communication: Telephony and Telecommunications in Moldova'. Temporary exhibition, 2008
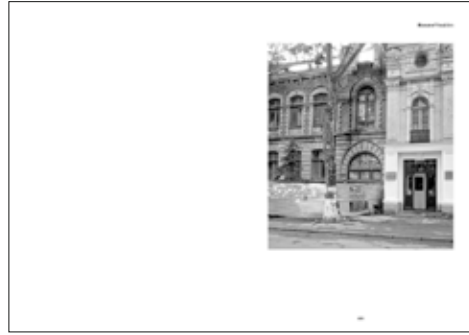
111 ►
Façade of the National Museum of Fine Arts of the Republic of Moldova, 2008

The National Museum of Fine Arts of the Republic of Moldova is situated on 31 August 1989 Street. Though the museum's collection was inaugurated in 1939, most it was looted during the Second World War. At the end of 1944, the museum received some artworks from the Tretyakov Gallery and the Hermitage in Moscow and was able to open a permanent exhibition that included both Western European and Soviet artists. The museum's collection was later rounded off with some ancient arti-facts and works by Bessarabian, as well as Russian, Western European, Japanese, Indian and Chinese artists. At present, the National Museum of Fine Arts of the Republic of Moldova contains more than 39,000 works of art and reflects the evolution of the arts from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century.

◄ ► 112–113
The temporary exhibition hall of the National Museum of Fine Arts.

The exhibition shows the work of the Moldovan artist Alexandru Plămădeala (1889–1940). From 1945 until 1970, the building that currently houses the National Museum of Fine Arts in Moldova was the headquar-ters of Central Committee of The Communist Party of MSSR. The exhibition salons for the art collections in today's museum still partly preserve the ideologi-cal imprint and symbolism of the Communist era. The main salon of the building, formerly used for the plenum sessions, is ingrained with an aesthetic that was to show the achievements of the Communist Party to the people who attended the sessions.

◄ ► 114–115
The temporary exhibition hall of the National Museum of Fine Arts. The exhibition shows the work of the Moldovan artist Alexandru Plamadeala (1889–1940)

On the right: a self portrait of Alexandru Plămădeala (1916), on the left: the bust of Bogdan Pertriceicu Hasdeu (1936).

◄ 116

The main staircase in the former Museum of the History of the Communist Party of Moldavia

From 1945 until 1970, the building that currently houses the National Museum of Fine Arts in Moldova was the headquarters of the Central Committee of The Communist Party of MSSR. In 1970, the headquarters became the Communist Party Museum and exhibited a collection of propaganda materials, such as leaflets, newspapers, books, pictures, sculptures and the personal belongings of party activists. Most of this material was drawn from the underground printing house of the Communist newspaper *Iskra*. A separate section of the museum displayed items from the Communist struggle against the Romanian authorities during the years 1918–1940. In 1991, the museum was closed by government decree and its archive transferred to the National History Museum.

117 ►

1) Top, left: An exhibition entitled 'Arts in the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic'
2) Top, right: The hall devoted to L.I. Brezhniev, First Secretary of the Moldavian Communist Party, at the former Museum of the History of the Communist Party of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic
3) Bottom: Materials describing the 'Specialization and Concentration of the Agricultural Production of Moldavia'

119 ►

Façade of the Glory of Labour Museum featuring a tram wagon from the 1890s

The Glory of Labour Museum was established in 1974 by the management of the Chişinău Electric Public Transport Department (UPTW). The purpose of the museum was to motivate Public Transport workers by venerating their jobs. Alongside the museum, the UPTW in Chişinău also ran sports competitions, concerts and social events to 'inspire' its employees. Today, the museum exhibits the prizes won by the Chişinău UPTW workers, as well as photographs of employees who received medals of honor for public services.

◄ ► 120–121

A display in the Glory of Labor Museum

The illuminated models on either side of the doorway show the trolleybus public network system of the 1970s (left) and the 1980s and 1990s (right).
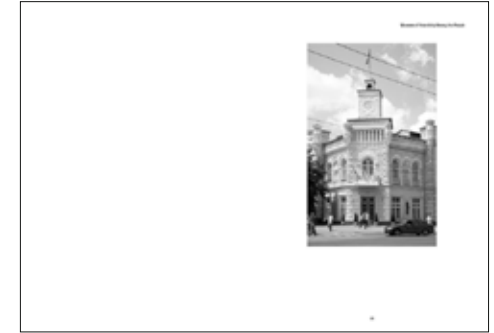
123 ►

Façade of the Chisinau City Hall showing the entrance to the former Republican Museum of Friendship Among The Peoples, 2008

The building, designed by architect A. Bernardazzi, was constructed between 1898 and 1901 to house the Municipal Duma (city council). It sustained serious damage on the first day of the Second World War and had to be rebuilt. In 1977, the Duma building became the home of the Republican Museum of Friendship Among the Peoples. The museum contained documents regarding the relationship between the Soviet Union and the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1991, the museum was closed by government decree and its archive transferred to the National History Museum.
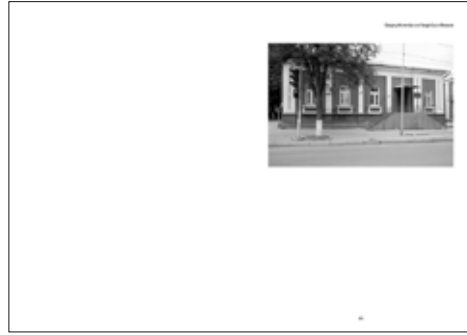
◄ 124
A private office space in the former Republican Museum of Friendship Among The Peoples, 2008

125 ►
Detail from the exhibition 'Along the Roads of Friendship' in the former Republican Museum of Friendship Among the Peoples
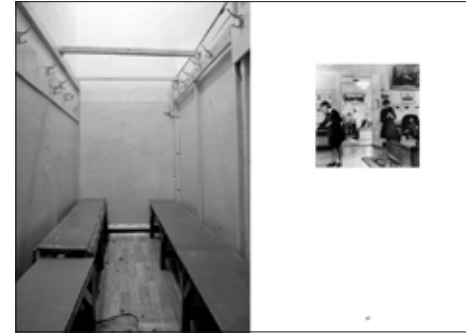Photographer unknown.

127 ►
Façade of the former Gregory Kotovsky and Sergei Lazo Museum, 2008
The museum is situated in an early twentieth-century mansion in the center of Chişinău. The museum was inaugurated in 1948 to honor Soviet military leader and Communist activist G. Kotovsky. It contained materials about this former Communist hero, including a scale model of his house from the town Hanceşti. In 1958, another section dedicated to the life of Soviet revolutionary and author S. Lazo (1894–1920) was added.
The museum was closed in 1991 and its archive transferred to the patrimony of the National Museum of History and Archaeology. The building was taken over by the Choreography Ballet College.

◄ 128
Room in the Choreography Ballet College, which formerly housed the G. Katovsky and S. Lazo Museum, 2008

129 ►
G. I. Katovsky and S. Lazo Museum around 1976
Photographer unknown.

◄ ► 130–131
Choreography Ballet College, 2008

History on the Move

Stefan Rusu

The tragic events that have taken place in several regions of the East Bloc during the post-Communist decades seem to contradict Francis Fukuyama's famous thesis regarding the end of history.[1] The internecine conflicts in regions such as the Caucasus, the Balkans and Moldova do not seem to indicate 'the end of history', but, rather, a recursive turn to history – understood by many thinkers in terms of a permanent conflict between classes, races or nations.[2] In the case of the Republic of Moldova, a total confusion persists concerning its history, which becomes visible in the various ways in which this history is represented by public institutions, such as museums. By analyzing the various representational strategies employed by two national museums in Chişinău – the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History and the National Museum of History and Archaeology – we can observe that each of these museums partly constructs a historical scenario that does not seem to correspond with the official version advanced by the state. The museums seem to place themselves at a distance of the country's official political and cultural discourses that promote identity politics. As such, these discources can be seen, as the political scientist Benedict Anderson has pointed out, as being part of a social and political mechanism and as a primary form of generating a national identity.[3]

It is precisely these idiosyncrasies that have incited Rabinovich's interest and formed the inspiration for an investigation by means of visual art. In the context of the *RO-MD/Moldova in Two Scenarios* project, Ilya Rabinovich has artistically examined the diverse models and types used by various museums in Chişinău to represent history and political and cultural identity.[4] Through his project *Museutopia*, he strives to analyze the phenomenon of the distorted representation of history in Moldova, in the context of reclaiming a history that had been suppressed by the Soviet Union during the formation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) and during the development of a socialist system across its territory (1940–1989).[5] Rabinovich compares photos made in the premises of the museums in Chişinău with images selected from their archives (some of them dissolved after 1989). In order to analyze the recent shifts of representation, he focuses on the ways in which these museums represented the country's history and national identity before 1989 and between 1990 and 2008. In order to understand the framework of Rabinovich's project, but also the mechanisms of representation used by the museums to construct and reshape the country's national identity, it helps to bring in the historical background.

A New Phase of the 'Moldovan Identity Project'

It is probable that few people in Europe outside the Eastern region know about the complexity of the history of Moldova. By far the most dramatic turn was the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact in 1939, which led to the division of Northern and Eastern Europe in spheres of influence between Nazi Germany and the USSR. From 1944 until 1989, Moldavia was placed under Russian Communist rule, which was institutionalized through the formation of the so-called Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR).

A series of museums that had promoted a 'Moldavian' identity discourse constructed by the USSR disappeared in 1989 without a trace.[6] These museums were part of the ideology department of the USSR's Communist Party and, consequently, a propagandistic instrument by which a perverse project of social engineering had been applied to the population of Moldova. This process of rewriting history began with the occupation and Sovietization of the region. Soviet ideologists engaged in a complex campaign whereby they fundamentally altered the values and norms of the native population with the purpose of replacing the 'inveterate' forms of autochthonous culture with the socialist model and the model of 'The New Man'.[7] Guided by the political agenda, the Soviet propaganda system created the G. I. Kotovsky and S. Lazo Republican Museum in 1948, with a view to legitimize the involvement of a number of Bessarabian natives in the Russian revolutionary movement. In the period between 1960 and 1970, this system instrumentalized the Museum of the Chişinău Underground Publishing House *Iskra* and the History Museum of the Communist Party of Moldavia to emphasize the decisive role of the Communist doctrine in the construction of the 'Moldavian' identity.

The subsequent eradication of these and other museums that had erected an 'invented' version of history was triggered by the political movement known as the Popular Front of Moldavia, along with the process of returning to a national discourse that had been suppressed throughout the socialist period. Moldavia regained independence in the 1980s, as a result of the political conditions created by Glasnost and Perestroika and the 'awakening' of a renewed national consciousness. This was the beginning of a transition toward a democratic regime that altered the discourse about a national identity, which had been 'constructed' during succeeding periods of colonization: initially promoted by the Russian Empire in Besarrabian Gubernia (1812–1917) and, afterwards, as a strategy of the 'Moldavian language and nation' imposed by the Soviet regime. The changes that took place within society propelled the Parliament in 1989 to adopt a set of new laws, including a return to the Latin alphabet (Romanian language) and the adoption of the Romanian tricolour. A kind of rewriting of history took place. There was a strong urge to return to the values and symbols that had existed before the invasion of the USSR. But this was only the start of a long process of coming to terms with a new identity.

Due to economic collapse and a military conflict with the secessionist region of Transnistria in 1991–1992, the disassembling of the socialist system and the revival of national history induced a period of suspense among the people of Moldova.[8] In the 1994 parliamentary elections, the Democratic Agrarian Party gained a majority of the seats, setting a turning point in Moldovan politics. Plans for a union with Romania were abandoned; the name of the state language was modified from Romanian to 'Moldovan' and symbols like the flag were modified to differentiate them from those of the neighbouring state of Romania. This led to confusion; some people believed it would even lead to a return to the situation as it was before 1989, when 'Moldavian' identity had been promoted by the Communist ideology of the USSR.

The phenomenon of rewriting history would return even more fiercely in 2001, when the Communist Party of Moldova (CPRM) came to power. As a consequence, Communist leaders imposed a new phase of the 'Moldovan' identity project, employing well-known ideological instruments. The 'Moldovan' identity was intensely mediatized once again; only this time, it was also repositioned in a spectrum that included two political extremes: the left one, represented by the Communist Party and the right one, represented by the Christian and Democratic Popular Party (CDPP). Guided by political agendas from inside and outside the country, the Communist political leaders used the subject of identity as a political weapon against the so-called menace of 'Romanianization' and integration into the European Union, promoted by the right political wing (CDPP).

Representation Strategies in Three National Museums

The identity discourse as it can be observed today in the museums in Moldova in their presentation of the changes that took place after 1989 is supposed to be neutral. As museums claim to operate from an independent and politically neutral stance, the fluctuating attitudes of the political class toward the issue of identity do not influence the reasoning behind their representations. Still, as public institutions, museums represent the promotion of strategies for an identity discourse all the same, even if that discourse may not be official. Because they have no other means of representation than those inherited from the previous period, they have created 'new' models transposed into 'old' raiments, with a view to represent the changes subsequent to 1989. Often, this results in a 'schizophrenic' discourse. This can be witnessed in the museums photographed by Ilya Rabinovich, including the National Museum of History and Archaeology, the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History and the National Museum of Fine Arts. The National Museum of History and Archaeology was founded in 1983, based on the historic funds of the State Museum of the Province and the Museum of Military Glory.[9] In the photographs that Rabinovich has taken, one can see that the type of discourse promoted by this museum bear resemblances

to that of the former military museum. The 'Operation Iaşi-Chişinău Diorama' (1944), one of the major elements of the militarist-patriotic discourse originally conceived for the military museum, was simply adopted in its entirety by the current history museum.[10] In essence, the heroic and triumphalist aura indicates the discourse promoted by the Soviet propaganda, which replaced the scientific spirit with the mythologization of history. This seems to be the main point of attraction for present-day visitors, unaware of its bleak history.

Another strange, anachronistic feature, which can be found in the displays, is that the design elements (the racks, cases, salon settings, etc.) inherited from the military museum have been retained for a new identity discourse aiming to show the changes that have taken place after 1989. The collections are presented to the public in an incoherent historiographic discourse. The ancient, medieval and modern history collections are presented in a fragmented and truncated manner and there is a clear lack of a full reference to the socialist period and the processes whereby the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (1940–1941/1944–1989) was formed and developed. Restricted access to the museum's archives seems to confirm the lack of transparency and interest in recent history. The archives of the museums, dissolved in 1989–1990, have been ingested by this 'Leviathan of a museum' and the documents and artefacts of these defunct museums are inaccessible to researchers, even today.[11]

A clear model of rewriting history is also present in the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History (NMENH).[12] Originally, this museum was called the 'Zoological, Agricultural and Handicraft Museum of Zemstvo from Bessarabia' and it housed a collection of agricultural techniques and a section for insects (parasites) and zoology. In the 1980s, the museum was closed. It was reopened in 1994, long after the social and political changes had taken place. The logistics deployed for the representation and systematization of the collections (geological, paleontological, zoological, entomological, archaeological, ethnographic and numismatic) were repositioned according to the ideological climate in the periods between 1940–1941/1944–1989.

The images from the 1950s, excavated by Rabinovich from the museum's archive, clearly show how the museum displays were associated with the ideological and scientific discourses promoted by the Soviet regime: the statue of Stalin dominated the main hall of the museum. In the new museum, by comparison, the concept on the whole and the typology used to exhibit the collections subsequent to 1989 have been vastly altered and reorganized in accordance with the changes surrounding the return to the Latin alphabet (Romanian language) and the adoption of the Romanian tricolour in 1989. According to Mihai Ursu, the director of the museum, a team of museographers, designers, painters and illustrators who have essentially remained faithful to the type of representation from this period, have thought out the concept of the new museum.[13] The team of designers used technical and visual structures and methods that have their moorings in the 1980s:

design elements in the Constructivist style, photographic images, paintings and frescos in the Socialist-Realist style, etc. Thus, the museum abounds in quotations and representational elements that contradict, on the whole, the rationale of historical representation imposed by the museum's team itself. This makes the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History also an example of the forced attribution of some recuperating and history-censoring valences all the same, because it presents the period subsequent to 1989 exclusively, without mentioning the period between 1944–1989.

Another museum that practices distorted models and types of representation is the National Museum of Fine Arts.[14] Throughout the period of Soviet power, this edifice housed the headquarters of the Communist Party of Moldavia (1945– 1970) and, after that, it functioned as a museum of the history of the Communist Party. In part, the exhibition salons for the art collections in the current museum still preserve the ideological imprint and symbolism of the Communist era. The main salon of the building, formerly used for the plenum sessions, is ingrained with an aesthetic that was to show the achievements of the Communist Party to the people who attended the sessions. The artists invited to re-design those interiors after WWII followed the Socialist-Realist style and depicted the walls using Realist patterns: flowers, fruits, legumes, etc., identified symbolically with Moldovan agriculture, interspersed with Communist symbols like the star and the hammer and sickle. Although the museum promotes the values of a renewed society, it also preserves 'Socialist Realism' in its very title, by using the term 'fine arts' (*arta plastica*), a term ingrained in the Communist era. The museum's present-day curatorial strategy replaced an ideological discourse with an aesthetic one, but in essence of the same nature. By visiting the art museum today, you cannot lose the feeling that this is just another offshoot of the former Party museum.

Towards a New 'European' Identity

One of the delicate aspects elucidated by the *Museutopia* project and Rabinovich's investigation is the process of rewriting history that took place during the period of the socialist modernization of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. This process indirectly shows the lack of critical attitude *vis-à-vis* this period in the major museums of the Republic of Moldova and throughout society.

The movement for national renewal, formerly vehemently supported by writers, only came to fruition recently, in 2009, when young students took to the streets to protest against the authoritarian regime and the identity discourse that had been promoted by the Communist Party since 2001. At the moment, it is hard to evaluate the long-term consequences of the young demonstrators' ravaging of the presidential and parliamentary offices on the 7th of April, spurred by the elections of 2009. These events in the short term triggered a change in the state's

political orientation and, after eight years of defective governing on the part of the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova, strengthened aspirations for a democratic society and transparent governing. The reelections resulting from the political crisis have radically changed the political regime. The Communist government, based on institutionalized family business (and also a public image based exclusively on nostalgia for the USSR) was replaced by the Democratic Alliance for European Integration, comprised mostly of liberal parties (the Liberal Democratic Party, the Liberal Party, Alliance Our Moldova and the Democratic Party). This triggered a wide-scale change in the political orientation of Moldovan society.

Along with this political reorientation, another change took place at the level of the identity discourse promoted by the new authorities, which returned to designating the Romanian language as the official language. Pursuing the logic of transition, a series of repositionings and rearticulations of the spheres and attitudes in the manner in which the country is governed could produce other changes and/or corrections in the representational logic of the identity discourse as well, finding its visual correspondent in the museums of Moldova. Ultimately, we are realizing that we are dealing with a weak state, currently undergoing a process of transformation toward a democratic society. After the integration of Romania and Bulgaria into the European Union (2007), the Republic of Moldova finds itself in a geopolitical situation similar to that before 1989. In its new position, the Republic of Moldova has very frail chances of surviving as an independent entity, as it becomes a peripheral state both unto the countries of the EU and unto the countries of the former Soviet Union. The society at large and the political class are still engaged in defining the identity and the values of a European state and the museums investigated by Ilya Rabinovich are sensitive indicators of these complex processes.

Notes

1. In his book *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), Francis Fukuyama predicted the eventual global triumph of political and economic liberalism. According to him, what we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government – and as such, the end of history as we know it.

2. The Caucasus region has been subject to various territorial disputes since the collapse of the Soviet Union: the Ossetian-Ingush conflict (1989–1991); the war in Abkhazia (1992–1993); the first and second Chechen wars (1994–1996)/(1999–2009); and the South Ossetian war (2008). During the Cold War, Communist governments ruled most of the countries in the Balkans. In the 1990s, the region was gravely affected by the war between the republics of the former Yugoslavia. In the ensuing ten years of armed confrontation, gradually all of the republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo) declared independence.

3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983, revised 1991). In his book anderson systematically describes the major factors contributing to the emergence of nationalism in the world during the past three centuries. Anderson defines a nation as 'an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.

4. Ilya Rabinovich participated in the exhibition and research project *RO-MD/Moldova in Two Scenarios* (2008), organized by the [KSA:K] Center for Contemporary Art in Chişinău in partnership with VECTOR Association, Iaşi. It consisted of an exhibition, publication, workshops, documentary films and seminars that took place in Iaşi and Chişinău. The project aimed to question the identity of the Republic of Moldova and the influence of the ideological schema imposed from the outside by the USSR. The artists and researchers investigated various aspects of the formation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) and, later on, after the dissolution of the USSR, of the independence and institution of the current state – the Republic of Moldova (1992). See: www.art.md.

5. The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact led to the division of Northern and Eastern Europe in spheres of influence between Nazi Germany and USSR, owing to which, in 1940, the province of Bessarabia (the current Republic of Moldova) became part of the USSR.

6. The museums that have been dissolved since 1989 are: the G. I. Kotovsky and S. Lazo Republican Museum (founded in 1948), the Republican Museum of Friendship Among the Peoples (from 1970), the Museum of the Chişinău Underground Publishing House 'Iskra' (founded in 1960), the History Museum of the Communist Party of Moldavia (1970) and the Museum of Scientific Atheism (1978).

7. Postulated by the ideologists of the Communist Party of the USSR, the 'New Soviet Man' was an archetype of a person with certain qualities that ought to be dominant among all citizens, creating a single Soviet people. The Soviet Man was to be selfless, learned, healthy and enthusiastic in spreading the Socialist Revolution.

8. In the region east of the Dniester river, Transnistria, where the headquarters and many units of the Soviet 14th Guards Army were stationed, an independent Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed on August 16, 1990, with its capital in Tiraspol. The motives behind this move were fear of the rise of nationalism in Moldova and the country's expected reunification with Romania upon secession from the USSR. In 1992, clashes occurred between Transnistrian forces supported by the 14th Army and the Moldovan police and escalated into a military engagement.

9. Interview with Nicolae Răileanu, former director of the National Museum of History and Archaeology (1983–2007). According to the initial scenario, the museum rebuilt after the earthquake was intended to house a museum devoted to the Soviet Army, but this was never realized due to the profound economic stagnation that overtook the USSR, which made the financing and finalizing of some long-term investments in public space impossible. See: www.nationalmuseum.md

10. The 'Operation Iaşi-Chişinău Diorama' was inaugurated in 1990 and was created by Nicolai Prisekin and Alexei Semionov, painters of the military studio from Moscow.

11. After 1991, The National Museum of History and Archaeology supposedly accepted the historical collections of the dissolved museums: the G. I. Kotovsky and S. Lazo Republican Museum, the Republican Museum of Friendship Among the Peoples, the Museum of the Chişinău Underground Publishing House 'Iskra', the History Museum of the Communist Party of Moldavia and the Museum of Scientific Atheism.

12. Throughout its history, the museum has been based on the study of Moldova's nature and culture, successively bearing the names: National Museum of Natural History (1905–1917), Regional Museum of Bessarabia (1918–1940) and Republican Museum for the Study of the Native Land (1945–1984). See also: www.muzeu.md.

13. Interview with Mihai Ursu, current director of the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History.

14. The National Museum of Fine Arts of Moldova, founded in November 1939 by Alexandru Plămădeală and Auguste Baillayre. http://mnam.md.

Stefan Rusu (Kâietu, Moldavia, 1964) is an artist and curator based in Chişinău and Bucharest. In 2005/2006 he attended the Curatorial Training Program at De Appel in Amsterdam, where he co-curated the exhibition *Mercury in Retrograde*. Rusu's interest is closely connected with the changes that have occurred in post-socialist societies after 1989. Exploring issues of political and social transformations, he curated the project *RO-MD/Moldova in Two Scenarios* (2008). This project juxtaposes the present-day cultural, social and political situation in two regions that are currently referred to as 'Moldova', namely the Romanian province Moldova and the Republic of Moldova. In 2011, he developed *Chişinău – Art, Research in the Public Sphere*, a curatorial project exploring the dominant institutional and political discourses that have shaped the social and urban landscape of Chişinău in the course of its recent history. Photo: Niklas Horn.

Modern Museum or Museum of Modernity?

Bogdan Ghiu

'Today, almost anything may turn out to be a museum and museums can be found in farms, boats, coal mines, warehouses, prisons, castles, or cottages (...). Museums have always had to modify how they worked and what they did, according to the context, the plays of power and the social, economic and political imperatives that surrounded them. Museums, in common with all other social institutions, serve many masters and must play many tunes accordingly. Perhaps success can be defined by the ability to balance all the tunes that must be played and still make a sound worth listening to.'

– Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (1992).[1]

Museums watch us from every side and seem to have a nocturnal, secret and intangible life; they chase us, trying to capture us. Being identity industries, museums are also constantly searching for their own identity. They make the totalitarian, absolute claim of representing history but have a fascinating history themselves, which until recently was kept from the view of researchers. With their pretension of 'transcending history', museums evade research and historicization.

But insensibly, unknowingly, we have turned in modernity to the formation of a true museal field – if not even a 'military-museal complex' – coextensive to the worldwide urban space. Through the self-bestirred acceleration of history and the idea of 'progress', 'musealization' has come to affect our personal lives in the present, instead of only concerning itself with the lives of our great grandparents and forefathers. Maybe one could even say that we have already been living in museums for some time now, that our cities, homes and images 'musealize' themselves instantly and that the intimate reference to ourselves and to others is based on a museal type of relation: objectification and narcissistic (self)exposure.

Analyzing this typically postmodern situation can only be done from the inside, from the immanence of the worldwide museal complex. Actual archaeological and genealogical histories of museums were not written until two decades ago. Under the pressure of the so-called 'visual turn' in contemporary culture and at confluence with visual studies, museum studies have emerged out of the gap of the empty and inexplicit description of the museum-form by a philosopher like Michel Foucault, particularly in *The Order of Things* (1966) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), but also in studies concerning 'the micro-physics of power'. Ilya Rabinovich's project, entitled *Museutopia*, provides an inside view of the museal complex, image against image, image against image-shaper apparatus: the museum. To handle this adequately, Rabinovich's project cannot be submitted to the condition that it objectifies, that it shows, without naming it as well. *Museutopia*, just like any ambitious and coherent project of artistic research, succeeds in exceeding itself, in not letting itself tire of its own intention. On the one hand, the photographic images are never enough; they are mute and inexplicit and have to be explained by adding text, words, labels and captions. On the other hand, the images always 'tell' and show more. One can determine three levels for this project, as it were: the decided, local intention; the photographic images felt as being insufficient and the artist then having the urge to name, to explain; and, finally, the photographic images showing something else, overflowing not only the artist's intention, but also his discursive textual additions. En route for an expedition of visual introspection, Rabinovich ended up in a journey within the archaeology and genealogy of the image itself.

We don't even know what we're seeing!

Ilya Rabinovich photographed several museums in Chişinău, including the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History, the National Museum of History and Archaeology, the National Museum of Fine Arts, the Pedagogical Museum, the Military Museum, the Union of Writers Museum and the Union of Public Transport Workers Museum. The initial intention of Rabinovich's expedition through the museums of Chişinău was to identify the 'forms of archiving and representing recent history in the public sphere'. The result of this research was, as he describes it himself, 'A clear and disturbing reflection. I traced the process of omitting recent history that is present in those public institutes. Each institute tried to re-create its own concept and strategy of re-presenting the continuity and existence of the Moldavian state. Artefacts related to the ancient history of the state were re-contextualized, while artefacts and other archaeological exhibits dealing with the recent history of the nineteenth and twentieth century were removed and replaced by other artefacts that support the new national discourse.' In the museums of Chişinău, a 'denial ideology' was being practiced, according to Rabinovich, whereby 'Moldovan society erases and rejects any

objective reference to the cultural and social atmosphere of the Soviet era'. By denying its both grievous and shameful immediate past, by covering its narcissistic wounds, by producing a 'missing link' in its own evolution, Moldovan society chooses to build its identity upon a void, upon an absence.[2] This is what Ilya Rabinovich *says* he sees and what he is willing to *show*, to *render*, through his photography. But the museums in Chişinău are deserted today; their motor, provided there is one, seems to be running idle. A simple omission no longer builds an identity. When the omission is the only poetic weapon, what we can get is, at the very most, a blockage, an identity crisis. What one can *see*, therefore, in Rabinovich's photographs is that, in Chişinău, the modern museum in the first place exposes itself as apparatus.

But what can one *say* of what one can *see*? And, particularly, can the modern museum still function; can it still be used, politically, as an industry for the creation of collective identities? Do Moldovans presently have a choice, or does their by-no-means-circumstantial identity crisis, their essential lack of essence, their indecision between other identities going themselves into crisis only express a general situation: the deconstruction of the collective, national identities of modernity?

In other words, is Ilya Rabinovich's nostalgia for the political employment of the museum – as a collectively identitary weapon characteristic of historic modernity – legitimate, practicable? Does it reveal a past or, fortunately, open us to a future that is still traumatically felt? These are the serious questions that arise within the wider horizon that the *Museutopia* project opens up.

From the Modern Museum to the Museum of Modernity

'In many colonial museums the artefacts of colonized peoples were displayed in natural history museums; the Australian Museum in Sydney is one example among many where geology, zoology and anthropology were combined for the purposes of "science" (...). Indigenous peoples, through this formulation, took their place among the flora and fauna of the natural history museum.'

– Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in *Museums and Education. Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance* (2007).[3]

Let us look at a selection of photos that Ilya Rabinovich took in the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History. What can one see in a first glance at a modern museum photographed by Ilya Rabinovich in Chişinău? The permanent exhibition *Nature – Man – Culture* was inaugurated in 1994. Here, the visitor can see the evolution of the organic world, from primitive organisms to the present stage of anthropogenesis. One can also follow the sinuous history of the region between the Prut and the Dniester rivers, as well as gain insights into the use of natural resources and ways of improving the ecological situation. The exhibition is a rumination on the dialectics of man and nature in contemporary civilization.

Located between 'The Flora and Fauna of Moldova' and the Prehistoric wing is a room encompassing the museum's concept of humanity. Its walls are covered with an allegorical painting tracing the development of humanity, as well as the exploitation of the land from creation to modern times. Humanity stands with its back to the viewer and watches the wonder of nature. The painting depicts the excessive use of the earth's resources as creating an imbalance. It warns of the impeding ecological disaster if those who created this situation were to pluck the last flower. Needless to say, these kinds of scenes would never have existed in the Soviet era, because they do not depict any scientific or historical facts.

The images immediately show a great political-epistemological problem: the 'nationalization' of nature and the unification of natural history with ethnography in a kind of ideological chain of being: nature, man, culture. These images quickly become delirious in their totalitarian pedagogical ambition. They manifest a will to act as evidence, to be 'authentic', to produce an effect of realness: not only to act as representation, but also as the reproduction and even proper production of the 'real', the museum as hyper-image.

The internal, specific problem of the way in which the Modern Museum has made use and continues to make use of photography for its reproductive-mimetic effect of realness, as 'probatory proof' of the 'evidences' of evolution, also becomes visible: the colonial ideology of 'ethnographic photography'. The Modern Museum is a triumph of the illusionist art of representing and persuading, of producing and imposing truths, a propagandistic machine for the production of evidence. The Museum is a teleologically-oriented, total panoptical museum where the viewer as terminus point is guided towards him/herself, as the climactic moment of evolution.

Already at first glance, the museum appears as a history of a compelling evolution, culminating in an unattainable modernity that has to be built endlessly: modernity as self-utopia exposing itself as 'Museum of Utopia'. Museums are utopias, but utopia in itself is already its own museum to begin with, subjecting all of reality and itself, to a museal view: here is what the 'essence' of modernity turns out to be in postmodernity.

Happy about itself, encouraging itself to persevere, continue and push along its heavily linear progression through its establishment as self spectacle, modernity falls into the trap of its own visualization, coming to self-museify itself, to transform itself into *image*. Nothing remains but some images. Yet, the great virtue of utopias is exactly that. Being unaccomplishable, they can be resumed, recycled at any time, as they are generating and cultivating a prophetic, 'Messianic' nostalgia: only that which has never existed can be repeated!

In Chişinău, formerly at the periphery of two superposed empires, the Tsarist and the Soviet, and today at the edge of the European Union, the museum seems to have attained its full historic brilliance, going out of history and ceasing to lay the claim of making history. It seems to have brutally completed its historic

mission, by becoming an exhibit itself. No one seems to any longer be in need of the 'historical' museum, whose power to represent and unify all knowledge, to dispose it linearly-narratively and to pedagogically fabricate massified identities, is no longer exerted today. In Chişinău, the museum, left in historic inoccupation, 'poses' in its full dress, only to be photographed and admired *aesthetically*, posthumously.

As appears to be photographically revealed in *Museutopia,* in the museums of Chişinău, we view the very essence of the historical museum: the museum as manufacturer of modernity being reclaimed and integrated in the series of the famous *topoi* of modernity analyzed by Michel Foucault: prison, asylum, school, manufacturing plant, hospital, etc.

Visuality as Key Feature of Modernity: the Birth of the Viewer/Subject

According to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Emeritus Professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, museums can be seen as 'disciplinary apparatuses'.[4] In *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (1992), she asserts that the 'disciplinary museum' has been formed on a military model, after the French Revolution, in a Napoleonic-imperial context. In *Pasts Beyond Memory. Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (2004), the Australian sociologist Tony Bennett introduces another important model: the 'evolutionary' museum, which developed particularly in the Victorian era.[5] Bennett claims that the 'evolutionary museum' had the very vocation of retrospectively filling the spaces between objects, of leading evolution narratively, gradually, without leaps, as an invisible process that evolves between objects and forms, as visible stages. The problem of the evolutionary museum was 'how to make the spaces between things represent time and change through time'.[6] The answer, the solution to this being: 'visualizing the invisible laws governing the evolution of human culture'.[7] As Bennett writes: 'Evolution (...) could be made evident not in things themselves, but only in a particular narrative ordering of the relations between them (...) and it could not be made evident at all where sequences were interrupted and discontinuous.' This resulted in a 'focus on the task of filling in those spaces in order to provide continuous sequences of lineal descent connecting the past to the present in an unbroken historical order'.[8] The modern museum disciplines sight through/as attentiveness; it obliges the individual to get through the Darwinian evolution narratively, it takes one by the hand, it obliges one to regard, to read the labels and the notes and to listen to the explanations running between image (exhibit) and text. In order to be reformed and requalified as a citizen, the individual must be subjected to a mediatorial authority. 'The authority of a new form of expertise', Bennett suggests, 'was installed and exercised as the public eye was subordinated to the evolutionary showman's mediation of the relations between the visible surface of things and the invisible significance of their interconnections.'[9]

This is what one can call a 'visibility politics', a teleological organization of the visible in order to discipline history as evolution. This is also exactly what one can observe in the museums in the capital of the Republic of Moldova, what Ilya Rabinovich's photographs denounce and what they *show* without *naming*. The modern museum *appears*, in the images of the *Museutopia* project, as being already at congruence with modern *media*. Through the organization of a 'slow' narration of a continuous evolution, without leaps, without mutations, the disciplinary-evolutionary modern museum, as it *is seen* in the images of Rabinovich's project, *appears* to be an ancestor of film. In a similar context, Bennett expresses 'the belief that no effort should be spared to lay out objects within the museum space in ways that would make the relations between them – relations of temporal succession and development – readily and directly perceptible. That the laws and direction of evolution should be taken in "at a glance" was a simple given for the evolutionary showman'.[10]

The museums of modernity 'lie', in that they cover and fill, retrospectively, the gaps that they camouflage by always exhibiting too many objects in order to exceed, to abuse the vision, creating the illusion of completeness and the solid, ordered continuity of the 'chain of being'. In other words, we are confronted with the museum as a 'visual technologies' apparatus. As Bennett demonstrates, inside the modern museum 'the central exhibition rhetoric', the organization of those 'gradual and continuous lines of evolutionary development', of 'regulate progress' and of 'smooth and uninterrupted advance' constitute, vitally, 'a problem of visibility' for the interception of those 'spaces between things' whereby the film of evolution can be played, recounted.[11]

Though Michel Foucault neglected the museum, it proves to be a central disciplinary apparatus that is fundamental to modernity. We can even assume that through its narrative visualization, the museal apparatus is the most important feature of modernity. Foucault perceived panoptical modernity from the perspective of the prison-matrix, focusing on objectification through visibility. Today, after the so-called 'visual turn', we should perhaps consider the same panoptical modernity from the perspective of the museum-matrix and highlight subjectification through visuality. From the angle of postmodernity, as an episteme dominated by visuality and democratic subjectification through vision, the museum appears to be a central apparatus of modernity.

Yet, the modern museum represents, in my opinion, the completion of this episteme, a paradigm of modernity that is alternative and complementary to Foucaultian panoptism.[12] Man is no longer just a *seen object*, exhibited exhibit, but, at the same time and in the same person, a *seeing*, self-objectifying *subject*. The new visual modernity integrates the individual not only as an object-exhibit (of the human sciences, of the public vision, etc.), but also as a viewer-subject. Through the Modern Museum, as a disciplinary-evolutionary historic museum, modern man sees himself as subject-object of visuality, self-thematizing himself narcissistically through a new, democratic royalty.

The Decolonization of Photography

The photographic images of Ilya Rabinovich re-centre the gaze through reintroducing the history, the story of the image *back into the image* from whence they had been functionally exiled. It is not by accident that these things are seen, become apparent in the images of Ilya Rabinovich, but are not and cannot immediately be *spoken*. Rabinovich's panoramic photographs are aiming at the recuperation of the photographic image's purity and originality, whereas the disciplinary-evolutionary modern museum has only served to 'literaturize' the image, narrativizing it so as to tell about evolution 'feuilletonistically'.

According to recent museum studies, the nineteenth century is that of the museum. It is also the century of the novel, of both the great Romanesque systems and the popular feuilleton novels published in the press of that time. The succession of visual modernity is thus replenished: museum-novel-film-media. The Modern Museum is the most recently discovered ancestor and, until lately, the last missing link of modernity's genealogy. Rabinovich's images bring an essential contribution in this regard, for that genealogy was still demanding to be verbally developed, enunciated and analyzed.

In order to produce the illusion of evolutionary continuity, the Modern Museum had *de-focused* the image and extracted the 'visual' out of the image. Once again, it is clear that television and film have been developed as laboratory material in the disciplinary museum as well. Through his project, the photographer-artist Ilya Rabinovich has involuntarily triggered – or, even better, the photographic image has automatically reactivated – two as yet unconsummated genealogical wars of modernity. Firstly, his work addresses the question of *the institutional context* of contemporary art as a specific issue of *photography*. In other words, it addresses the question of bringing into play, cinematizing and transforming into flux, the evolutionary, linearly-narrative matrix of the museal display in which the photographic image has been subjected. Or, as Bennett remarks: 'the eye is directed in how to read the spaces between things'.[13]

Secondly, one could say that we are currently witnessing a retaliation of photography against the museum, which, under the very express form of 'ethnographic photography', has heartily contributed to the naturalization of the colonial status of photography. What the *Museutopia* project denounces here, implicitly, is exactly 'the supposedly irrefutable authority of the photographic image'. Through his photos, Ilya Rabinovich objectivizes the museum itself, the employment of photography as 'scientific document', as 'probatory proof'. The artist causes us to look again *inside* the image and not *between* images, from one image to another. He 'de-musealizes' the photography, setting it free for a

possible *reflexive, critical usage*, which in its turn is redeeming. He historically *restores* the photography to us. In *Museutopia*, we are witnessing an important battle in the war of *the decolonization of photography* and, implicitly, of the cultural images, of the stereotypes due to its prestige. The modern museum therefore appears as an educated theatre opposed to the popular mart, but as illusionist as this one: a frame-up of knowledge to political effects. By pausing, by opposing the on-the-run view of the cinematic non-view, the photography reframes the image.

Towards a Future Subjectivity

'The cultural narratives of museums are constructed today at a time when museums are expected to act as critical thinkers in the context of human rights and at a time when the politics of recognition demands that attention is paid both to cultural representation and to patterns of the distribution of culture (...). New ideas about the educational use and potential of museums are needed (...). Questions about educational purpose, pedagogy and performance come together in post-modern times, placing the museum in a swirling vortex of ambiguity, confusion and potential opportunity. These questions, if considered honestly and answered with analytical clarity, will enable the emergence of diverse approaches to the post-museum.'[14]

– Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in *Museums and Education. Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance* (2007).

Ilya Rabinovich seems to agree with the above statement of Eilean Hooper-Greenhill. In the description of his project, he specifically deplores the indecision of the museums in Chişinău. He does not propose the closing of these museums, but their transformation and employment. Abandoned weapons of the Cold War, the museums in Chişinău are waiting to be transformed and used as new pedagogical-identitary apparatuses. Only, the political will to use them seems to be lacking. But can these museums still be used or are they merely reminiscences of a defunct modernity – a modernity that in Moldova, as paramount symbol of Eastern Europe in general, has never actually been practiced?

'One of the most significant characteristics of learning in museums,' Eilean Hooper-Greenhill states, 'is its power to *shape identities*'.[15] Yet, these are not fixed, pre-set identities, as in the case of the Modern Museum, but individual, personal identities, characteristic of postmodernity. The museums in Chişinău exhibit a void. They show a 'missing link' with regard to the immediate past and, mainly, the present. In this way they express, like a symptom, the chronic identity crisis of the Republic of Moldova. These museums represent the country's already morbid hesitation between more histories, geographies, pasts and spheres of influence, between being a province of a great (former and, probably, future) empire like the Tsarist-Bolshevik one, or of a national state of average importance, marginal, peripheral in its turn, more or less undecided, itself oscillating between East and West (Romania). Moldova lies not only on the border, but also between borders, being a geopolitical buffer zone.

The Modern Museum can and still has to play the pedagogical-identitary role, yet in a post-modern, post-colonial, post-imperial and post-visual context, for the reflexively-critical creation of new (micro) identities. In Moldova, at once on the border and between borders, the disciplinary-evolutionary subjectification of the Modern Museum is out of action. The identity crisis, the identity block of Moldova has seized the modern museal apparatus, causing it to glow posthumously, in historic inoccupation, vacantly. The Moldovan un-subjectification, authentic 'I would prefer not to' of an entire population has left the Modern Museum in off-side. This situation is good in itself, as a terminal phenomenon of the objective deconstruction of modernity, but bad as a social symptom.

Aude sapere, 'dare to know, to find out', seems to echo Kantianly in the silence of the museums in Ilya Rabinovich's photographs. The nostalgia from which Ilya Rabinovich's expedition through these 'museums of the Modern Museum' has arisen is not *retrospective*, oriented to fixed, set inveterate and artificial collective identities, but *prospective*, open towards a future subjectivity. History has to move on.

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Notes

1. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 1.
2. Forming itself, in this way, as identitary norm upon an accident, upon a deflection: a typically modern and modernist process and procedure, analyzed at length by Foucault in the cases of madness and delinquency, for instance, on the 'deflections' of which the canon of Western Reason has been built.
3. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Education. Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 195.
4. Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, chapter VII, 'The Disciplinary Museum'.
5. Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory. Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004).
6. Ibid., p. 165.
7. Ibid., p. 166.
8. Ibid., pp. 162–163. 'Evolution, in short, could not be seen directly. It could be made evident not in things themselves, but only in a particular narrative ordering of the relations between them through which resemblances were interpreted as descent; and it could not be made evident at all where sequences were interrupted and discontinuous. The spaces between things were, accordingly, invested with a particular and compelling significance as scientific method, across a range of disciplines, came to focus on the task of filling in those spaces in order to provide continuous sequences of lineal descent connecting the past to the present in an unbroken historical order.'
9. Ibid., p. 177.
10. Ibid., p. 161.
11. Ibid., p. 165.
12. In the panoptical, Foucauldian episteme of modernity as well, vision and sight are essential. Yet, in the Benthamian Panopticon, generalized by Foucault as matrix or paradigm, the production of power is performed through the asymmetry between seeing and being seen (which was to lead to the specular-narcissistic closing characteristic of modern reflexivity). In the panoptical society, the subject is objectified, exhibited: it is object, exhibit.
13. Bennett, 2004, p. 176.
14. Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 195, p. 200, p. 201.
15. Ibid., p. 178, my emphasis.

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Acknowledgements

Ilya Rabinovich, *I will be your image*, 2007, passport photograph of Ilya Rabinovich in 1981

Ilya Rabinovich was born in Chişinău, Moldova (former USSR) in 1965 and emigrated with his family to Israel in 1973. He obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Bezalel Academy of Design and Art in Jerusalem in 1994. From 1998 to 2000, he participated in the artist-in-residency programme at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, where he continues to be based. Rabinovich's work is informed by his émigré experience and primarily deals with issues of identity and memory. His photographs are noted for being austere and enigmatic, 'show[ing] places in terms of their fleetingness, remoteness, as if they were bereft of memories.' They display what the Russian art critic Viktor Misiano has called, 'the detached gaze of the diasporic artist' – considering his homeland from a distance, through the lens of his traumatic departure.

Rabinovich's subjects are places that reflect his struggle for creating a coherent identity. These are mostly places that have been subjected to radical change. For example, in 1997–1998 he photographed the area that was once the border between East and West Berlin. His images of the backyards of houses and old grey buildings represented an attempt to reconnect to his pre-immigration childhood memories of Chişinău; memories that were not discussed during his life in Israel. The project is ostensibly a metaphor for his struggle to locate his roots in an urban landscape that is constantly changing.

After his 'Berlin East-West' project, the following year Rabinovich collaborated with Luan Nel, a fellow artist from the Rijksakademie, in a travel project that investigated how his lost memories from early childhood were influencing his artistic practice. Returning to Chişinău after 26 years and witnessing a city that was in the middle of redefining its own identity, Rabinovich was struck by how detached he had become from his roots.

He pursued the theme further in a project in 2005, in which he photographed the interiors of Hotel Rossiya in Moscow shortly before its demolition. The project enabled him to find a connection with his cultural origins by investigating how power and authority were and continue to be, demonstrated in the former USSR and present-day Russia.

Rabinovich's focus on the Soviet past and on the disappearance of the Communist heritage from the public sphere in particular, carried into his 2008 project, *Museutopia*. Rabinovich travelled back to his birthplace Chişinău to photograph the architecture and exhibitions in existing museums, as well as at museum sites that have been 'censored' since the independence of Moldova in 1991.

Since 2007, Rabinovich has attempted to engage the public in his work, presenting exhibitions with a 'hands-on' approach. In *Rear Window,* visitors were given pocket lights that enabled them to see Rabinovich's photographs in a darkened room (Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2008). In the case of *Museutopia*, his photographs were enhanced by the inclusion of historical footage and texts from the museums he visited (Chişinău, 2008–2012).

In 2009, Rabinovich continued his exploration of the immigrant condition by photographing a series of homes of illegal Eastern European migrant workers in Amsterdam, in an attempt to reflect upon the meaning of modern slavery in Western Europe.

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