THE MUSEUM AS A CATALYST OF COMMUNITY. CASE STUDY: THE EXHIBITION *IMAGINING FUTURES: URBAN COMICS FROM ARTIVISTORY COLLECTIVE* AT THE ART MUSEUM IN CLUJ-NAPOCA

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ABSTRACT. The Museum as a Catalyst of Community. Case Study: The Exhibition *Imagining Futures: Urban Comics from ArtiViStory Collective* at the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca. The present article aims at illustrating the role of the contemporary museum as a conscious central stakeholder that strengthens the community and connects in the era of participatory culture with different types of audiences. Built in two parts, the article points out the main concepts of the new museum philosophy as explored in the expertise in

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the field and brings on a case study that focuses on the analysis of the cultural mediation program built for an original thematic exhibition, centered around the exploration of the urban future and having as its conceptual stake to draw the viewer into a process of reflection on the different ways of perceiving the surrounding society.

Understanding social issues, remembering the past, exploring the ecosystem, acting on change and imagining futures are the invisible problems launched for debate through the creative laboratory of the members of the ArtiViStory Collective whose artworks could be explored within the exhibition. Their visual narratives, gathered in the various sections of the exhibition, have invited the viewers to respond to a series of questions that envisage the role of art in the community, the way we perceive the world around us, the stories that can be told about our past, the need for engaging young people into building inclusive communities or the way we can imagine our future.

Through a wide variety of formulas for exploiting the potential of the graphic imaginary (visual documentaries, comic strips, animations, sequential illustrations), the exhibition offers an overview of this space of creative investigation of the urban imaginary and social identity, rendering sequential art not only as a tool of representation but as a catalyst for activating the collective imagination, which can serve to coagulate the common interests of the community. At the same time, the cultural mediation program conceived for the exhibition is an important component that creates engagement and participation of young audiences in a discourse on the future of our community.

Keywords: *urban comics, participative art, museum education, cultural mediation*

The contemporary museum landscape is now tending, at a visibly accelerated pace, to enter a new phase of existence, as the 21st-century museum seeks to consciously and assertively connect to the requirements of the era of participatory culture, on whose collective intelligence it is betting, trying to fully capitalize on its creative and expressive potential, in formulas relevant to its own intentions. Everything is, in fact, part of a logic of democratization and cultural liberalization, the so-called "policy of open doors and the active involvement of the public in the life of «its» museum",[1] which, beyond the stake of broadening, diversifying and retaining the loyalty of current audiences, places a major emphasis on adequate institutional integration in the economic, cultural and social life of the territory to which the museum relates, with a notable contribution both in terms of increasing social cohesion and community resilience, and a significant impact on the personal development of those who walk into such an institution.

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[1] Massimo Negri, *La grande rivoluzione dei musei europei. Museum Proms* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2016), 101.

Within this context, the present article aims at illustrating the way in which the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca understands to act as a responsible institution in the service of the community and to create different perspectives for alignment with the desiderates of the 21st-century museum. Therefore, in the first part of the article, we will explore the key concepts of the new museum philosophy and its undertaken role within contemporary society as a catalyst of community, focusing on a series of reports and discussions within the professional expertise of the field (Alberto Garlandini, Jacqueline Eidelman, Massimo Negri, Nina Simon, Margherita Sani, Michela Rota, Anna Chiara Cimoli, Maria Chiara Ciaccheri etc.). Then, the second part of the article will focus on the case study of the cultural mediation program within the "*Imagining Futures. Urban Comics from ArtiViStory Collective*" exhibition set in the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca between March 11 and March 27, 2022. Even though this case study will render a localized example of a genuine initiative in Romania, through both the art form it envisages and the cultural mediation content it provides, we believe it could constitute a basis for further approaches that explore the relationship between the individual and the city, or the museum's role within the community.

Starting from the premise that the key concepts of the new museum philosophy are active participation, co-creation and experiential, the nowadays museum is becoming a space of innovative action and enthusiastic discoveries, of constructive dialogue between already established communicative languages and behaviors put in direct relation with emerging ones, hosting innovative experimental projects, which allow themselves, deliberately, to be contaminated with various forms of expression.

Embracing an open and consistent attitude towards interdisciplinarity, informal practices, unconventional approaches, participatory processes, collaborative approaches focused on inclusive education and social perspective, innovation, experimentation and even risk-taking, the great museums of the Western world are becoming more and more interested in a conscious effort to strengthen the museum-audience-territory connection, to give a "voice" and a generous space of expression to their own target audiences (thus recognizing them as central figures of current cultural practices).[2] They are thus requested to contribute and be actively involved in a series of thematic actions focused on the creative valorization of the museum's heritage collections or the historical-cultural environment of their own headquarters, assimilating them as a genuine resource, as an integral, vital part of their personal "journey", with all the implications of an intellectual, emotional and purely aesthetic process.

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[2] On the subject, see: Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010, URL: https://participatorymuseum.org/read/ and the most recent *Guidelines. Developing Education and Public Engagement in Museums* (Berlin: NEMO – The Network of European Museum Organisations, German Museums Association and German Association for Museum Education, May 2023).

These are valuable initiatives, which highlight not only the huge educational vocation and social relevance of museums[3] but also the importance of awareness of the fact that cultural heritage belongs to us and is accessible to all of us, as an indispensable resource for increasing the quality of life, individual potential and the psycho-emotional well-being of each of us.

Far from being just a simple whim or a fulgurating fashion effect, such approaches engage museums in a fruitful dialogue with multiple perspectives and sensitivities. This prompts them to decentralize their discourse and, at the same time, to diversify their cultural mediation "devices", to become truly accessible and empathetic spaces. They would render listening as an authentic and voluntary act – in other words, not just as a style exercise, but as a vital requirement, which commits you to adopting a new "tone" and diversifying communication styles –, a first-hand strategy in approaching their own audiences, understood in all their diversity and socio-economic complexity.

In the logic of this equation, the museum of the 21st century is no longer just a depository/custodian or "elitist sanctuary" of the artefacts of collective memory – a cultural heritage that, according to the new ICOM definition of the museum, adopted on August 24, 2022, is "active memory and civil commitment",[4] but opens up to embrace a plurality of voices and experiences under the umbrella of a "common house",[5] organically integrated into the community/communities it serves, raising lively debates and reflection, opening windows and building bridges of dialogue and interaction (multicultural and interdisciplinary, intercultural and intergenerational), in the desire to alleviate inequalities and overcome social barriers.

As an *agora* open to all, basically a public, dialogical and collaborative forum, which can stimulate and motivate civic participation, respectively can promote social justice, it defines itself as a fertile environment for debate, questioning and controversy, within which it becomes possible to affirm an alternative and nuanced perception of the world, that encourages critical distance,

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[3] On this topic, see: Nina Simon, *The Art of Relevance* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2016) and the international conference reports: *EU – Presidency Trio Conference: Museums and Social Responsibility – Values Revisited* (Berlin: NEMO – The Network of European Museum Organisations, Deutscher Museumsbund e.V., December 2020) and *NEMO 26th Annual Conference, 15–18 November 2018, Valleta, Malta: Museums out of the Box! The Crossover Impact of Museums* (Berlin: NEMO – The Network of European Museum Organisations, 2018).

[4] Alberto Garlandini, "Musei e patrimonio culturale per la difesa della diversità e della democrazia", *Territori della Cultura* 50 (2022): 168.

[5] Jacqueline Eidelman (coord.), *Inventer des musées pour demain. Rapport de la Mission Musées XXIe siècle* (Paris: La documentation Française, Direction de l'information légale et administrative, 2017), 25, 79.

analytical skills or dexterity in giving a concrete expression to thoughts and feelings. Against the background of this cultural and social exchange, the encounter with similarity or otherness inevitably occurs, "incarnated" in the presence of the other… a fact that calls for an empathic attunement to the essence of his or hers uniqueness and individuality, in order to be able to truly see it, fulfilling, thus, the point of an authentic encounter. Questioning the concept of the pretended normality, the museum of the present times understands to give a very particular interest to the so-called "public of the social field",[6] a fragile, vulnerable sample, characteristic of peripheral contexts, disadvantaged and distant from culture, who persist in perceiving museum environments as deeply niched spaces, in which they are almost never found as possible recipients.

In order to be able to change such a limiting belief, generating inevitable negative experiences, it becomes fundamental to rethink the role and functionality of the museum in a perspective of valorization for all[7] – the museum without barriers, the accessible museum, the museum without limits or borders, the museum viewed as a common home, the museum open to all – which guarantees universal accessibility (physical, cognitive, sensory, but also cultural, linguistic, economic or even emotional), aligned with the particular demands and needs of heterogeneous and dispersed audiences, actively supporting an attitudinal change in the way we understand to relate to concepts such as disability, equality and inclusion. A truly accessible museum embraces the social model of disability, in the perspective of which limitations and deficiencies are read as a key to the normality of the human condition: what, in reality, "takes out of the game" or "disables" a person, labelling him or her as "incapable", being nothing but the superficiality of an erroneous view that favors experiencing disability as a negative experience created by society, with all the undesirable effects of discrimination, oppression and the obstacles raised by "barriers". Accessibility is, in fact, not only of a physical nature that requires the conscious removal of architectural obstacles that prevent access but also one that touches on the problem of perception and cultural sensitivity, to which museums cannot remain impassive.[8]

In this way, as a "spokesperson" of peripheral and marginalized vulnerability, the museum also creates a series of opportunities as a true capital of compliance and resilience, the impact of which is also reflected positively on the health and psycho-emotional well-being of the public, mitigating the traumatic experience of

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6   Eidelman, *Inventer des musées*, 100–103.
7   On this issue, a very useful tool is the volume: Maria Chiara Ciaccheri and Fabio Fornasari, *Il museo per tutti. Buone pratiche di accessibilità* (Molfetta: Edizioni La Meridiana, 2022).
8   Fabrizio Serra, Franco Tartaglia and Silvio Venuti, *Operatori museali e disabilità. Come favorire una cultura dell'accoglienza* (Roma: Carocci Faber, 2018), 39–43, 71–78, 119–133.

social isolation, supporting the overcoming of relationships and/or communication difficulties, increasing personal comfort or the degree of social integration and adaptation, with significant effects on improving self-esteem and quality of life.

Consequently, today, the museum institution embodies a living "organism", one that is complex, imaginative, innovative, proactive, relational and dialogical, inclusive and collaborative, tolerant and reconciling, convivial, hospitable, safe, protective and comfortable, potentially widely accessible to all, in a continuous reinvention "in step with its time", a vector of social health, but also a vehicle of perennial values, a platform of potentialities and experiential well-being (a resource, documentation and research center, a stimulating environment for non-formal learning and socio-cultural exchange that offers tools for decoding and interpretation of the represented realities, but also a space for continuous training, complementary to formal education, respectively a place for creative production, permeable to the reflexive exercise of plural interpretations or polysemic approaches, a social-hub, a fab-lab or museum-cooperative, as well as its protean posture: the museum "*in situ*", "outside the walls" or dematerialized, "engine" for welfare and urban regeneration),[9] which aims, deliberately and consistently, relying also on the contribution of new technologies (the digital media viewed as a tool for cultural mediation and democratization),[10] to (re)define itself as a true point of reference and actor of the collectivity.

Without denying or harming any of its fundamental missions, the museum of the present times, through the wide range of experiences it puts into practice, with a strong emphasis on intangible notions such as aesthetic emotion, amazement, curiosity, inspiration, creativity, multisensoriality, exploration and interaction, inter and transdisciplinarity, diversity, freedom and fun, respect, morality, ethics, responsibility and solidarity, health and well-being, asserts more and more its role as a community catalyst and "driving force" of social transformation, an imperative that it understands to materialize, including, by encouraging the construction of a viable fabric of collaborative "strategic alliances" or partnerships, which not only credits, but also intelligently fructifies, aligning them adequately to the vision, mission and its own values, areas of competence and expertise of the cultural-creative, educational and social ecosystem of proximity

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[9] For emerging models and reference experiences, see Eidelman, *Inventer des musées*, 25–34, 35–46, 47–57, 59–71.

[10] On this matter, see: Kristina Barekyan and Lisa Peter, *Digital Learning and Education in Museums. Innovative Approaches and Insights* (Berlin: NEMO – The Network of European Museum Organisations, January 2023), Maria Elena Colombo, *Musei e cultura digitale. Fra narrativa, pratiche e testimonianze* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 2020), Nicolette Mandarano, *Musei e media digitali* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2019) and the chapter entitled "Musei e digital transformation", in Lucia Cataldo and Marta Paraventi, *Il museo oggi. Modelli museologici e museografici nell'era della digital transformation*, seconda edizione (Milano: Editore Ulrico Hoepli, 2023), 263–290.

(the local and territorial network formed by various public cultural institutions, educational environments, associative networks, local authorities, tourism offices, actors in the field of health and well-being etc.). Although they operate in similar or, on the contrary, completely distinct fields, all these institutional "teammates" are not competing with each other, but collaborate fruitfully, facilitating the exchange of experience and content-sharing in ingenious and attractive formats.

Far from being a static and neutral or apolitical "creature", but a visionary, versatile, adaptable and empathetic one, embodying an increasingly "liquid" and transparent, hybrid or multifunctional identity, guided, par excellence, by meaning, quality and value, the contemporary museum also distinguishes itself as a space of democracy, citizen participation and, last but not least, civic activism, where a position is taken through the balanced approach and debate of pressing topical issues such as emerging challenges, multiple crises and societal changes[11] (gender identity and equality; racism, antisemitism and xenophobia; the alarming recrudescence of (ultra)nationalist or localist positions; illegal immigration flow and human trafficking; refugee movements and the question of statelessness; the cultural hybridization generated by the phenomenon of mass migration; the European demographic setback and its extended implications; corruption and clientelism; the exacerbation of prejudices/conflicts/inequalities reflected in an increasingly accentuated division on multiple fronts, a source of deep animosities, hostility and social frictions that risk degenerating into large-scale street movements; the impact of technological changes on the labor market; the polarization of opinions and the accentuated radicalization of public discourse in the Western world; economic recession and depression caused by rising inflation and unemployment; the energy crisis; the global food insecurity; the recent escalation of Israeli-Palestinian dissensions or the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian military conflict; the geopolitical tensions and rivalries in the Eastern Mediterranean; decolonization and ethical issues that directly concern cultural heritage; the pressing problem of transition towards sustainability etc.), the relationship between culture and well-being[12] (the global health crisis generated

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[11] Concerning this topic, see: H.A. McGhie, *Museums and Human Rights: human rights as a basis for public service*, UK: Curating Tomorrow, 2020 and Anna Chiara Cimoli, Federica Facchetti, Alessia Fassone et al., *Musei e migranti. Gli strumenti per l'incontro. Atti del workshop internazionale 4 giunio 2018, 26 novembre 2018, 18 febbraio 2019*, serie "Formazione e Ricerca", Modena: Museo Egizio, Franco Cosimo Panini Editore, 2022.

[12] In this field, an edifying synthesis is offered by Rariţa Zbranca and Kornélia Kiss (eds.), *Culture for Health Report. Scoping review of culture, well-being, and health interventions and their evidence, impacts, challenges and policy recommendations for Europe*, November 2022, as well as Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn, *Health Evidence Network synthesis report 67: What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review* (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2019).

by the COVID-19 pandemic, with major impact and severe, "cascading", disruptive effects across all aspects of society; the intensely destabilizing consequences of stress and states of anxiety generated by digital hyper-connectivity and the proliferation of new social media platforms, the ever-faster pace of everyday life, financial worries and the uncertainty of tomorrow, to which is added the worrying increase in insecurity at global level; the transformative power of art/culture, its therapeutic valences and supporting capacity, a true tool for creative adaptation to challenges in society, effectively used in prevention models, but also in alternative treatment schemes for diseases typical of contemporary society, partly related to lifestyle; the correlation between cultural participation and its positive effects in terms of quality of life, improvement of self-esteem, socio-sanitary inclusion that contributes to salutogenesis and increasing the social well-being of individuals; Museum Therapy; Art Therapy; Dance Therapy; Theatre Therapy) or culture and climate change[13] (the devastating consequences of global warming and related extreme weather phenomena, reflected in the fragility of the environment, the decline of biodiversity and the extinction of species; natural calamities and humanitarian emergencies, with adverse effects on cultural heritage as well; the impact of human activity on the environment and the quality of life; the specific issues of environmental sustainability and respect for the biosphere; ecological challenges; environmental activism; cultural ecology etc.).

In other words, the museum institution, acting as an agent of innovation and social change, as a promoter of tolerance, inclusion, diversity and sustainability, appeals to responsibility and requires a critical sense, designing its cultural offer in order to support the construction of an educated and demanding society, fully aware, with a lucid and analytical spirit, refractory to manipulation, integral and vertical, and last but not least, much more fair, equitable, empathetic, durable, resilient and solidary. At the same time, as spaces of representation at the service of society, museums build and strengthen the sense of personal and collective identity, including that conferred by ethnicity, gender, race, religion or social status, and from the position of "relational connectors", they coagulate communities, fortifying in among the constituent members the feeling of belonging to a common past and culture. Last but not least, they are facilitators of social aggregation and cohesion, and through education, they contribute to

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[13] On this issue, see: Michela Rota, *Musei per la sostenibilità integrata* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 2019), Elizabeth Wilde (ed.), *Museums in the climate crisis. Survey results and recommendations for the sustainable transition of Europe* (Berlin: NEMO – The Network of European Museum Organisations, November 2022) and *Museums, Climate and Politics: Taking political action in the sustainable transition* (Berlin: NEMO – The Network of European Museum Organisations, November 2023).

the intellectual growth of the entire community, becoming "awakeners" of public consciousness that can incite action and take positions. And thus, aware of contemporary social dynamics, museums turn into genuine community activators.

Against such a complex and nuanced background, the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca undertakes, in turn, to connect to the new principles and concepts of museology, integrating with the exhibition program new projects, which enhance the aspirations of the 21st-century museum at the community level. The exhibition that is the basis of this case study thus reflects the interest and welcome openness of the Cluj museum institution towards interdisciplinarity, towards diversity or towards participatory processes, but also towards community, towards experimentation, or social innovation, both through the artistic environment represented (sequential art – the comic strip), as well as by the manner of construction of the exhibition format.

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The comic strip begins to build a status and consolidate its position on the artistic scene after the 1940s, and in the 1960s it gains its legitimacy including the creation of the first comic strip exhibitions in galleries and museum institutions. The history of comic strips as an artistic medium is controversial, even its presence in exhibitions built in major international museums significantly contributing to its recognition as the Ninth Art, as characterized by the French critic Claude Beylie in 1964. Exhibitions such as *Bande dessinée et Figuration narrative* at the Musée des arts décoratifs de Paris from 1967, *The Comic Art Show* from 1983 at the Whitney Museum of American Art New York, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* from 1990 at MoMA New York or the 2005's *Master of American Comics* from the Hammer Museum and MOCA Los Angeles are powerful examples of the "cultural trajectory that shows us signs of the growing recognition of comics as an equal art form in the eyes of curators, critics, and academia, as well as some of the techniques used to overcome the problems that arose as this form of narrative art began to permeate the great art museums".[14] Today, comic strip artists are present in the international institutional circuit, being represented by contemporary art galleries, their artworks entering private collections and museums, enjoying a strong presence in the exhibition circuit, both in comic strip festivals and in the great international museums.

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[14] Kim Munson, "Beyond High and Low: How Comics and Museums Learned to Co-exist", *International Journal of Comic Art* 11, no. 2 (2009): 283.

The exhibition *Imagining Futures. Urban Comics from ArtiViStory Collective*, curated by Anamaria Tomiuc, Alice Iliescu and Daniel Popescu with the support of the exhibition commissioner, Alexandra Sârbu, was built inside the exhibition space of the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca, in March 2022, a labyrinthine route through the expressive environment of the comic strip and socially engaged sequential art. Unprecedented, both for the program of the Cluj museum institution and for the entire Romanian exhibition landscape, the exhibition marks the end of a research project focused on urban development *(in)VISIBLE: a novel approach to research and community engagement for OurCluj*, financed by Fondation Botnar[15] and constitutes a staging of the visual research process carried out by young artists Evelina Grigorean, Lucian Barbu, Melinda Ureczki-Lázár, Teodora Predescu, Horaţiu Coman, Bálint Erdély, Sebastian Ştefan, Zsófia Bernát, Eunicia Zidaru, Carla Oros, Mihai Udubaşa, Diana Florescu, Oliviana Fudulache, Alexandru Papa, Dariana Ilie, master's students of the Comics and Animation Study Program of the University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca, coordinated by PhD lecturer Alice Iliescu and grouped under the name ArtiViStory Collective. A previous article dedicated to these artists collective had been published in 2022 and includes more detailed aspects about both the development of the project and the ArtiViStory Collective research process.[16]

The ArtiViStory Collective's research endeavor seeks to highlight the limitless potential, as well as the complexity and formal diversity that the medium of comics affords. Within the artistic practice, the exploration and experimentation of the limits and openings offered by the urban comic strip medium have generated multiple formulas specific to the comic genre: documentary CS, analysis CS, research CS, investigation CS, reflexive CS, self-referential CS, intimate CS, fictional CS and auto-fictional CS.

In the creative process, an own research methodology was developed and, implicitly, a creative laboratory in which various methods of observation, analysis or documentary representation were used, as well as a framework for experiment and interpretive analysis through subjective representations and imaginary constructs. The work process was carried out in a phased, long-term research program with the aim of generating new systems for exploration, representation and interpretation, different algorithms for analysis and dissemination of results. The artists established different codes of representation, and

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[15] Eric Gordon, Barbara Bulc, Tomas Guarna et al., *Activating Values in Urban Transitions: A Novel Approach to Urban Innovation in Romania* (Plovdiv: Punkt, 2022).

[16] Anamaria Tomiuc, Alice Iliescu and Daniel Popescu, "Urban Comics as a Research Method and Tool in Social Innovation. Case Study: ArtiViStory Collective", *Journal of Media Research* 15, no. 3/44 (2022): 74–92.

decoding formulas, and created inside the comic strips frames of reflection and analysis through which the viewer is invited to problematize the visual content and its meanings.

These exploratory formulas of analysis and representation in urban comics resulting from the research carried out subsequently create contexts for dissemination through curatorial processes, which seek the direct involvement of the public in an interactive, creative and participatory exhibition perimeter.

In this way, within the current exhibition, the curators have built in the exhibition perimeter a maze of comics, conventional and unconventional narrative sequences, oversized sequential illustrations, animations and creativity activation areas, imagining an interrogative route reflected in several areas dedicated to the following concepts and issues: ArtiViStory Collective's creative lab, understanding social issues, remembering the past, exploring the ecosystem, the need for change, imagining the future, youth well-being, collaboration, trust and care.

As stated in the introductory text, the exhibition starts from the premise that collective efforts are needed to imagine and build the future of our communities and invites the viewer to discover both the personal creative universes of the artists and their collective efforts towards imaginative representation of the city, focusing on either subjective stories or representational documentation or symbolic reinterpretations of the surrounding world. Conceived as a mapping of the creative process, the exhibition renders opinions, captures points of view, questions different ways of perceiving reality, raises issues and proposes concepts, while inviting the viewer to engage in a dynamic conversation about the power of imagination.[17]

As mentioned above, the exhibition is organized around a series of themes explored in visual narratives and aims to engage the viewer in a process of reflection on different ways of perceiving the surrounding society, the viewer being invited to respond, in a self-reflexive manner to a series of questions such as – What is the role of art in the community? How do we perceive the world around us? What stories can be told about the past? How do we imagine the future? How do we build inclusive communities? How can young people get involved? What if we placed the concept of well-being and not economic growth at the center of community development concerns?[18]

Through visual documentation, comic strips, animations, sequential illustrations and other means of artistic expression, the exhibition thus offers a glimpse into the creative laboratory and renders sequential art not only as a

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[17] Reference to the press release of the exhibition that can be found here:
URL: https://www.macluj.ro/exhibitions/imagining-futures-urban-comics-from-artivistory-collective

[18] Tomiuc et al., *Urban Comics*, 88.

tool of representation, but as a catalyst for activating the collective imagination. Through a wide variety of formulas for exploiting the potential of the graphic imaginary, through multiple construction systems in sequential frames in which image and text build visual artistic narratives specific to the medium of documentary comics, the works of the artists of the ArtiViStory Collective investigate the urban imaginary and social identity in objective and subjective ways and emphasizes the role that comics and sequential art could acquire in collaboration with different research collectives of urban development practices and social innovation processes.[19]

In the context in which the museum institution is today a strong partner in the educational process and taking into account both the artistic environment and the conceptual content of the exhibition, public involvement was one of the stated intentions of the curatorial approach. Thus, the exhibition was accompanied by an extensive cultural mediation program dedicated to young people from Cluj schools. We will use the term cultural mediation here in a double sense: primarily as a process of acquiring and negotiating knowledge about arts and social or scientific phenomena through exchange, reaction and creative response, which is at the heart of the work between artistic objects, institutions, social contexts or the people who meet them[20] covering a wide spectrum of practices intersected with public development, artistic or cultural education, but also with collaborative or participatory art; secondly, as a process that investigates debate and critical discussion around artistic/cultural works or events assuming a programmatic mission to transform the public, the visitor, the spectator, into an active cultural participant.[21]

The cultural mediation program has been twofold. On the one hand, it was addressed to the average museum visitor through a mediation kit available for everybody at the entrance of the exhibition, and, on the other hand, it was particularly conceived for youngsters in Cluj schools, under the form of a guided tour within the exhibition.

The mediation kit consisted of a brochure entitled *Your Inner Hero in Cluj* which included a series of activities that could have been considered during the exhibition visit. Even though any visitor could use the mediation kit, the targeted audience was young people, both because of the nature of the works of art

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[19] URL: https://www.macluj.ro/exhibitions/imagining-futures-urban-comics-from-artivistory-collective

[20] Carmen Mörsch and Andrew Holland, *Time for Cultural Mediation* (Zurich: The Institute for Art Education of Zurich University of the Arts, 2013), 14.

[21] Eva Quintas, *Cultural Mediation: Questions and Answers. A Guide* (2015), 2, https://www.culturepourtous.ca/en/cultural-professionals/cultural-mediation/2015/09/05/cultural-mediation-questions-and-answers/.

and because of the conceptual content of the exhibition. With this mediation tool, the visitors were invited to join the @*artivistory* Instagram page where they could envision their personal hero based on a series of personality traits while being invited to screenshot a template, complete it and repost it as a story using the hashtags *#artivistory #imaginingfutures!* The inquiry activity would allow the viewers to reflect upon and position themselves in a direct relation with the city. Next, they were directed towards a series of works within the exhibition, where through direct observation, description and analysis they were asked to identify different issues in connection to the city and the community, as well as their own priorities in dealing with these problems. Then, a series of questions were set in confronting the viewer with a series of concepts such as mental health, well-being, recognition, equal opportunities, support system, inclusion, green spaces, ecosystem, trust or care, all connected to the exhibited works. At the end of the journey the visitors were invited, within a creative activity to draw their own one-page comic in the exhibition, whose main hero would face the societal or personal problems and would act for the future. The one-page comic was posted afterwards in stories on the Instagram page.

The second part of the program consisted of a guided tour of the exhibition, dedicated to young audiences, more precisely groups of school students. For a period of 6 days, 576 students from 13 schools in the Cluj-Napoca metropolitan area, from the 3rd grade to the 11th grade, participated in the mediation activities. For the participation in the program an invitation letter had been sent through the support of the Cluj Schools Networks initiated by Cluj Cultural Center, thus 17 classes from the 30 schools included in the network came to take part in this extra-curricular activity. The invitation letter included details about the exhibition, about the comics strips medium, about the research process and the aims of the mediation program: to understand the characteristics of urban comics as an artistic genre and to familiarize students with a range of concepts such as social issues, collaboration, trust, well-being, caring and awareness of our individual values, thus discussing the role each of us can play in engaging in community life. The tour was conceived for a one hour duration and each of the classes was assigned a time slot within the 6 days dedicated to the program. The activities were run by mediators, MA students of the Contemporary Curatorial Practices study program of the University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca (UAD) and their coordinators, Anamaria Tomiuc and Alice Iliescu, both curators of the exhibition and professors within UAD. The activities were developed through a non-formal education approach, adapted for each group of students.

The guided tour started from the figure of the comic strip's hero and aimed, on the one hand, to facilitate dialogue and familiarization of young people with the concepts raised in the exhibition and, on the other hand, to offer them

a safe space in which, through creative exercises, they could imagine possible perspectives on the future of their city, but also on how they themselves could contribute to its construction. The guided tour was conceived from the very beginning with a strong participatory dimension, with a series of activities planned within it, following the palette of artistic thinking developed within Project Zero of the Harvard Graduate School of Education,[22] such as questioning and inquiry exercises, observation, description and analysis exercises, compare and contrast exercises (mainly done in discussions) and creative/drawing activities. We will accurately describe the route within this tour to illustrate the role of cultural mediation in museum practice and, implicitly, a concrete example through which the museum becomes a space of co-participation and social engagement.

Upon entering the exhibition, each young visitor received a sticker, as an avatar of their presence in the museum environment, which they were encouraged to place on the first piece of the exhibition, a cartographic illustration of Cluj, being invited to reflect on favorite places in Cluj, in the spaces that define them or with which they have a personal affinity, thus drawing attention to what the city represents as an identity vector in the lives of its inhabitants. The map was populated with these avatars, and a series of places in the city became indicators of the city's relationship with its young inhabitants: the central square, the central park, and different streets and neighborhoods became signifiers of this relation.

Entering the exhibition space, the viewers stepped into the comic strip maze and were invited to problematize in a first discursive activity, the concept of the comic strip. Following the discussions, the mediators also explained the implicitly assumed definitions understood as "systems formed with the help of collections of codes and symbols united within an «iconic solidarity» that reflects a certain cultural specificity"[23] as a "mechanism of arranging pictures or pictures and words to tell a story or dramatize an idea"[24] or as "the juxtaposition of pictorial images and other images in a deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer".[25] Attention was then drawn, by the mediators, to the specificity of the term urban comic strip understood as sequential art and graphic narratives that emphasize the contingency of the physical infrastructures that shape our city life, while at the

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[22] Shari Tishman and Patricia Palmer, *Artful Thinking. Stronger Thinking and Learning through the Power of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2006).

[23] Thierry Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 14.

[24] Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art* (Tamarac: Poorhouse Press, 1985), 8.

[25] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1994), 9.

same time making visible, through multidimensional formats, the invisible connections, the different socio-political concerns or the various conceptual interpretations that appear in our contemporary urban spaces.[26] In the midst of creative approaches, in urban comics, there will be constant concerns regarding the reconstruction of public space, urban common spaces and the future of cities and their communities, often realized within collaborative production processes that contribute to the creation of alternative communication networks, to cultural exchange and social interaction. Then, during the discussions, the formulas of sequential composition, the genres addressed, the narrative character of the comic strip, the ways of constructing the characters, and the various formats of graphic representation had been analysed. In addition, there was an exercise of personal selection of a favorite comic strip from 12 publications that were available to the public for reading, which was directly connected to one's own experience.

In continuation of the discursive activity (based on reflection and analysis), visitors walked into the exhibition area dedicated to the creative laboratory of the ArtiViStory Collective's artists. Information was provided about the artists, about their working process (with a detailed analysis of Evelina Grigorean's installation that presented the way of working and her conceptual and artistic process), about the creative context and the online experience (many of the artworks being made during the COVID-19 pandemic), about individual styles, but also about the collective way of working and the formation of the ArtiViStory Collective. This community of artists has coagulated in a visual research approach documenting the urban development process within the OurCluj initiative to make visible to the general public, with the help of comics, the invisible aspects of the interconnectedness of the OurCluj ecosystem, but, more than that, to contribute through the visual discourse to offering solutions and artistic perspectives with reference to these investigated aspects and aiming to implicitly engage the general public in intended to activate their imagination.

In the second part of the exhibition, which aimed to actively involve the viewers in understanding some essential concepts in the discourse on urban development and social innovation, the discursive and reflective activities had been combined with creative activities resulting in a participatory project (of puzzle type). So, starting from the analysis of a series of artworks by Teodora Predescu, in which a special emphasis was placed on a series of identity or social issues such as trust, well-being, friendly environment, bureaucracy, health and mental health, visitors were invited to analyze the problems they had faced

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[26] Dominic Davies, *Urban Comics: Infrastructure and the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 6.

either in their homes, at school, in their communities or friend groups, or in our wider society. Then, they were invited to draw or write on a triangular puzzle piece (white paper) their main problem and / or their main solution to this problem, thus building in the exhibition space a huge participatory puzzle that reflected the different points of view of young visitors. A series of subjects had been tackled, thus rendering the views of the young visitors on the collective issues they were confronted with: personal and collective trauma, ecological issues, poverty, social relationships, bullying and aggression, inadequate education, etc. The tour continued with the analysis of the artworks of Melinda Ureczki-Lázár and Sebastian Ştefan that problematized the notions of past and future, debating concepts such as trauma, collective memory, healing or change and observing multiple perspectives of individual or collective action in relation to these.

The third part of the exhibition showed the artists' involvement in the research project *(in) VISIBLE: a novel approach to research and community engagement for OurCluj*, financed by Botnar Foundation, visitors being presented through discursive activities, starting from the works of Lucian Barbu and Horaţiu Coman, a series of concepts such as ecosystem, civic imagination, stakeholders, but also the work process within *OurCluj* and the artists' contributions regarding the transformation of the invisible process (interviews, working sessions, workshops, debates, innovation policies, specific reports) in visible constructs: the works of art that constituted within the project a strong catalyst for reflection and analysis. As a main concept related to the research process, OurCluj is an ideational construct, a new approach to urban innovation that stimulates it around a set of values.[27] As a part of the city's ecosystem, OurCluj takes the form of a multisectoral and multidisciplinary living laboratory, optimized for the increased well-being of the city's young inhabitants, considered to hold the key to a better future. Living labs usually focus on specific innovations such as transportation, energy systems, tourism or education.[28] Instead, OurCluj[29] focuses on well-being, which substantially changes the form and function of the living lab structure. This unique arrangement was called the Value-Based Living Urban Laboratory. The aim of OurCluj is to value trust and care, while prioritizing them is a requirement for creating optimized policies and programs to increase the well-being of citizens. This new approach to urban innovation is funded with a 10-year commitment by Botnar Foundation, a Swiss foundation focused on improving health and well-being in urban environments and is part of the

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[27] Gordon, Bulc, Guarna et al., *Activating Values*, 32.
[28] Simon Marvin, Harriet Bulkeley, Lindsay Mai et al. (eds.), *Urban Living Labs. Experimenting with City Future*s (New York: Routledge, 2018).
[29] URL: https://ourcluj.city/#ourcluj

foundation's "New Cities" initiative in cities across Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia.[30] The in-depth research study of OurCluj entitled *Activating Values in Urban Transitions – a novel approach to urban innovation*[31] analyzes the social, political, cultural and economic context of Cluj and can provide, for those interested, more details about this unique initiative of urban innovation in Romania.

In the final part of the exhibition, the mediators initiate a conversation based on a series of concepts explored in the exhibited artworks: change, collaboration, well-being, the audience being invited to imagine their own role in the community and to reflect on how each of the members of a community can act in its support. The youngsters were invited to create a one-page comic strip (on a given format), this being the final activity conceived as a creative series of comics on the theme *My Inner Hero in Cluj* to imagine a story, an individual path of one's own involvement in the community. Not coincidentally, the mediation program ended with this creative activity that brought into question the figure of the hero in relation to the figure of the superhero as the favorite character of the comic book. If in American comics the superhero is the collective character who accumulates, through his fantastic powers, all the social desiderata and fights for the rights and freedoms of the community, in European comics, each of the individuals can become a hero through individual involvement and through the power of example, thus representing *the everyman hero* who contributes, step by step, together with the members of his community to various acts of social change. By engaging the public in the creative act, each participant in the mediation program who had built a comic strip accepted the challenge of assuming an individual role in the process of imagining the urban future.

During the 6 days, 576 students from 13 schools in the Cluj-Napoca metropolitan area, from the 3rd to the 11th grade, participated in this program, as a result of which 114 one page comics were generated – *My Inner Hero in Cluj* and 360 puzzle pieces that identify the various problems and concerns of the young people in Cluj. Following the analysis of the content of each puzzle piece, after the exhibition, the following categories of issues stated by the participants in the mediation program could be observed: over 39% were concerned with topics that speak of various traumas (96 pieces) and the need for healing (33 pieces), this represented the highest percentage identified. A percentage of 15% are concerned with social and economic problems (49 pieces), 12% with problems related to the environment and climate change, and also with the need to get

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[30] URL: https://www.fondationbotnar.org/project/ourcity-initiative/
[31] Gordon, Bulc, Guarna et al., *Activating Values*, 34.

involved in finding solutions (47 pieces). Education and school occupy 9% (30 pieces), as well as concerns regarding collectivity and social relations (32 pieces), the lack of trust and the need to strengthen it occupy a percentage of 7% (25 pieces), while the family only 4% (13 pieces). These results later formed the basis of a new exhibition project, *Voices of Youth*, presented at the Casa Matei Gallery in September 2022. At the same time, the one-page comics contained stories of self-fulfilment and healing, stories of friendship and community, the individual presence in the city, the need for nature and for safe spaces, the favorite small details in one's life, the saving of the others or of the environment, while imagining different possible actions for the future of the city and of the community.

As part of the *Imagining Futures* exhibition, the curators built an interrogative journey during the exhibition that, ultimately, questions both the role that art can have in the community, and the status of comics as socially involved art that can contribute to the public discourse on society and community activation. During the project that was the basis of the present exhibition, the urban comics primarily represented a qualitative research method, through which concepts, processes, and tools used by different actors in their social innovation efforts are transferred into sequential registers with the aim of making them transparent and rendering them in a comprehensive visual language. Also, the urban comic strip, beyond being a way of documentary representation, is used for its ability to build fictional universes in subjective reinterpretations of the issues and concepts researched. In this way, comics, as an independent artistic medium, becomes, a subject of analysis with strong implications, in the exhibition context. Through the cultural mediation program related to the exhibition, the urban comics build a secure framework, a safe, friendly, and participatory space in which the invited public can feel free to problematize, debate and imagine, in turn, various possibilities for the construction of the urban future. Thus, the urban comic strip is both a means of activating the individual and collective imagination and a means of engaging the public in art.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the case study described here is an example that could constitute a basis for further approaches that explore the relationship between the individual and the city, or the museum's role as a catalyst of community. For the Art Museum in Cluj-Napoca, it has been the first initiative to exhibit comics as a main genre as well as, through the cultural mediation program developed, an inquiry into the social responsibility of the contemporary museum, opening the gate for other projects dedicated to urban comics and to social activation.

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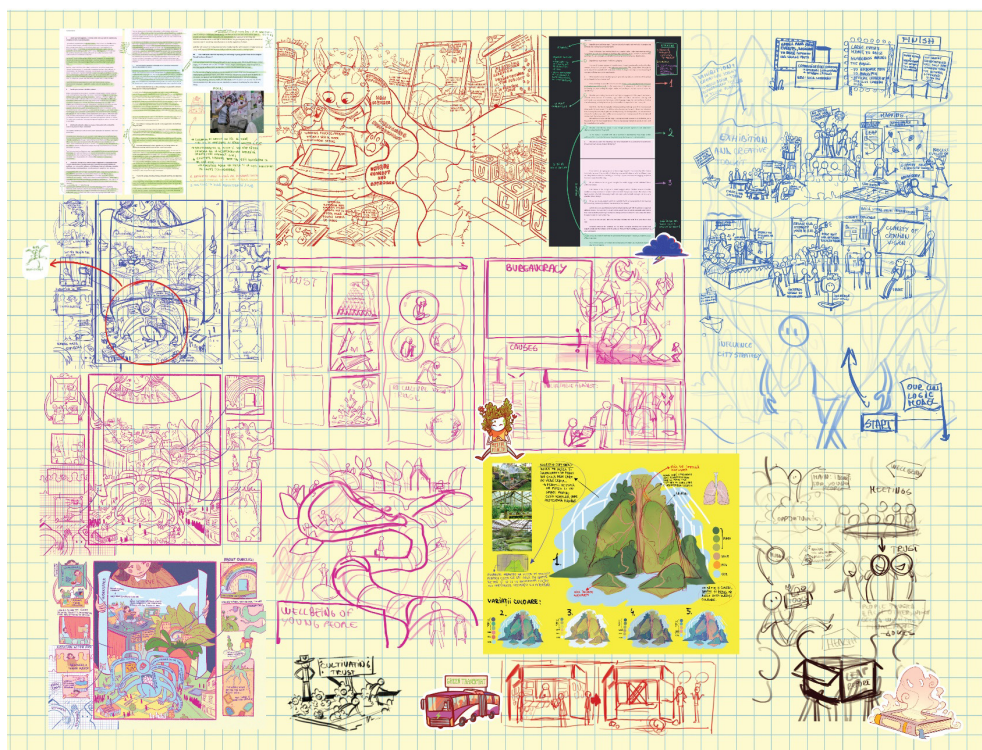## Examples of artworks by ArtiViStory Collective artists

Fig. 1. Teodora Predescu, *Creative Laboratory*, 2022. (photo A. Sârbu)

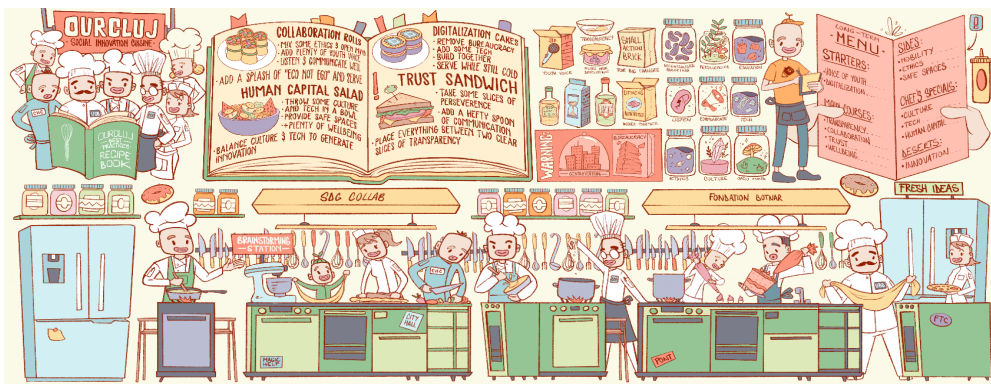**Fig. 2.** Evelina Grigorean, *Conceptual and Artistic Process*, 2022. (photo A. Sârbu)

Fig. 3. Horaţiu Coman, *Ecosystem Mapping*, 2022. (photo A. Sârbu)

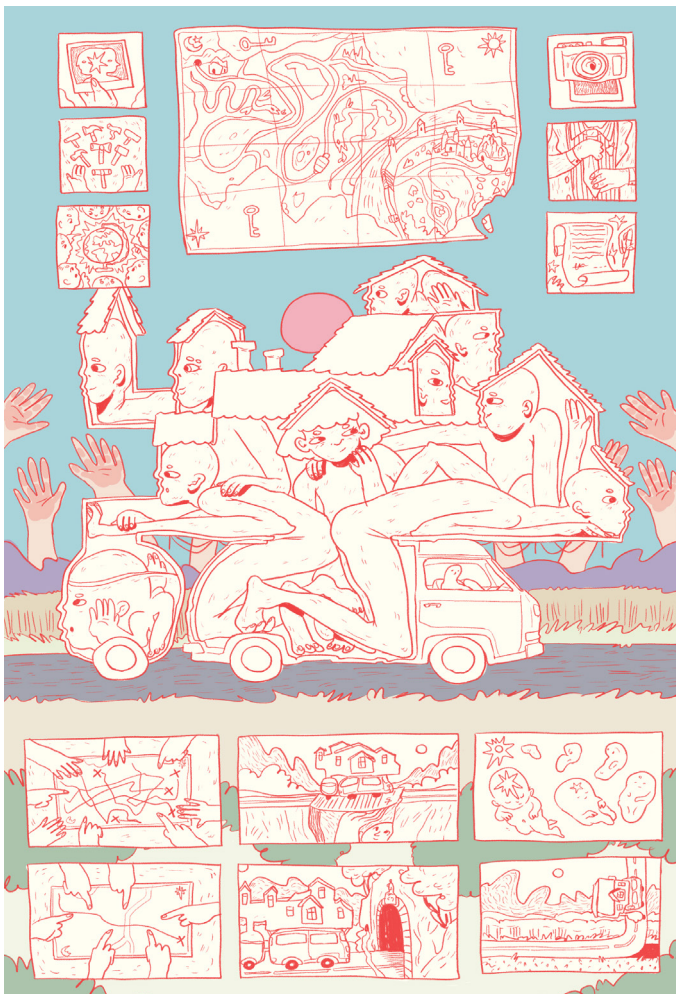**Fig. 4.** Ureczki-Lázăr Melinda, *Remembering the Past*, 2022. (photo A. Sârbu)

Fig. 5. Lucian Barbu, *Youth and the Ecosystem*, 2022. (photo A. Sârbu)

Fig. 6. Sebastian Ştefan, *Imagining the Future*, 2022. (photo A. Sârbu)

Images from the exhibition

Fig. 7. Entrance to the exhibition space. (photo A. Sârbu)

Fig. 8. Image from inside the exhibition space. (photo A. Sârbu)

Examples from the cultural mediation program

Fig. 9. Group of school students at the beginning of the cultural mediation program. (photo A. Sârbu)

Fig. 10. Group of school students during the cultural mediation program. (photo A. Sârbu)

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