

# PAGES, VIEWS

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### International Symposium Vienna 2016

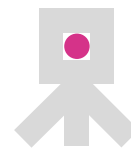


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ESHP European Society for the History of Photography

**Adriana Dumitran**

**Investigations into Peripheries in  
Romanian Photo Books (2010 – 2015)**

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Mihai Barabancea,  
*Rescrierea secvenței – Overriding sequences*,  
Asociația pentru Artă Ilfoveanu, București 2015, 19.



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# Investigations into Peripheries in Romanian Photo Books (2010 – 2015)

**Adriana Dumitran** Romanian contemporary photography seems to be attracted by the strong contrasts of present day Romania that are often found on the outskirts of towns. This paper treats the latest photo books of two Romanian photographers: Nicu Ilfoveanu (b. 1975) and Mihai Barabancea (b. 1983). Their works propose various readings on peripheries: from the vivid life of the flea markets on the outskirts of the city to the ghostly remnants of the communist era invisibly embedded in everyday life in the provincial small towns or the periphery of the collective memory when photographically inventorying the WWI monuments spread throughout the country. The new generation of fine art photographers in Romania benefits from the development of the photo/video academic education founded by the former generations of artists that worked under difficult conditions behind the Iron Curtain until 1989. It is impossible to understand the evolution and new artistic forms of manifestation without considering their sources. Until 1989, education – together with the development of artistic photography – was hindered by barriers put up by the Iron Curtain and the ideology imposed by the communist regime. A connection to the artistic movements and currents of the free world became possible in the 1960s and '70s when artists, ideas and information circulated more freely and participation in exhibitions and international biennales developed.<sup>1</sup> Photography was practiced by groups of plastic artists, as well as by a larger category of users active in photo clubs. The creative work performed in these clubs was more easily guided by the state ideology based on Socialist Realism and, as such, could be better controlled by the authorities. Photography was subject to the influence of experimentalism and constructivism, becoming a complementary way of expression for the plastic artists. It was also an environment for experimentation and an interdisciplinary use field with the photo collage, photomontage, painting interventions on photography and the documentation of happenings. Starting in the 1960s, the interdisciplinary groups of artists – *1.1.1.* and *Sigma*<sup>2</sup> – started their activities in Timișoara and promoted photography as a means for plastic art research,<sup>3</sup> for documenting their painting and installation art works. Ștefan Bertalan,<sup>4</sup> Constantin Flondor and Doru Tulcan<sup>5</sup> were the most representative artists of this group. Exhibitions were organized in Romania and abroad showing the works of artists experimenting with photography: Ion Grigorescu, Horia Bernea, Geta Brătescu, Diet Sayler, Iosif Király, Dan Mihălișanu, Gheorghe Rasovsky and the Sigma Group are just a few of the most prominent. The artistic activity of the 1980s was marked by the ever-growing isolation and lack of western photographic materials. Photography remained in the experimenting area of documenting performances and happenings, as well as in mail art. The new generation of artists began to use the photographic experiment as an autonomous form of artistic expression.

1. Alexandra Titu, 'Experimentalismul în arta românească după 1960', in: *Experiment – în arta românească după 1960*, exh. cat., Bucharest 1996, 17.

2. Ileana Pintilie, Ștefan Bertalan, Constantin Flondor, Doru Tulcan, *Creație și sincronism european. Mișcarea artistică timișoreană (anii 1960 – 70)*, exh. cat., Timișoara 1991.

3. Ruxandra Balaci, 'Fotografia – o posibilă cronologie a unui capitol experimental', in: *Experiment – în arta românească după 1960*, exh. cat., Cluj 1997, 69.

4. Ileana Pintilie, Ștefan Bertalan, *Drumuri la răscruce*, Timișoara 2010.

5. Doru Tulcan, *Fotografie*, Timișoara 2008.

Iosif Király, Dan Mihălțianu, Wanda Mihuleac, Laurențiu Ruță, Radu Igaszag, Marinela Preda Sânc, Decebal Scriba, Dorel Găină, Aniko Gerendi and Gheorghe Rasovsky experimented with photography and exhibit the results. After 1990, some of them were involved in establishing the photo/video departments in the Romanian academies of arts.

Beginning with the 1960s, photography became a separate field of study within Graphic and Design Departments of the *Ion Andreescu* Visual Arts Academy in Cluj Napoca. In the '70s and '80s, there was a strong interest in photography both in the Academy of Art and in the photo clubs,<sup>6</sup> which were numerous at the time – partly for students, and partly for amateurs.

The Union of Plastic Artists hosted *Atelier 35* in which a small group of artists from Bucharest, Cluj, Timisoara and Oradea dealt with photography – one of the artistic ways of expression.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to the already existing tradition, a photography department was introduced into the Academy of Art in Cluj Napoca in 1990.

The Photo/Video and Computer Processed Image Department was established at the National University of Art in Bucharest in 1995 and soon developed into one of most popular faculties with future students'.<sup>8</sup>

In another Academy of Art – the *George Enescu* University of Art in Iași – the Photo/Video Department was established in 2007<sup>9</sup> and the teaching program focused on documentary photography concerned with a critical view of the social realities in post-communist Romania, as well as on performance photography. The Photo/Video Department of the Art and Design University in Timișoara was founded in 2008.<sup>10</sup>

In Romania, photo-album production follows certain directions derived from the specific cultural needs. One of these is concerned with highlighting the historical photographic heritage accessible in public and private collections. In most cases, it is concerned with the recovery of a past that is frequently idealized: photographs of the Royal House of Romania, interwar Romania, the visual history of the big cities and images of the rural, traditional world.

There are also historical sequences from the communist period including images of the Black Sea coast spas and albums of the photographers who took pictures of the daily life during this era.<sup>11</sup>

Bringing back the micro-history, the passage of the individual through the communist period, is another new direction. The private photographic collections favour the recovery of the models of everyday life in communism.<sup>12</sup> This idea of visual recovery of the recent past is also expressed in the slides the painter Ion Dumitriu (1943-1998) made at a landfill on the outskirts of Bucharest between 1975 and 1978.<sup>13</sup>

6. Feleki Károly, Dorel Găină, 'Specializarea Fotografie-Videoprosesare Computerizată a Imaginii de la Universitatea de Artă și Design de la Cluj', *Arta*, revistă de arte vizuale, nr. 6-7, 2012, 25-26.

7. Iosif Király, 'Câteva considerații despre fotografia de artă din România', *Balkon*, revistă de artă contemporană, nr. 8, September 2001, 27.

8. Iosif Király, Daniel Constantinescu, Alexandra Croitoru, Nicu Ilfoveanu, 'Universitatea Națională de Arte București. Departamentul FVPCI', *Arta*, revistă de arte vizuale, nr. 6-7, 2012, 8.

9. Matei Bejenaru, Lavinia German, Cătălin Gheorghe, Bogdan Teodorescu,

'Școala de fotografie de la Iași', *Arta*, revistă de arte vizuale, nr. 6-7, 2012, 16 – 18.

10. Stelian Acea, 'Fotografia în cadrul Facultății de Arte și Design Timișoara', *Arta*, revistă de arte vizuale, nr. 6-7, 2012, 32-33.

11. Florin Andreescu, *Flashback – Clișee voalate din Epoca de Aur și anii tranziției: 1975 – 1995*, Bucharest, 2009; Florin Andreescu, *Flashback 2 – Comunism glorios, capitalism victorios*, Bucharest, 2013.

12. Nicoleta Moise, *Nu-mi place numai marea, dar și muntele! / Not only the sea-side, but I like the mountains too*, Bucharest 2014.

13. Ion Dumitriu, *Groapa de gunoi / The Dump*, Diapozitive 1975 – 1978, exh.cat., Bucharest 2007.

Communism produced a hiatus in the historical development of the country, between the period prior to the instauration of the communist regime (a period perceived as being normal) and the post-communist period itself.

Artistic photographers are among those who propose a detached view, together with a visual investigation of the radical hard-to-foresee changes brought about by the transition from the so-called “multilateral development of the socialist society” to the unpredictable way in which the social, economic and cultural structures have been taken apart in the post-communist period.

The new wave of photographers asks questions: What is left? How much has remained? Where is this world? How did people manage to adapt to the post-communist period? Starting from these questions, a series of radiographies were made of Romanian contemporary society.

We choose to present four albums by the young photographers Nicu Ilfoveanu and Mihai Barabancea, who share a common topic – investigations of peripheries. The photo albums created by the two photographers look into the world of the peripheries in a complementary way. Nicu Ilfoveanu prefers provincial towns and the outskirts of towns whereas Mihai Barabancea scrutinizes the underground, visceral world of cities usually hidden in marginal neighbourhoods or underground in the sewage tunnels.

Nicu Ilfoveanu graduated from the Photo-Video Department of the University of Art of Bucharest in 2000 and currently teaches photography at the same institution. His work has been exhibited in solo and group shows in Bucharest, Sibiu, Cluj-Napoca, Berlin, Poznan, Krakow, Prague, Beijing, Oslo, Roma, Paris, Graz, and at the Venice Biennale.

Mihai Barabancea started on his artistic path as a graffiti artist and then enrolled in the Photo-Video Department of the Bucharest University of Art where his interest shifted to photography, experimental film and installations. The subject of his artistic exploration is the urban environment and the people he meets on his journeys. He encourages people to perform in front of the camera, to express their need to be recognized outside of the space of social exclusion.

#### **Agnes Birebent, Nicu Ilfoveanu, *ELECTRO +*, AAI, Bucharest 2011**

The authors – writer Agnès Birebent and Nicu Ilfoveanu with his camera – took an almost initiatory voyage to small provincial towns in Romania. We called it *initiatory* as they were not leisure travellers. This voyage was more of a spiritual exercise, a rediscovery of the worlds that no one talks about: of small provincial towns that, during the communist period, had been subjected to forced urban modernizing made up of some dominant points: the city centre with a representative monument, a square and the downtown hotel and, on the outskirts of the town, the industrial area which ensured jobs and economic development. Like a giant



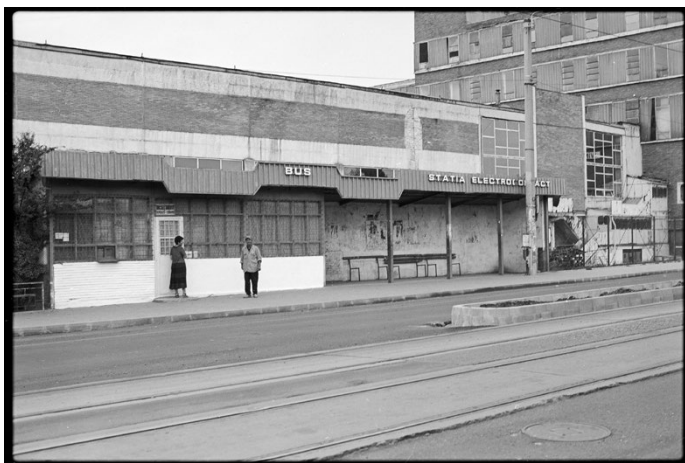


Figure 1  
Agnès Birebent, Nicu Ilfoveanu.  
*ELECTRO +*, AAI, Bucharest 2011, 90-91.

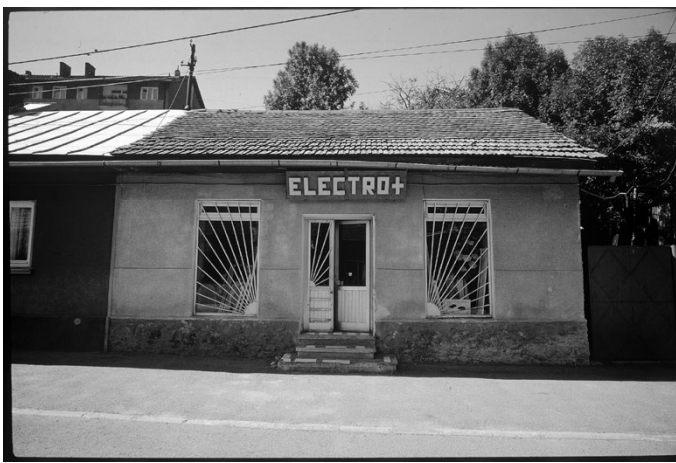


Figure 2  
Agnès Birebent, Nicu Ilfoveanu.  
*ELECTRO +*, AAI, Bucharest 2011, 49.

being, these large platforms and their supporting industries provided food, services, education and entertainment to the people working there.

Gradually, after 1989, these industrial areas that had become symbiotically attached to people's lives ceased to exist (fig. 1). The physical decline and finally the abandonment of these central points changed these little towns. Their inhabitants adapted to this change in various ways (fig. 2). During the first ten years after the fall of communism, the old social structures and mentalities coexisted with the new structures imposed by democracy and adaptive reflexes were less used. But, in the following fifteen years, the absolute collapse of the economic platforms that formerly supported these structures and the massive emigration forced the manifestation of the adaptive reflexes or inadaptation.<sup>14</sup>

Small, apparently insignificant, details tell us about the changes and the passing of time. The downtown hotels, finely furnished thirty or forty years ago, have never been modernized and their ornaments now seem fit to be displayed in a possible museum dealing with life in the communist period. Any tourist taking the voyage made by the two travellers would encounter these hotels and they form one of the recurrent motifs of the album. The image on the album cover is a photo mounted on the wall of such a hotel. A group of young people looking happy in the sea waves – a commercial, a propaganda, image; it was quite banal at that time but, today, is forced to play a role without being sustained any longer by the old ideology and aesthetics (fig. 3).

The communist apartment houses are obsessively photographed as witnesses to the struggle between the imposed uniformity of the communist regime and its rejection by each and every tenant living in them; an attitude expressed in the very personal way they managed to alter the functionality and exterior aspect of the buildings.

The carpet beating rack (fig. 4) is a recurrent motive in Nicu Ilfoveanu's pictures. The carpet beating rack had a well-established social and practical function within the small communities formed around the apartment houses.

In the afternoon whole generations of children used to play near the carpet beating rack – the place seemed to have a magical aura. The carpet beating rack was one of the first objects of public service to be mounted when new apartment houses were built. It was the place where the prosperity of a family – the purchase of a Persian carpet – was exhibited to the public. The "Persian" carpet, which obviously was not at all Persian but produced in one of the state factories, was put on the beating rack to be dusted or washed where everybody could admire

14. David A Kideckel, *România postsocialistă. Munca, trupul și cultura clasei muncitoare*, Iași 2010, 144 – 151.

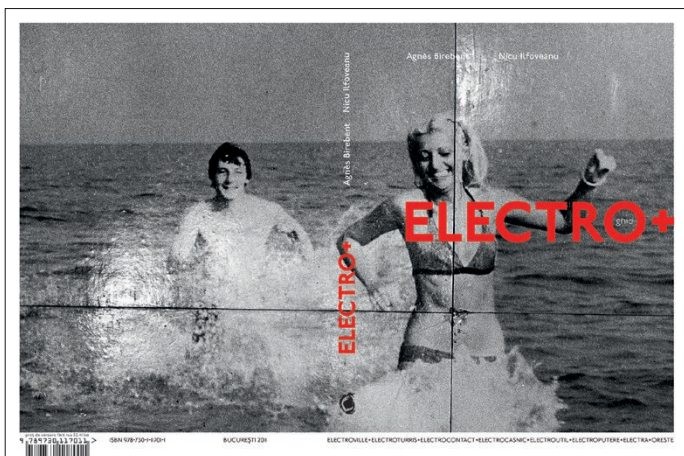


Figure 3  
Agnès Birebent, Nicu Ilfoveanu.  
*ELECTRO +*, AAI, Bucharest 2011, cover.

Figure 4  
Agnès Birebent, Nicu Ilfoveanu.  
*ELECTRO +*, AAI, Bucharest 2011, 76.



it. If the carpet was large, several neighbours were gathered to transport and clean it.<sup>15</sup> To get a carpet meant occupying a higher social and economic rank. It was as important as another symbol of life under communism – the national brand car, the Dacia.

Communism's values disappeared along with its ideology. The carpet beating rack, the Persian carpet and Dacia car, the ante-1989 models and the children playing around the rug beating rack are gradually disappearing too. Like vestiges of the past, these symbols had a longer life in small villages because there was nothing to take their place. These symbols of the forgotten times were pushed towards the margin of the town by the changing stream.

#### Nicu Ilfoveanu, Octav Avramescu,

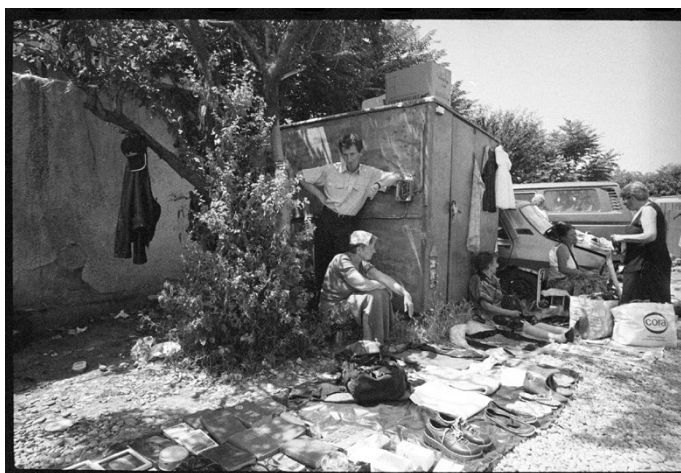
#### *Găsiți și pierduti / Found and lost*, self-published, Bucharest 2011

Figure 5  
Nicu Ilfoveanu, Octav Avramescu,  
*Găsiți și pierduti / Found and lost*,  
self published, Bucharest 2011, 60–61.

Figure 6  
Nicu Ilfoveanu, Octav Avramescu,  
*Găsiți și pierduti / Found and lost*,  
self published, Bucharest 2011, 134–135.

Nicu Ilfoveanu had been trying to undertake a study on human nature by taking pictures in two flea markets in Bucharest across the seasons. Located on the outskirts of the city, they became an investigation point for Ilfoveanu who wished to see who is selling, who is buying and what is being bought.

With its black-and-white photos, this album has a narrative structure that sticks to the course of the seasons from winter to summer, spring and fall with all the tribulations accompanying trading in the open air: snow, rain, mud, sun and perspiration (fig. 5).



15. Adam Drazin, 'Vânătoarea de molii: curățenie, intimitate și progres în România', in: Vintilă Mihăilescu (coord.). *Etnografii urbane. Cotidianul văzut de aproape*, Iași 2009, 65 – 86.





Figure 7  
Nicu Ilfoveanu, Octav Avramescu,  
*Găsiți și pierduți/Found and lost*,  
self published, Bucharest, 2011, 135.



Figure 8  
Nicu Ilfoveanu, Octav Avramescu,  
*Găsiți și pierduți/Found and lost*,  
self published, Bucharest, 2011, 128 – 129.

People crowd into a maze together with the ambiguous forms created by the rows of objects set on the ground; they are completely absorbed with evaluating and investigating the displayed objects. To the people who sell – young or old, specialized in certain kinds of objects or in different ones put together at random – the world is only the piece of ground covered by a plastic sheet with their merchandise lying on it (fig. 6).

The market is a freely-accessible, chaotic museum where obsolete objects mirror the daily life of the last one hundred years in Romania:<sup>16</sup> household goods, sanitary fittings, clothes, toys, old books, taxidermied animals (fig. 7) and out-of-fashion knick-knacks.

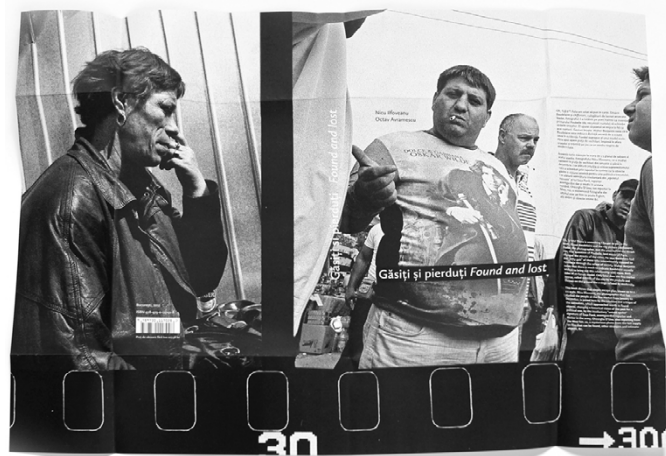
Ilfoveanu wants to discover the mechanisms that connect the people on the margins of society to the margins of the city; he sometimes takes a very close look, sticks close to their body, making the same gestures they make, in a natural, pretenseless way (fig. 8).

With the same lack of ostentation, seeming to be naturally integrated in this world, he gazes at those who are selling, watching them curiously, trying to catch something from their story. The buyers are driven by curiosity and interest as they look for objects that fit into their temporal and functional needs. The periphery is the single way of living for these people; the only one they are aware of (fig. 9).

The outskirts are linked to poverty and a lack of landmarks in this world created by communism through the forced urbanization and poor assimilation to the rules of city life by those taken from their rural environment.<sup>17</sup> The flea market reproduces, at the periphery, a community led by well-defined rules.

**Nicu Ilfoveanu, *Serii. Multiplii. Realisme / Series. Multiples. Realisms*, self-published, Bucharest 2014**

In *Series. Multiples. Realisms*, Nicu Ilfoveanu delves into the temporal dimension of the Romanian collective memory and takes the images of some symbols out of the edges of this memory. These symbols are the monuments erected in the Romanian villages in the interwar period and consecrated to the heroes who fell in the Great War, thus commemorating the people from their community (fig. 10). This project had the clear purpose of making a visual inventory of these monuments, devoid of the spectacular,



16. Claude Karnoouh, 'Sarea pământului ... A propos de lucrările lui Nicu Ilfoveanu', *Arta*, revistă de arte vizuale, nr. 6-7, 2012, 221 – 223.

17. Adrian Majuru, *Bucureștii mahalalelor sau periferia ca mod de existență*, Bucharest 2003, 235 – 238.



Figure 10  
Nicu Ilfoveanu,  
*Serii. Multiplii. Realisme.* /  
*Series. Multiples. Realisms.*,  
self published, Bucharest 2014, 85.

“in a compositional frame placed somewhere between sight and webcam”.<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 11) Ilfoveanu focuses on what is going on in their proximity and how they interconnect with the place they live in. The monuments are visible, they have a well-defined form, preserved by those who are alive; but at the same time, these monuments are invisible, they appear to be engulfed by the tangled threads of human lives as if the fingerprints of countless actual times since their erection, had covered them, blurring their outlines, integrating them into the surrounding landscape by means of a complete mimetism (fig. 12). Nicu Ilfoveanu has a camera that, without rough movements, softly removes these fingerprints to reveal their outlines for just a few moments; the time needed to clearly see them, and then, lets them return to their previous condition.

His photography is neither a photo report nor a documentary. He tries to record the long duration of history, its fingerprint on people's consciousness. More often than not, this fingerprint has the appearance of a cliché, of the little nothings of life. People pass by these monuments indifferently, absorbed by their own daily existence. There is no trace of the heroics in these photos, no stress placed on the idea of sacrifice of those who lost their lives in the war and the idea of demystification of heroism – and that is exactly the author's intention.

Figure 11  
Nicu Ilfoveanu,  
*Serii. Multiplii. Realisme.* /  
*Series. Multiples. Realisms.*,  
self published, Bucharest 2014, 47.

Figure 12  
Nicu Ilfoveanu,  
*Serii. Multiplii. Realisme.* /  
*Series. Multiples. Realisms.*,  
self published, Bucharest 2014, 103.

### Mihai Barabancea, *Rescrierea secvenței / Overriding sequence*, Asociația pentru Artă Ilfoveanu, Bucharest 2015

Mihai Barabancea enters into a dialogue with his characters and encourages them to perform in front of the camera. Mihai Barabancea obliges you to look at a section of humanity that,



18. Alina Șerban, 'Nicu Ilfoveanu, O prezentare cinematică a istoriei', in: *Serii. Multiplii. Realisme* / *Series. Multiples. Realisms*, self published, Bucharest 2014, 1.





Figure 13  
Mihai Barabancea,  
*Rescrierea secvenței – Overriding sequences*,  
Asociația pentru Artă Ilfoveanu,  
București 2015, 74-75.

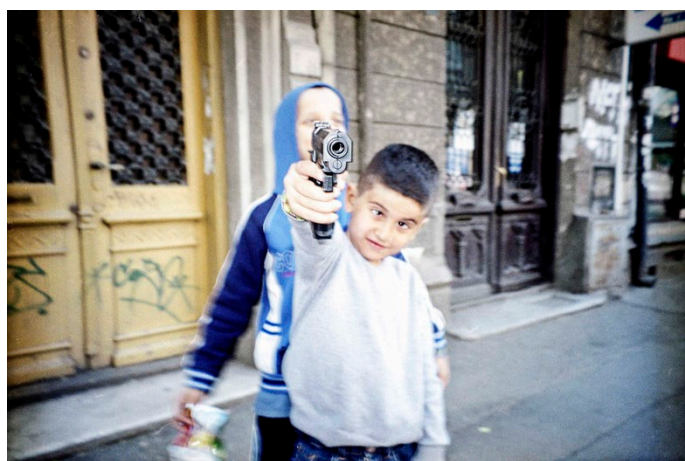


Figure 14  
Mihai Barabancea,  
*Rescrierea secvenței – Overriding sequences*,  
Asociația pentru Artă Ilfoveanu,  
București 2015, 90-91.

at first, makes you feel uneasy. Mihai Barabancea's marginals gain their right to be recognized by sitting in front of his camera, sometimes making a real show of their appearance, portraying their own character in this world on the margins of society. By agreeing to be photographed and participating in the creation of the image, they impose the transmission of a message which asks for their acceptance at the social level. They exist, but they are invisible for the rest of the society – invisible in the darkness of the sewage tunnels, invisible in the daylight among the accepted and acceptable elements of society. They are invisible because, embarrassed by the image bearing grotesque tinges that are nevertheless presented with vitality and impudence, society refuses to recognize their presence.

They adapt to this world in a marginal way following their own laws and rules. They are more than their bodies that bear the traces of their personal stories (fig. 13). They carry their past and present in various vehicles – this could be their own body or the carriages and suitcases that are continuously deteriorating.

The photographer interacts with his characters in a language that they recognize and allows them to accept him in their environment. It is a direct language, tough, rude and vulgar when needed.

He does not create a documentary; he just favours the telling of the personal stories. Barabancea takes an inventory of the periphery starting from the exterior – blocks of flats on the outskirts of the town, maidans, abandoned houses, squat houses, dangerous neighbourhoods, sewage tunnels, cheap pubs with gambling games and slot machines – and moves towards the interior, to the human beings that populate them. And, here, he inventories human typologies: homeless people searching in garbage, drug addicts, prostitutes, people living in sewage, children playing with real guns (fig. 14), those possessing boldness and those who have been defeated, those who hope to be saved (fig. 15) and those who have nothing left to lose.

The narrative thread is carefully knitted. Symbolically, the entrance into this parallel world is through a maidan (fig. 16) leading to an improvised football goal and guided by a character dressed in an Elvis costume. It is an invitation to a world apart. The characters are followed in the daylight and then in the dark, on backstreets, on the park benches or in the shabby



Figures 15 & 16  
Mihai Barabancea,  
*Rescrierea secvenței – Overriding sequences*,  
Asociația pentru Artă Ilfoveanu,  
București 2015, 18-19.

intimacy of some brothel rooms or improvised shelters where they show their bodies in a natural impudence, in a genuine way typical for the margins of society.

Mihai Barabancea's passion for searching for his characters on the periphery, reminds us of that of some photojournalists' in the Romanian interwar illustrated press. The outskirts and the margins of society formed an investigation topic for the journalists and photojournalists of this period including journalist F. Brunea Fox and photographer Iosif Berman. They frequently investigated the margins of society, going in leper houses, night asylums, prisons, railway stations, villages and small towns in the provinces. The common elements of these investigations that took place more than 70 years apart from each other are the search for those people in their living places, close to and, at the same time, at a distance from the rest of the society and then placing them in the public consciousness. Although, in the interwar period, these images were shown in left-wing newspapers, today, Mihai Barabancea puts them in a photo album edited in outstanding graphic design. It is his first personal photo book and was awarded a prize at a contest for the most beautiful books in Romania in 2015.

It is widely accepted that, in the present cultural and economic context, it is hard for a young artist to reach the art galleries, so that his work may become better known. But, at the same time, he can self-publish his work, he can participate in festivals specialized in photo books, he can promote his own work and make the larger public aware of it. As Martin Parr puts it, for an artistic photographer the photo album is "the supreme platform" through which his personal vision can become known to the public and art collectors.

Nicu Ilfoveanu's and Mihai Barabancea's works investigate the shabby world but they are also full of meaningful observations on human nature as is seen at peripheries. And, one of the most durable qualities of their work is that they dare to look at the remains of the bygone times that still float in front of our eyes.

**Adriana Dumitran**, Bucharest, Romania

Studies of history at Bucharest University. Since 2008 librarian at the National Library of Romania, Special Collection Department, Photography Cabinet. Author and curator of numerous articles and exhibitions on photography. Focus on Romanian history of photography, currently working on a PhD thesis on press photography in Romania 1860 – 1919. Recent publication 'Arta fotografică a lui Iosif Berman (1890 – 1941)' (The photographic art of Iosif Berman), in: *Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei* – (Studies and Researches in History of Art), vol. 4 (48), București, Editura Academiei Române 2014.

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