

The bazaar as an unconventional exhibition space. A case study

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore the bazaar as an unconventional exhibition space and to analyse its artistic and cultural potential, starting from a concrete instance, that of the Iași Flea Market. The research is based on the theory of design research developed by Christopher Frayling and uses visual methodologies, such as documentary photography, art installation and semi-structured interviews to investigate how informal spaces such as bazaars can be artistically reinterpreted and integrated into contemporary discourses about collective memory and cultural identities. Drawing on the works of theorists and artists such as Ernst Van Alphen, Nicolas Bourriaud and Walter Benjamin, it will be analysed how the bazaar functions as a living archive, in which objects circulate not only in economic logic, but also in cultural and affective ones. The sociological background of the case study also demonstrates how these spaces reflect and challenge social norms and hierarchies, while the concept of kitsch is examined in the context of class dynamics. The research results highlight the bazaar as a space of spontaneous interaction, of negotiation of aesthetic and affective values, proposing new ways of artistic presentation and archiving outside formal institutions. The article thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the bazaar as a complex cultural and artistic phenomenon and suggests innovative directions for interdisciplinary artistic practices, relevant both for academic research and for contemporary exhibition practice.

Keywords: bazaar, documentary photography, archive, collective memory, unconventional exhibition space.

Introduction

This research explores the bazaar as an unconventional exhibition space, starting from the particular case of the Iași flea market. Starting from a long personal experience with this space, the work analyses how the bazaar transcends its commercial function, becoming a complex artistic and cultural environment. In the midst of the visual chaos and seemingly banal objects, dynamic social relations and valuable fragments of collective memory crystallize that deserve to be documented and artistically reinterpreted. The “Memories Fair” project was a starting point for this visual and conceptual exploration, and this doctoral research aims to extend this approach through an

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interdisciplinary methodology that combines documentary photography, semi-structured interviews and artistic installations.

The research uses a theoretical framework that integrates concepts from cultural memory, archiving theory and relational aesthetics to re-evaluate spaces considered marginal from an artistic and exhibition point of view. Thus, the bazaar becomes a living archive, a laboratory of social and artistic experimentation, in which the spontaneous interaction between people and objects offers innovative perspectives on contemporary social and cultural dynamics. Through this approach, the work contributes to the development of new exhibition and methodological models, highlighting the potential of art to transform and use everyday spaces in contexts of reflection and creation.

Review / topic contextualisation

Following my participation in the conference *Culture and Creation. Doctoral Research as a Cultural Act*, held within the Doctoral School of the “George Enescu” National University of Arts in Iași, 2024, I presented the directions of my doctoral research, which investigates the ways in which contemporary artistic practices can transform an informal space like the bazaar into a place of cultural reflection and visual expression. The main theme consists of exploring the bazaar and especially flea markets in terms of a living archive of collective memory, a hybrid territory where objects, people and their stories meet in a continuous aesthetic and affective flow, not just as a place where commercial transactions take place.

My research approach aims to document this type of space through documentary photography, artistic installation and visual methods that activate cultural memory. The idea of working with objects and their stories – in the context of a bazaar – emerged after several personal visits and projects, but also from direct contact with this living social and cultural phenomenon. In contrast to institutionalised exhibition spaces (museums, galleries), the bazaar offers a spontaneous, chaotic, but deeply human medium of expression, in which affective and aesthetic values are constantly negotiated. This article starts from the premise that such spaces deserve not only to be documented, but also to be artistically reinterpreted, becoming sources of contemporary creation and reflection.

The bazaar as an artistic space: Unconventional exhibition forms and photographic practices of documentation and archiving

The bazaar as a cultural element.

The present research is based on a set of concepts and theories that provide a framework for understanding the bazaar not only as a commercial space, but especially as a field of cultural and artistic manifestation. The bazaar therefore becomes not only a commercial space, but also a complex cultural phenomenon

that reflects and influences the identities and social dynamics of the communities in which it is integrated. In this sense, the bazaar is understood as a microcosm of cultural activity, a space in which various social, economic and cultural practices intersect and mutually influence each other.

Defining the concept of bazaar from anthropological and cultural perspectives, I emphasize not only its economic role, but also its social and cultural importance. Bazaars are described as spaces of cultural exchange, where cultural and social diversity is expressed. They represent meeting points between the traditional and the modern, the rural and the urban, the local and the global, creating a unique environment in which cultural identities and influences are negotiated and reinterpreted. They also function as dynamic mirrors of society, adapting to changing times and highlighting the interactions between sellers and buyers, the negotiation of prices and exchanges, as well as the way in which these interactions reflect and reinforce cultural and social norms, including hierarchies related to class, gender or ethnicity. Thus, the bazaar recodes social dynamics in a visible and palpable form, becoming a scene of daily processes of asserting and contesting power.

A collective archive

Similar to the collective archive, the bazaar collects different objects, each of which is accompanied by a unique story and cultural imprint. Unlike a traditional archive, which is based on a formal structure and a process of preserving materials according to strict rules, the bazaar describes itself as an alternative, proposing an ephemeral and formally unstructured exhibition, thus allowing for the formation of direct and fluid interactions between people and objects. The logic of the bazaar therefore facilitates a transfer of knowledge and memory in a more organic and unconventional manner.

Ernst Van Alphen, in his book *Productive Archiving*, argues that archiving is not only a form of storage, but also an activity of collecting and recalling knowledge, independent of institutions. He identifies three major problems in archival science: decisions regarding inclusion or exclusion from the archive, the loss of uniqueness of archived materials, and the tendency of archiving to become a restrictive form of cataloguing. The notion of “archive” can be understood literally, as an institution of preservation, or figuratively, influenced by Michel Foucault, as a set of practices and rules that determine what knowledge is retained or omitted. The archive not only preserves information, but also defines what is worthy of preservation and what is excluded, thus establishing the boundaries of accepted knowledge¹.

¹ Ernst van Alphen (2003). *“Productive Archiving” Artistic Strategies, Future Memories, and Fluid Identities*, Valiz, Amsterdam.

A sociology case study

The bazaar is a vital space of economic and social interaction, essential for sociological studies. Different from modern markets and uniformed shopping centers, the bazaar stands out as a dynamic social ecosystem. Here, not only goods are exchanged, but also stories, cultural practices, and identities are transferred. The bazaar serves as a meeting point between tradition and modernity, reflecting and challenging social norms and structures. It provides an ideal setting for analysing social dynamics, power relations, and the formation of cultural identities.

From an anthropological and sociological perspective, Michel de Certeau's theories² about everyday practices provides a useful framework for understanding how seemingly banal spaces are activated through anonymous use and gestures. Thus, in the bazaar, every interaction – negotiation, gaze, touch – participates in the continuous rewriting of space.

The sociological study of the bazaar highlights the interaction between the informal economy and local culture. In contrast to the formal economy, which is governed by strict regulations and standardized codes, the informal economy of the bazaar is based on networks of trust, reciprocity, and local knowledge. This not only demonstrates the economic resilience of the bazaar, but also illustrates how it preserves traditions and culturally resists imposed globalization and modernity³. Thus, the bazaar is not just a place of trade, but also a space of cultural continuity and change, where the past and the present meet in a distinctive way.

The bazaar, therefore, emerges as a valuable resource for the study of contemporary sociological phenomena, offering a dynamic perspective on the interaction between cultural and economic spaces and the way in which they shape social and cultural identities. Due to its inclusive and fluid character, the bazaar facilitates the observation of the negotiation and redefinition of identities, power relations and the formation of collective memory, thus offering deep insights into the social complexities of everyday life.

Social class and kitsch

Within the bazaar, the concept of “kitsch” intersects with social class structures and becomes a cultural and aesthetic symbol. It often reflects the preferences, aspirations, and identities of different social groups. Kitsch is frequently described as an object or art form seen as tasteless or overly ornate, and is associated with the efforts of the middle and lower classes to imitate the styles of the elite. Within the bazaar, kitsch objects are widespread and function

² Michel de Certeau (1984). *The practice of everyday life*, University of California Press, California.

³ Aleida Assmann (2011). *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

as means through which different social groups manifest their belonging, aspirations, and cultural flexibility.

For many groups present in the bazaar, kitsch serves as an accessible means of simulating and embodying, at least symbolically, the tastes and styles associated with the upper classes. Kitsch objects, such as colourful souvenirs, exaggerated decorations, or replicas of luxury items, are used by buyers to simulate a higher social status. This preference for objects of questionable cultural or aesthetic value, as Pierre Bourdieu indicates, can be seen as a strategy by which the middle and lower classes negotiate their social positions and identities in a context in which access to “cultivated taste” is restricted. In the bazaar, kitsch objects are used by individuals and groups to construct their identities and assert their position in the social hierarchy. Buyers choose these objects not only for their aesthetic value, but also for the symbolic meanings they confer, thus manifesting aspirations for social mobility. These selections not only reflect personal tastes, but also collective strategies to position themselves in the social structure and differentiate themselves from other groups.

Kitsch in the bazaar can serve as a social differentiator. Those who reject it on the grounds of its lack of refinement or quality often position themselves as having superior tastes, associated with the dominant cultural class. Thus, the bazaar becomes a symbolic terrain of dispute, where social groups reaffirm and contest their status through the objects traded or purchased. According to Bourdieu, aesthetic tastes are not simple individual preferences, but reflect learned social practices and predispositions, linked to the social position of individuals. In this context, for the working class and emerging middle classes, kitsch can represent an authentic expression of identity and community belonging, while for cultural elites, it is often seen as an indicator of a lack of refinement and aesthetic education.

The bazaar space as a space for the cultural circulation of objects

The bazaar is a vital space of cultural circulation, where not only physical goods are exchanged, but also ideas, symbols and identities. Unlike modern commercial markets, which are rigidly organized and standardized, the bazaar functions as an open, fluid and inclusive space, where objects are subject to multiple cultural uses and interpretations. These objects are not only commercial goods, but also bearers of history, memory and cultural meaning, being part of a process of cultural reinterpretation and reintegration. Nicolas Bourriaud considers the flea market as a “formal model” of contemporary artistic practices due to its capacity to culturally recycle objects, recontextualising them and transforming them into artefacts with new meanings. Thus, the bazaar becomes a space of cultural transformation, where the meanings of objects are constantly negotiated and re-evaluated. This dynamic makes the bazaar an essential place for exploring the relationships between consumption, identity and cultural

memory. The objects in the bazaar, signs of cultural diversity, connect different traditions and identities, creating a cultural dialogue that reflects the dynamics of globalization and the process of mutual cultural enrichment.

The bazaar can be considered an example of “relational aesthetics”, a place where human interactions and cultural exchanges are aesthetically appreciated. It is not only a space for economic transaction, but also a field of cultural experimentation, where artists and visitors actively participate in re-signifying objects and creating new forms of cultural relating. Thus, the bazaar becomes a laboratory for artistic and social experimentation, in a way similar to Nicolas Bourriaud’s description of the flea market, where the boundaries between art and everyday life are often fluid and blurred⁴.

At the same time, when we discuss the physical goods traded, the fascination of the antique collector is a complex phenomenon that illustrates the desire to recover and preserve fragments of the past, giving them new life and meaning. Walter Benjamin explores in his essay *On the Concept of History* the ways in which old objects can function as portals to other eras, establishing an intimate connection between the collector and material history. Walter Benjamin believed that these objects possess a unique “aura” that charges them with aesthetic and emotional value that goes beyond their usefulness. Collecting, in his vision, becomes an act of recovering history and restoring cultural memory. Collectors are drawn to objects not only for their connection to the past, but also for the sensory and intellectual experience they offer, contrary to the rapidity of the modern world. In the bazaar, collectors transform items into personal relics, each piece having the potential to reveal forgotten stories and inspire reflections on the past. Thus, the bazaar becomes a living archive of material history, where collectors contribute to the formation of a collective cultural identity and the preservation of social memory.

From the perspective of trading physical goods, the presence of a phenomenon of the fascination of the antique collector is highlighted, which illustrates the desire to recover and preserve fragments of the past. Walter Benjamin, in the same essay *On the Concept of History*, describes the function of old objects to create links with other eras and how they, through their unique “aura”, go beyond simple utility, contributing to the recovery of history and the restoration of cultural memory⁵.

Thus, the bazaar, as a space of cultural circulation of objects, represents a unique setting for social and cultural interaction. Objects here are constantly recontextualised and reinterpreted within a process of cultural negotiation. This dynamic makes it a crucial place for the study of cultural circulation in the

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud (2007). *Estetica relaționară și Postproducție (Relational aesthetics and postproduction)*, Translated by Cristian Nae, Idea Design & Print, Cluj-Napoca.

⁵ Benjamin Walter (1999). *Excavating and Memory*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

contemporary global context, highlighting the importance of diversity and the exchange of ideas and objects in cultural and social interactions.

Methodologies of the project

The methodology of this research is visual, artistic and reflexive, built on direct interaction with the space, objects and people who give life to the bazaar. Starting from an in-depth visual documentation, the approach proposes an understanding of the bazaar not through statistical data or impersonal observations, but also through a direct and participatory involvement, in which the artist researcher becomes at the same time observer, collector, archivist and curator.

Contemporary artistic research requires continuous transformation, and the creative process must go beyond simple technical execution or the spontaneous expression of ideas. Any significant artistic project involves a rigorous research process that includes analysing the subject from historical, social, and cultural perspectives, using analytical and experimental methods. The artist, in his role as researcher, must explore and test various methods of representing and conceptualizing his theme, in order to ensure a clear and innovative approach.

Henk Borgdorff⁶ argues that artistic research supports the creative process, while also contributing to the expansion of knowledge in the field of the arts, offering new perspectives on the transformation of experiences into relevant visual forms. Research thus becomes essential for any large-scale artistic project, creating a framework for critical reflection and a deeper understanding of the interactions between artist, audience and cultural context. Without this process of investigation and analysis, the risk of producing a superficial or irrelevant artistic work increases considerably.

The central method of the project is documentary photography, used not only as a form of representation, but as a means of visual reflection on the spontaneous aesthetics and micro-narratives of the bazaar space. This is complemented by semi-structured interviews with vendors, collectors and visitors, which contribute to building an archive of voices and stories. Such artistic practice not only reflects reality, but also creates new ways of understanding the world, and this fact is described in studies in the field of artistic research, which conclude that creative exploration can lead to the development of methodological alternatives that would not have been accessible strictly through traditional research. According to the specialized literature, artistic research “helps to articulate our capacity to discover new ways of shaping

⁶ Henk Borgdorff (2012). *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Leiden University Press, Leiden.

consciousness and to design alternative research methods capable of generating economic, cultural and social capital”⁷.

Another important element is the collection of objects with affective, symbolic or formal value, which are subsequently recontextualised within an artistic installation. This becomes the space where memory, affect and aesthetics meet in the form of an ephemeral, accessible and participatory museum.

Archiving and documentation are now central elements in contemporary artistic practices, underlining an increased attention paid to memory, history and identity. Contemporary artists do not limit themselves to collecting and preserving materials, but reinterpret and recontextualise them, thus offering new perspectives on the past and the present. This approach metamorphoses archives from simple storage places into essential environments for the analysis and rediscovery of cultural memory. Sara Callahan⁸ highlights the idea that the phenomenon of archival art transforms archives into fluid and versatile structures, influencing historical and social discourses.

In the context of a bazaar, this aestheticisation of archives can take the form of an artistic installation that presents found objects in a way that highlights their visual and tactile qualities. An artist could arrange these objects in an exhibition, emphasizing how they function as fragments of collective memory and reflect the social interactions in this space. Thus, the bazaar becomes not only a place of economic exchange, but also a living exhibition space, where the past and the present intersect through art.

Many artists have used archives and objects as a source of inspiration, and among them Fred Wilson stands out, who exhibited his work “Mining the Museum” at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore in 1992⁹ – a work that represented a turning point in the world of art and museology. By reinterpreting existing collections, Wilson highlighted the marginalized stories of African-American and Indigenous communities, using subtle arrangements and provocative labels to highlight the absence or distorted representation of these groups in official history. This exhibition provoked a profound reassessment of the role of museums, showing that they do not have a neutral position towards historical narratives, but reflect dominant perspectives and dynamics. Through his innovative approach, Wilson paved the way for a more conscious cultural critique, questioning how history is presented and who controls it.

⁷ Estelle Barrett & Barbara Bolt (2007). *Practice as Research – Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, London.

⁸ Sara Callahan (2022). *Art + Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

⁹ Wilson Fred (2017). *BmoreArt*, retrieved from: <https://bmoreart.com/2017/05/how-mining-the-museum-changed-the-art-world.html> (accessed on 20 March 2025).

Another important artist to mention is Christian Boltanski, with the installation called “Personnes”¹⁰, exhibited at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2010 – a profound meditation on memory, death and the fragility of human existence. The work consists of a vast arrangement of old clothes, laid out on the ground and illuminated by bright lights, which evoke images of victims of the Holocaust or other human tragedies. The sounds of heartbeats, a recurring element in Boltanski’s work, add an emotional and intimate dimension, transforming the space into a collective memorial. By using everyday objects such as clothes, the artist emphasizes the universality of loss and how each object can become a relic of an individual life, forgotten or neglected.

Conclusion

The proposed research seeks to ultimately achieve an artistic and conceptual re-evaluation of the bazaar as a space for visual reflection, affective circulation and alternative exposure. Through this project, I wish to demonstrate that the bazaar is not just a place of economic transactions, but a hybrid territory where collective memory, material culture and social dynamics intersect in a form of living archive. Through photographic documentation, object collection, interviews and artistic installation, I seek to explore the potential of these spaces to become participatory environments, in which the public is a co-author in the activation of memory and meaning.

I seek for this project to be part of a contemporary dialogue with current theoretical directions and artistic practices based on artistic archiving, relational aesthetics and visual anthropology, proposing a critical approach to memory in informal spaces. Treated as an ephemeral museum, the bazaar becomes a terrain for the reconstruction of personal and collective narratives and for the reassessment of how memory can be exhibited, transmitted and contested outside of official institutions.

In conclusion, this artistic research will seek to demonstrate that marginal spaces such as the bazaar can become sources of critical reflection and creative expression, offering new exhibition, documentation and relational models. Finally, the contribution proposes new visual-artistic methodologies applicable both to other cultural contexts and in demonstrating that the artistic process can itself become a form of research, capable of generating knowledge, investigating cultural themes and offering new perspectives on reality through visual means.

¹⁰ Sanyal K. Sunanda (2023). *Christian Boltanski, Personnes*, in “Smarthistory”, retrieved from: <https://smarthistory.org/christian-boltanski-personnes-2010/> (accessed on 20 March 2025)

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