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The Darkroom

CHEMICAL CULTURAL INDUSTRIAL

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Contents

4—15

From the Editor

16—31

**“Diseases in the Darkroom”: Morality and Mortality in
Nineteenth-century Photographic Chemical Work**

Jennifer Tucker

32—47

The Darkroom of the Soul

Junko Theresa Mikuriya

48—61

**Keeping out the Fog: Atmospheric Contamination and
Control in the Industrial Darkroom**

Michelle Henning

62—77

**Darkroom Typologies: Amateur Photographic Practices
in Britain, 1840s–1930s**

Michael Pritchard

78—93

On Mobile Darkrooms in Art Reproduction around 1900

Franziska Lampe

94—109

**The Photographic Laboratory in the Athenaeum:
Cooperation and Social Emancipation in Barcelona
1900–1936**

Núria F. Rius

110—121

An American Darkroom in Paris

Kelley Wilder

122—133

The Home Darkroom during Romania’s Communist Era

Uschi Klein

134—141

Making Space

The Gate Darkroom in Conversation with Lucy Rogers



The Home Darkroom during Romania's Communist Era

Uschi Klein

fig. 1
Dan Dinescu, *Vasile Chindriș cu soția sa Ileană*, Maramureș 1976, gelatine silver print. Dinescu's private collection, Bucharest.

Photography had an ambiguous status during the communist era in Romania (1947–1989).¹ People were allowed to own a camera as long as they used it to support positive views of the nation or to take family pictures. Those interested in social documentary or street photography, two genres which were instead forbidden by the regime, had to turn to the home darkroom in order to be able to document their reality. This article reconstructs their experiences of developing and printing photographs in their home, and how this shaped their practice and ideas during the country's darkest moment, euphemistically called the 'Golden Age' (early 1970s–1989).

Following Nicolae Ceaușescu's 'July theses' of 1971, seventeen proposals that, as Cezar Stanciu explains, "called for an increase of political education in schools and universities ... [and more] party control, blam[ing] 'bourgeois' influences in society and culture,"² several artistic and cultural works were banned, and censorship of the media tightened in order to support work that glorified the regime's ideology. Photography was not exempt from the effects of the 'July theses'; image production was regulated in indirect and subtle ways and (self-)censored to some extent. The lack of (quality) photographic supplies, darkroom chemicals, and photography training (including the inability to study photography at university level until the early 1990s), in particular, limited amateur and professional photographers from practicing photography. This brought many to teach themselves how to develop and print photographs at home. As we will see, the regime's supported *Association of Artist Photographers* (AAF) played an important role in the distribution of photographic materials but not every photographer was an AAF member, which made it harder, but not impossible, for those interested in documenting social issues to find supplies.

Photography's ambiguous status arose because, on the one hand, the camera was neither forbidden nor heavily censored like, for example, the typewriter was.³ Yet, on the other hand, social documentary and street photography that focused on the consequences of Ceaușescu's austerity programme, which lasted for almost a decade until his fall in 1989, were prohibited. Nonetheless, many felt the urge to create a visual record of what was happening. According to Simina Bădică, "capturing socialist everyday life was not merely a question of courage, of capturing the 'forbidden image', it was also a question of seeing that special something in a landscape that

1 ____ There is a growing literature on Romania's communist past. For example, Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965–1989*, London 1995; Dennis Deletant, *Communist Terror in Romania: Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State, 1948–1965*, New York 1999; Dennis Deletant, *Romania under Communism: Paradox and Degeneration*, London 2019; Jill Massino, *Ambiguous Transitions: Gender, the State, and Everyday Life in Socialist and Postsocialist Romania*, Oxford 2019; Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe (eds.), *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges*

to Communist Rule, London 2006; Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*, Berkeley 2003.

2 ____ Cezar Stanciu, 'The End of Liberalization in Communist Romania', in: *The Historical Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2013, 1065.

3 ____ Typewriters had to be registered annually at local police stations and failing to report a written conversation with a foreigner was a criminal offence. The police also requested writing samples as a precaution against the spread of secret texts, leaflets, and manifestos.

seemed ‘normal’ for everyone else.”⁴ At a time when basic food items like bread, oil, milk, sugar, butter and meat were always short in supply and people had to queue for hours in anticipation that food would be delivered to the empty shops, photographing what seemed ‘normal’ in people’s everyday life was not desired. The only photo-

graphic representations supported by the regime – and, as an extension, by the AAF – were those showing people as ‘nice and happy’; that is, images that supported the regime’s ideology by illustrating Romanian everyday life and culture in an idyllic light (—figs. 1 & 2).

These types of photographs, which adopted the Socialist Realism aesthetic, were published in the illustrated press and in photobooks. Despite “the undeniable political solidarity of Socialist Realism with one or the other communist political system,”⁵ Socialist Realism in Romania should not be considered as direct propaganda, at least until 1971. This aesthetic was not strictly imposed from above, seemingly leaving photographers and visual artists a choice on whether they wanted to adopt it or not. However, photographers who wished to display their photographs in a public context were required to follow the regime’s ideology and edit/crop photographs accordingly. After the ‘July theses’, the Communist Party revived and endorsed Socialist Realism as an ideological source for art and literature, and the aesthetic became a significant part of the regime’s visual culture (—fig. 3).⁶

Photographers, who created photographs “as witnesses of their times,”⁷ were certainly courageous to photograph the harsh realities of everyday life. Crucially, prints and negatives of such documentary nature could be made and have survived



fig. 2
Hedy Löffler, *De ziuă mamă*, 1970s, gelatine silver print. Association of Artist Photographers Archive, Bucharest.

into the post-socialist era because the film rolls were processed in the private space of one’s home or studio, where many were able to set up photographic darkrooms. Having a darkroom at home was not, in itself, forbidden or courageous, since many people processed their family photographs at home too; the courage was instead shown by taking ‘forbidden images’ and processing those films at home. Being caught with ‘forbidden images’ by the security police, the all-powerful *Securitate*, was risky, but so was telling the wrong person about one’s ‘forbidden images’, since the *Securitate* had a vast network of informers who spied on people; they could be one’s neighbour, relative, sibling, friend, work colleague, classmate or university peer, and arrests were frequently made after a tip-off from an informer.

With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to explore what role the home darkroom played during Ceaușescu’s ‘Golden Age’, thereby contributing more broadly to our understanding of the history of photography in Romania. Although the introduction of photography in Romania can be traced back to the early 1840s, when a rich photography movement that lasted until the interwar period was established, relatively little is known about photography during the Romanian communist era. There are

4 — Simina Bădică, ‘Historicizing the Absence: The Missing Photographic Documents of Romanian Late Communism’, in: *Colloquia*, vol. 19, 2012, 44.

5 — Jérôme Bazin et al. (eds.) *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe [1945–1989]*, CEU Press 2016, 13.

6 — For a comprehensive discussion of Socialist Realism, see Jérôme Bazin et al. (reference 5).

7 — Bădică 2012 (reference 4), 45.

several individual journal articles but book-length studies on photography in Romania are missing.⁸ Very little is also known about the home darkroom culture in Romania, be that in the context of the darkroom's artistic, commercial, or private uses, settings, and facilities.

In what follows, I draw on the lived experiences of three male photographers – Dragoș Lumpan (b. 1969), Andrei Bîrsan (b. 1965) and Andrei Pandeale (b. 1945) – to begin to address this gap. As many other photographers across Romania at this time, they took it upon themselves to photograph the harsh realities of everyday life during the 'Golden Age', using their private space to process their own films and develop their prints. I interviewed them in Bucharest during a research trip in the autumn of 2023.⁹ I was particularly curious to find out about how the home environment supported their photographic practice, how they felt about taking 'forbidden images' and processing those films at home, and how their darkroom – mostly set up in the bathroom – impacted their family life. Drawing on their answers, this paper argues that the home darkroom was not only a private space that enabled agency, but also a space that afforded the possibility to defy the regime's ideology in their 'forbidden' photographs.

The Association of Artist Photographers

To develop an understanding of the photographic darkroom culture during the 'Golden Age', it is also important to shed some light on Romania's dominant photographic movement, as the two are intricately linked with each other. The core of this movement was largely formed of amateur photographers and the work they created through the *Association of Artist Photographers* (AAF), which was set up by a group of photographers in 1956.¹⁰ To become a member, a photographer was required to pass an exam. They were then expected to participate in national and/or international photography salons. Commercial photographers who had their own photography studios (mainly for portraiture and wedding photography) could also join the association. Those who took photographs for the press (they were not called photojournalists at that time but referred to as technicians) had access to photographic supplies and darkrooms located on the premises of the House of the Free Press, formerly called *Casa Scântei* under the communist regime. Members of the AAF did not have access to these darkroom facilities and, due to the lack of available space, the AAF was also not able to provide photo-



fig. 3
Dan Hatmanu, *Aniversare*, oil on canvas, 1983. National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest. Image courtesy of Uschi Klein.

Photographers (AAF), which was set up by a group of photographers in 1956.¹⁰ To become a member, a photographer was required to pass an exam. They were then expected to participate in national and/or international photography salons. Commercial photographers who had their own photography studios (mainly for portraiture and wedding photography) could also join the association. Those who took photographs for the press (they were not called photojournalists at that time but referred to as technicians) had access to photographic supplies and darkrooms located on the premises of the House of the Free Press, formerly called *Casa Scântei* under the communist regime. Members of the AAF did not have access to these darkroom facilities and, due to the lack of available space, the AAF was also not able to provide photo-

8 ____ A recent exception is a special issue of *PhotoResearcher* (no. 34) that was published in 2020, and articles by the following writers: Maria-Alina Asavei, 'Indexical Realism During Socialism: Documenting and Remembering the 'Everyday Realities' of Late Socialist Romania Through Photographs', in: *Photography & Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2021, 5–21; Juliana Maxim, 'Developing Socialism: The Photographic Condition of Architecture in Romania, 1958–1970', in: *Visual Resources*, vol. 27 no. 14, 2011, 154–171; Cristian Nae, 'Messages in Bottles: Documented Performance and Performative Photography in Romanian Art during Late Socialism', in: *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2019, 81–97.

9 ____ It was not possible for me to additionally visit and connect with other photographers in different places during my research trip. My time was limited

to the original research and impact activities that were linked to my funding and online meetings with the photographers were not an option.

10 ____ I have written elsewhere about the Association of Artist Photographers, and provided examples of photographs taken by AAF members, including two of the Association's female founding members, Hedy Löffler and Clara Spitzer. See Uschi Klein, 'Picturing the Female Gaze: Photography During Romanian Communism', in: *Miejsce* vol. 7, 2021, 240–259; Uschi Klein, 'An Invitation to Look: The Role of Vernacular Photography in Scrutinising and Understanding Romania's Communist Past in the Context of Everyday Life', in: *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens*, no. 57, 2022, <<https://rcl.fcsh.unl.pt/index.php/rcl/article/view/269/173>> (23.11.2023).

graphic darkroom facilities on their premises. Instead, AAF members were expected to set up their own darkrooms in their homes, or in art or photography studios.¹¹

As the only official association related to photography during Romania's communist era, the AAF was endorsed and financially supported by the regime (the Council for Socialist Culture and Education) and had its headquarters (changed to *Informa ia Bucureștiului* in 1954), on the ground floor of the *Universul* printing house, named after the daily *Universul* newspaper, in central Bucharest, for fifty years. Amateur photographers living outside of Bucharest could join their local photo clubs, which were organised into regional branches and supported by the AAF. Despite the regime's support, AAF members were neither required to officially adopt the Socialist Realism aesthetic, nor were they forced to produce overt propaganda photographs in support of the regime – this was entirely reserved for those working for the press (___ fig. 4) – although they may have felt compelled to do so. Photographs that presented an abstract version of reality through processing techniques like inversion, rasterisation, or solarisation were promoted (___ fig. 5). However, some AAF members chose to produce photographs that could be published in tourist guides or similar photobooks, for example, and therefore supported the regime's ideology.¹²



fig. 4
Agrare, 1970, gelatine silver print.
Minerva Cultural Association, Cluj.

Many AAF members were more focused on pursuing their artistic aspirations, developing a national and international community for photographic art, which extended into regional photo clubs, and in sharing common interests and artistic values with other photographers inside and outside of Romania. As Eugen Negrea states, “Censorship brutally penetrated all other forms of artistic expression, while photographic art was able to preserve its free spirit.”¹³ Maintaining a ‘free spirit’ was possible by creating photographs and participating in national and international photography salons under the Federation International de L’Art Photographique (FIAP) patronage, an international organisation for amateur photographers.¹⁴ The AAF adopted the FIAP’s honour system and AAF members strived to earn titles like AFIAP (Artist of FIAP), MFIAP (Master FIAP) and EFIAP (Excellence FIAP). For example, participating in at least ten international salons organised by FIAP over five years was required to earn the AFIAP. Given the vast majority of AAF members were amateur photographers, the honour system seemingly served as some kind of artistic aspiration, and motivation and fostered a sense of community. In a country like Romania, where society was so atomised, AAF membership provided a sense of belonging amongst its members.

Membership of the AAF had important rewards. In exchange for a small annual fee, which was around 120 Lei (about US \$8.50 in today’s money), members

11 ___ Art or photography studios were typically established inside family apartments during the communist period, as people could not simply rent multiple places and use them for different purposes.

12 ___ A very successful female photographer, who published over twenty national and international city guidebooks, was Hedy Löffler, one of the founding members of the AAF. To publish these guides, the photographs had to be edited in line with the regime's ideology.

13 ___ Eugen Negrea, ‘The Association of Photographer Artists of Romania 1956–2020’, in: *PhotoResearcher* no. 34, 2020, 98.

14 ___ Travelling outside of Romania was not without problems. While travelling to countries within the Soviet bloc was possible, it was particularly difficult to obtain visas to travel to Western countries during the communist period.

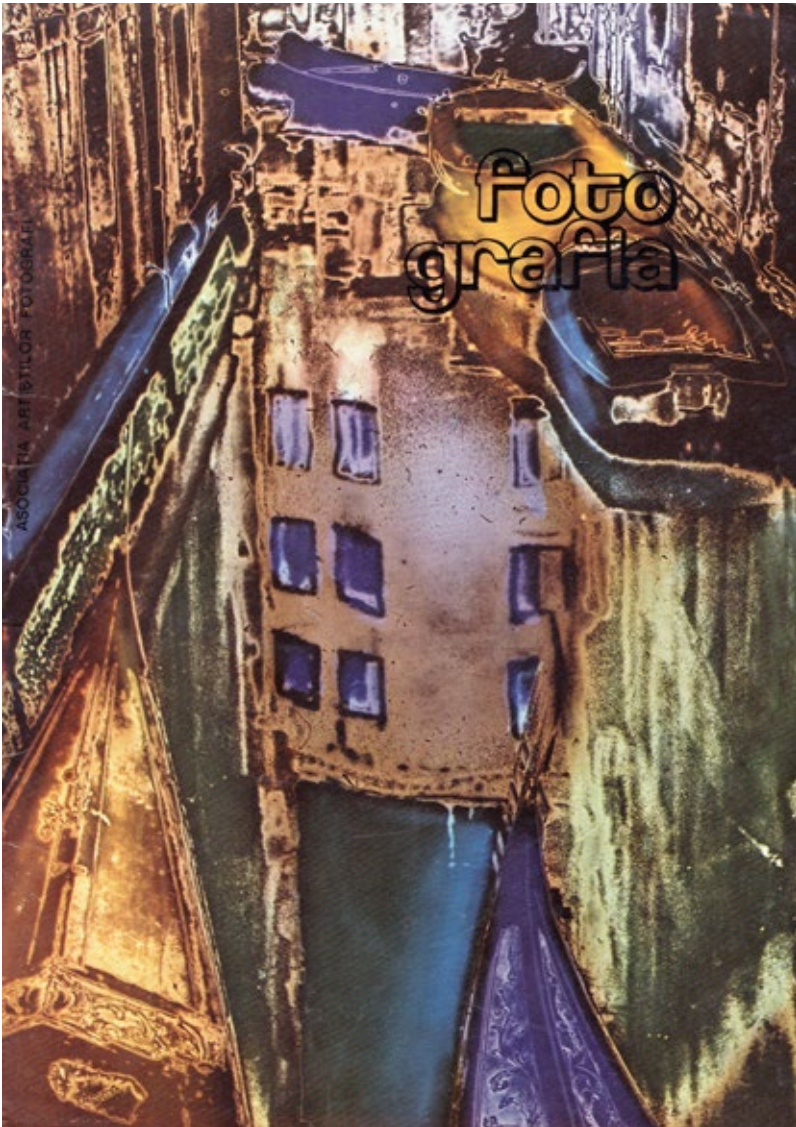


fig. 5
Hedy Löffler, *Venetia*, cover for the AAF magazine *Fotografia*, 1970s. Association of Artist Photographers Archive, Bucharest.

received the AAF's quarterly magazine *Fotografia*, which was an important source of information about photographic developments from around the world. AAF members were also granted access to exhibition spaces, and they could purchase photographic supplies through the AAF, but only when materials were available. AAF members were not automatically granted access to darkroom chemicals and photographic materials. Yet, if there were any materials available in the country, they were more likely to be found and distributed through the AAF. As architect and photographer Andrei Pandeale says:

*All good photographers in Romania were members of the AAF. That helped them do their work unhindered. Those were the good parts. There were dark sides. The official pictures had to be artistic, artificial, and remote from photography. [The] fake and [the] non-value was openly promoted.*¹⁵

By 'good photographers', Pandeale refers to those who were more active with their image-making and therefore required supplies more frequently. Based in Bucharest, Pandeale was initially invited to join the AAF in 1971, which would have enabled him to borrow different cameras. However, he hesitated with his decision and only became a member in 1973, mainly because his main photographic interest was not art but sport and social documentary. As an architect, he had the advantage of learning about Ceaușescu's plan to demolish

large parts of Bucharest in the early 1980s in order to build the House of the Republic. As Pandeale recalls:

*As an architect, I tried, at first, to take interesting pictures, with the background of city landmarks that were to disappear. I was lucky enough not to end up visible in the eyes of the Securitate. The Panel Code had a chapter called Denigrating Socialist Reality, where the punishment started at six years of imprisonment. Once I was aware of the danger, I became quicker in making decisions what to photograph. If I had attentive 'bystanders' [who could have been informers or the Securitate], I would look one way and trigger the other, or else.*¹⁶

Through the courage he showed – not only on the streets of Bucharest but also in other main cities across Romania – Pandeale created an impressive body of work during the 1970s and 1980s, which he exhibited nationally and internationally. AAF membership enabled him, like all AAF members, to access materials and do his work relatively unrestricted within the parameters of the AAF. Such privileged access should

15 — Andrei Pandeale and Uschi Klein, personal communication, 4 May 2023.

16 — Andrei Pandeale and Uschi Klein, personal communication, 4 May 2023.

not be underestimated, seeing that exhibition spaces on the AAF premises allowed for developing a photography community of shared artistic values and interests in photographic art. Equally, photographic equipment and materials were not always easily available in shops, especially not during the last decade of the Ceaușescu regime; thus, it was indeed a privilege to purchase these through the AAF.



fig. 6
Photographer unknown, the Japanese Konishiroku license, 1980, gelatine silver print. Szócs/Azopan Archive.



fig. 7
Photographer unknown, black and white panchromatic negative film packaging (cardboard and plastic boxes), AZOpan PS-18 and PS-21 with 36 positions, 1989. Source: Wikipedia.

Although photographic materials and darkroom supplies were imported from the USSR, the German Democratic Republic, and China, Romania produced its own photographic supplies. Opened in 1981, the factory *Azomureș* manufactured AZOpan, the only brand of photosensitive materials that was produced in Romania. Located in the Transylvanian town of Târgu-Mureș, the photographic materials were made in a separate section of the chemical plant. Striving for

excellence, the first products were manufactured under the guidance of the Japanese Konishiroku license (___fig. 6). The main products were black-and-white and colour photographic papers, films for photographic, industrial, and medical use, and black-and-white and colour cinematographic films (___fig. 7). The decision to open the factory in this town was based on the tradition of photographic art and the existence of an older company in the area. During the 1980s, *Azomureș* stood out as one of the newest enterprises of its kind in Eastern Europe. They used the latest state-of-the-art production equipment, but one factory alone did not meet the demand of the whole country.

The distribution of the available photographic supplies was not very democratic or widespread. Individuals who were not members of the AAF found it much harder, but not impossible, to buy cameras, photographic supplies or darkroom equipment and chemicals. When chemicals became unavailable, for example, people mixed their own substances to be able to continue with their photography.

As Pandeale describes, “We prepared [stop bath] at home from substances obtained from chemists, pharmacists, or other photographers. Sodium sulphite and borax were commercially available. To make prints, we used any developer by adding drops of benzotriazole diluted in alcohol.”¹⁷ As the following section moves on to explore, the context for these do-It-yourself practices was the home.

The home darkroom

Despite Romania manufacturing its own photosensitive materials at *Azomureș*, access to photographic supplies was limited during the last decade of the communist regime. As photographer Dragoș Lumpan explains:

*In those days [1980s], you bought photographic supplies or darkroom chemicals according to what was available, not according to what you required. You bought films in bulk when shops had them, not just one or two films at a time, because you never knew when, or if, shops would stock films again in the future. Similarly, if you needed stop bath but the shop only had fixer available, you bought the fixer whilst it was available and waited until the shop would stock stop bath again.*¹⁸

17 ___ Andrei Pandeale and Uschi Klein, personal communication, 4 May 2023.

18 ___ Dragoș Lumpan and Uschi Klein, personal communication, 1 October 2023.

Lumpan first began photographing people on the streets of central Bucharest as a teenager in 1984 and was never an AAF member. Despite the benefits of the membership, not everyone sought to become an AAF member as it required a certain level of commitment to the Association and not everyone was interested in art photography. From the beginning, Lumpan photographed many of his friends, but also strangers on the streets, and even started a small business by offering his photographic subjects two prints for 10 Lei. His base was the home. As Lumpan recollects:

I took photographs of passers-by near the Nottara Theatre. A friend of mine helped me; more precisely, he gave those I photographed a voucher on which he wrote: You have been photographed by a professional photographer. If you want this photo call 1234567890 and say voucher number XYZ1234. Within 3 days you will receive 2 photos 13 × 18 cm. Price 10 lei. I developed the pictures in the bathroom and dried them in the bedroom. With the order number we would find the photos on the film – for those who called and said they wanted the photos. The phone number was my home number, so my mother would take the orders. Then a university friend enlarged the photos in a garage ... that I had turned into a photo lab. Afterwards I would go with the enlarged photos in front of the Nottara and give them to those who had ordered them.¹⁹

Lumpan's short anecdote highlights the complexity that went into producing such photographs and how some individuals relied on a network of fellow photographers to reach beyond their material limitations. These arrangements varied in size, depending on where they were set up and people's own means. For example, people who lived in houses often had possibilities to convert parts of their basements into a small but permanent home darkroom, while people living in communist apartments were more restricted, for they were only able to convert their small, typically windowless bathroom, and to do so temporarily. Moreover, the latter setup required careful negotiations with other family members since private bathrooms could not be regularly used while film processing or printing was taking place. Thus, prior agreements or schedules were created, so that family members were not inconvenienced by the temporary darkroom setup in the bathroom. As Lumpan recalls:

I often used the darkroom while my parents were at work. I sat on the toilet with a developing can between my legs to process my films. I then dried the negatives in the bedroom. When I wanted to make prints, I used the small telephone table we had in the hallway, as that was the only table in the apartment that would fit into the small bathroom. At first, I borrowed a portable Russian enlarger that came in its own box before I bought my own one. I created the red light by cutting off the bottom of a coffee tin to create a tube that I placed around a normal light bulb and used thin red paper that I found in the box of photosensitive paper to wrap around the normal light bulb and create the red-light effect. It worked okay, even though it was all very primitive equipment.²⁰

After all, most apartments had only one bathroom for the entire family and occupying that space to process images required understanding from the whole household. If the darkroom is "a place for discovery, observation and mediation,"²¹ as Robert Hirsch quotes Jerry Uelsmann, the small, temporary bathroom-turned-darkroom potentially limited people's experience to just using the developing can in order to

19 — Dragos Lumpan and Uschi Klein, personal communication, 1 October 2023.

20 — Dragos Lumpan and Uschi Klein, personal communication, 1 October 2023.

21 — Robert Hirsch, *Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Equipment, Ideas, Materials, and Processes*, Amsterdam 2009, 21.

process their films without being able to discover, observe or mediate their photographic prints – at least not immediately – if individuals did not own or have access to an enlarger that was small (portable) enough to fit into the available bathroom space. However, that does not mean people were not able to embrace the small darkroom as a space of thought and imagination, for printing contact sheets did not require the use of an enlarger, but waiting for the contact sheet to be ready created a sense of anticipation and imagination before the subjects were revealed. If people collaborated with close friends who had larger darkrooms with an enlarger, they could experience what Hirsch described in someone else’s darkroom. Similarly, individuals, who worked on other people’s prints were able to experience the darkroom more fully as a place for imagination and discovery.

Descriptions of the different setups is all we have from those times, as no one I spoke with took photographs of their darkrooms in those days. Lumpan even acknowledged that was not on his mind. Perhaps that was due to the limited availability of photographic films and not wanting to waste precious frames, or perhaps people simply did not see the value in photographing their home darkroom. Given the lack of related material and sources, there is a real risk of losing this information and not being able to develop a better understanding of the darkroom culture in Romania, which is why interviews such as those included in this article are so significant.

Another photographer, who started his photographic practice in 1979, was Andrei Bîrsan. Like Lumpan, he was never an AAF member and either used his small bathroom or the windowless hallway inside the family apartment to do his photographic work. Out of necessity, he also built his own enlarger:

I bought wooden panels and lenses in the shops and followed the instructions I found in photography magazines to build my first two enlargers, since it was more difficult to buy them in the 1980s, when the regime cut the import of almost everything.²²

The photography magazines Bîrsan refers to were vital in the understanding and conceptualisation of photography as a documentary practice during those years. Magazines were exchanged between friends and other photography enthusiasts. The content ranged from technical information around photography to discussions about the works of other, often international, photographers. Reading these magazines was part of the self-taught nature of photography that was prevalent during the communist years in Romania. Another part was having a home darkroom and the space it afforded to develop one’s photographic practice by, for example, experimenting with different techniques, materials, and exposure times to alter the photographs. This is not to suggest that all photographers who used a home darkroom manipulated their images but no doubt, working independently – and perhaps outside a formal organisation like the AAF – appeared to emphasise people’s understanding of the darkroom as a space that offered technical and material support, whilst equally being a vital space of creativity (— fig. 8).

Creativity, as Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyen claims, “is a practice and method of theory-making and political intervention, from which a process of re-fashioning and world-making is possible.”²³ Adopting Hoàng Nguyen’s idea, the home darkroom was a creative space that empowered individuals to re-create a social world

22 — Dragos Lumpan and Uschi Klein, personal communication, 1 October 2023.

23 — Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn, ‘Re-Processing Archival Images: Artists as Darkroom Technicians’, in: *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2021, 93.



fig. 8
Nicolae Banu, *L'Echo*, 1973, gelatine
silver print. Association of Artist
Photographers Archive, Bucharest.

through their photographs that the regime prohibited to portray. This – albeit inadvertently – generated a space that – albeit subtly – opposed the regime’s ideology. In other words, the home darkroom served as an act of resistance for individuals whose ‘forbidden images’, whether intended or not, challenged the regime’s ideological views. The idea of the darkroom as a space that enabled a sense of agency, belonging, and opposition is central to this paper. Citing Phil Hubbard, Nicola Brandt contends:

*The concept of ‘space’, read from a Marxist and materialist perspective, ‘explores the relations of domination and resistance played out across different spaces’. This reading emphasizes the importance of ‘space as socially produced and consumed’ and acknowledges the inequalities in occupation of space by different groups.*²⁴

The concept of space is interesting in the context of communist Romania, seeing that all public (and, to some extent, private) spaces were occupied by the regime, not least in the form of the *Securitate*. Their vast network of informers meant that people did not trust each other, often not even their own friends and families, which led to what Brandt calls ‘the inequalities in occupation of space by different groups’ and in response to that, “the urgency to claim individual and collective agency in ... con-

flicted sites and spaces.”²⁵ The home darkroom, then, had the potential to provide an autonomous space that could be consumed in private. This afforded individuals the opportunity to create an intimate and productive space, in which they could develop as photographers and employ different techniques to advance their practice. Moreover, the freedom that came with having one’s own darkroom at home perhaps motivated some photographers to be more courageous in their approach to taking ‘forbidden images’, such as those of the queues that shaped Romania during the 1980s and into the early 1990s, that clearly depicted social issues (— fig. 9). That was certainly the case for Andrei Pandeale, who acknowledged that he became increasingly confident in his photographic practice once he understood the value of his images for the future, whilst also being able to process his own films at home without being caught.

When the subject matter clearly depicted the harsh reality of everyday life, it was not uncommon to destroy the print(s) before they even left the darkroom. The reason for this was because ‘forbidden images’ were taken as part of a whole film that would have had many different subjects on it, making it only clear in the darkroom which images on that film were risky. For example, Pandeale worked part-time as a sports photographer and explained that he often used the last few frames of a film to photograph everyday life on the streets of Bucharest or other places he visited (unfortunately, he does not have an example of a contact sheet that he could provide). However, this approach was also taken by press photographers.

24 — Phil Hubbard ‘Space/Place’, in: *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Ideas*, David Atkinson (ed.), London 2005, 41, in: Nicola Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now. Recent Histories in Southern African Photography, Performance and Video Art*, London 2020, 10.

25 — Nicola Brandt, *Landscapes Between Then and Now. Recent Histories in Southern African Photography, Performance and Video Art*, London 2020 20.



fig.9
 Andrei Pandele, *Queuing for Freedom*, 1989, gelatine silver print.
 Andrei Pandele's private collection,
 Bucharest.

Risky print(s) were destroyed but negatives could be hidden more easily seeing it is very difficult to recognise anything on a 35 mm negative with the bare eye if you are not trained to do so; thus, negatives exposed little risk for the photographer. In contrast, a photographic print was certainly potential evidence for one's politically negligent attitude. That did not make social documentary photography unappealing for practitioners but more dangerous since there was a penalty of six years of imprisonment for taking pictures of that nature.

As important as the home darkroom was during the 'Golden Age', it was also understood by many as an isolated and private, even intimate, space where individuals could experiment with darkroom processes and imagine the photographs before they were made. For example, Pandele found working in the home darkroom peaceful, stating, "A chore for some, the lab seemed relaxing to me."²⁶ This contrasts with his brief experience using a professional darkroom that he could access when he worked for a sport newspaper. As Pandele recalls:

*Working at the newspaper was unpleasant. The photo had to be handed in within an hour after the end of the [sports] event. Developing, fixing, drying the film, exposure developing, fixing, drying the copy was all done by hand. The film, roughly fixed, was enlarged wet and sometimes discarded after use. At first photographers were kind. When they noticed I was taking better photos, their kindness faded. There was nothing more for me to do in the LOR lab.*²⁷

Pandele's remark is interesting in that he highlights the difference between the professional and amateur darkroom; the former appeared to be a more stressful work environment than the latter, but also one in which it was more common to share the space with others, namely colleagues. Of course, this is only one experience of the professional darkroom, but it is not unrealistic to imagine that this was the case.

26 ___ Andrei Pandele and Uschi Klein, personal communication, 4 May 2023.

27 ___ Andrei Pandele and Uschi Klein, personal communication, 4 May 2023.

It makes it also seem interesting that the AAF did not have its own darkrooms for members to share and use collectively.

The darkroom, then, means different things to different people. For Bîrsan and Lumpan, who relied on their home darkroom as a temporary environment, it was more experimental; a space to explore the darkroom's nature and practices. As Geoffrey Batchen reminds us, "The darkroom is ... the place where photographs are produced but also tested, notated, transformed, rejected, reprinted, found wanting, and destroyed."²⁸ Photographers influence every photograph they make, either by directing or intervening with the subject matter before the photograph is taken, or by manipulating the picture afterwards in the darkroom. This leaves out any doubt that the darkroom is neutral. As Lily Cho argues:

*"the darkroom technician's work is never merely technical, not simply an automated process of churning out contact sheets and printing images through a prescribed formula ... it matters in what context the darkroom technician learns their craft; like photography itself, photographic development processes are not neutral."*²⁹

Although Cho discusses the darkroom technician in relation to race, her description is true of any darkroom technician. In the context of Romania, there was no separation of the roles; most photographers were also darkroom technicians, seeing that they processed their own films and developed their own prints. Largely self-taught, they learned their craft on their own or by asking friends they trusted. This afforded the opportunity to develop different ideas around photography, instead of following the regime's approach to photography as an artistic practice.

Conclusion

Photography's ambiguous status during Romania's communist era leaves some questions open but this paper has attempted to reconstruct some of the uses and experiences of the home darkroom during the country's 'Golden Age'. What happens in the home darkroom matters and it matters particularly for thinking about it as a space for (relative) freedom, agency and, above all, for defying political ideologies, in this case Romania's communist regime. Having a home darkroom was generally not forbidden, but the lack of darkroom supplies made it more challenging to create the space in one's home. At the same time, the home darkroom was potentially a risky place and setting for those individuals who were interested in photography's social documentary nature in order to capture the harsh realities of everyday life during Ceaușescu's 'Golden Age'. A visit by the *Securitate* was never unlikely, seeing that an informer, most often a close friend or family member, could always inform the *Securitate* about one's (illegal) activities and taking those photographs certainly carried a prison sentence. Essentially, people who had a home darkroom understood the power of photography in capturing people's experiences, struggles and daily problems during those years. This, I would argue, shaped people's ideas and understanding of photography during those years. As those images survived into post-communist times, they are now of historic value.

28 — Geoffrey Batchen, *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography*, New York 2021, 6.

29 — Lily Cho, 'Darkroom Material: Race and the Chromogenic Print Process', in: *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2018.

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**The Gate Darkroom, Nellie and Cristina developing their
prints in the tray area during a session, 2023**

© **The Gate Darkroom**

Image page 2: see page 131 fig. 8

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