

Review

Museotopia: A photographic research project by Ilya Rabinovich

edited by Huub van Baar and Ingrid Commandeur
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Museotopia explores the relationship between national museums, identity construction and memory. The artist and driving force of the book, Ilya Rabinovich, presents a photographic series of colour photographs depicting various national museums in Chişinău, the capital of Moldova. The photographs, in a deadpan, documentary style, appear to be 'silent', neutral representations of museum interiors. However, like museum exhibitions themselves, Rabinovich's photographs make a specific argument even if his work is veiled by a deceptive aura of objectivity. The artist's photographs are highly selected and far from silent or neutral. They are polemical in nature and the five essays that accompany them make this explicit.

Rabinovich, an Amsterdam-based artist/researcher, was born in Moldova under Soviet rule and grew up in Israel. His work is driven by a need to understand his own past by revealing the pasts hidden in the museums of his birthplace. To do so means challenging the official narratives of Moldova. For a reader/viewer unfamiliar with the turbulent history of the country, the photographic series by itself cannot tell the whole story or explain the 'organized forgetting' (9) which operates in these spaces. In order to contextualise the artwork, the reader needs to consider the detailed labels (much like museum labels) and the five accompanying essays (an editorial, two interviews with the artist and two essays). As Rabinovich mentions in an interview with art critic and curator Victor Misiano, '[t]he viewer has to engage with an intense reading process in order to unravel the Moldovan identity puzzle' (17).

The combination and interdependency of artistic images and an 'intense reading process' is one of the features of the book which I found most appealing. The book seems to be a cross between an exhibition catalogue/photo book and an edited academic volume. It resembles an exhibition catalogue/photo book in the sense that the full page, colour photographs dominate at least half of the book. Additionally, the interviews with the artist place the photographic series in the context of Rabinovich's previous work and concerns as an artist. On the other hand, it also has the feel of an academic text as it is an edited volume and the last two essays place the work in the context of contemporary museum theory and Moldova's political context. Rabinovich also undertakes the role of the researcher when he accompanies his photographs with long labels and archival photographs of the museums he examines.

As a result, we are presented with a 'hybrid' book by an artist/researcher that might appeal to a variety of audiences. It is true that museum specialists or sociologists may find the texts incomplete, while visual artists might find the labels and texts excessive and distracting. However, in order to evaluate the contribution of this book, we have to consider its hybridity and the fact that it offers a different reading experience. Increasingly, more 'photographic research projects', as we are informed by the title of this book, are created by artists/researchers. Artists may well be theoretically informed, hold academic positions, participate in theoretical conferences and publish in academic journals (as the readers of this journal know very well). The content and format of this publication can be seen as an excellent manifestation of the relationship between art and research, a relationship that seems possible and fully developed only in the form of a book.

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