

5. FROM AN EXHIBITION GALLERY TO A SPACE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART PROJECTS. APARTE GALLERY OF UNAGE IAȘI

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Abstract: *This research aims to analyze the exhibitions activity of the Aparte Gallery of “George Enescu” National University of the Arts in Iași, from 2005 to 2020, respectively artistic projects created by students, teachers or guest artists of the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design. The multitude of artistic events formats includes exhibitions, workshops, conferences, book launches, residencies, bachelor and dissertation exams, and highlights the versatility of the gallery that has evolved, over time, into a real space of contemporary artistic projects, which encourages the artistic research and experiment in all FAVD’s specializations. The aim of the research is to relate the diversity of the artistic event formats, their thematics and mediatic variety, within the institutional context of university art education.*

Key words: *Aparte Gallery, exhibitions, contemporary art, interdisciplinarity, visual arts*

1. Introduction

As a base for artistic practice for students of all faculties of the “George Enescu” National University of the Arts (UNAGE) in Iași, Aparte Gallery is one of the most important infrastructures for supporting teaching activities, as a project space that mediates the direct contact between the university artistic events and the general art public, either local, national, or international. The gallery hosts interdisciplinary artistic events, mediating the exchange of ideas and experiences specific to contemporary culture, being one of the few university exhibition spaces in Romania, and it was established at the end of 2004 through the collective effort of the professors from the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design (FAVD) in Iași²⁰⁴. The purpose of the Aparte Gallery was to offer an exhibition space dedicated to student activities, a natural consequence of the need to deepen and complete their artistic projects, the development of the faculty infrastructure and the need to experiment with the exhibition as an artistic format.

An artistic research project was carried out around the gallery in 2020 and 2021, aimed at stimulating the exhibition activities of the Aparte Gallery, part of the contemporary interdisciplinary teaching process²⁰⁵. One of the results of this project was the creation of an archive of projects from the 15 years since the

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²⁰⁴ The gallery was established at the end of 2004 through the collective effort of professors Dan Acostioaei, Matei Bejenaru, Cătălin Gheorghe and Bogdan Teodorescu, at the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design (FAVD) in Iași, Romania. The first exhibitions took place in January 2005, and in the following years, other professors from FAVD joined the curatorial team. See editorial note by Cătălin Soreanu of the 2021 catalogue published by the gallery (Galeria Aparte. Index 2005 - 2020 2021, 20-21).

²⁰⁵ Two publications were realized in 2020 for the gallery: “Aparte Gallery. Exhibitions”, coordinating editor Cătălin Gheorghe, in English (Gheorghe, German, et al., Aparte Gallery. Exhibitions 2020) and Romanian (Gheorghe, German, et al., Galeria Aparte. Expoziții 2020), and “Aparte Gallery. A guide for exhibition practices”, coordinating editor Lavinia German (German, Gheorghe, et al. 2020).

establishment of the gallery, organized chronologically into a database that provides a retrospective evolution of the exhibition space within the educational, cultural, and artistic context. This consistent accumulation of case studies (over 250 documented events, involving more than 1600 participants, students, teachers and guest artists) can be analysed from different perspectives, providing both directions for understanding the development of artistic space identity and symptoms of evolutionary changes in its relationship with artistic and cultural context.

These perspectives include the study of artistic formats that integrate exhibitions, colloquia, symposia, as elements that reveal the versatility of this space and the plurality of artistic concerns of generations of students. Such a thematic perspective is related to the approached subject and research topics, which complete the understanding, the adaptation, and the appropriation of exhibition formats, and the understanding of space and institutional criticism, ranging from personal mythologies and formulas of psychological or social intimate introspection, to subjects of social, political, or economic approach, or studies of artistic environment and artistic criticism.

In the present research, we will approach the study of the project archive from two perspectives: one concerning the status of the gallery space in the institutional and artistic context, and the other one that involves the analysis of the exhibition program, respectively of the events calendar, relevant by the diversity of exhibition formats, thematic versatility, and variety of artistic mediums. The working methods includes the quantitative analysis of the body of case studies, highlighting the criteria and establishing selective analogies, distribution and interpretation of results and their translation into presumptive research conclusions.

2. The Aparte Gallery of UNAGE Iași

Aparte Gallery hosts interdisciplinary artistic events, mediating the exchange of ideas and experiences specific to contemporary culture, being one of the few university exhibition spaces in Romania²⁰⁶. The gallery is one of the few art spaces in Iași with artistic autonomy²⁰⁷, being protected from the pressures of the art market (which often involves commercial compromises from exhibiting artists or institutions that own galleries), happily complementing the artistic infrastructure of Iași, precarious compared to other cities such as Bucharest, Cluj, or Timisoara²⁰⁸.

The gallery has a physical space located in D-Building of the FAVD in Iași, in a building with a long nave, divided into sections and administrative areas throughout its length. The structural reminiscences of the initial functionality of the space (a stable) are present in the gallery in the form of the four central pillars,

²⁰⁶ There are similar exhibition spaces within art universities or faculties in Cluj, Bucharest and Timisoara

²⁰⁷ The city of Iași benefits from several spaces of the Union of Visual Artists in Romania (UAPR), respectively the Victoria, Pallady and Tonitza Art Galleries, some other private spaces such as Dana Galleries and Borderline ArtSpace, along with exhibition spaces developed inside institutions, such as museums, memorial houses, libraries, universities, etc.

²⁰⁸ As noted by Ona Maria Nae in her introduction to “Galeria Aparte. Index 2005 – 2020”, published by Galeria Aparte, UNAGE Iași in October 2021, coordinating editor Cătălin Soreanu. (Soreanu, German and Gavrilean, et al. 2021, 12-13)

which were incorporated into the architectural structure by plastering and applying elements specific to the electrical system). When the gallery was established in 2005, the space had an entrance in the northern part of the building, with two windows and was arranged with white walls, lighting system with halogen lamps and grey tiles. At the beginning of 2015, there was a renovation of the space, with the cancellation of the windows and the relocation on the southern wall of the entrance, the realization of a floor covered with epoxy paint for heavy traffic, and the replacement of the lighting system with modern projectors.

In 2020 and 2021, the third major arrangement of the space took place when, within the FDI project “Aparte Base” and “Extended Aparte Base”, the floor and the painting of the walls were restored, the lighting system was completely replaced with LED lamps of colour controlled temperature, specific exhibition furniture was built (frames, additional movable walls, steps and cubes) and a creative socialization area was created outside the gallery by arranging a space with urban furniture. All these arrangement stages have preserved the initial white-cube structure of the gallery, an exhibition concept of neutral, impartial, objective space, able to enhance the thematic aspect of the exhibition events. Through its generous surface area, through the modularity of the space dictated by the presence of the central pillars and through the symmetrical arrangement towards the entrance, the Aparte Gallery is a space with artistic personality and recognizable exhibition potential.

3. The exhibition program

The calendar of events of the Apart Gallery is positioned around the program of the academic year, offering an exhibition event at its opening, various exhibitions of specializations scheduled throughout the semesters, hosting exam sessions for undergraduates and dissertations as short daily exhibitions, also exhibitions of doctoral students, etc. There are a variety of exhibition formats, from visual art and interdisciplinary exhibitions, to recurring events such as art biennials or international exhibitions, symposia, workshops for FAVD students or the public, artist-talks, and presentations of artistic activity, totalling a number of over 250 documented events, with the most varied thematic approaches (figure 1).

The archive of the 15 years of activity in the Aparte Gallery, offers a wide typology of the exhibitions, based on the nature of the participants, and the distribution within the specializations of the faculty (figure 2). Specifically, we identify group, collective or personal exhibitions, which vary over the 15 years with moments of active recurrence corresponding to the peaks of 2010 and 2018 (which coincide, for example, with the moments of renovation of the gallery). We also notice how group exhibitions are prevalent, a natural consequence of the university nature of the gallery where groups of students constantly exhibit (in specialization events), and personal initiatives or those of micro-organization in artistic groups appear with difficulty (figure 3). As for the educational specifics of the gallery, we can also see the balance between the presence of students' exhibitions (on average, 15-20 exhibitions per year) and those of teachers, along with projects by guest artists in collaborations with partners and specific artistic initiatives (a reduced

number of exhibitions until 2015, followed by a constant number of 8 to 10 exhibitions annually) (figure 4).

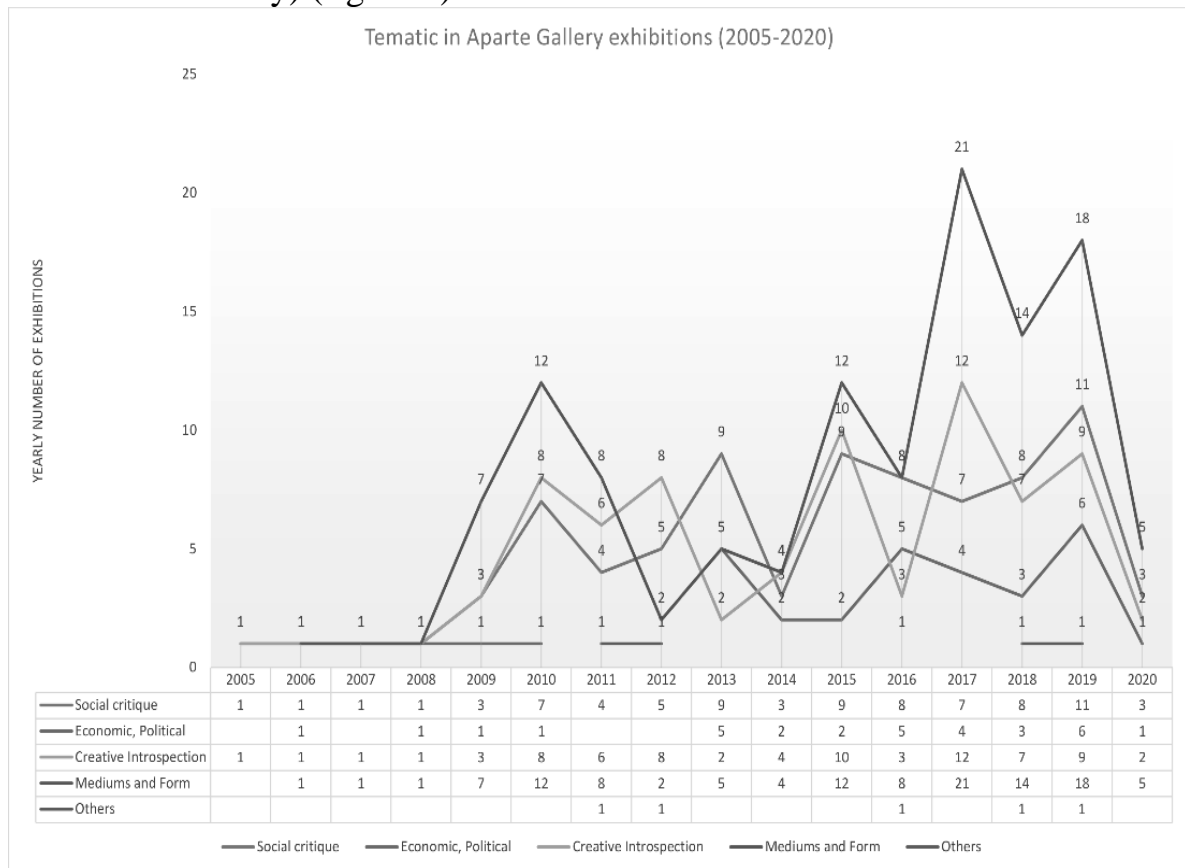


Fig. 1. Chart with the thematic yearly distribution of the exhibitions between 2005 and 2020 in Aparte Gallery of UNAGE Iași

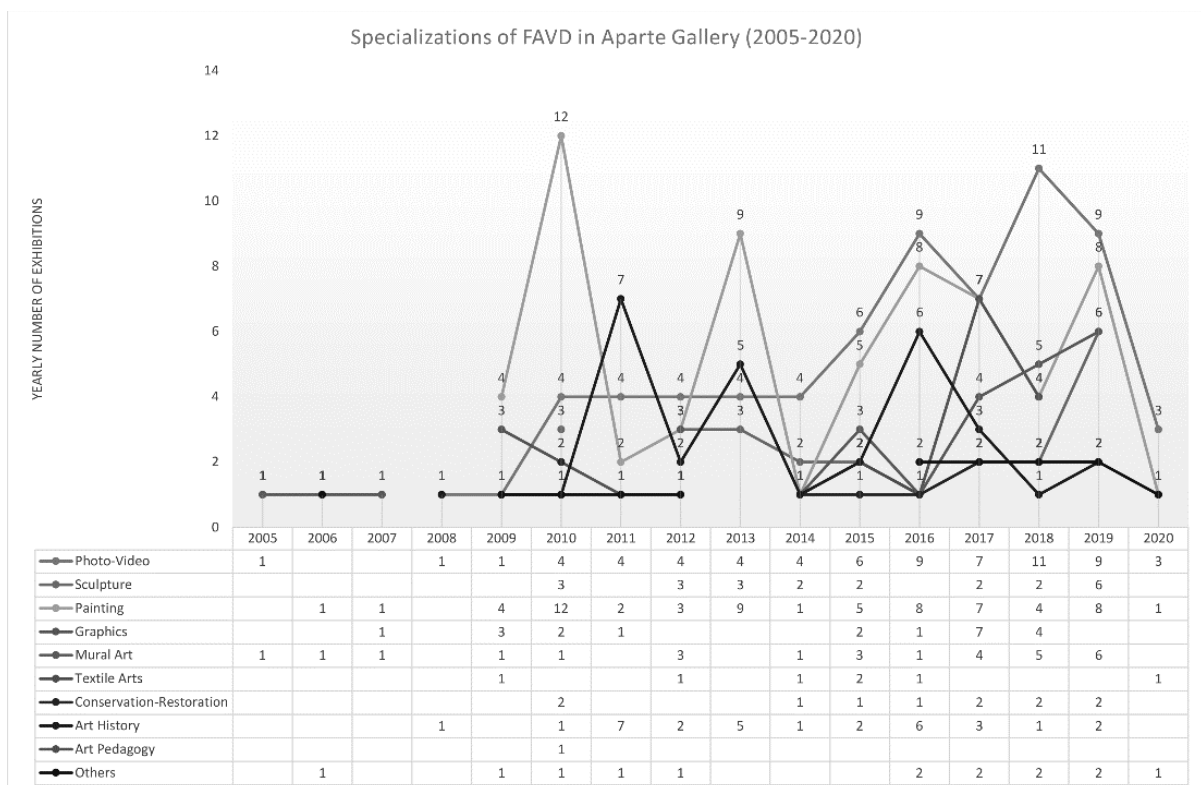


Fig. 2. Chart with the FAVD specializations exhibitions distribution between 2005 and 2020 in Aparte Gallery of UNAGE Iași

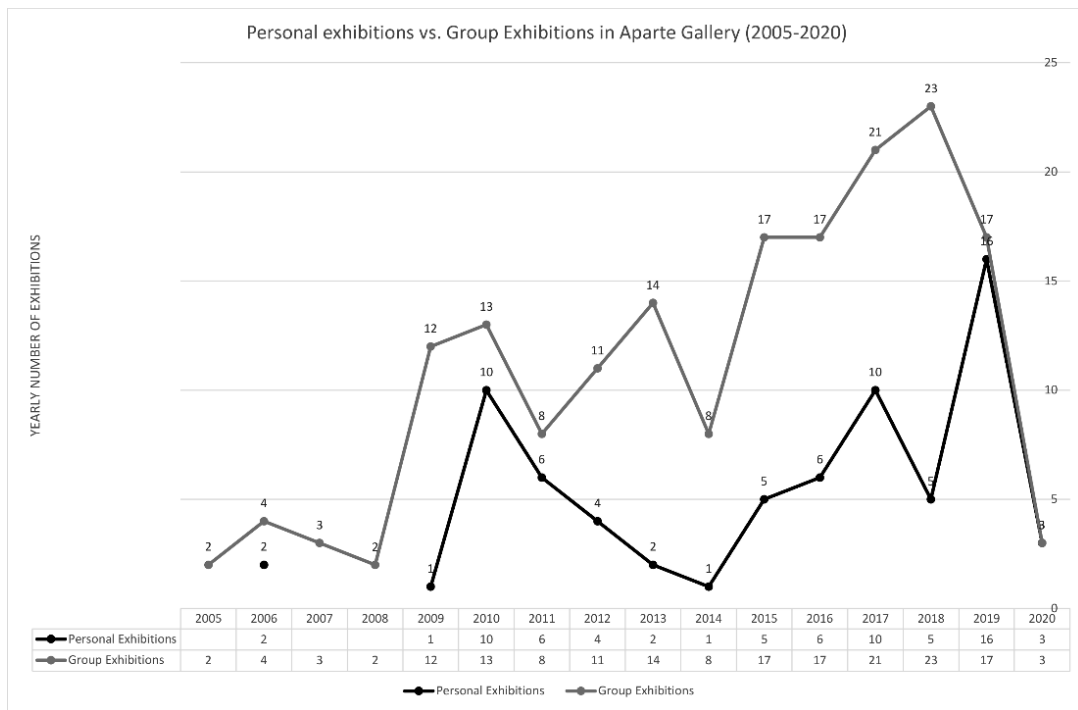


Fig. 3. Chart with the balance between personal versus group exhibitions between 2005 and 2020 in Aparte Gallery of UNAGE Iași

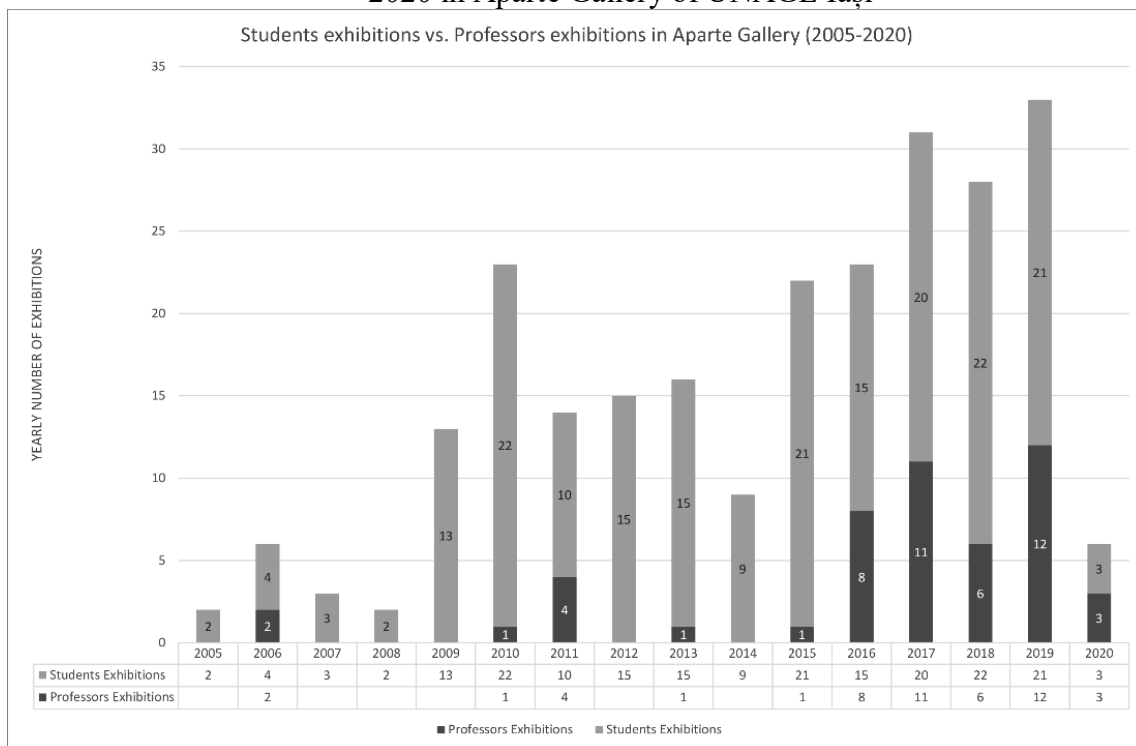


Fig. 4. Chart with the students versus professors and guest artists exhibitions organized between 2005 and 2020 in Aparte Gallery of UNAGE Iași

4. The thematic diversity

The thematic diversity of the gallery's exhibitions follows the artistic, cultural, social-demographic, economic and political changes of this 15-year period, as perceived in the local artistic space. Particularly heterogeneous, this thematic dimension is characterized by extremely varied artistic practices, such as artistic attitudes tributary to traditional mediums, intimate-introspective psychological investigations, capitalization of formal aspects of traditional artistic

mediums, synchronicity with the major political events of the period, the mixing of the formal experiment with the critical argumentation, the exploration of the specific expressiveness of the artistic mediums, etc. Within the artistic manifestations associated with traditional media, we discover the predilection for artistic objectivity, for the respect reserved for the plastic arts, for the excellent mastery of these environments (painting, graphics, sculpture, decorative arts), with a major stake on the subject, often to the detriment use of the exhibition space offer.

A consistent part of the exhibition experiments in the Aparte Gallery is thematically oriented toward the intimate-introspective investigations, with psychological accents, which exploit the creative personal mythologies of the authors, transposed at the level of representation, medium, or discursive offer. One example is the Photo-Video student Andreea Hajtajer and her video exhibition “Give me beauty, give me death” from 2009, where she elaborates a neo-romantic poetics of private life and radical loneliness.²⁰⁹ We can also mention the series of exhibitions “Myth-Body-Space” initiated by the Photo-Video and the History and Art Theory Specialization, coordinated by the professors Matei Bejenaru, Bogdan Teodorescu, Lavinia German, and Andrei Cozlac, in June 2011. They exhibited Andreea Dănilă (curator Raluca Ciocoiu), Emanuela Boroș (curator Cătălin Soreanu), Alex Gheorghită and Ciprian Niculescu and Bianca Boroș (curator Cristina Moraru), which explored the themes of intimate space versus private space, the unfamiliar as a narrative element²¹⁰ or the creative erotica of photographic intimacy.

The valorisation of the formal aspects of the traditional environments through validating bridges of critical connection with the post-modern artistic practices, is another thematic direction of the exhibitions in Aparte Gallery. The series of exhibitions “Visiting Art History” initiated by Cristian Ungureanu in 2009, Ioana Palamar’s painting exhibition “Inner Shaddows” from 2017, the exhibitions “New Earth” and “Interior Explorations” from 2017, or the series “Levels of Reality” coordinated by Ioan Pricop (in 2015, 2016 and in 2018), are examples of the relationship between the referential values of the visual arts and the exhibition practices of FAVD students.

The socio-political issues, marked by synchronous insertions with major events of the period such as election periods, social events reflected in the media, global economic conflicts, elements of instructional criticism, or the exploitation of the communist heritage, are a constant feature of the concerns of contemporary visual artists and, by extension, of visual arts students in their exhibitions in Aparte Gallery. Notable examples are the exhibitions “Scratch disk is full” (2007) curated by Dan Acostioaei, those made by Bogdan Armanu and Silvia Amancei such as “Metropia” and “A map of indifference” (2014), “No hope for a future” (2015), “Constellations of Desire” from 2016, in which Bogdan and Silvia build narrative scenarios about desirable or utopian political alternatives; we can also notice

²⁰⁹ The Foto-Video students’ exhibitions are presented in the 2021 publication “Foto-Video. Exhibition projects 2005-2021”. (Soreanu and German, Foto-Video. Proiecte expoziționale 2005-2021 2021)

²¹⁰ German, Lavinia, in the article „The relation between ‘seeing’ and ‘being seen’: a diachronic perspective on photographic view”, published in the volume “Interpersonal communication. Art and education as means of communication”, coordinated by Marinela Rusu, Ars Longa, in Iași 2018. (German 2018, 187-193)

“Artist, I buy an apartment in this block” and “The social factory of desire: work and cultural memory in the creative industries after the 90s”, both signed by Andrei Timofte in 2019, “The paradox of white work” (2017) and “Altered Visions” (2020) realized by Sarah Daria Muscalu, exhibition exercises that discuss the legacy of the communist tradition interpreted in a political key of the present, against which the artist actively positions himself, with a critical reading of his condition in the contemporary socio-political context.

Since Aparte Gallery was built around the concept of experimenting with artistic expression in both professional approach and curatorial takes, the infusion of criticality and artistic theory brought the necessary support for the UNAGE students’ exhibitions, providing a sustainable environment of discursive conditions for all the specializations within FAVD. Some exhibition events which are considering the formal experiment doubled by critical argumentation, are the “Table Talk” project from 2008, curated by Dan Acostioaei and Cătălin Gheorghe, “Recycling Ghosts” by SATELLITE (Social Artistic Tendency group) curated by Cătălin Gheorghe (2010), or the project “Gallery” curated by Luminița Apostu in 2012.

Related to an important thematic direction of the exhibitions in the Aparte Gallery, the one which explores the specific expressiveness of the art mediums, of the analysis of language elements and their trans-media interpretation,²¹¹ we can find notable examples such as the “Working title” exhibition coordinated by Dan Acostioaei and Ramona Biciușcă in 2015, the exhibition “Clinical architectures for a future compositionist” curated by Cătălin Gheorghe, part of the events of the “Camera Plus” Biennial²¹² in 2016, the exhibition of photography and dynamic image “Reflector” made by Matei Bejenaru in 2018, also “Film, curatorial project”, a collective exhibition curated by Matei Bejenaru in 2018, or the exhibition “On the edge of the surface” made by Lavinia German in 2020, as a plea for the dynamic image or the photography, and their specific expressions of visual language, proposing a critical reflection on the perspective of the artistic medium.

Using mediums such as photography, video, installation, painting or sound-performance, these exhibitions reflected the interest of the authors to approach the creation act from a theoretical perspective conceptually applied to the professional art medium, while also considering the intrinsic expressiveness of both the art product and the exhibition as components of the art practice. In this regard, there is also a consistent number of student exhibitions, such as the series of exhibitions from the Photo-Video specialization coordinated by Cătălin Soreanu such as “I’ll be back!?” (2017), “Life on hold” (2018), “Duplex” (2019) and “Intamplabil” (2021), a series of exhibitions realized with the students from the second year of licence studies of the Foto-Video specialization as part of their studies in dealing with the exhibition as artistic format and experience²¹³, also the

²¹¹ The difference between (communication) media and (artistic) mediums was discussed by Cătălin Soreanu in Chapter II of “Art and Advertising. Mediums of expression in contemporary advertising”, Artes Publishing House of UNAGE Iași. (Soreanu, Artă și publicitate. Medii de expresie în publicitatea contemporană 2018, 24-29)

²¹² CAMERA PLUS - Biennial of contemporary photography and dynamic image, published by CFC – Center for Contemporary Photography in Iași, 2021, coordinating editor Matei Bejenaru (Bejenaru, et al. 2016)

²¹³ The exhibitions of the Foto-Video students are an important resource of experience and practice before the next

exhibition titled “Digging in the mirror” coordinated by Bogdan Teodorescu from 2020, and the exhibition “Domestic” coordinated by Lavinia German and Mihai Vereștiuc, both events from 2019, as well as the multitude of exhibitions for licenses and dissertations exams of FAVD specializations within UNAGE Iași.

Within FAVD and with the support of Aparte Gallery, development perspectives are offered to both students concerned with new environments and those interested in cultivating plastic media and traditional artistic values of UNAGE Iași. The gallery is able to host a wide range of exhibition art mediums and thematic, including decorative and applied art, conservation and reconstruction experiments of old paintings or mural artefacts, religious and iconographic painting²¹⁴, contemporary art with a thematic inspiration derived from the religious subjects²¹⁵, such as the exhibitions “Sinopia” and “Proplasma” coordinated by Constantin Tudor in 2016, the project exhibition “Methodological aspects of conservation - restoration interventions” coordinated by Bogdan Gavrilean and Bogdan Ungurean in 2018, or the exhibition “Hypostases” by Simion Cristea in March 2019.

The flexibility and versatility of the space, able to host different exhibition formulas and artistic medium specific to the artistic practices of all FAVD specializations, is the natural outcome of any analysis of the exhibition themes and artistic mediums in 15 years of activity in the Aparte Gallery. The diversity of the mediums of artistic expression cultivated in the gallery is also emphasized by the presence of performative areas, as they appear in exhibitions or events such as “Sugar” from 2009, or the “Live love life” performance made by George Hneda under the coordination of Dan Acostioaei. We also note the choreography expressiveness within the project “Explore festival # 11” of WASP Bucharest in 2016, the sound performance of tenor Renato Ridiche in the project “Counter.point” from 2017 made by Cătălin Soreanu²¹⁶, another performance by Jamie Morgan, the artist invited to the exhibition of Ioana Palamar from 2017, the performativity exercises in front of the camera of the “In situ” artist group from January 2018²¹⁷, or the project “Yes, thank you” by the guest artist John Dillard, coordinated by Zamfira Bîrzu and Ioana Palamar back in 2019.

The exhibition as an artistic format is one of the most important and constant searches of the exhibition coordinators. The experience of the artistic installation as a medium of expression and its transposition at the level of the entire exhibition

year main graduation exam (and exhibition), realized as a public exhibition in Aparte Gallery, in July exams sessions. (Proiectele absolvenților Foto-Video 2021), (Proiectele absolvenților Foto-Video 2020), (Catalogul absolvenților Foto-Video UNAGE Iași 2019)

²¹⁴ For a wider understanding of the phenomena, the article of Oana Maria Nae (Nicuță 2018, 110-129) and the book of Bogdan Gavrilean are to be consulted (Gavrilean 2011). Both Oana Maria Nae and Bogdan Gavrilean are visual artists and members of the academic staff of the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design from the “George Enescu” National University of the Arts in Iași. (Stoleriu 2020, 160-163)

²¹⁵ Soreanu, Cătălin, “The Sacred in Contemporary Advertising”, published in “ANASTASIS - Research in Medieval Culture and Art” 3(1), edited by Codrina-Laura Ioniță, Puiu Ioniță and Brîndușa Grigoriu (Soreanu 2016, 149-158)

²¹⁶ The “Counter.Point” exhibition was realized in 2017 and the homonym photography book was published 3 years later with the images from the exhibition. (Soreanu, contra.punct / counter.point 2020)

²¹⁷ “In situ” is an artistic group formed by Lavinia German, Cătălin Soreanu and Mihai Vereștiuc, professors at the UNAGE Iași. (Aparte Gallery. Exhibitions 2020, 280-285)

space became, in time, a favourite subject of the students' exhibitions within FAVD. Notable examples are "Scratch disk is full", an installation curated by Dan Acostioaei in 2007, the exhibition "Parrhesia" in 2011 made by Emanuela Boros and coordinated by Lavinia German, the project "The complaint" by Andrei Venghiac from 2012 curated by Cătălin Gheorghe, the exhibition "...and with the rest of us" by Mihai Vereștiuc from 2016, or the installation "In situ (II)" from 2018 made by the homonymous artistic group.

There is a constant interaction between the Aparte Gallery and the professional artistic environment, which facilitates the exchange of artistic ideas and experiences, through events that helped increasing the visibility of the gallery, such as the "Confluences" International Graphic Exhibitions series (started in 2010), the Biennial for Contemporary Photography and Dynamic Image "Camera Plus" or the collaboration with the University of Johannesburg from 2016, the various activities and artistic programs with UAPR Iași as organizing partner, the series of events "NAG – White Night of Galleries", the itinerant exhibition projects that facilitated the exchange of ideas and artistic experiences such as the "Mobile Biennial" from 2017, "eXplore festival" organized by WASP Bucharest and the "D-Platform" exhibition project (both from 2016), etc.

5. Conclusions

As a basis for artistic practice for students of all faculties of the UNAGE in Iași, Aparte Gallery is *one of the most important infrastructures for supporting teaching activities* as a project space that mediates the direct contact between university artistic events and the local, national, and international art public. The Aparte Gallery has an exhibition program that facilitates the experiment and the analytical discourse, favours the artistic research and the exhibition format of creative workshops, both practical and theoretical. Since its establishment in 2005, the Aparte Gallery of UNAGE Iași has become an active presence in the local and national artistic context, with a major role in promoting the artistic creation of students in the FAVD.

Through its presence in the local and national artistic environment (and even internationally), as well as among the universities, the Aparte Gallery is *an important resource for marketing, promotion, and artistic relations* of the UNAGE Iași, importing artistic knowledge, facilitating the exchange of educational ideas, bringing visibility and prestige to the university and to its faculties. The Aparte Gallery has *an extremely important role in promoting the artistic creation of the students* within FAVD, as well as the curatorial contribution made by the coordinators of these exhibitions. Such events coordinated or curated by FAVD professors have become landmarks in the fields of sculpture, painting, photography, video art or installation art for generations of students.

Within the exhibition events in the Aparte Gallery, we can easily *notice the imports of artistic knowledge* (in the form of theories, thematic, mediums, practices, and specific knowledge), through interferences with national and international artistic contexts and events such as exhibitions and biennials, various artistic residencies, mobility and university exchanges, itinerant exhibition

programs, etc. Such imports have led to the constant enrichment of the exhibition vocabulary of FAVD students, as well as to the connection of their artistic practices to the values of international art.

We note the constant *interaction between Aparte Gallery, as an exhibition space of UNAGE and the local, national and international professional artistic environment*, facilitating the exchange of artistic ideas and experiences, emphasized by: the presence of professors' exhibitions in the gallery, while offering artistic models to young generations of the students; the convergence of curatorial approaches by activating guest artists in exhibitions or curatorial programs such as "Carte Blanche aux Jeunes Créateurs" or "Iași Art Residence",²¹⁸ as micro-contexts of artistic practice supported of the Aparte Gallery; and the continuous effort in hosting exhibition events that introduced the gallery into the circuit of high visibility exhibition spaces, such as the international exhibitions, biennials, public events, itinerant exhibition projects etc.

We are witnessing *15 years of continuity of artistic and educational practices*, in which we have various cycles of university artistic education, entire generations of students who finished undergraduate, master, or doctorate studies, students who also became professors within UNAGE institution, thus ensuring the transfer of knowledge from one generation to another, as well as the continuity of the values specific to our university.

Thus, we discover *15 years of constant (and natural) evolution of the Aparte Gallery*, from an exhibition gallery to a versatile space for contemporary art projects, which hosts multiple experimental exhibition formats and favours the artistic discourse and research. At the same time, we notice the plurality of artistic concerns specific to all specializations within FAVD, offering a wide range of development perspectives to the students concerned with new environments, while cultivating traditions and associated artistic values of UNAGE Iași.

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²¹⁸ "Carte Blanche aux Jeunes Créateurs" is a curatorial program initiated by Cătălin Gheorghe with the help of French Institute in Iași (Galeria Aparte. Index 2005 - 2020, 42-224), and "Iasi Art Residence" is an artistic residency in Iași, coordinated by Ioana Palamar (228, 253, 262).

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