

At Auntie Gabi – about the past, present, and possible futures of neighbourhood shops

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The Corner Kiosk

Eliza P.: *My childhood shop was a small convenience store between the apartment buildings of the Drumul Taberei neighbourhood. Everyone called it Ciuperçuța (the mushroom), perhaps because it had sprung out of nowhere, without any rhyme or reason. When us kids went out to play, we would get ice cream, sweets, and other treats from there – it was the kind of store where you went with the money you had saved for 3 days to buy surprise bubble gum.*

The owner knew all the families around, so he would sometimes give you a little extra or cover for you if you were short on money. Occasionally, young people or older men would gather for drinks, but there was never too much trouble. You went there to get small things and a bit of gossip, to hear who was doing what and why. There were also a few friendly stray dogs around that always slept near the kiosk. Now I see they've made parking lots where it used to be. In fact, they've also made parking lots where the garden in front of my old building block used to be; they too seem to have sprouted like mushrooms after rain. They're everywhere...

Sorin V.: *In the sweet classical style of Joni Mitchell, “they paved paradise to put up a parking lot”¹. This whole project is so cool because I've heard stories like this from everyone; these neighbourhood stores became a part of everyone's lives, and the people there often became a second family.*

I remember in my childhood my parents sent me for the first time to our neighbourhood store to buy oil/vinegar, in their attempt to teach me responsibility. When I got to the kiosk, I no longer knew if I was asked to buy vinegar or oil, and I made that trip about 5 times because I was too embarrassed to ask my folks. The lady at the store kept seeing me coming for oil and then swapping it for vinegar, and in the end, I had to tell her I couldn't remember which one I had to buy anymore and that I felt awkward about going home with the wrong product. So, I received both oil and vinegar, even though I only had money for one product, my problem was solved, and I could go home happily. Honestly, even now, I can't remember whether I was supposed to buy oil or vinegar.

¹ Lyrics from the song 'Big Yellow Taxi' by the singer Joni Mitchell, which criticizes the destructive impact of urban development on nature



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Intro to Urban Shopping

Eliza P.: A shopping list on an app – What do you need? What are you missing? Your time is precious! Why stand in line for hours when you could spend your day doing something else? Shopping online is so convenient! You have countless options, can easily compare products and prices, and there are also deals and promotions, the total price calculated at the end... all without needing to leave your home, without having to walk around a bunch of stores or haggle endlessly! So efficient and quick! Because, once again, your time is precious! Time is what you lack, time is what we offer! Time, time, time – transactions by the minute, consumption by the minute, don't stop, don't waste your time, we do it all for you!

Sorin V.: Why bother going outside when you can take your vitamin D? Although I too sometimes suffer from idleness and laziness, how do you feel up a pita or a vegetable on an app? And those promotions you keep chasing are also kind of a scam. I'm not saying we don't need apps and technology and efficiency and all that, just that we could have both options; one shouldn't exclude the other. This project isn't trying to encourage giving up on technology, progress, or efficiency. I would like the research to paint an overall picture of this type of micro-business and why it should be taken into account in urban development strategies.

And besides, we still have this fascination with aggressive capitalism - we dismiss everything that's not made in "Germany". Anything local seems to have a somewhat communist, uncivilized flavour. We want to become the West and cancel everything that's okay-ish about this country out of sheer frustration that things haven't worked out as they should have. It's nice to have products at your fingertips, and these stores actually do offer that: you just go downstairs, and you have a few, fresh products from people you know, who aren't just trying to sell you stuff; you leave with a story, learn something new, get to know your neighbours, etc.

Still, it's interesting that we turn even the decision to buy something into a conflict, everything has to be either this or that. Perhaps the goal should be to stop thinking that capitalism is the only possible economic alternative.

Eliza P.: Vandana Shiva² once said that productivity should be measured not in financial terms, but in terms of people's health and well-being. When we talk about urban trade, it may be important to understand what it entails beyond the exchange of money and products - as an integral part of community life.

Sorin V.: In the last couple of years, I've witnessed the closure of several neighbourhood stores in Timișoara and the surrounding cities. The reasons are generally well-known - high expenses, low sales, poor fund management, lack of financial education, regulations, etc., all contributing to the corner shop becoming an

² Shiva, V. (2016) 'DEVELOPMENT, ECOLOGY AND WOMEN', in *Staying alive: Women, ecology, and development*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

unprofitable business. However, there is another cause aside from economic and administrative reasons, namely the unfair competition from supermarkets.

A quick Google search shows that in the Gheorghe Lazăr/Circumvalațiunii area alone, where I used to spend my time, 8 Profi, 3 Mega Image, 1 Lidl, 1 Kaufland, 1 Penny, 1 Supeco, and 1 Carrefour have opened in recent years. The development of residential units and aggressive gentrification have created an unfair environment for neighbourhood micro-businesses. The only opposition these stores could put up against aggressive urban development has really been reciprocal practices, cooperation, barter, and so on. In fact, these practices have always formed social bonds and kept small communities alive: help between neighbours, friends, relatives, gifts, sharing, lending, mending, care.

Eliza P.: Community transactions versus financial transactions and perhaps even versus political transactions. It's interesting because, as you've mentioned at the beginning of this project, in a Romanian context, the neighbourhood store has often played a subversive role in times of hardship. During the Communist era, with its chaotic soviet queues, it is from local corner shops and grocery stores that you could get items under the counter, through informal arrangements. While I was abroad, you could still get cigarettes at Romanian prices from Romanian stores, or you could ask for specific products to be brought to you – pickled cabbage, pălincă. Even during the pandemic, these small stores sometimes opened after lock-down hours for the customers they knew. It may sound anarchical, but many of the restrictions imposed during crisis periods are extremely classist, and there is a need for community spaces that work as platforms for social opposition.

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Mass Media/Social Media vs. Community Media

Eliza P.: Media is an interesting word. One of the many words we use daily with the illusion that we understand them. Media mediates – but what does it mediate and in what ways? Communication between points of view and perspectives, perhaps. To mediate is an act of translation that filters the way we perceive reality not only as an individual experience but also as a collective phenomenon. Articles, reports, news, interviews – factuality – impact how we understand and navigate physical spaces, shaping our consumption patterns and social behaviours.

Sorin V.: Well, what we're experiencing now, they say, is the Post-Truth era. The concept of Mass Media and Social Media is from the start viewed with a dose of scepticism. I mean, ever since 9/11 and Brexit, pandemics, wars, protests, and so on, what we receive as information from institutions has become a truth cut down to 0.8g. It seems to me that we should mediate information differently, ask silly questions,

forget things, unlearn habits, and engage in more discussions amongst ourselves. Learn how to unlearn, I don't know.

Now, truth has become an ideal with many variables, and it's too broad a subject to debate, however, we have small, community-based truths that directly affect us, and information received from sources close to us with the intention of caring for neighbours and friends becomes the last line of defence against entities that restrict ideas, people, and civic spirit.

We seem to forget how to take care of each other, and almost everything that is being discussed or received through mass media are things that divide us – religion, sexuality, class, race, etc. In small, neighbouring communities, these subjects hardly ever come up, or they only come up as abstract declarations because you don't want problems at home. You manage, you listen, you learn, you respect.

Eliza P.: These topics are, of course, subjects that need to be discussed, but widely circulated information is globalized, abstracted, polarized – it is transformed, as you said, into absolute, uprooted truths. And yet, the ability to mediate and create media is not held solely by the printed or audio-visual press.

Sorin V.: Community Media pops up at the neighbourhood store and around the corner of apartment blocks. Aunty Gabi mediates information because she has involuntarily become the representative of a community through the simple trust she inspires. Regardless of whether the information discussed in a conversation with her is relevant or not, you know that her intentions are good, and someone actually wants to protect you. I believe that's what it should all be about: care and compassion should ideally dictate the mediation between the state and the population.

Eliza P.: Community Media, in the sense that local communities develop their own methods of self-representation and self-management through the production, circulation, and mediation of information. Information situated in physical space and interpersonal relationships. Media as a means of mass communication generally takes the form of written or audio-visual content, but perhaps an alternative definition, at least in its community manifestation, could include communication by word of mouth. Aunty Gabi operates as a moderator, and her store serves as a platform for socializing and exchanging information.

Sorin V.: Exactly. Aunty Gabi is simply fantastic; I mean we could make this whole project about her as a dissident, an involuntary leader, or an example of resistance against patriarchy. Since I've known her, she's been a real support for the entire community in the area - from opinion former, economic advisor, and therapist to mother, wife, and sister. She takes care of everyone, gives advice, makes recommendations, knows all her customers by name, and has a very courageous life story. Personally, my own life has become better since I got to know her. We've eaten, laughed, and shared stories together, all within the first 5 minutes of meeting.

In addition to all this, Aunty Gabi is also very well informed and up-to-date with everything happening politically in Romania. This is largely because her store often becomes a community platform where customers express their dissatisfaction with the state and, as you mentioned, media circulates by word of mouth and through personal and authentic experiences.

Word of mouth communication becomes an alternative form of media; it's fresh and necessary to hear a multitude of people from different social classes conveying something experienced and filtered through their own lens. It hits differently when you receive information from a real person. This is also a form of post-digitalization in the context of the exhibition at the Ștefania Palace.

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Connections, Materiality and Process

Eliza P.: However, local communities are, to a certain extent, difficult to get access to and difficult to represent, especially if you don't want to adopt an omniscient or detached attitude. I know we've talked about the desire to avoid the Discovery "Lost Worlds" type of representation, which seems to freeze certain communities in the past, making their disappearance appear tragic but inevitable.

Sorin V.: I just want people to go to their neighbourhood store as an exercise and experience what I'm trying to do here. Besides, for me, it has become an adventure and a part of everyday life to try to shop ethically, with principles, in an era where everything is changing and digitizing. It's also quite nice, there's not a day without something to recollect.

As this is a relatively new attempt to delve into this quasi-documentary area, I've encountered many restrictions, which I have otherwise accepted and respected, because I am aware of the importance of privacy and consider it a human right. Also, due to the lack of resources and my stubbornness to do everything independently, or perhaps due to the refusal to have something directed or constructed as a ready-made product for a gallery, I don't suffer from any sense of being engaged in an exploitative practice. I feel part of the respective community, especially now that I've moved to the area, and the fact that this is a pilot project has allowed me room for experimentation, testing, failure, and feedback.

Eliza P.: The documentary film, in itself, has its flaws as a means of conveying information or narratives. There is a tendency to perceive it as a kind of window into another reality – a transparent artistic medium that we often do not critically or aesthetically analyse. Ultimately, even in news or documentary footage, aesthetic decisions are being made, through composition or editing, which present events from situated perspectives. An experimental approach can work against the aesthetic conventions normalized in the classic format, to provide visibility over the entire

process. Visual anthropology as art creates a critical context for self-reflexivity and places a focus on materiality, but as Hal Foster³ has aptly emphasized, it also has its pitfalls.

Sorin V.: Well, the danger would be that artists could place themselves at the centre of a different discipline, with certain ethnographic principles no longer being respected, let alone criticized. Despite the artists' good intentions, everything would be reduced to a short-term commitment, based on temporary interests, and executed in a visual form.

However, there is also an interest and a gap in contemporary art that anthropology can fill because it is the science of identities and critical discourse, taking culture as a reference point, and because ethnography contextualizes field work. The reverse is also true, as Arnd Schneider and Chris Wright said: “[a]nthropology’s iconophobia and self-imposed restriction of visual expression to text-based models needs to be overcome by a critical engagement with a range of material and sensual practices in the contemporary art”⁴.

Eliza P.: Beyond aesthetics, as you’ve mentioned, there are also ethical considerations. Earlier, we talked about how the emphasis in today’s commercial transactions falls on efficiency and speed, while community transactions, or small trade, involve slowing down the process and shifting the focus to the relational aspect. In the anthropological or artistic research of communities, slow interaction and long-term commitment are also crucial for the development of ethical practices.

Sorin V.: You need to build relationships based on trust and respect, which means working within the limits set by people. There are also technical and emotional limitations - people become too self-aware when you have an entire team recording. However, I managed to adapt to Aunty Gabi’s comfort and that of the customers through unusual angles and frames; the narrow space didn’t help, but it was satisfying to simply go and exist in that place and be part of everything happening. Before I started filming at Aunty Gabi’s, I faced many refusals, and, to a large extent, this project is also about the right of communities to say no, to choose alternative ways of functioning.

Eliza P.: I find it very interesting that these restrictions and limitations are physically and sensorially reflected in the footage you’ve captured, and we, as outsider viewers so to speak, have limited access because the primary audience, those who will understand the context best, are the locals.

Sorin V.: For more context, visit Aunty Gabi’s shop, buy something, and have a chat with her. I’m just trying to open a conversation about the social role of neighbourhood

³ Foster, H (1995) ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’, in *The traffic in culture. Refiguring art and anthropology.*, ed. G. Marcus and F. Myers, 302–309. Berkeley, LA and London: University of California Press.

⁴ Schneider, A. and C. Wright. 2006. *Contemporary art and anthropology.* Oxford and New York: Berg., p. 4

stores and how they could function in the future. Because it's not about nostalgia for an imaginary past or stubbornly resisting progress, but about possible futures.

Eliza P.: Reimagining urban ecologies, not based on nostalgia but on memory...

Sorin V.: Exactly, the memory that things can work differently...

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