

## Fragmentum at the Brâncoveanu Palaces

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### Exhibition Credits

- **Artists:** Cristina Irian & Roxana Donaldson
  - **Curators:** Denisa Rad & Roxana Dragne
  - **Project Title:** FRAGMENTUM
  - **Institutional Framework:** Master's research project initiated by artists Cristina Irian and Roxana Donaldson, within the Master's studies center of the Doctoral School "Space, Image, Text, Territory" / Center of Excellence in Image Studies (CESI), University of Bucharest.
  - **Opening:** Saturday, April 3, 16:30, Ghețarie Gallery.
  - **Venue:** Brâncoveanu Palaces Cultural Center at the Gates of Bucharest, Mogoșoaia.
  - **Project Coordinator:** Ana Negoită, associate lecturer CESI, contemporary art curator.
  - **Technical Team:** Installation: Ariadna Pecingină and Octavia Anghel; photography: Bogdan Oprea; video editing: Cristina Bodnărescu; advertising graphics: George Anghelescu.
  - **Duration:** Multimedia and interactive exhibition, April 3 – May 15, 2021.
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### Introductory Text

The triggering of a global crisis and sudden isolation led to the re-evaluation of the connection between the individual and the community and, especially, his relationship with the process of habitation. The process of habitation also concerns the procedures of remembrance and narrative restitution, while the dialogue between interior and exterior reveals, in fact, the micro-histories found in urban passages, in the layers of walls, and in the transited gardens.

The *Fragmentum* exhibition at the Brâncoveanu Palaces renders a fragmented time, a narrative of compromised, degraded, and often forgotten spaces. Visual artists Cristina Irian and Roxana Donaldson explore what derives from the uninhabited and the survived. The spatio-temporal dimension is restored and recovered as a substantial whole: the wall fragment—part of a house structure from the last century—and the herbarium dating from the end of the 19th century become, in this context, artifacts of private histories.

Consequently, the objects—the wall fragment and the herbarium—are visually re-instrumented in two installations realized according to the requirements of a detective-like and participatory eye in the reconstruction of the narrative. The four houses, once and/or today inhabited, are presented via video as if in a temporal loop, in which images of gardens and plants succeed each other, all becoming a (possible) extension of the local monograph and of the habitation process marked by noises, natural processes of degradation, time. **(Denisa RAD and Roxana DRAGNE)**

## House Quartet.

### Small Urban Histories

The *Fragmentum* exhibition was structured in the logic of a visual meta-narrative, which has as its central element an artifact with anthropological and archaeological values: a real, banal piece of an interior wall from a house in Arefu, Argeş county, the family home of composer George Stephănescu (the object is part of the Cesianu-Racoviţa family collection, owner: Alexandru Ştefan Mihăilescu, Bucharest). The narrative line was augmented by the stories of three other houses, uninhabited, forgotten, from the same city, over which the quarantine from the beginning of 2020 laid a special silence.

The houses and their exterior gardens become characters, give birth to a story, have the capacity to render the nodal theme transposed in this multimedia installation proposed by the two exhibiting artists: Cristina Irian and Roxana Donaldson. The mounting of this visual structure in the space of the old ice house (gheţărie) of the Brâncoveanu palace at Mogoşoaia, a space with a claustal, somber, diffuse, underground character, transposes here, in the general atmosphere of the exhibition, an unknown air from a distant space, creating, through the chosen curatorial solutions, a type of site-specific scenography.

The reading line of the exhibition follows the main narrative thread: the wall, as a relic of a forgotten world, a world that no longer survived and from which today we have here only a few urban remains: a piece of wallpaper, an incomplete page of a newspaper from those times (which would have had the role of protecting a portion of peeled wall), a few rubber rollers used for beautifying interiors, a herbarium—another type of reliquary that preserves leaves and flowers from exterior gardens. All these artifacts, which generate a symbolic archaeology of the place from which these objects were extracted, are exhibited either bluntly or inserted into meta-objects that receive another narrative resonance.

Such a curatorial solution, which inserts new semantic structures into interstitial spaces, generating niches of visual content, has the role of triggering in the viewer a mnemonic mechanism of immersion into the world from which the objects come. And this return to the past, to the matrix of the object, to the zero point of the story, does nothing but stabilize an increasingly clear perspective, more attentive to the object, which thus becomes stripped of the story, becoming an artistic body. Precisely through this procedure and at the end of this process of visualization (observation) and understanding (assimilation), domestic artifacts with archaeological values can become artistic objects; they discharge their personal history to be charged with an artistic function.

### Classification of Exhibits

The exhibits can be categorized into visual series, depending on their compositional and aesthetic structure:

- **Ready-made structures:** rollers, newspapers, the herbarium.

- **Prop-like (butaforic) structures:** scenographic values replaced by a specific mockup design (replica), highlighting manual skill (the ability to craft an object): the four suspended walls, designed to offer an interactive experience;
- **Documentary structures:** the projection of the film about the quartet of houses;
- **Oversized plastic structures:** a gargantuan rotulus of washes and colored drawings (details from parietal decorative elements) which, through dimensional change, presents an object-installation where the miniature detail is taken to the extreme through oversizing zoom at a microscopic level into decorative fractals.

All these visual structures contain an extremely poetic layer, enhanced by the presence of an atypical intimacy for the procedures of ex-posing, a sensation augmented by the space. The exhibition follows aesthetic connection mechanisms between decorative typologies of the inhabited era, urban models of decoration, and a visual convention capable of narrating a curatorial concept.

The visiting trajectory defines a pre-established semantic route. A synesthetic immersion induces the viewer into an atemporal state. Descending the steps toward the double wood gate helps the visitor dive into a past that seems familiar and unknown. The vaulted interior space, the brick profiles eaten by time, and the filtered light synthesis the story through osmosis with the space . display solutions range from classic vitrines to interactive objects discovered through maneuvering sequential paddles. *Fragmentum* is an exhibition where the natural tendency is to walk in a whisper.

**Ana NEGOIȚĂ, coordinator**

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### **Fragmentum camerata**

The fragment, not the detail, represents our life in the pandemic. Detail meant "to cut from"—a deliberate action where part and whole are concomitant. Fragment, from *frangere* (to break), is what happened to us: suddenly broken from each other, from the community whole, and public space. Like the fragment belonging to a whole that no longer defines it, we feel the condition of fragmented humanity, realizing we belonged to a community now absent. The pandemic did not cut us; it broke us.

While understanding a detail requires reconstitution, the fragment requires reconstruction relative to the object's system of belonging. The detail explains the system, while the fragment is explained by the system; the former is inside, the latter outside. My discourse about the world before isolation no longer has a concrete reference.

As a professor, I speak to my students as other fragments on a laptop screen. Through this discourse, we help ourselves to reconstruct-together, to (re)become a common body, like a young plant growing partially from the trunk of the old one. Like a Florentine Camerata (a cultural reunion), the micro-community that realized the *Fragmentum* exhibition was constituted online.

We gathered virtually around a wall fragment from an old Argeș house. Cristina Irian, a photographer with hypersensitivity for details and visual archiving science, teamed with Roxana Donaldson, a refined visual artist and philologist passionate about documentation, for research

dedicated to the fragment. They focused on a material fragment, a survivor: a small piece of wall with floral wallpaper from a musician's house.

The project became a score with several participants, reunited in situ at Mogoșoaia with masks and gloves. The artists transformed a lifeless remnant into a cultural object. Roxana Donaldson created a giant pastel roll (\$15~m^2\$) reminiscent of Renaissance panels, while Cristina Irian realized suspended panels, interactive wall-photo albums. Multimediality is explicit (video projected on brick) and implicit (wall-panels with sequential photo inserts of eyes looking from the wall and time). The Palace walls are the fortress of this new world. The wall-object, a cultural and artistic object, becomes contemporary with us through current works and texts.

Unlike the detail, the fragment is an orphan object, free to migrate and provoke new meanings. It is the inspirer, and other objects accompany it. From the threshold of today's world, objects look at us and each other. We must learn from their survival lesson and reconstruction of meaning.

*Fragmentum camerata* is our answer today. **Laura MESINA, profesor CESI**

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### **Zidul-Pergament (*The Parchment Wall*)**

**Installation, mixed media on paper (acrylic, ink, liner, pencil, collage, 1.5x10m, 2021)**

Imagine a descent into the depths of your own mind, just as you would descend into the cellar of your house, an interior *anabasis* passing through residual, degraded, interwoven image and word fragments. This is the *Fragmentum* exhibition, an artistic experiment where my installation, *The Parchment Wall*, reconstitutes the visual recurrence of the long human-plant relationship on painted paper. These are fragments of vegetation arranged in layers, reinterpreting botanical plates, cyanotypes, degraded paint, and the herbarium in a fanciful mapping of urban interactions, composing a symbolic wall.

The challenge was to transform paper into a strong presence and use decorative style to conceptually speak about habitation and species, breaking clichés. *The Parchment Wall* contains partially obliterated written text referencing timelines: the house construction, installation realization, and the exhibition—a circular continuum where words are walled into the texture, mixed with the plants. The installation materializes interdisciplinarity, while the written and the painted signs reveal ambivalence.

The dimensions (15mp) make complete linear display impossible; thus, only a fragment remains accessible at a time, a metaphor for the impossibility of recovering the whole. A scratched word on a wall, a fleeting diary note, an unfinished decoration, or a pressed flower—traces of the past, fragments that survived. **Roxana DONALDSON, visual artist**

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### **Zidurile cu două fețe (*The Double-Sided Walls*)**

Installation composed of 4 double panels (\$100 \times 50~cm\$), prop-like exterior/interior wall painted, fixed and mobile inserts of image/text. Materials: construction materials; decorative rollers (1960s-1980s), Bursa newspaper fragments (1993, original); Piatra Neamț map fragment (1930s,

reproduction); house/plant cyanotypes; images on transparent material, mobile inserts with period portraits, garden plants, and field research text.

The installation subjectively reconstitutes fragments of houses and gardens. They are "four plus one": four early 20th-century houses from Piatra-Neamț (numbers 10, 11, 20, 23) and "plus one"—a plaster remnant with newspaper and wallpaper fragments from an 1873 house in Arefu.

Walls have two sides: the exterior seen by passersby and the interior seen by inhabitants. The installation invites you to explore both, entering the life of houses from street level and then meeting the "forever blue" past inside, face to face with eyes of inhabitants from interwar times. The floral wallpaper and newspaper fragment is incorporated as a leitmotif of real estate advertisements and floral traces. There are four installations because of the four houses, and also like the four parts of a symphony. **Cristina IRIAN, visual artist**

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### Stories and Texts about Houses

- Near Băeșu lives a venerable lady with a rose garden. I tell her about "my houses" I stop by during the pandemic. She remembers Mr. Lubieniecki, a natural sciences teacher at number 23.
- Zoo Park, 2021: likely being disbanded. Built in 1904, with firs and pines brought from Sinaia in honor of Carol I.
- Number 20, Ștefan cel Mare: A heritage house I always watch. An elderly man tells me: "I was a child, I saw when they took out their beautiful wooden furniture and made it firewood. Jewish doctors were the owners. Then many fought over the house".
- A guard tells me: "Now it's bought by new owners... many of these old ones died".
- The wooden synagogue (1766) and the white synagogue with blue windows. A tree leans against the wall. A cat lives in the yard. **Cristina IRIAN, visual artist**