

Hands on



A hands-on experience: marking time in Măgura

By Paul Evans



I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep rooted: places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin ... (Perec 1974, 91).

From *Species of Spaces* by Georges Perec



Taking in the panorama from the tell (a man-made hillock) that underlies the village church, one can't help but sense an almost tangible permanence emanating from the landscape surrounding Măgura.

But this, in contradiction to the desired-for *untouched places* in the above quote from Perec, is clearly a landscape that has been *touched* by the hand of people. The mound indicates, by its relatively modest physical presence, a history of settlement going back over 8,000 years. Throughout this time human eyes have overlooked the ever changing meanders of a river whose constant evolution predates us but which has slowly lain down, in gravel and sand, the conditions and context for human occupation.



What were the first marks made here by members of our species? What were the first signs of our passing through? One might, perhaps, think of footprints in mud or snow, or perhaps envisage the impression of a warm body lain in a soft bed of gathered leaves or rushes; but these marks would have been made without intention. In fact the *intention* might have been to avoid creating signs that might have been read by predators or by other, potentially hostile, groups of human beings.

I first saw the *Gulgum Manja* or Cave of Hands in the Grampians National Park, Western Victoria, Australia (a place that the indigenous peoples call *Gariwerd*) around 15 years ago. It consists of a frantic mass of right hand prints made on blood-red sandstone. What makes the *Gulgum Manja* so affecting to modern eyes is the presence of the hands of men, women and children – it is a succession of family albums made by the impressions of warm flesh pressing on

cool sandstone. Although these vibrant shadows (made, in fact, by the delicate act of blowing paint from the mouth to leave a stencil/shadow shape of fingers, thumb and palm) were kept at a distance of somewhat more than arm's length



by an ugly metal grill (installed to protect the paintings from modern vandalism), they still had a direct, physical and palpable power to communicate meaning.



The choice of site, sheltered as it is from the elements that might weather away these marks, would clearly suggest a desire for permanence, an intention to create something deep rooted; a place to return to, perhaps repeatedly over time, to imprint a collective identity upon a space, to leave a special mark for a particular people within their land. Other hand-stencil paintings occur in other cultures and date from other times. They are separated by continents and by many thousands of years. There is a Cave of Hands (Cuevo de las Manos) in the province of Santa Cruz, Argentina, which dates back over 10,000 years – predating the human activity that has been documented within Teleorman County by two millennia. Going back even

further into deep time, hand stencils can be seen in close juxtaposition to the famous, 25,000 year old horse paintings of Peche Merle, which lie deep in caves beneath the Lot Valley in Southern France. They are part of a sublime series of interventions made by people from the Gravettian culture.









In David Lewis-Williams book *The Mind in the Cave*, he interprets this particular juxtaposition between hand prints and horses as a 'meaningful composition' perhaps representing a shamanic *dissolving* of the thin membrane between the 'spirit world' and our own, which existed here, for them, in these underground chambers and passages (Lewis-Williams 2002, 218).

Michel Lorblanchet who, according to Lewis-Williams, had considerable anthropological experience in Australia, investigated the blown handprints in Peche Merle in the light of what he had learned about aboriginal painting techniques:

The method of spit painting seems to have had in itself exceptional symbolic significance to early people. Human breath, the most profound expression of a human being, literally breathes life onto a cave wall (Lewis-Williams 2002, 220).

Even so, Lorblanchet, who used chewed up charcoal in his experiments, was





apparently discouraged from using Manganese dioxide - a common pigment in use during the Upper Paleolithic - on account of the fact that accidental swallowing might result in serious health problems!

How might an intervention from the past breathe new life in the present? The intention of 'Cave of Hands', the workshop, was to carry this cultural idea from the landscape of southern Australia into a very different place, into the classroom of a village school in southern Romania. By including the hands of teachers, parents and the archaeologists and artists sharing these moments in time, in this space, the idea was to fix something transient in a very simple and direct way, in a *form* that bypassed any problems of verbal communication

I was delighted by the enthusiasm with which all members of the community entered into this task, by the ease with which the idea was communicated and by the very apparent pleasure that our participants showed when



making their mark. What seemed most important here was not only the individual contribution but also the 'co-operative mode of making'. Again, in *The Mind in the Cave* Lewis-Williams states that the blowing of the paint need not to have been done by the person holding his or her hand to the rock; perhaps it could have been blown by an officiating person, perhaps the participants took turns (Lewis-Williams 2002, 219)?



What remains both then and now is the proof of physical contact, proof of participation.

Of course there is one very different process at work today. The object created in Cave of Hands the Workshop has been *fixed*. Firstly, physically with hairspray bought in Alexandria and then through digital photography. It doesn't need a rock shelter to survive. Through meticulous documentation it has become *history*; and by collecting the names of the participants we have preserved them, in contrast to the anonymity of





the subjects of its ancient precedents. Evidently this changes its nature considerably, because the Cave of Hands Workshop is a product of the living, we can't *imagine* the nameless ghosts waving to us from those subterranean passages.

Handprints like the hands of a clock, fixed in their moments yet endlessly indicating the passing of time.

Bibliography

Lewis-Williams, D. 2002. *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Perec, G. 1974. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. London: Penguin Classics.