

One step at a time

Written component master thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (MA) at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Institute of Fine Arts and Media

Alin Cîrstea

Registration number: 1074105

Program number: S 066 776
Study program: Art & Science

Supervisor: Virgil Widrich

Vienna, June 2013

Table of contents

Abstract and key visual

Documentation of research and methods

Historical context

Collective memory

Putting ideas into practice. Built

Putting ideas into practice. Software

Description of the work

Origins. Inspiration. Motivation. Title

References

Image of video installation

Abstract and key visual

The video installation *One step at a time*, explores the history of the Romanian city of Timișoara. It shows a literal falling into the footsteps of the revolution, that took place on the streets of the city nearly 24 years ago and which led, in part, to the fall of the communist regime. The installation tries to depict the collective memory of a generation, taking into account elective omission, a memory bias where a group (state, media, public opinion) works to forget some traumatic memories. And lastly endeavours in the field of anger management. Looking at psychological therapeutic techniques and exercises, it tries to develop a method based on reliving past experiences.

Documentation of research and methods

Historical context

It all comes down to an article in the local press. An article about steps. About new steps for the Orthodox cathedral. Steps that were dismissing history. The old steps that had witnessed a revolution and were bearing the marks to show it were gone. The steps I knew from local's stories and history books are gone. Enough said, for now, about the article that partly triggered this project. Let me share a brief history lesson, extracted in parts from the *Romanian Revolution of 1989* article from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, to try and understand where I am coming from.

On December 16 1989, a protest broke out in Timișoara in response to an attempt by the government to evict a dissident, Hungarian Reformed church pastor László Tőkés. Tőkés had in July that year made critical comments against the regime's Systematization policy to the Hungarian television, and complained that the Romanians do not even know their human rights.

The government then alleged that he was inciting ethnic hatred. At the behest of the government, his bishop removed him from his post - thereby depriving him of the right to use the apartment to which he was entitled as a pastor - and assigned him to be a pastor in the countryside. For some time, his parishioners gathered around his home to protect him from harassment and eviction. Many passers-by, including religious Romanian students, spontaneously joined in.

As it became clear that the crowd would not disperse, the mayor, Petre Moț, made remarks suggesting that he had overturned the decision to evict Tőkés. Meanwhile, the crowd had grown impatient, and when Moț declined to confirm his statement against the planned eviction in writing, the crowd started to chant anticommunist slogans. Subsequently, police and *Securitate* forces showed up at the scene. By 7:30 pm, the protest had spread, and the original cause became largely irrelevant.

Some of the protesters attempted to burn down the building that housed the District Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR). The *Securitate* responded with tear gas and water jets, while the police beat up rioters and arrested many of them. Around 9:00 pm, the rioters withdrew. They regrouped eventually around the Romanian Orthodox Cathedral and started a protest march around the city, but again they were confronted by the security forces.

Riots and protests resumed the following day, December 17. Again, the protesters attempted to set the building on fire, but this time they were stopped by military units.

Since Romania did not have riot police, the military were sent in to control the riots. The significance of the army presence in the streets was an ominous one: it meant that they had received their orders from the highest level of the command chain, presumably from Ceaușescu himself. The army failed to establish order and chaos ensued with gunfire, fights, casualties, and burned cars. Transportor Amfibiu Blindat (TAB) armored personnel carriers and tanks were called in.

After 8:00 pm, from Piața Libertății (Liberty Square) to the Opera there was wild shooting, including the area of Decebal bridge, Calea Lipovei (Lipovei Avenue), and Calea Girocului (Girocului Avenue). Tanks, trucks, and TABs blocked the accesses into the city while helicopters hovered overhead. After midnight the protests calmed down, leaving the city to look in some areas like the aftermath of a war: destruction, ash, and blood.

The morning of December 18 mayor Moț ordered a Party gathering to take place at the University, with the purpose of condemning the "vandalism" of the previous days. He also declared martial law, prohibiting people from going about in groups larger than two people.

Defying the curfew, a group of 30 young men headed for the Orthodox Cathedral, where they stopped and waved a Romanian flag from which they had removed the Romanian Communist coat of arms. Expecting that they would be fired upon, they started to sing *Deșteaptă-te, române!* (Wake up, Romanian!), an earlier national song that had been banned since 1947. They were, indeed, fired upon and some died, and others were seriously injured, while the lucky ones were able to escape.

On December 20 massive columns of workers were entering the city. About 100,000 protesters occupied Piața Operei (Opera Square – today Piața Victoriei, Victory Square) and started to chant anti-government protests: *Noi suntem poporul!* (We are the people!), *Armata e cu noi!* (The army is on our side!), *Nu vă fie frică, Ceaușescu pică!* (Have no fear, Ceaușescu is falling!).

The next day, trains loaded with workers originating from factories in Oltenia arrived in Timișoara. The regime was attempting to use them to repress the mass protests, but after a brief encounter they finally ended up joining the protests. One worker explained: *Yesterday, our factory boss and a Party official rounded us up in the yard, handed us wooden clubs and told us that Hungarians and 'hooligans' were devastating Timișoara and that it is our duty to go there and help crush the riots. But I realized that wasn't the truth.*

These events lead to the fall of the communist regime after the trial and execution of Ceaușescu on December 25.

Documentation of research and methods

Collective memory

The ordeal with the steps brought forth an interesting aspect; memory. Memory has been a concern of mine ever since I realized for myself that I am very good at remembering images, locations, stories but am terrible at remembering dates and names.

Either way this is not what I want to talk about in regards of the steps. I want to address the aspect of collective memory. A phrase which appeared in various contexts in the second half of the nineteenth century, referring to the shared pool of information held in the memories of two or more members of a group. The philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs analyzed and advanced the concept in his book *La mémoire collective* (Paris, 1950). Collective memory can be shared, passed on and constructed by groups both small and large. In many ways, collective memory parallels individual memory, but also exhibits some key differences and features.¹

After the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, the relevance of history as collective remembering has acquired deeper and wider significance. The revolutionary fervor of 1989 Eastern Europe has marked the beginning of a process of reckoning with the Communist regime and thus attempting to coming to terms with the national past. Issues of collective memory and collective remembering in post-communist Eastern Europe have been the subject of numerous analyses.²

More than twenty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain the memory of communism in the countries of the former Soviet empire is still changing. While this memory (and memories) is shaped and reshaped by the surfacing of new files and testimonies about life in the communist system, it is influenced by political changes in the region: in all countries of the Soviet Block every administration since the "fall of the wall" seems to have its own recollection(s) - and explanation(s) - of communism and tries to present it as the only true version of the past events. This memory, determined by current politics as well as by historical and sociological factors and perspectives, may be called a collective memory. At the same time there are also private memories of communism, different for each individual who experienced the former system, built on elements of personal lives, such as childhood games, school lessons, the first job, births and deaths of relatives, etc. This type of memory is not as much (re)shaped by new historical publications, the public discourse, or changes on the political scene as

¹ From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. *Collective memory*

² TILEAGA, C., 2008. *What is a 'revolution'? National commemoration, collective memory and managing authenticity in the representation of a political event*. Discourse & Society, 19 (3), pp. 359-382

by photographs, songs, food, smells, and other "Proustian" triggers of - mostly nostalgic - recollections.³

Collective memory, transformation and change in Eastern European societies have been usually approached with a concern of mapping and explaining the 'macro' processes of change and transformation. Discourses of 'transition' and change have been placed within diverse explanatory historical and political frameworks, but not necessarily within (political) actors' own categorial constructions of change and collective remembrance of the (national) past.²

At this point I want to stress out that collective memory does not apply just to communism. It applies to, as stated previously, any given group small or large (think nations). Each group erects their own images of the world, continually shaping and reshaping versions of the past. This way they define themselves and create boundaries that separate them from other groups that share different memories of the past, or maybe, different interpretations of the same events.

The key interest for me in all of this is what happens with the people when the physical counterpart of one of their memories is removed. How do they react to selective omission? Anger?

3 Lisiak, Agata Anna "Memories of Communism in Central and East Europe: New Work by Janaszek-Ivaničková, Modrzejewski and Sznajderman, Rév, and Spiewak." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 8.2 (2006)

Documentation of research and methods. Putting ideas into practice. Built

The first step in implementing my idea was to build a physical devices, that could be used as the tool need to materialize my vision, literally falling into the footsteps of the revolution and re walking some of its locations. It was clear from the start that I would be needing some kind of shoes with cameras. It took me a few weeks, of searching the internet and thinking of ways on how to approach it, to decid what that the most efficient way would be. Taking of the shelf web-cameras and hacking them so that they fit into a pair of ordinary sneakers, that I had at home and had not used for a wile (img01).

After having established what way to go it was another couple of days of searching the internet, looking at camera models and reviews, visiting different hardware stores, filtering through hundreds of models and trying to determine witch one would be best suited for my needs. Finally I decided on the VX 800 LifeCam from Microsoft (img02). I was small enough (52.1mm x 52.1mm after having removed the stand) and strong enough to support part of my weight when stepping on it.

Having acquired two web-cameras the process of building them into the shoes was a matter of hours and a bit of planning. First thing to be done was determining where best to place them inside the sole. In order to establish this I walked in front of a full length mirror and memorized the flexing of the sneakers. I did this so I could know where to place the camera. Not to far back so that there is not to much weight on it, but also not to far front in order to see the lift of the ground. The position being set, the inner sole was removed and the place of the camera traced onto the remaining part (img03). After the intensive use of a industrial cutter and pliers the hole for the camera was complete (img04).

The final step in the build was hacking the cameras. First of the stand had to go. This was easily solved by removing three screws, lifting the body and removing it. The more complicated part was removing the electronics of the camera to gain access to the back housing and removing the USB cable that connects to them in order do change the place the cable enters the housing (img05).

All that remained was putting everything back together. And so the right tool was created (img06).



img01



img02



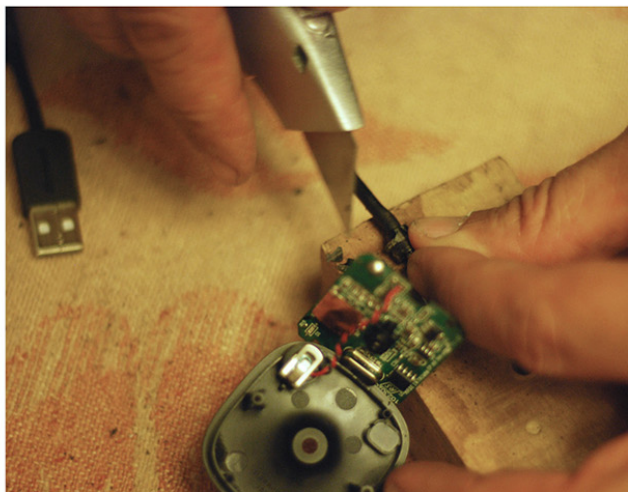
img06



img03



img04



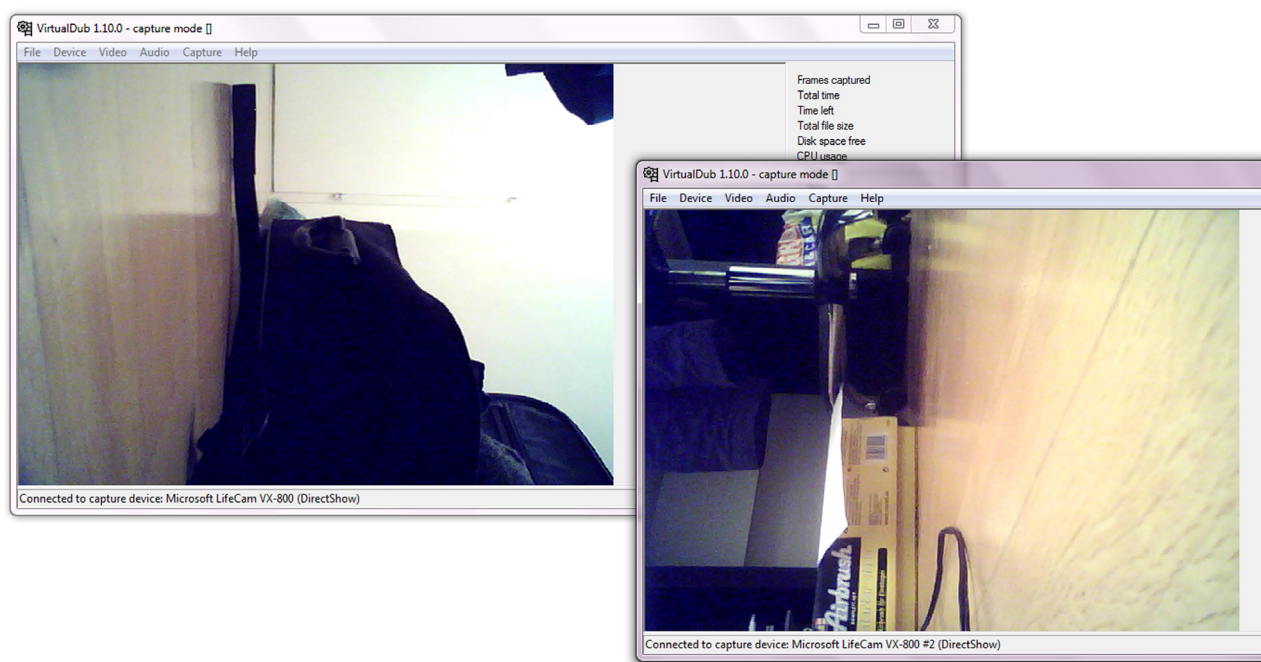
img05

Documentation of research and methods. Putting ideas into practice. Software

Having the tool built, all that remained was testing it. Testing though resulted to be more problematic than I had thought.

At first I thought that for the first testing I could just use a pre installed software that came with the operating system (Windows 8). Opening the Movie Maker application in two instances though as I found out is not possible.

The next attempt, a partial successful one, was trying to use the open-source software VirtualDub, a video capture/processing utility for 32-bit and 64-bit Windows platforms.



This was a partial success because now I could see the video feeds, but while trying to walk I realized that I had forgotten about the auto exposure feature of the web cameras. This meant that the camera tries to adjust to the light conditions, which in turn means that the exposure is right until the moment you step down and the images turns black. In that moment the camera tries to adjust to the light so the moment you lift your foot the image is overexposed for one, two seconds until the camera adjusts.

Seeing as how Virtualdub offers no control over the auto exposure of the cameras I decided to turn to Processing, an open source programming language and environment, and write a program specific for my needs.

```
import processing.video.*;

Capture myCapture;

MovieMaker mm; // Declare MovieMaker object

void setup()
{
    size(640, 480);

    // Create MovieMaker object with size, filename,
    // compression codec and quality, framerate
    mm = new MovieMaker(this, width, height, "test04.mov",
                        15, MovieMaker.H263, MovieMaker.BEST);

    // The name of the capture device is dependent on
    // the cameras that are currently attached to your
    // computer. To get a list of the
    // choices, uncomment the following line
    // println(Capture.list());

    // To select the camera, replace "Camera Name"
    // in the next line with one from Capture.list()
    // myCapture = new Capture(this, width, height, "Camera Name", 30);

    // This code will try to use the camera used
    myCapture = new Capture(this, width, height, 15);
}

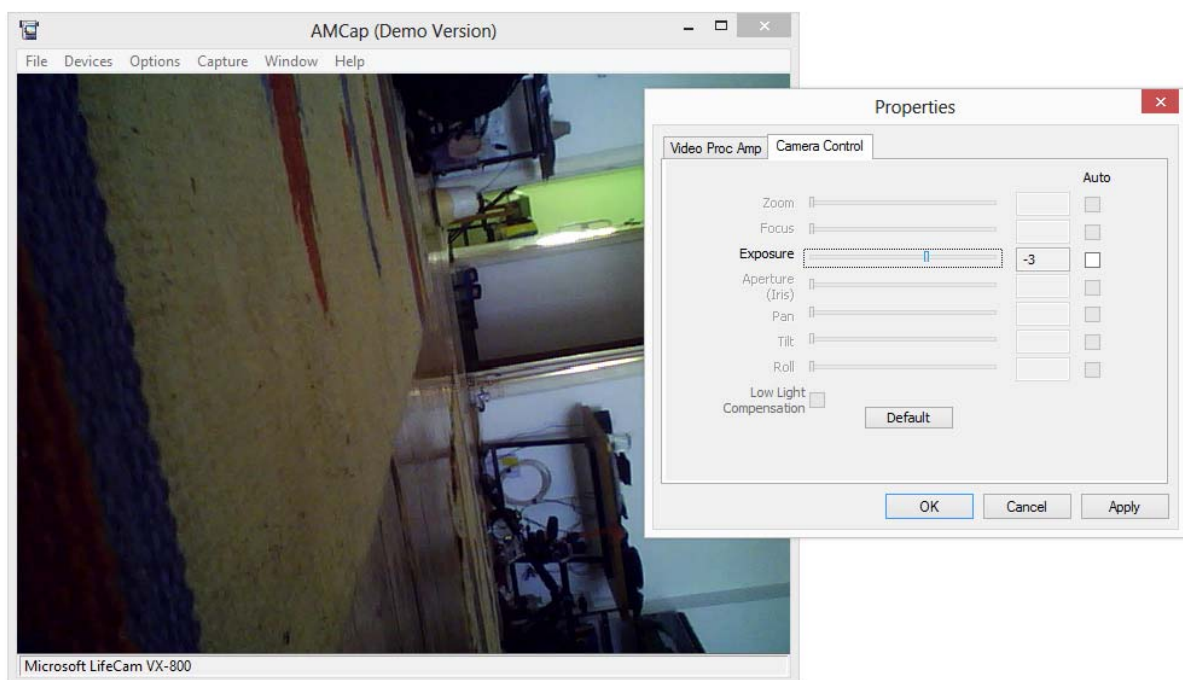
void captureEvent(Capture myCapture) {
    myCapture.read();
}

void draw() {
    image(myCapture, 0, 0);
    mm.addFrame(); // Add window's pixels to movie
}

void keyPressed() {
    if (key == ' ') {
        mm.finish(); // Finish the movie if space bar is pressed!
    }
}
```

Documentation of research and methods. Putting ideas into practice. Software

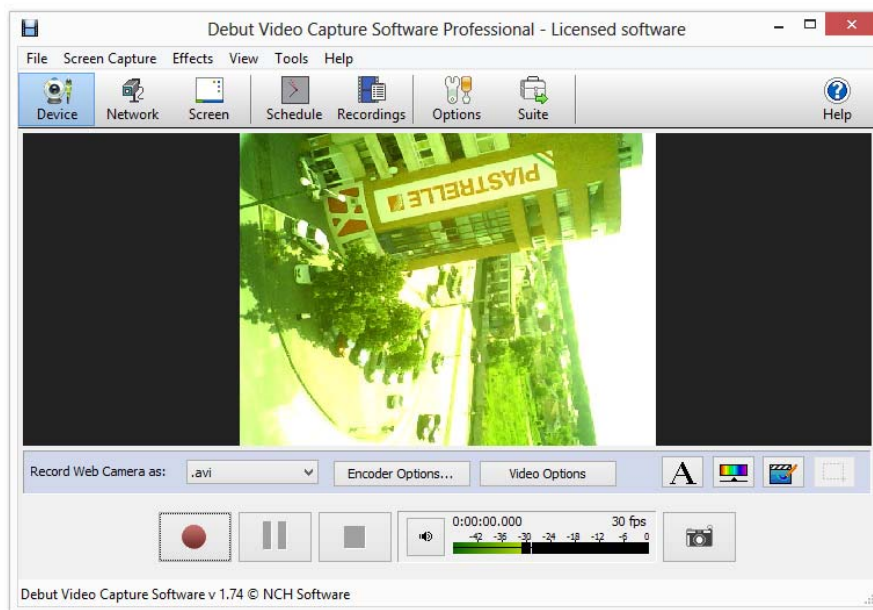
Having gotten to a certain point with the programming while still looking for a way to code what I needed I realized that Processing was not the way to go. I had come across a few individuals trying to code parts of the same program I was trying to build. This is how I came across AMCap, a small video capture and preview application, developed by Noël Danjou.



AMCap brought partly relief partly despair, while being able to disable the auto exposure the problem of the two instances remained. Not yet despairing I tried to disable the exposure setting for the cameras and trying to use Virtualdub, once you disable it it stays disabled for all program until reactivated. I did this just to find out that even though I had control over the exposure the image was overexposed in the sunlight outdoors.

At first I thought this is due to the fact that web cameras are meant for indoor use have a large aperture. The first impulse was to hack more at the camera and installing a pinhole iris in order to get the light flood under control.

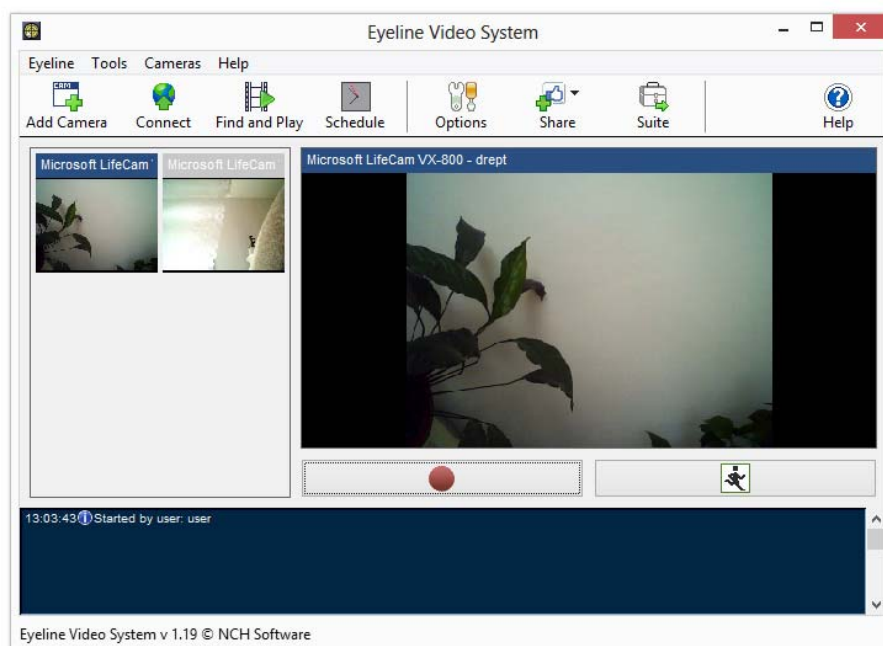
Luckily I dismissed my first impulse and started digging for another software, hoping the problem was software related. This is how I came across Debut Video Capture Software by NCH Software.



While still having a bit of overexposure in very bright sunlight it was a huge improvement. Being the answer to my exposure problem, delivering a good image during a cloudier day and also offering enough controls for recording video, Debut seemed like the perfect solution. The perfect solution for one camera feed, not two. If only it would have permitted two instances to be open at the same time.

Lucky for me NCH Software would have a solution also for this problem in form of Eyeline Video Surveillance Software. This program offered all the utilities of Debut, plus the added bonus of having multiple camera feeds and the possibility of simultaneous recording.

Documentation of research and methods. Putting ideas into practice. Software



Description of the work

Origins. Inspiration. Motivation. Title

Before going into detail on the work I want to take a moment and relate how the work came into being and how the idea for it was born.

To be honest the idea of shoe cameras is not a new one for me. I had the wish to build something like this a year back, after brainstorming ideas for taking part in the fullframe Kunstfilmfestival which had the theme Experimental - and Avantgardefilme. The idea is inspired by the French Impressionist Cinema and its notion of setting the camera free and using it in extreme ways in order to make the viewer see the world afresh.

*It was and still is very important to set the camera free in the extreme: to place the automatic camera in footballs launched in rockets, on the back of a galloping horse, on buoys during a storm; to crouch with it in the cellar, to take it up to the ceiling heights. It doesn't matter that these virtuoso positions may seem excessive the first ten times; the eleventh time we understand how necessary and yet insufficient they are. Thanks to them, and even before the revelations of three-dimensional cinematography to come, we experience the new sensation of exactly what hills, trees and faces are in space. (Epstein, in Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism, 1907-1939: Volume 2, 1929-1939*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1988, p.66)*

All that remained was an appropriate motivation and context in which the cameras would find their use. Said motivation came in the form of an article about how the steps of the Orthodox cathedral in Timișoara were being replaced with new ones. The shocking part of this was not the price of the replacement, it was the replacement itself. Those steps have a tremendous historical value. Exactly what may have determined the church to change them. For most of the people they are a symbol of the revolution. The bullet holes in them a reminder of the people that have been shut down there. But it is also a reminder that people have died there because they have been denied access into the cathedral, whose doors were closed in front of fleeing ones.

The replacement of the steps resulted in quite some anger from the public (revolutionary organizations and citizens). It was a clear removal of a piece from the memory of the collective. For me personally an example of selective omission, a memory bias in collective memory, where a group (state, media, public opinion) work to forget some traumatic memories. A post-war rewriting of history in a more coherent way according to local stereotypes and moral values.

These factors added together resulted in conceptualizing *One step at a time*, a multiple screen video installation that comments on the actions of the present in regards of the past. It tries to act as an exercise for anger management. Literally stomping out one's anger, one step at a time, while following in the steps of the

revolution. Mapping out three locations with historical importance. Showing video footage from the days of the revolution mixed with remastered photographs. The installation relives the past while commenting on the present and reinforcing the memory of an important mile stone in Romania's history for the future.

References

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. *Romanian Revolution of 1989*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanian_Revolution_of_1989

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. *Collective memory*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_memory

TILEAGA, C., 2008. *What is a 'revolution'? National commemoration, collective memory and managing authenticity in the representation of a political event*. Discourse & Society, 19 (3), pp. 359-382
<https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/handle/2134/5427>

Lisiak, Agata Anna "Memories of Communism in Central and East Europe: New Work by Janaszek-Ivaničková, Modrzejewski and Sznajderman, Rév, and Spiewak." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 8.2 (2006)
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1312&context=clcweb>

img01
<http://www.microsoft.com/hardware/en-us/p/lifecam-vx-800>

VirtualDub homepage
<http://www.virtualdub.org/>

Processing homepage
<http://www.processing.org/>

AMCap homepage
<http://noeld.com/programs.asp?cat=video>

NCH Software homepage
<http://www.nchsoftware.com/index.html>

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. *Selective omission*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selective_omission

Video footage provided by Gheorghe Șfaițer from his 1999 production of the episode *50, ... and a world, my world*, a co-production: TVR Timișoara, Radio Canada and CIRTEF, part of *50... et un monde* program.

