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# SANCTA

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# ZIANA

**Seeking connections with my lost folkloric heritage  
through dance improvisation and filming  
as design processes**

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Fig. 1. Still of Sofia Norman (2021)



Fig. 2. Still of Sarah Hansas (2021)

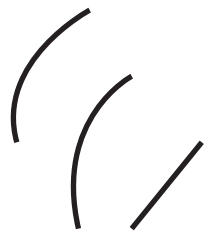
# ABSTRACT

During my childhood, my parents, grandparents and I lived within a spiritual way of doing things; always tied to Romanian traditions, country where I was born. For the common good of the family, when I was 13 years old, we moved from Romania to Valencia, Spain, my mother's hometown. In my adolescence, whilst living in Spain, I completely lost my connection with my Romanian folkloric heritage. Today, while living in the Netherlands, I seek to reestablish and explore that relation with the past that I forgot. To achieve this, I am using a specific folkloric custom as a study case and as a practical and metaphorical tool, being it the Romanian Summer Solstice, called *Noaptea de Sânziene* (the Night of Sanziene), celebrated during the night of the 23rd of June.

This thesis, divided in two parts, will begin by introducing my experience of *Noaptea de Sânziene* in the past, through my memories and my family archive images. I will afterwards show how I experience *Noaptea de Sânziene* today, by exploring a photographic digital archive, stock images and by unpacking my filmmaking practice, a short film structured in two different parts too. The first part is a classic and cinematic reimagination of *Noaptea de Sânziene*, while the second one is critical exploration of folklore fading.

Moreover, interviews were conducted with practitioners of the Summer Solstice from Norway, Sweden, Poland, Latvia and Denmark, to get a better understanding of the custom. In order to find out why this folkloric custom was fading in my life, and perhaps in other's lives too, I propose a method applied to filmmaking, which I call "planned embodied improvisation", making my filmmaking practice more situated, embodied and conscious. It is up to future research to explore whether it can be fruitfully applied to other fields of art and design.

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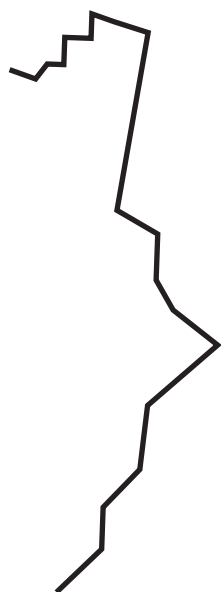
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# Introduction

This project derives from a feeling of missing out the collective memory of my Romanian folklore; a memory that I actually excluded myself from, as I am artificially remembering being part of it, but that I no longer belong to. As my main theme, I am exploring the *Noaptea de Sânziene* (The Night of Sanziene), the Romanian version of the Summer Solstice, practiced during the night of 23rd of June, as a way to find out how to reconnect with a forgotten folkloric heritage after losing touch with it.

Another main trigger of this project is also my feeling of guilt towards myself and my young generation, as we tend more than before to take distance from our heritage as we grow into adults. The exploration of this topic from a personal self-discovery to a non-personal perspective is enabling my practical research to find ways of making filmmaking more engaging, improvised and fluctuant, and why not, more appealing to my young generation. On a socio-cultural level, the thesis is exploring the general fading of folkloric motifs in *Noaptea de Sânziene*, expanding this observation in my practice, a dance short film called *Sancta Ziana*. The name of the short film finds inspiration in the Latin name of the emblematic white maidens of this custom, shown in Fig. 3. The name of a single maiden used to be called in the past in a similar way as the Roman goddess Diana, concretely *Sancta Diana*. The result of the title is a personal twist and morphing of the origin of the maiden's name *Sancta Diana* and its current variation, *Sânziana*, resulting in *Sancta Ziana*.

Choosing a folkloric custom mostly unknown to the audience and explaining my project a couple of times made me realize that, first of all, it needs a clear explanation for the general public. So, what is happening during *Noaptea de Sânziene*, you may ask yourself? During the night of the 23rd to the 24th of June, corresponding with the Orthodox Day of St. John the Baptist, the Romanian Summer Solstice (*Noaptea de Sânziene*), normally takes place in the entire Romanian territory, mostly in the central areas closer to the Carpatian mountains. On a mystical level, it is believed that the skies open on this magical night and miracles can happen, giving prosperity and growth to the humans and to the land. Running water is considered to wash away all the misfortunes and upsets of last year, as well as to help fulfill all desires in the coming year.

According to folk beliefs, the *Sânziene* white maidens start to dance and sing, as the world beyond is coming into contact with our mundane world. Also, the houses are surrounded by burning torches, as well as the cereal fields, hayfields, stables, so that next year it will be richer. Trading fairs are also usually organized on this day in several regions of Romania. In the past, this was a good opportunity for young men and women to meet, hoping to get married. To scare away the evil spirits, humans light big fires in some parts of Romania and, in some villages, loud indescribable noises are made at night to ward off evil spirits.

However, with the passage of time while living in Spain, I realized that I was missing the fictional visual universe of *Noaptea de Sânziene*: the possibility to dream, to reimagine other realities and not to be the only creatures on Earth. As a consequence of this feeling, the creation of *Sancta Ziana* is an intentional act of recreating my folkloric heritage via the medium of film in the contemporary realm. I see this as an act of oral and visual cultural transmission, as a "debt" to myself, to my family and to my culture. My practice, since last September, has included talking about *Noaptea de Sânziene* more than four times a week, amounting to a sum of 384 hours, accumulating to a sum of approximately 1152 hours by the end of this project.



Fig. 3. *Noaptea de Sanziene* celebration. Retrieved from <https://ziarulunirea.ro/noaptea-de-sanziene-obiceuri-credinte-traditii-si-superstitii-de-sanziene-331456/> on February 30th, 2022.



# The short film

*Sancta Ziana* is a short film based on improvisation dance as a movement technique, that questions the fading of the aesthetics, beliefs and biases of the current young generation about *Noaptea de Sânziene*, a Romanian folkloric custom, where ritualistic practices and a deep connection with nature occurs.

The short film is a one year collaborative process structured in two parts, both having a contemporary twist. The first part is more mystical, minimalist, cinematic, white and clean, specific with how the Summer Solstice is originally represented in the visual popular culture (see Fig 4).

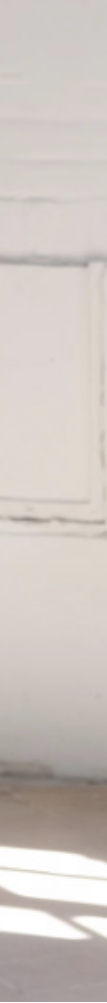


Fig. 4. Still of Part One of *Sancta Ziana* (Arnhem, 2021)





Fig. 5. Still of Part Two of *Sancta Ziana* (Den Bosch, 2022)

The second part of the short film is highlighting how the folkloric custom is perceived by people from other countries and how religion, among other factors, facilitates the fading of the custom. This part is more critical, brutalist, raw, colorful and messy. Accordingly, the structure of the short film is also the structure of the thesis, divided also in Part One and Part Two.

# Part One

SANCTA

# ZIANA

in the past



During Part One, I will introduce the folklore rituals that I practiced in my youth during *Noaptea de Sânziene*. I will also explain the rituals' current *status quo* and how it changed during time, together with how I work with archive material due to lack of information about the study case. Throughout the thesis, I am blending the theoretical and technical content with ritualistic practices (i.e. dancing, sewing, collecting flowers), motifs (i.e. the water, the tree, religion) and fiction and improvisation techniques with the intention to facilitate a contemporary, but situated and personal view on the topic.

# The empty lyrics and the spiritual

Flute sounds, colourful costumes, dancing in circles and excited screams; this is how people normally identify Romanian folklore. Throughout my childhood, I was never truly connected to that specific way of portraying Romanian folklore, even though my family members and I participated in a traditional folkloric singing and dancing group in the village Runcu, county Dâmbovița (see Fig 6, 7, 8 and 9). For more than 6 years, I took part in Romanian seasonal folkloric celebrations, such as “the transhumance”, easily translated as the migration of the big pasture between summer and winter. They were never appealing to me, even though we were all performing on the stage during autumn. When on stage, the lyrics of the songs felt empty to me, as the performance was sometimes too staged and too disconnected from what was bringing me peace and comfort.



Fig. 6 and Fig. 7. Pictures of my dad(left) and I (right) forming part of Doinitorii Runcului folkloric singing group during transhumance (Runcu, Dâmbovița, Romania. 1975, 2008) (family archive)



Fig. 8 and Fig. 9. Pictures of my grandmother (left) and me (right) forming part of Doinitorii Runcului folkloric singing group during other folkloric celebrations (Runcu, Romania. 1975, 2008) (family archive)

I felt more joy when the night of the 23rd of June would come. Perhaps it is because I was taught by my only living "grandmother", the sister of my dad, to live, meditate and grow within a spiritual mindset. We would go out in the fields and collect Lady's Bedstraw (*galium verum*) flowers to make tea and detox our body and mind. In the afternoon, we would go to the traditional trading fair and follow other small rituals specific to this celebration day, such as making a small bonfire in our backyard and go around our house with lighted torches. My grandmother taught me that it we need to do that in order to keep safe the house and garden. Unfortunately, we never took pictures of that day, as it was never seen as being a "celebration" day. However, I do recall a lot of family images of her surrounded by flowers. During the year, being surrounded by flowers was something that was only practiced during *Noaptea de Sânziene*, birthday celebrations (see Fig.11), weddings and baptisms.



Fig. 10. My "grandmother" (left; the sister of my dad) and my mum (right) surrounded by flowers after the night of the 23rd of June (Runcu, Romania. 1922)





Fig. 11. Acsinte,C. (N.d). *Costica Acsinte Archive*. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/costicaacsinte/> on March 2nd, 2022.

# Failing to define folklore

My experience with folklore taught me how this term can be something too personal to try to define. It might be almost an impossible task to do. However, I would like to combine two definitions that reflect my view on how I perceive and work with folklore. The words of professor Costantina Boghici in *An unusual folk event* (2010), published with the occasion of the Journal of Science and Arts, come in handy when trying to embrace and accept the variation of folklore in nowadays society, together with the drastic changes that it brings, but with the desire to still keep and look at the spirituality that it preserves. There is a need, then, to adapt to the changes that folklore suffers and try to question which elements of folklore can be explored, expanded and protected.

“ In the South-East of Dâmbovița County is situated a group of localities forming together one commune (...) In the area of this commune, major archeological discoveries have been made, which point out the ancientness of the habitat and reveal certain aspects concerning the material and spiritual life of the inhabitants of this area along the centuries. The existence of this settlement can be traced far back in history, as the finds of the earliest habitats in this area date from the Neolithic. (...) The research of contemporary folklore phenomena underlines the processes of transformation/adaptation of the folklore reality to the conditions of social life nowadays. The two apparently contradictory trends – the urgent research to save the traditional folklore consumer goods which have not suffered essential changes and the research of the contemporary phenomena which seeks the transformation processes – show the idea of the existence of two forms of manifestation of folk creation.” (Boghici, 2010, p.2)

The impact that folklore has in our daily life and the need to accept the change of its aesthetics and beliefs is, as stated by the historian and artist Wes Hill in the book *How folklore shaped modern art* (2015), “due to the cultural traditions, belief systems and performed exchanges that were once integral to the folklore discipline, and that they are now central to contemporary art’s “post-critical turn” (...) which arguably updated folklore studies to resolve its biases against technological progress and urban culture.” (Hill, 2015, p.3). Thus, it is clear that folklore can go over its traditional boundaries and also function as a methodological and analytical tool in order to critically engage with spectrums outside the folkloric scene, such as art, design or filmmaking, in our case. Folklore is then the backbone of societal changes, present in the way we deal with content, aesthetics and practices in many other areas of research.

In this way, I decided to work with folklore from the more sensitive, ephemeral elements that I experienced in the past, such as dressing up, dancing and enjoying the day, to the most actual, analytic data and technical aspects nowadays, such as visual cultural distortion, archive absence or digitalisation.



# Resurrecting folklore through improvisation

Myth, identity and conflict, as stated by professor Monica Simileanu et. al in the article *Folkmedia: A modern approach on preservation of Romanian Folklore Archive* (2015), published by the International Journal of Conservation Science, are the elements of folklore that can be reinvented, repurposed and resurrected in order to, applied to our project, find a modern approach for preserving the Romanian Folklore Archive and a higher engagement with the public. Consequently, these three elements became the sub themes of *Sancta Ziana*. To give a concrete example, in the short film, I am questioning the myth and identity by adding modern elements such as: the maidens don't come to bring love and joy to the man and woman anymore, but they try to explore their own existence by getting closer and attached to each other. The narrative also escalates in a way in which conflict is the driving force in the reshaping of their identity: conflict with themselves, conflict with each other, conflict with religion, conflict with the costumes that they are wearing, conflict with nature.

Additionally, fiction is the backbone of my research method, especially the element of fiction found in our research tools , improvisation and mythology. Fiction starts playing an important role in meticulously giving agency to improvisation as a working methodology. In the book *The Spectralities Reader*, edited by Dr. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Dr. Esther Peeren (2013), the example of the notion of the *ghost* is critically unfolding how talking about mythology can be an analytical tool in social and humanity sciences. Mythology has the potential to become an entitled research tool in order to tackle day-to-day inquiries, offering a more engaged line of thinking.



Fig. 12. *Sancta Ziana* stills of trying to embrace the changes of folklore (Arnhem, 2021)



# A tradition perpetuator

*I decided out of guiltiness that I had to talk about the Romanian Summer solstice until my mouth is dry; until I have no words left to describe it; until all my cells are tense. With the wind and with the forest, with the eyes and with the ears, with the camera, with the teachers, with colleagues, with family members, with strangers.*

I consider myself a failed tradition perpetuator that did not manage to keep, share and live with my Romanian heritage. Sometimes, I was even hiding my Romanian origins when someone would ask me about my nationality. Now, after realizing that what I did was unfair to myself and to my family, I decided to form part of a dance community again—just to feel that I am performing again on the stage and that I am accepting myself as a whole. I attended dance improvisation workshops every Wednesday (see Appendix 3) and I talked to the dance community a lot about *Noaptea de Sânziene*; maybe sometimes too much, which made me feel less guilty. In the setting of the Wednesday workshop, multidisciplinary students coming from different countries in Europe would have heard about *Noaptea de Sânziene*.

Together with Sarah Hances, Sofia Norman, Hannah Nadjia Olga, Sarah Maratson, Megija Maria and Chiara Heute, we gathered every Wednesday at the dance theater rehearsal room at ArtEz, Arnhem, discussing about the beginnings of folklore, how it is practiced in their countries and how do they relate to it. From September until February, we learnt diverse contemporary dance techniques, and developed an embodied experience that consequently created the main choreographic movements for *Sancta Ziana*. Our performances were task-driven, image-driven, poem-driven, imagination-driven, meaning that we would receive a stimulator related to *Noaptea de Sânziene* that would trigger our creativity in order to start dancing. We would reproduce rituals, such as dancing in a circle or scaring the maidens with fire torches or pretend that we are maidens.

Furthermore, I tried to make clear my positioning towards my project. For that, the idea of finding a new self by artifacting a short film, made me take the words of author Beatriz Colomina (2016) in the book *Are we human?* very literally. The purpose of this project, then, is mirrored by what she thinks about photography and filming seen as “(...) an act itself, a personal artifact. Artifacts are therefore never simply the representatives of human intentions and abilities. They are also openings, possibilities of something new in the human, even a new human. They offer (...) and some additional resistance.” (Colomina, 2016, p.24). My artifacting journey started by agreeing with the girls from the Workshop to document just for ourselves how the relationship with our body would change, at first glance, without thinking that it would become the base of my graduation project. Firstly, I didn't think I would make a short film, but a photographic series. After some feedback from professionals, we realized the workshop content was so powerful, that it deserved close observation and visualization, and filmmaking could portray it the best.



Fig. 13. Sharing stories in the Wednesday workshop and initiating improvisation (Arnhem, 2021)



Fig. 14. First contact in the Wednesday workshop. Megija (left) and me (right) (Arnhem, 2021)



A very clear example of an artist that is also trying to strengthen her relationship with her small village via her medium of work is artist Marie Rime (2017), in her photographic series *La Désalpe. Traditions as an Ever-Evolving Search for Collective Experience and Transformation*. Featured in the book *The Auto-Ethnographic turn in Design*, edited by professors Louise Schouwenberg and Michael Kaethler (2021), Marie creates masks and magic sticks with materials of daily life in order to connect closer to Charmey, located in the Swiss Prealps. She explores themes of staged rituals and she reuses the materials involved in sustaining tradition in her village, in order to look at the present to be able to question, perpetuate and critique the past and the future. In a similar way, I am intending to use film and improvisation as an engaging contemporary shift to *Noapte de Sânziene*, to experiment whether in this way, my generation would find an open door to engage with the festivity again: via not denying its contemporary mutation, as I did.

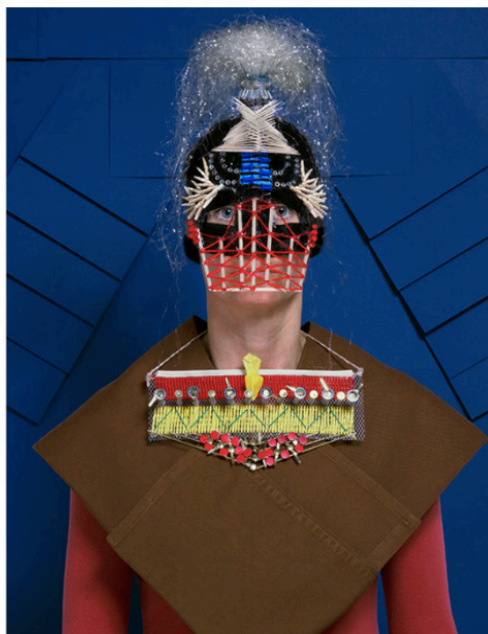
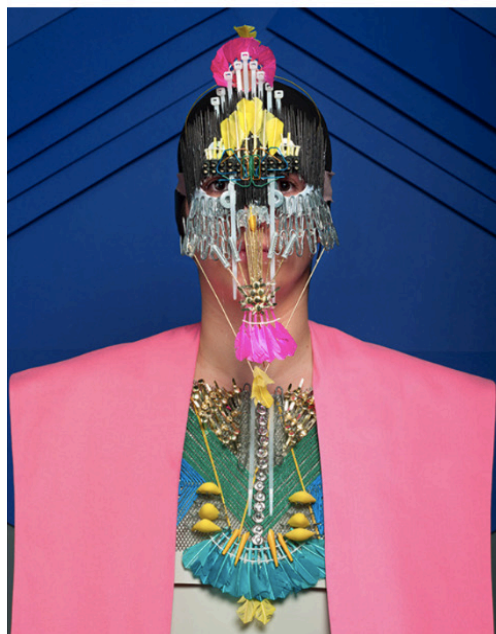


Fig. 15-20. Marie Rime,  
*Sans Titre*  
(Armure 01),  
(Armure 02),  
(Armure 03),  
(Armure 04),  
(Armure 05),  
(Armure 06)  
2013, photograph,  
80x65cm.  
Switzerland.



# The status quo

The current state of *Noaptea de Sânziene* is worth looking at. Apart from tackling the issue from a situated perspective, I decided to look at other similar cases around the world, such as the ones found in the book *Life and Death of Fiction. Modern monsters* edited by David Wang and Anselm Franke (2012) in the Taipei Biennial Journal. This book was the ideal source in finding a compilation of clear examples of tradition fading and the potential of fiction to engage with bigger societal aspects.

My thoughts strongly align with the main theme of this Biennial; the idea of the existence of a main monster <sup>1</sup> with which folklore and fiction keeps fighting for centuries. The evolution and current role of The *Taowu monster* in ancient China is giving us a clear insight on how folkloric customs go further in the layers of society than only their ritualistic and aesthetics biases. The *Taowu monster* is known due to its power to know the past and the future. From that specific feature, together with having "a humans face, a tigers feet, a pig's teeth and a tail, as long as eighteen feet (...), since the seventeenth century, the meaning of Taowu has taken on yet another dimension: as a fictional account of history" (Wang, D.W.D, 2013, p.23).

I was seeking to blame someone or something for the fading of *Noaptea de Sânziene*, as I tried to understand what provoked the change; a thought maybe a bit stubborn and unsubstantiated. Groundless, two lines of thinking started to arise: to blame religion and to blame digitalisation. Of course, I am nobody to put the blame on a situation that started to be more visible after the recovery from the Communist regime, but looking at other authors' perspective and using religion as part of the narration of the short film, this was an important element to consider.



Fig. 21. Still of *Sancta Ziana* simulating religion (Radu) stealing folklore (Sarah) (DenBosch, 2022)



Fig. 22. Still of *Sancta Ziana* simulating religion as the eating monster (Den Bosch, 2022)



After digging deeper and finding similarities with other authors, I can confirm that religion is one of the big elements that caused the fading of *Noaptea de Sânziene*. However, the other side of the coin is supported by political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson (1963) in *Imagined Communities*, where he puts the blame on nationalism; understanding that by nationalism any local tradition, sense of belonging, folklore, etc. for the substitution of religion; a point that is very much contradictory to mine.

It is therefore necessary to look deeper into the demographic relationship between *Noaptea de Sânziene* and religion to determine religion's role in "eating up" (consuming; taking over) the folkloric tradition. Evidently, countries such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden still consider the Summer Solstice a Pagan tradition. Countries such as Romania, Hungary or Bulgaria have a hybrid meaning related to it: it blends with the day of St. John the Baptist. However, in the case of Spain, France or Italy, the Summer Solstice is focusing only on the religious day of St. John the Baptist, completely taking over any mythological and fictional elements.

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<sup>1</sup> "You thought the monster was some dictator, but actually isn't even human—it is a system, a structure, a substance, a chemical, an ideology, an economy, a process, a fear, a ghost, a language, a border, an event, a story, a history. And it had infected all of us (...) Get ready for a globally deterritorialized geomagnetic regime that constantly adjusts and reconstitutes itself through a peace and pacification that is an essentially conservative restoration of tradition, virally producing new taboos, new methods of sealing, of hiding, of avoiding." (Franke, A, 2012)



Fig. 23. Still of *Sancta Ziana* simulating an escape from the overstimulating and chaotic current context of tradition (Arnhem, 2022)



However, digitalisation was also the catalyst of this situation to happen, having as a base argument my own experience. Being in touch with too many micro-cultures shaped my identity in totally opposite ways. From changing countries, to changing cities, from changing ways of life to changing friends and changing schools, my awareness of the self was more and more perplexed. The position of artist Hito Steyerl (2013) in the book *Too much world* is explaining the lack of our current generation's engagement with tradition due to overstimulation of too much information. There will always be something more interesting for the public; a standard imaginary that the public would relate to <sup>2</sup>. In alignment with Steyerl (2013) main argument, we will analyse in Appendix 6 how having access to too much information can eradicate tradition from a digital perspective by diving into stock images and Google Algorithm recommendations.

This nebula of too much information and too many strong political and cultural monsters made the digital research about *Noaptea de Sânziene* a big challenge. As I expected, there was scarce material available on Google about it, being barely represented in national or international museums and absent from official national documents such as the Journal of Ethnography and Folklore (REF) or the Journal of the Folklore Institute (IEF). The only public institution in Romania that still includes the festivity as part of annual celebrations is the *Dimitrie Gusti* National Village Museum in Bucharest, Romania.

Even more so, the emblematic white costumes of *Noaptea de Sânziene* in international exhibitions of Folkloric Romanian costumes are normally outlining the aesthetically colorful universal folkloric costume composed by the well-known suman (vest), the ie (blouse), the fota (dress) and the opinci (shoes). In the Fig 16, as seen in the online article *The Suman. A Romanian Folk Coat Fit for a Queen*, author Ana-Maria Bogdan (2020) creates a visual historical aesthetic evolution of the Romanian folkloric vest, which becomes more simple and distorsioned with the pass of time. This allegory applies to the costumes of *Noaptea de Sânziene* as well.

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<sup>2</sup> This argument is also sustained by author and professor Saidiya Hartman (2008) in *Venus in Two Acts*, where there is a clear natural selection of fictional characters during history. "What else is there to know? Hers is the same fate as every other Black Venus: no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all. Hers is an untimely story told by a failed witness. It would be centuries before she would be allowed to "try her tongue. It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive. Loss gives rise to longing, and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive." (Hartman, S. 2008)





Her majesty, Queen Marie on the deck of her yacht "Mircea" with the Romanian marines, wearing her national garb. US Library of Congress, 1924



Man's coat from Gorj (southwest Romania), early 20th century, 42½" long; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art



Romanian Newlyweds from Vâlcea or Oltenia, photo from *Les 32 Mariages Roumains*, 1893, 5½" x 3½"; Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art



The Romanian Coats  
Horniman Museum & Gardens (London, UK)



The Romanian Coats - Horniman Museum & Gardens (London, UK)



Man's coat from Gorj (20th century)  
Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art



romanianmuseum.com



Suman for men  
(nuntatraditionala.ro)



romaniadacia.wordpress.com



Princess Mărioara of Romania,  
also known as Mignon  
(Romanian National Archives)



The Romanian Folk Costume  
Hedvig-Maria Formagiu  
Bucharest, 1975



Romanian wool coat  
romaniadacia.wordpress.com




Romanian coat  
Nicolae Dunăre - Bihor Folk  
Costume, Bucharest, 1957



The Romanian Coats - Horniman Museum & Gardens (London, UK)

Part Two



Sancta



# Monα

in the present

I invite you to treat Part Two as something more engaging with the working process of my practice, the short film. The structure of this section consists of an introduction to the archive of Costica Acsinte and how I visually reinterpreted it when filming for *Sancta Ziana*. Further on I intend to give some insight about some of my art direction decisions, together with both a theoretical and practical overview of my proposed working methodology., the “planned embodied improvisation”.

# Costica Acsinte and Motives

In my endless search in the virtual world, I did not give up until finding a big digital archive of general Romanian folklore. I told myself: *It cannot be possible that I would find no trace of, at least, some online hints about what general annual celebrations were looking like in Romania in the past.* I found photographer Costica Acsinte's (n.d) archive named *Collection*<sup>3</sup>, consisting of approximately 7366 images<sup>4</sup>, retrieved from the platform Flickr and previously made public on his own website. Conceptual elements, visual motifs and storyline were fully shaped in *Sancta Ziana* thanks to finding the archive of Costica Acsinte. As I will mention in a further chapter, this archive helped me a lot to situate my blurred memories about my years in Romania and about *Noaptea de Sânziene*.

The process of working with this archive as a sort of inspiration for the short film was very much observational. I analyzed each image, using my judgment and assumption of which image could have been taken during/ around the 23rd of June; during *Noaptea de Sânziene*. Of course, this selection was very intuitive, but together with my short memories about the festivity, six motives became the main visual elements of the short film: the dance, the sewing, the water and the fire, the tree, the religion (see Fig 21 and further analysis in Appendix 2 and 4). I engage with this motives from an art director perspective too, using them as the starting point to give instruction to Sarah and Sofia when starting their improvising dance tasks for *Sancta Ziana*.

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3 Constantin Axinte was born on July 4, 1897, in the village of Perieți, Ialomița County, Romania as the second of the seven children of Costache and Maria. He became known by the pseudonym Costică Acsinte, present on the backs of most of his photographs. He graduated after the 5th grade in Perieți, as a mediocre student.

At the age of 18 he graduated from the Cotroceni Piloting School in Bucharest, but he did not obtain the pilot license (as of April 1, 1913, Romania had only 20 licensed pilots). With the start of the First World War, Costica Acsinte enrolled as a volunteer war photographer,[2] developing his own photographs as well as the ones of the Romanian pilots and reconnaissance missions. He also developed films for the French reconnaissance missions and even for Russian pilots of the 1st and 3rd Aviation Groups. He was enrolled in the photographic section of the Air Squadron 1 of the Romanian army.

4 See full digital archive of Costica Acsinte: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/costicaacsinte/>





Fig. 25. Acsinte, C. (N.d). Costica Acsinte Archive *Collection*. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/costicaacsinte/> on March 2nd, 2022.



# The motives

Reinterpreting a visual reference allowed the process to be both closer to the Romanian beliefs, superstitions and rituals, but also to be more poetic and universal. The effect of looking at the archive and imagining small stories for the motives made me nostalgic, especially when viewing how folklore used to be practiced in the past and how poor and non-contextualized my relationship with it is now. That is why I decided to show below in the Fig.26-35 the rough and harsh contrasting feeling that I have been carrying with myself during this whole film production: a painful constant retrospection from the past to the present and from the present to the past. However, as a filming direction decision, I did not want my short film to carry this nostalgic aesthetic, but accept the fact that time passed and this is how tradition is nowadays: it is about something else than what people wear and what people do; it is more about how we behave with each other.



26



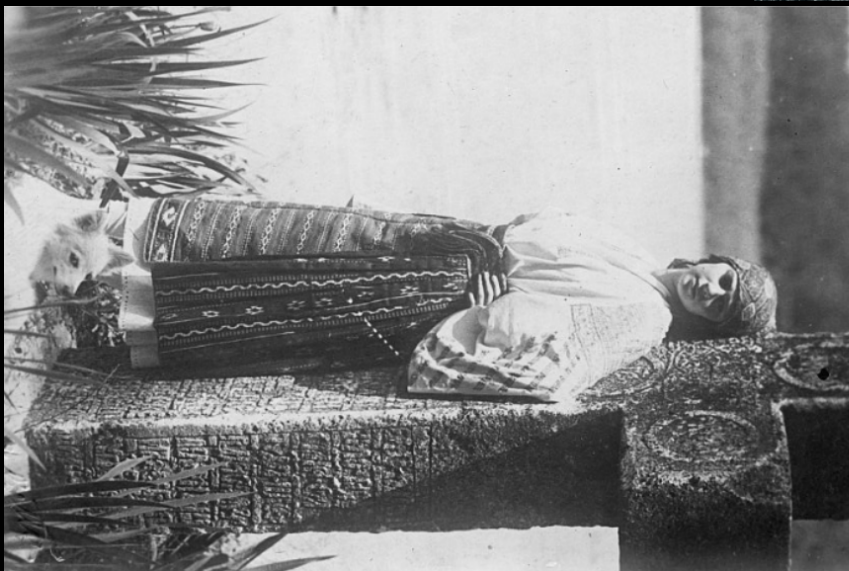
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Fig. 26-31. Acsinte,C. (N.d). *Costica Acsinte Archive*. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/costicaacsinte/> on March 2nd, 2022.

Fig. 32, 33, 36, 37. *Sancta Ziana* diverse stills, 2022.

Fig. 34. Sewing the first outfit for *Sancta Ziana*, 2021.

Fig. 35. Progress exhibition bonfire reinterpretation prototype. 2021.

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# The planned embodied improvisation

In perfect alignment with my intentions as a researcher, I attempt to figure out whether improvisation can function as a research methodology that can strengthen connections, first of all, between my folklore and myself. As a result of putting improvisation in practice, it had the power to make bridges between me, the actors, the medium of work, the storyline and the location of the short film. It is of utmost importance to mention that my practice until now was focusing on photography, being now the first time that I am making a short film, jumping myself a lot into improvisational decisions along the way.

Regarding the improvisational part used for filmmaking, it opened up a more-than-casual relationship between me, the characters and the new person that joined the filming, Radu, a Romanian Visual Art Student from the MIVC Art & Design Academy. At some point, when having to introduce to Radu the project, it felt like the project was not mine anymore, but of the girls. It felt like they knew more than I did about it and they found better ways to explain it to Radu than I did. Also, the fact that Radu is Romanian opened a new way for the girls to understand the topic. Radu was cold and unbothered by the topic, while the girls took the role to "indoctrinate" him and explain things that not even him was aware about: the girls knew them from me.

As far as I am concerned, the result of implementing improvisation as an explorative method in the production of *Sancta Ziana* had a big role in shaping that constant "updating" of a new myself that I introduced in the beginning of the research. Outlined also through the terminology of artist Philipine Hoegen (2020) in the book *Another Version: Thinking through Performing*, she creates the concept of *versioning*, being improvisation a key mechanism in unfolding the new self of the storyline, of the object of research and, above all, a new self of the short film after every filming session .

Therefore, both the research and the short film kept updating each other in parallel; the findings of the research can be seen in the short film and viceversal. As seen in Fig. 36, in the beginning, the narrative started from being more explorative, to become neutral and in the end more critical. At a specific moment, the research became the short film and the short film became the research. Also my thinking constantly changed from a nostalgic feeling about *Noaptea de Sânziene*, to finding practical and effective ways of engaging with it, to research about deeper elements such as the role of religion in the fading of *Noaptea de Sanziene*. On the other hand, my making, as seen in the three still shots of *Sancta Ziana*, also followed a big evolution, both regarding the camera language, the relationship between Sarah and Sofia with it and the change of location and narrative.

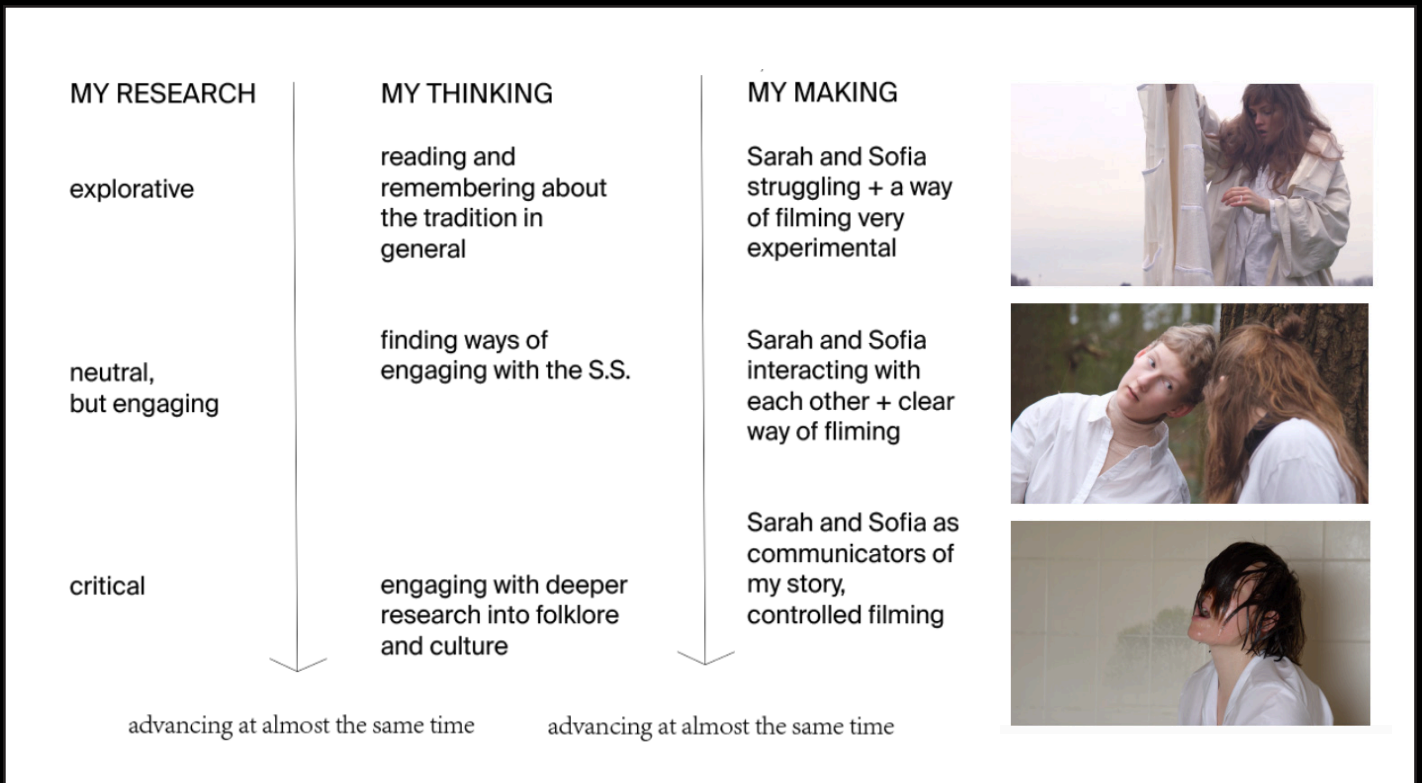


Fig. 36. Illustration of the evolution of the making and the thinking. (own illustration)





Fig. 37. Evolution of the Wednesday improv



# The relationship with the characters as improvisation

From not knowing Sarah and Sofia in September, to fully trusting that they would be able to communicate my story to a wider audience, there was improvisation at stake of our relationship growth. I have been purposely living with them for 6 months, trying to ethnographically unpack their personal connections with folklore. During this time, I was engraving into them beliefs, stories and anecdotes about *Noaptea de Sânziene* in order to make sure that they are prepared for the shooting days (see Appendix 1).

In *Sancta Ziana*, Sarah and Sofia formed a close relationship, becoming one indistinguishable entity. I am not sure if that was due to the fact that we decided to live together, or because of their high skills and talent in theater and interpreting. What was certain is that at the moment of the shooting, they started to behave with the camera and between each other in a very unexpected way: more grounded, more connected, more embodied.



Fig. 38. Spontaneous rehearsal (Arnhem, 2022)



Fig. 39. Still of living together with Sarah (Arnhem, 2022)

# The maidens, counters of an anomaly

After digging into the topic of folklore fading, there is no doubt that the white maidens of the Romanian *Sânziene* are a clear account regarding the separation, evolution, modification and fading of Romanian imaginary. In a similar way to the *Taowu monster* mentioned in the Taipei Biennale Journal at the beginning of the research, "we are talking about a liminal zone where the inhuman and the human mingle, a region that is politically and morally anomalous." (Wang W.D.W, 2012, p.23)

Being said that, artists and designers should take a position in blending that liminal zone by embracing the coexistence of different imaginaries and states of being in a bigger one. Nowadays, we are trying more than ever to create separated parallel and unhomogenised worlds, when there is such beauty to be found in letting other imaginative spaces connect with each other and with our mundane reality. I consider that it is up to our current generation to find which are the most effective, powerful, genuine and long-term resitant ways of dealing with folkore in order to keep it closer to our daily life; and one possible way is creating new narratives about it.





Fig. 40. Still of *Sancta Ziana* (Arnhem, 2022)

# Turning back the page

That being said, improvisation has been present in the culture of humanity since our very beginnings. As seen in the thesis, the improvisation part of the project opened up an unestablished aesthetic choice for the whole short film. It also enabled more interaction, outlining that the resulting artifact of research can become more situated, more connected to the small environment in which it is created. Reviewing the filmmaking and improvisational process, I can conclude that the method of the “planned embodied improvisation” opened up a more fluctuant, but safe approach to the topic.

By applying this method, my journey was not toxic anymore, but more universal, depicting the fact there is no folklore discussion without the people, the folk. The fact that sometimes I was not the center of attention of the research allowed me to take a non-stable role as an art director in the division of the agency of the project and look at the project from above. In this way, I could decide when I wanted to be the topic of research, when the girls would be the topic of research or when the folkloric celebration would be the topic of research, adopting non-linearity from the smaller to the bigger component of this journey.

Secondly, as I turn back the page, I am realizing that the absence of documentation of *Noaptea de Sânziene* can only lead to one clue: it was probably something that my grandmother incorporated from other parts of the country, trying to transmit it in our territory to future generations, including mine. Why was it only her that I was hearing it from? Probably, from a closer perspective, this is how in the past, folklore was being perpetuated, and now is my turn to also perpetuate it in the contemporary realm.

In relation to this, the main point that this research process highlights is that something so intangible as the transmission of folklore, can be actually sensed in actions and observations if carefully looked at in our daily life. Moreover, in the beginning of the research, I mentioned that I am curious to find out which new person I will be after this project, and the answer is clear: a person more eager to visually and creatively unpack the baggage that I have been carrying until now and to see which insights they can bring into my practice and research. Overall, I am proud to have been making this personal topic my graduation research theme and I am surprised to see how much impact rediscovering my identity has had in my art direction and my filmmaking development.



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## APPENDIX 1

# APPENDIX



Fig. 41. First shooting with Sofia in order to get comfortable with each other



Fig. 42. First shooting with Sofia in order to get comfortable with each other



Fig. 43-45. Location scouting together with Sarah; location that ended up being chosen for Part One of *Sancta Ziana* in order to outline the motif of the tree <sup>5</sup>





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5 During *Noaptea de Sânziene*, the tree is a key element. It has a big role in the narrative, as in: dancing around the tree, hiding in the woods, or making a bonfire from tree branches. It also shows the power of how the tree is forming part of the cycle of human life and of the maidens spirituality; of how their intertwined relationship is getting richer and richer by sharing a common element for both worlds: the real and the fictional.





Fig. 46. Location scouting together with Sarah; location that ended up being chosen for Part Two of *Sancta Ziana*, which inspired the relation of the short film with religion <sup>6</sup>





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6 The presence of religious motifs in Sancta Ziana comes also as a critique to the power that religion has in Romania, especially when it comes to ritualistic traditions, especially overpowering the ones that are not Ortodox. Also, Sarah decided that she would like to cut her hair short, something similar to the images of the ladies from Costica Acsinte's Archive. It was a surprise for me during one of the days that we would be rehearsing some shootings. We both considered that it was a perfect change for the switch in the narrative of Part Two: from the fairy mood to a more harsh feeling. Also, this is how she imagined that the maiden (Sarah) would look like if religion would take her role over.

## APPENDIX 2



Fig. 47. Starting my research journey with sewing a vest as a costume for Sofia <sup>7</sup>

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7 Choosing and sewing the costumes for the characters was the first step that helped me to transition from a thinking process to a making one, where the critical aesthetic analysis of Noaptea de Sânziene costumes was put in practice.



Fig. 48-50. First interaction of Sofia with the vest <sup>8</sup>, which enabled the improvisation to flow smoother and to determine the camera language





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8 Sofia in the beginning was so shy to interact with the vest that she was constantly apologizing if she would treat it in a harsh way. After the experiments that she made outside the shooting, the vest broke. It was never a problem for me, eventually the vest ending up being broken in pieces during the shooting of Part Two, as a result of an improvisational act of Sarah.



## APPENDIX 3



Fig. 51-55. Archive image compilation that were key elements in the find of what I wanted to research about. Picture of myself. Purse and dress are worn during the Summer Solstice in Latvia. Carpet own by my grandmother. <sup>9</sup>






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9 Looking back at my grandmother's carpet outlined lines of thinking regarding the fading of a traditional house, that I am not having anymore and that I am not living in anymore. The desperate search to find information about *Noaptea de Sânziene* would only show how much my whole family and house were stepping away from tradition in general.



Fig. 56, 57. A Midsummer Night's Dream  
*Noapte*





n as a key inspiration to decide to work with  
*de Sanziene*

## APPENDIX 4



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10 The Wednesday dance improvisation workshops had such a power for me as an individual as well, that at some point of the research I thought I would like to talk only about it in my thesis. They outlined how much I was in need of help; in need to interact with people. I found myself dancing in little corners whenever I would have to improvise.

11 Currently, people don't perform folkloric dances anymore, especially during the Night of the Summer Solstice. They read poems, visit exhibitions and collect flowers. As a way of showing my critical attitude towards this, I use dance improvisation as the strengthening of it all : to unveil the body, the spirit and the narrative. It connected me with the people, me with my story and the people with my story. A never-ending dance is also the last visual motif that ends the short film, where the characters keep spinning in circles in order to outline a clear desire to maintain the folkloric custom of dancing during the Summer Solstice night.



Fig. 58-60. Evolution of the Wednesday improvisation workshop <sup>10</sup>. We were getting closer to choreographic movements for *Sancta Ziana* <sup>11</sup>



Fig. 61. Individual rehearsal of Sarah





Fig. 62. Individual rehearsal of Sofia

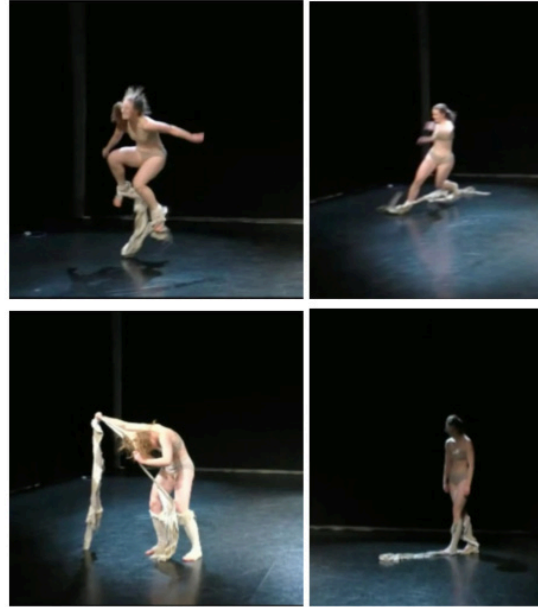


Fig. 63, 64. Individual rehearsal of Sarah interacting with Sofia's Vest



## APPENDIX 5

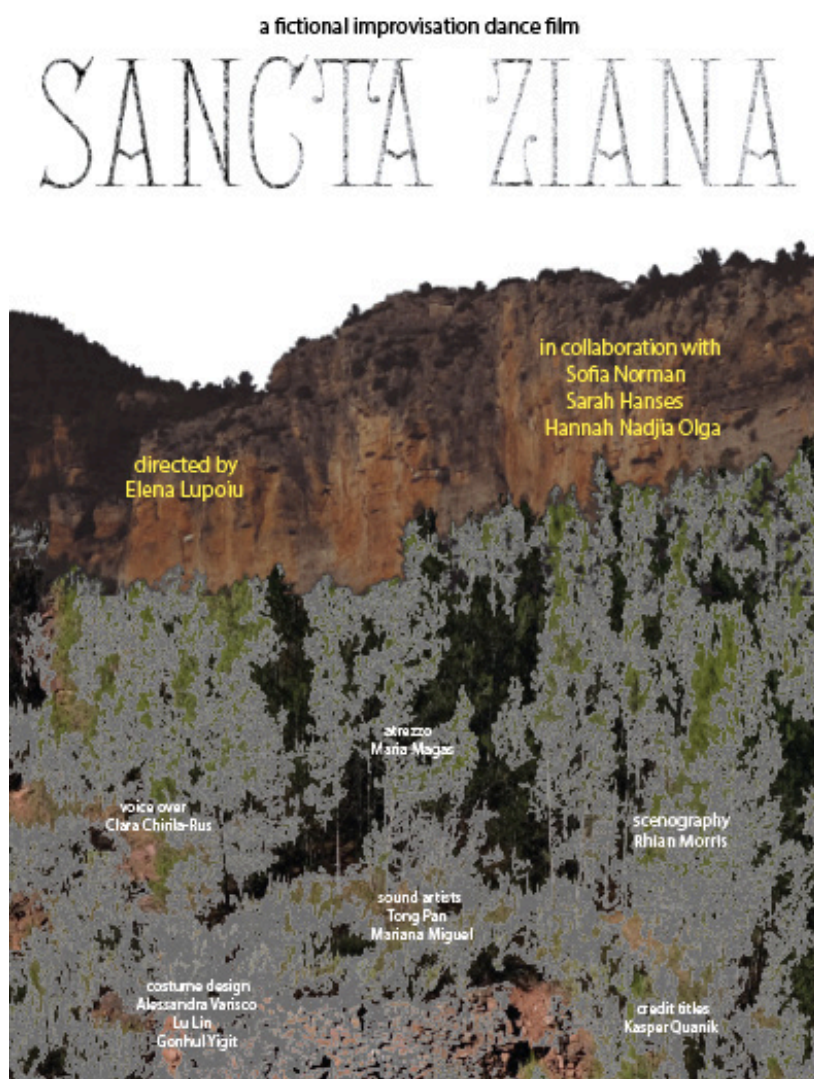


Fig. 65. First poster design prototype for *Sancta Ziana*

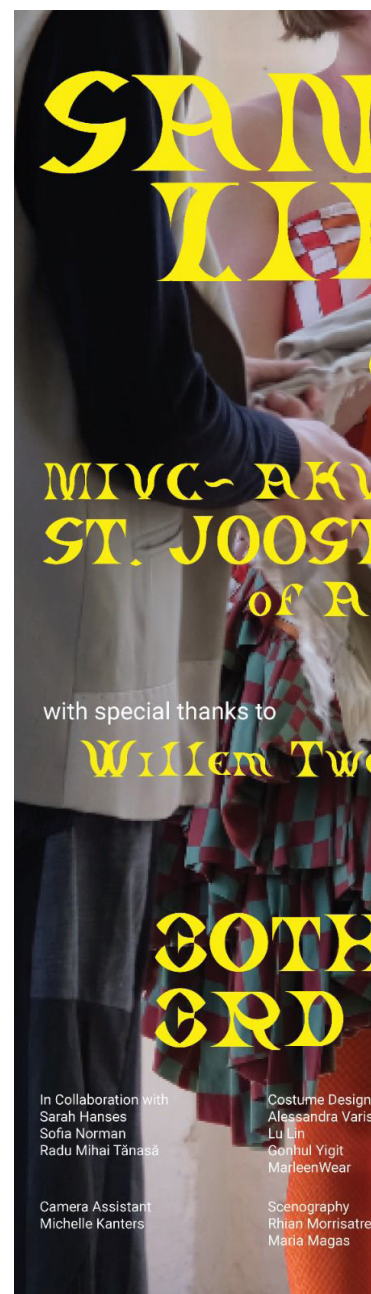


Fig. 66. Second poster design





A Dance Improvisation Short Film

SANCTA

Directed by Elena Lupoiu



ZIANA

Parrallelweg 21-23  
Den Bosch

With special thanks to:  
Willems Twee Poppodium



30th - 3rd  
june - july

In collaboration with:  
Sarah Hanes  
Sofia Norman  
Radu Mihai Tănăsă



Camera Assistant:  
Michiel van der Vliet

Costume Design:  
Alessandra Varisco  
Lu Lin  
Gonhul Yigit  
Marleen Wear

Scenography:  
Rhian Morris  
atrezzo  
Maria Magas



Graphic Design:  
Kasper Quank  
Ana Cojocaru

Sound Artist:  
Tong Pan





Fig. 68-69. Division into Par





Fig. 70, 71. First exhibition prototype for *Sancta Ziana* <sup>12</sup>





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12 First attempt to simulate a fire, together with a zine that contained the main body of inspirational images of the research. My intention was to create an imaginary and atmosphere as if the maidens would be in the room. The vest that Sofia was wearing in the Part One is hanging up from the ceiling. The images of the maidens are in the fake fire, as a way of outlining how they fear the fire, but how the humans reject them by using it during the day of the celebration. After all, I still decided that I preferred a dark setting for the screening of the project.



# APPENDIX 6

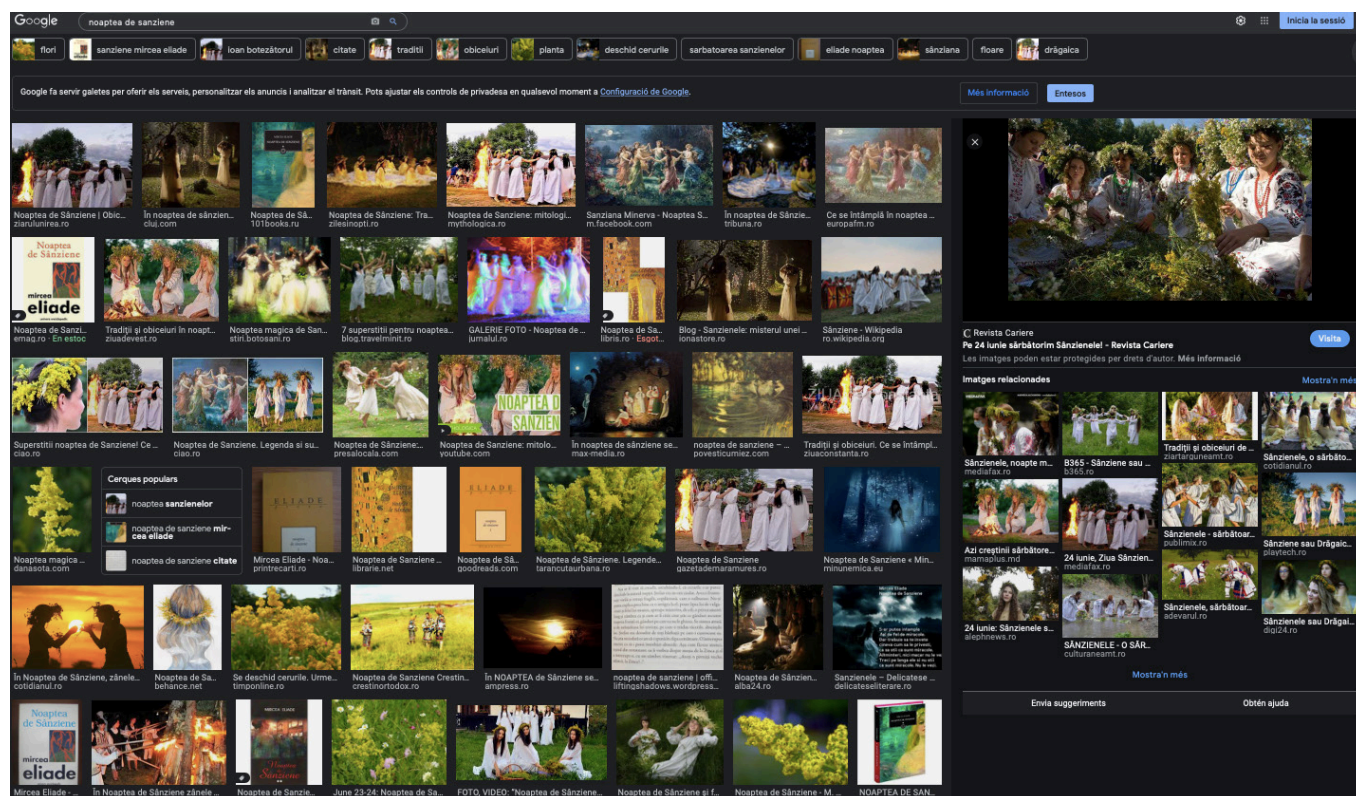


Fig. 72, 73, 74. Identical stock images and distortions Google Algorithm <sup>13</sup> when searching for the Summer Solstice (*Noaptea de Sanziene*) in another countries in Europe





13 I stumbled upon a lot of fake, staged stock footage while researching about *Noaptea de Sânziene* and I challenged myself to see what the Google Algorithm recommended to me while searching. The result was a totally errand view of what the festivity looks like versus how it is misunderstood with countries such as Latvia, Poland, Norway, etc. First I was googling: Summer Solstice Romania, then Summer Solstice Latvia, trying all of the countries in Europe. After that, I followed the google recommendation only for Romania, ending up with colorful masks and totally different customs practiced in the country, the search still having *Noaptea de Sânziene* in the description.

The distorsion and lack of both digital and analogical information shaped my next step in this exploratory journey. The feeling of anger towards this issue completely took over and I decided to spend hours in finding a complex visual archive that would give me the motivation to still "fight" to keep this festivity alive, which ended up being Costica Accinte's archive.

## APPENDIX 7

### Questions extracted from interviews with practitioners of the Summer Solstice from other countries in Europe

*What do you think the Summer Solstice is giving to you?*

Well, what we do in Latvia, as well as in Romania, is that we collect flowers from the ground that can be used for tea, and especially medicine. We make a sort of re-stock for the whole year with plants that will clear our gut system. It is also giving to my countries a lot of babies, as you know what other things normally happen during the Summer Solstice.

*Do the Summer Solstice makes you feel that you take part of a community??*

To be very honest, in Sweden, the Summer Solstice is the only moment when I can manage to drink and have fun with my family. It is also the day of the year when strangers are not strangers to each other anymore. We tend to be very cold, but during that day we all loosen up our boundaries.

*Do you think about traditions in your everyday life??*

For me, it is impossible not to think about it. In Latvia, tradition is very tied up to paganism too, so in my house, for example, it is full of symbols and objects that have engraved small writings on them. Some of those objects we bring them with us as a sort of a lucky charm. The same engravings can be found in the traditional costumes of Midsummer too.

*What would it be you contemporary contribution to tradition, if there is any?*

I would like the world not to forget their roots. In my Denmark, luckily, we still believe in maidens and Gods, and on a daily basis, I would love to have these things more present. Even listening to a spiritual playlist that opens up imagination can be a step closer to not loose folklore. I would like to create something that will make ourselves more personal, not so identical to each other. Tradition and small cultures can help in preserving our uniqueness.

*On a more concrete level, what are the entry points that opened up the narrative to tell this story?*

I remember I was very curious about the concept of the opening of the deep time. In the first year of the MA we had a workshop by Cocky Eek, Jarl Schulp and Mark Izjerman about deep listening, and somehow, at the end of my studies, all the things that I have been picking up during the two years magically connected. The idea of the maidens giving growth and wealth to the fields, fertility to the woman and the existence of a cosmic harmony made me want to build that universe in our current times. As we all know, the situation is not that mystical in our contemporary world.

*Do you think there are similarities between your country and the Romanian Summer Solstice?*

As the fire is very important in Romania, in Poland it is actually the main attraction of the Summer Solstice. *Noc Kupały*, as called in Polish, is practiced by people by lighting up lanterns and making wishes. However, even something as simple as that is practiced in areas of Poland with better economy, becoming a turistic activity and a small part of the motor of the economy too. However, it is not really a big thing for teenagers in Poland.

*How do you think the very young generation is educated about Summer Solstice now?*

In Denmark, both when I was a kid, and also hearing from my little cousin, they are learning specific songs that they only sing during the Summer Solstice. I still remember all the lyrics from the ones that I learnt too. I somehow think these little things follow us until we are old.

*Do you think there is a role of religion in the distortion of traditions?*

Well, indeed. What you mentioned to me about the aesthetics of the Summer Solstice in Romania and the small rituals, they actually happen in my country during Christmas. The custom is called Sankta Lucia and we sing carols and we are dressed in white with flower crowns on our head. Also, we have a sort of queen maiden that is chosen every year in the group, which is the human equivalent of Sankta Lucia.

*Do you have any specific recommendation for the short film Sancta Ziana?*

I would advise you to keep the idea of integrating colorful costumes in the second part of the short film. Apart from showing that you are critiquing the fading of the Summer Solstice and its misinterpretation with other colorful aesthetics of other customs from Romania, they remind me a bit of Spanish costumes too. That can be cool to outline the duality that you mentioned you are suffering from with your personal identity.



## Questions addressed back to me from interviews with practitioners of the Summer Solstice from other countries in Europe

*What is the Night of Sanziene composed of?*

The mystical characteristics of the main protagonists, the white maidens, the heavy air and the smelly fire are the first things that come to my mind if I think back on how I remember the stories about the Night of Sanziene.

*What are exactly these white maidens doing, as seen by the popular belief?*

There is not a lot of online material, so the whole tradition is still up to speculation and generational transmission. Under the popular belief, Sanzienele are very beautiful girls who live in the forests or fields unexplored by people. They float in the air or walk on the ground on the night of June 23 to June 24, dancing and singing.

*So I assume it is celebrated on the night of June 23rd?*

Yes, the same day as Saint John the Baptist. We can talk further about the religious aspect of this tradition on a deeper level. They are pretty interesting in my view.

*Is there something in this custom that catches your attention about them, that you decided to produce a short-film about it?*

On the one hand, they would never go against their principles, never doubt about subjective measures: why do people don't follow their rituals now? Also, unlike Rusalii (the Pentecost), which are bad fantasy beings, Sanzienele are believed to be good fairies. However, they can turn into bad forces if this day is not respected, and they can start storms and bring hail, leaving the field without crops and the flowers without cure. June 24 is a day of rest, and no one should do any kind of physical work on this day.

*On a more concrete level, what are the entry points that opened up the narrative to tell this story?*

I remember I was very curious about the concept of the opening of the deep time. In the first year of the MA we had a workshop by Cocky Eek, Jarl Schulp and Mark Izjerman about deep listening, and somehow, at the end of my studies, all the things that I have been picking up during the two years magically connected. The idea of the maidens giving growth and wealth to the fields, fertility to the woman and the existence of a cosmic harmony made me want to build that universe in our current times. As we all know, the situation is not that mystical in our contemporary world.

*Were you considering talking about other traditions too?*

Of course! First, I wanted to talk about the tradition that has been the closest to my family, being it *Ravasitul Oilor*, or the popularly called The Ascendance of the Sheep to the Mountain. The images of me and my family are normally taken in that sort of festivity. However, I was always more curious about the Summer Solstice/ the Night of Sanziene, especially after having conversations with people from Norway, Sweden and Poland.

*How do you connect this custom with your research?*

Engaging with this custom was a method for clarifying where my constant struggle between the two identities comes from. A little answer that I gave to myself is due to one's lack of stimulating a cultural imagination, while the other is the opposite; opening hundreds of horizons. Engaging and embracing my forgotten folkloric heritage was intrigued by my intention of picking one custom that both me and my family used to celebrate. Picking a custom and exploring it came as a challenge for me, as I had to re-learn about it, same as when I used to do as a little kid.

*What is the clear structure of the short film?*

Sancta Ziana is composed by two parts: one more mystical, minimalist and clean, specific with how the Summer Solstice is actually represented in the visual popular culture. The second one is a combination of how people in other countries visually perceive it; colored costumes, brutal and highly ritualistic.

*What aspects appearing in the short film are related to the Romanian Summer Solstice? Or do you prefer not to reveal them?*

Well, first of all, the reinterpreted white costumes, together with a performative dance are the key elements that can be easily recognised in the Summer Solstice. The fire and the Jasmine flower crowns is something that I have been having doubts about whether I should integrate them in the film or not. In a way, I did not want to give a clear identical documentary type of representation. They were, however, included in the exhibition setting. The second part of the short film is highlighting how the folkloric custom of the Summer Solstice in Romania is perceived by people from other countries. I felt that I cannot talk about what the custom is, without talking about how it is perceived to be.

