

The Life and Afterlife of the Archive

Ewa Partum's and VALIE EXPORT's Archives

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Introduction

Artistic archives and the archival processes occurring within them are an essential part of historical and contemporary artistic practices and are theorized, historicized, and presented in a variety of ways. The latest approach understands artistic archives as a product of both their holdings and their usage,¹ paying attention to the production of processual knowledge within various complementary operations consisting of updating and reconfiguring the artistic archive, and emphasizing the continuousness of these processes.²

This paper combines a problem-oriented approach—an emphasis on artistic archives understood as transforming and transformative apparatuses—with a comparative method. The comparison of the artistic archives of Ewa Partum and VALIE EXPORT does not merely aim to uncover their correspondences or to understand them against one another but rather tries to rearticulate the specificities and differences between these hybrid and media-invested artistic practices. It must be emphasized that within this comparative transnational approach the artistic archives, despite having been created in two different sociopolitical contexts, are brought together. Taking into account contextual differences in relation to the development of these artistic practices in the socialist East and the “former” West, as well as their political and economic interdependencies, it is necessary to narrow down the field of comparison and to ask questions that are as specific as

1 Barbara Büscher and Franz Anton Cramer, “Introduction,” in *Fluid Access: Archiving Performance-Based Arts*, eds. Barbara Büscher and Franz Anton Cramer (Hildesheim: Olms, 2017), 61–65, 63.

2 Büscher and Cramer, “Introduction,” 62.

possible. When comparing the archives, I focus on the problem of the archive as a switch between public and private spheres not by analyzing documents in which “the private and professional are inseparable”³ but by looking at the strategies of instituting the archives and their passage toward afterlife within Ewa Partum’s and VALIE EXPORT’s artistic practices.

The title of this paper references Peter Osborne’s essay’s title: “Archive as Afterlife and Life of Art,” which deals with the issue of the postconceptual ontology of contemporary art.⁴ Osborne focuses his attention on the ontological homogenization of an art object and its documentation, which implies an extended concept of the archive that he defines as an intrinsic part of a contemporary artwork. He emphasizes that postconceptual “work includes its own documentation and, to the extent that it proliferates and its materializations are collected, its own archive as well.”⁵

Artistic archives analyzed here have been generated within the practices that can be understood as postconceptual in the sense proposed by Osborne. However, I would like to move a step away from a discussion of an artwork and consider instead the “life and afterlife” of the archive—not to examine its ontological status but to define modes of its existence within contemporary art infrastructures. My understanding of art infrastructures follows the proposition formulated by Irit Rogoff to think of infrastructure beyond the limits of material and administrative constraints and to conceptualize it as productive rather than restrictive:⁶ as not only something that facilitates delivery but as “a set of protocols that bind and confine us.”⁷

3 Beatrice von Bismarck, “Arena Archive; Artistic Self-Archiving: Processes and Spaces,” in *Interarchive: Archivarische Praktiken und Handlungsräume im zeitgenössischen Kunstfeld* = *Interarchive: Archival Practices and Sites in the Contemporary Field of Art*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Diethelm Stoller, and Ulf Wuggenig (Cologne: König, 2002), 456–460, 457.

4 Peter Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays* (London: Verso, 2018), 123–31.

5 Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, 129. Osborne also writes about an incompleteness of the reduction of the social objectivity of works and documents to the image in the current digital regime, arguing that in such cases their afterlife is their life.

6 This is a quotation from “Infrastructure,” a keynote lecture delivered by Irit Rogoff during the Former West project’s research congress Documents, Constellations, Prospects, which took place March 18–24, 2013, at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. A recording of the lecture is available at: <http://www.formerwest.org/DocumentsConstellationsProspects/Contributions/Infrastructure>.

7 Keller Easterling describes infrastructures as something that have a capacity and currency not of text but rather of software: “an operating system that makes certain things

Within this theoretical framework I consider two modes of existence of the artistic archive, appropriating and extending the metaphor formulated by Osborne. These modes do not have to be temporally separated and can form a single continuum. The *life of the archive* considers its becoming and forming, or its making, by the artist and her collaborators. The life of the archive concerns, therefore, a multilayered processes of translations: from notes/models to an artwork/art project, from an artwork to documentation, from documentation and remains into an archive. It also considers archival philosophy inscribed implicitly and explicitly in the artistic processes and processual knowledge produced within and during these processes. Stage two, the *after-life of the archive*, does not imply lifelessness of stored documents, as Derrida's metaphor of "house arrest," but instead concerns all processes of instituting artistic archives. This comprises all the moments in which the archive physically and discursively enters the public domain—through exhibitions, presentations, and institutions. Thus the afterlife is the life of the archive in the future perfect, or an exercise in its constant potentialization.

By juxtaposing the artistic archives of Ewa Partum and VALIE EXPORT, I would like to examine topics that can be defined as specific to these artistic practices and the modes of their historicization and institutionalization but that can also be perceived as general issues pertinent to wider artistic archival discourses. They include the problem of the artistic archive understood as a liminal space, or a switch within art infrastructure between private and public spheres, and the practice of maintenance understood as constitutive for the life and "liveness" of the archive, especially in relation to ephemeral, action, and performance art. Other specific issues involve investigation into declared and undeclared disposition of both archives. Whereas the first two topics are self-explanatory, and will be discussed in more detail later, the last two terms need a brief explanation.

Archives are constituted through a set of strategies and decisions that, taken together, establish an archive's "active story."⁸ In the case of artistic archives, it is implicitly a curated vision of the practice: a declared story told by the *archon*, who is an artist. Still, the archive is not sealed, it is porous; it contains links to other archives and to other narratives and serves several

possible and other things impossible." Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014), 12.

8 See also Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 70.

undeclared functions, especially once it is opened to users in its afterlife. Undeclared disposition of the archive can, for instance, indicate “a degree of the faith in the evidence of the document.”⁹ Keller Easterling, defining the undeclared disposition of infrastructure, writes that

some of the most consequential political outcomes of infrastructure remain undeclared in the dominant stories that portray them. Information resides in the technologies [...] as well as in the declared intent or story [...]. Yet information also resides in a complex of countless other factors and activities. All these activities, taken together, lend the organization some other agency or capacity—a disposition—that often escapes detection or explanation.¹⁰

Within the archival discourse, the undeclared disposition is described as specific to artistic archives as well as to artistic operations within and around the archive. Referring to Hal Foster’s famous essay “An Archival Impulse,” Henk Slager argues that “by focusing on unacknowledged and repressed qualities, artistic archives show the essence of the archive as *found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private* [emphasis mine].”¹¹ Here, I am interested in the way in which the artist’s archive realizes or performs the latter condition of being public and private at the same time.

My approach to the material gathered in both Partum’s and EXPORT’s archives is inspired by recent feminist art historiography that reconsiders archives as places of collaboration and as multi-authored entities.¹² I am interested in historicizing artistic archives as constituted through archival and artistic perspectives. The artistic gaze can be defined as one that enables the ontological homogenization of artistic work and its archive. It implies a circular time of the ongoing medial transformations. Archival artefacts understood as outcomes of these constant transformations “generate new methods of appropriation and discursive exploration”¹³ to those related to the object of reference, for instance, live performance or artistic action. Within the artistic gaze, material in the archive is pragmatically separated into different registers

9 Bismarck, “Arena Archive,” 457.

10 Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 71.

11 Henk Slager, *The Pleasure of Research* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2015), 82.

12 See, for instance, Victoria Horne and Lara Perry, eds., *Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

13 Büscher, “Introduction,” 63.

(documentary and artistic) once it enters the public domain through institutions such as exhibitions, museums and publications. The archival gaze, on the other hand, indicates linear temporality that makes it possible to separate material on the basis of its production before and after the actual work of art or past event. There are things, processes, and labor that *led to* and *followed* the artwork. A historicizing gaze, which I try to exercise here, considers both the artistic and archival gazes simultaneously in their reciprocity and their declared and undeclared dispositions.

Why Juxtapose the Archives of These Two Artistic Practices?

There are several parallels between the artistic biographies and practices of Ewa Partum and VALIE EXPORT, and although they did not occupy any of the same institutional spaces until 1989, there are certain temporal resonances between them that go back to the beginnings of the lives and artistic work of both artists. Let me just briefly outline some pivotal dates on their respective timelines. Both artists were born in the same decade—VALIE EXPORT in 1940 and Ewa Partum in 1945—and they share certain generational experiences of postwar childhood and growing up in a period of socialist and capitalist modernizations. In 1967 they both adopted their artistic names—Ewa Partum by marrying a fellow artist, Andrzej Partum, and VALIE EXPORT by inventing her artistic pseudonym. There are other surprising biographical parallels: both artists attended textile schools in their youth and both worked at potboiler jobs in the film industry.¹⁴ The institutions that deal with their artistic legacies came to life at almost the same time: in 2015/16 the VALIE EXPORT Center (VEC) was established in Linz and opened to researchers and visitors in 2017. In 2016 Ewa Partum founded the ARTUM Foundation, ewa partum museum, in the Polish countryside near the Polish-German border.

The similarities of Partum's and EXPORT's artistic strategies and positions within national art histories cannot be denied. At the core of their various artistic projects is the processuality and in their work emphasis is placed "on the event's medial interlining and temporality rather than its materialization as an immutable object."¹⁵ Both artists deployed their bodies and po-

14 This can tell us a lot about possible positions and professional choices of creative women on both sides of the "Iron Curtain."

15 Büscher, "Introduction," 61.

larized the public in provocative guerrilla-style feminist actions in the 1970s and '80s. They share an understanding of feminist art not merely in terms of feminist content and effects, but also as an emancipatory attitude toward art formats, mediums, and conventions.

In her performances in the 1970s and '80s, Partum used her naked body as a tool of her feminist politics, which referenced and criticized the visual tradition of the disinterested body by denouncing its universalism as an ideological and historical construct. EXPORT, on the other hand, operating "in terminologies of psychoanalysis, surrealism and the inner spaces of poetry," concerned her work with the projection of the female body as a "double," "as something absent, vanishing, decorporealized, in a struggle against the male 'real.'"¹⁶

The beginnings of their artistic archives can be traced to the 1960s. Both archives contain reference material relevant to the making and reception of Ewa Partum's and VALIE EXPORT's respective art, allowing us to register the continuance and transformation of their works. In addition to accumulation and preservation, the artists reuse the materials, reintroducing them into circulation at certain intervals and subsequently returning them to the archives. Moreover, both artistic archives are used by the artists as tools of self-positioning—and they represent Ewa Partum and VALIE EXPORT not merely as artists but as multifaceted networking and cross-linked cultural producers: Partum as a curator, publisher, and organizer, and EXPORT as a researcher, theorist, curator, and academic educator.

However, what prompted me to start this research was the fact that the "backstages" of these seemingly correlated practices and their infrastructural settings do not correspond; they represent two different approaches to constituting and handling archives. The size, structure, scope, operating logic, arrangement, accessibility, disposition, and organizational principles of the two archives are utterly different. This difference gave rise to the question about new ways to address the shared genealogies of both practices and new possible ways of reading them together in their differences.

16 Sabine Folie, "Prologue to Script," in *VALIE EXPORT: Der virtuelle Körper. Vom Prothesenkörper zum postbiologischen Körper* = *VALIE EXPORT: The Virtual Body. From the Prosthetic to the Post-biological Body*, eds. Sabine Folie and Marius Babias (Cologne: König, 2020), 24; produced by the VALIE EXPORT Center Linz in cooperation with the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.).

There is also one more reason to juxtapose the archives of the two artistic practices; looking at these practices from the perspective of their archives might enable us to de-link them in order to re-link them in a more horizontal way. Due to the political dynamic related to the East-West divide, one of the practices became a model for reading the other one. If the art of VALIE EXPORT gradually gained international recognition after an initial phase of rejection in a West-centric art world, Ewa Partum's art was "rediscovered" and redistributed at the end of the 1990s within the globalized art world, which is still characterized by hierarchies and subdivisions into central and marginal locations. As a result, Partum's early work was initially conveyed through existing narratives on feminist art, as the rereading of her practice for secondary audiences was done through the lens of existing feminist works and within contemporary theoretical frameworks such as global feminisms.¹⁷ Can re-visiting these archives in a different temporal order, i.e., synchronically, change the way we are told about these artistic practices?

If we agree that "archival material precedes and disrupts historiographical practice, holding *information* in excess of narratives yet to be written,"¹⁸ then we can assume that synchronously looking into both archives and cross-visiting them can allow a certain cross-fertilization that consequently would enable a productive reencounter with both practices: a critical reexperience of these artistic practices. These presuppositions are in line with the vision of

17 The first readers revisiting Ewa Partum's archive, Angelika Stepken and Gisliind Nabakowski, to a certain extent used VALIE EXPORT's practice as a model for the interpretation of Partum's works. Nabakowski, who is the author of the first comprehensive historical analysis of Partum's work, starts her essay with a quotation from EXPORT's text "The Real and Its Double: The Body" published in 1988. Gisliind Nabakowski, "Apprehension and Masquerade: 'Letter Millionaire'—Ewa Partum's Path to Conceptual Poetry and Feminist Gender Theory," in *Gedankenakt ist ein Kunstakt: Ewa Partum 1965–2000*, exhibition catalog, ed. Angelika Stepken (Karlsruhe: Badischer Kunstverein, 2001). The English translation of Nabakowski's text is a shortened version of her longer German essay published in the same catalog. See "Das Unbehagen an der Maskerade: Ewa Partums Weg als 'Buchstabenmillionärin' zur konzeptuellen Poesie und zur feministischen Gender-thematic," 110–29.

18 Paul Clarke, Simon Jones, Nick Kaye and Johanna Linsley, "Introduction: Inside and Outside the Archive," in *Artists in the Archive: Creative and Curatorial Engagements with Documents of Art and Performance*, eds. Paul Clarke, Simon Jones, Nick Kaye, and Johanna Linsley (New York: Routledge, 2018) 11–24, 13.

the archive as a site of permanent potentiality, as a place of “constant potentialization.”¹⁹

In the following section, I would like to bring to the fore some pivotal moments of transference from the life to the afterlife of Ewa Partum’s and VALIE EXPORT’s archives, in which the artists renegotiated the boundaries and limits of the archives in relation to the private-public divide.

Ewa Partum: The Space between Private and Institutional

Ewa Partum worked on the archive of her own artistic practice—accumulating, producing, and reproducing visual and discursive materials but also, already in the early 1970s, working with the idea of the archive in the framework of her Galeria Adres (“Address Gallery”), presenting collected materials at exhibitions—as an archive (fig. 9.1). Galeria Adres, created by the artist in Łódź in 1972, was an archive-generating machine through which Partum self-historicized her own practice.

The transition between materials related to Galeria Adres and documentation of Partum’s own practice is quite smooth. Partum’s archive includes material generated in Poland in the 1970s and taken to West Berlin in 1982, when she left Poland with a one-way ticket; material from that period which remained in Warsaw, however, went missing. A large batch of material was also created in the 1980s, a decade in which Partum’s artistic practice functioned as physically located in West Berlin but virtually de-localized, still suspended in the art infrastructures of the Polish art world. A great amount of material was created in the process of a redistribution, on the occasion of new exhibitions and installations after 1989. The impulse of self-archivization did not, in Partum’s case, generate a rigid order or system of care to preserve

19 Bart De Baere, “Potentiality and Public Space: Archives as a Metaphor and Example for Public Culture,” in Bismarck et al., *Interarchive*, 105–12, 111. De Baere argues that “Constant potentialization as a goal liberates archives from their false identification with the past by transforming their receptivity into infrastructure, by seeing it as a permanent part of their work, which is also liberating with regard to any pressure to keep up to date. Archives are the presenters of a possible image in which past, present, and future are a continuum.”

Figure 9.1: Exhibition of the Galeria Adres archives at the Survey of Documentation of Independent Galleries at the Galeria Repassage, Warsaw, 1973–74.

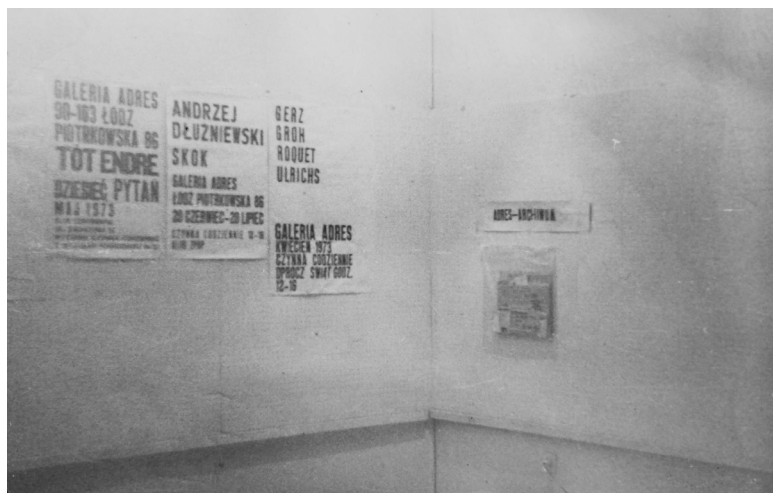


Photo © Courtesy of Ewa Partum, ARTUM Foundation, and ewa partum museum.

documents: the archive is fragmentary and fluid, formed “in the spirit” of the avant-garde tradition of radical reduction.²⁰

In recent years, the Ewa Partum Archive has become a place of intergenerational exchange and production of histories, primarily written in accordance with the recurring model of development, loss, and return as described by Clare Hemmings in her book *Why Stories Matter*, which explores narrative models of the history of Western feminism,²¹ or in accordance with its regional East–Central European variation, the paradigm of interrupted histo-

20 See Boris Groys, “The Weak Universalism,” *e-flux* 15 (April 15, 2010), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61294/the-weak-universalism/>. Groys writes, in the context of the historical avant-garde, “This radical reduction of artistic tradition had to anticipate the full degree of its impending destruction at the hand of progress. By means of reduction, the artists of the avant-garde began to create images that seemed to them to be so poor, so weak, so empty, that they would survive every possible historical catastrophe.”

21 Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

ries. Partum's retrospective exhibitions²² and accompanying publications can be described as the moments of a transformation of her artistic archive. The temporality of this kind of retroactive art history is a dynamic time of returning to the past and updating for the present, while the temporality of (and in) the archive is a duration related to the practice of maintenance,²³ to time without a vector, connected with everyday life. The place where Ewa Partum's artistic archive functions is also connected with everyday life. It is not the institutional space of a professional studio, but rather a private living space: a semiotic and spatial context evoking specific associations. It is a place of transformation, of continuous circulation of documents and notation: moving toward becoming and also in the opposite direction—toward entropy. It is a liminal space in which things and documents pass from the private sphere to the realm of art history; they change their status from missing to found, and also from documentary to artistic.

Ewa Partum's action *Non-Exhibition: Curators. Between Institutionality and Privacy* (Nie-wystawa: Kuratorki. Między instytucjonalnością a prywatnością) (fig. 9.2), realized in Zielona Góra in 2005, problematized in an interesting way this specific situatedness of the archive as a bordering space located "between institutionality and privacy." The work simultaneously practiced an opening of the archive, passing it into its afterlife. It revealed the moment of an opening and passing as situations of a tension resulting from the different agendas of an archive's users and a clash of two temporalities: time with a vector and time without a vector.

The work *Non-Exhibition* was a direct reaction to the curators Dorota Monkiewicz and Aneta Szyłak, who were at that time working on historicizing and re-establishing the position of Ewa Partum's artistic practice in Poland, and who had requested that Partum not present her art in Polish institutions until her retrospectives opened in Warsaw and Gdansk.

22 These retrospectives took place in Karlsruhe in 2001, in a double retrospective in Gdańsk and Warsaw in 2006, and in an individual exhibition at the Museum of Art in Łódź in 2014/15.

23 Lisa Baraitser, "Touching Time: Maintenance, Endurance, Care," in *Psychosocial Imaginaries: Perspectives on Temporality, Subjectivities and Activism*, ed. Stephen Frosh (London: Palgrave, 2015), 21–48, 22. Baraitser argues that the practice of care is associated with a different type of time order than art production or art history. She writes that the practice of maintenance allows for a completely different kind of relationship with the dominant ideas of temporality; it allows for some sort of experience of suspended duration, of slurry time not related to the idea of progress or a melancholic past.

Figure 9.2: Ewa Partum, “Non-Exhibition: Curators. Between Institutionalality and Privacy,” action, *Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, Zielona Góra*, 2005.



Photo © Courtesy of Ewa Partum, ARTUM Foundation, and ewa partum museum.

In response, the artist arranged a quasi-private but professional conversational spectacle—a meeting with curators in the gallery space on the subject of upcoming exhibitions. *Non-Exhibition* is not a systematic intervention of self-historicization; it is also not a performative over-identification with the position of a curator. It is, rather, a strategic shift to the space occupied by the curators. During the conversation, lasting over two hours, the participants not only talk, they also eat cake, drink wine (served by the butler, i.e., Partum’s ex-husband) and, above all, try to articulate their own understanding of Partum’s art. The artist presents on-screen documentation of her works, authorizing it with her authoritative commentary. Partum invites viewers, behind the stage, to a semi-private yet professional sphere in which the communication, negotiation, and translation of archival materials take place. She crosses borders, quoting private (but professional) text messages, emails or

phone calls, problematizing the issue of the in/visibility of the collective work in the archive.

Non-Exhibition reveals the private-institutional constellations of art infrastructures as an area in which curatorial agency is confronted with the need for constant negotiation with the artist's desires and ambitions. Through *Non-Exhibition*, Partum participates in the preparation of the archival material for a retrospective exhibition not only as a provider of content and documentation but also as a producer of new procedures. She intervenes in the sphere between art notations and curatorial narratives, sharing the very negative perception of the curatorial position as described, for instance, by Boris Groys in his essay on curatorial power.²⁴

Not only the poor video quality but also the extremely uncomfortable situation of tense exchanges and confrontations, which normally remain hidden from the viewer's gaze, make this video difficult to watch. It is this difficulty that determines the specificity of this work, which goes beyond recapitulating the conflict (as in the case of some classic Daniel Buren texts) and instead invites viewers to participate in the conflict: they are positioned between the interests and institutions of the artist and the curator.

Through *Non-Exhibition*, Partum reveals the process of the opening of an archive and its passage to the afterlife to be transformational and appropriate exercising her ownership on an arranged stage and trying to counteract the transformation of her art into a "colorful fresco whose meaning escapes the artist."²⁵ Importantly, through her actions, the artist relativizes not only

24 This aspect of curating is discussed by Boris Groys in his essay on "On Curatorship." Groys argues that the curator is a "radically secularized artist" and that the curatorial position is a place from which art objects and their meanings are administered, mostly by the medium of an exhibition. According to Groys, curators do everything that artists do but have no mystical power of transforming object into art. The curator physically situates and contextualizes a work of art, which means that he or she relativizes it and returns it to history. Thus, Groys argues, the curator transforms an autonomous object into an illustration and makes its value dependent on narration. For these reasons, curators became a target for critique by the contemporary artist, who perceives them as "the embodiment of the dark, dangerous side of the exhibiting practice" and the "destructive doppelgänger of the artist." See Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008) 43–53.

25 Daniel Buren, "Exposition d'une exposition—Ausstellung einer Ausstellung," in *Documenta 5*, exhibition catalog, ed. Harald Szeemann (Kassel: Bertelsmann Verlag, 1972), 29; reprinted as: "Exhibition of an Exhibition," in *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van

the value of the curator's narrative, but also the artistic gaze, which is revealed as one of the possible types of connections between documents gathered in the archive. Performative opening, making the artistic archive public, takes place here outside the format of the exhibition, in the form of polemic arranged around a table brought from the artist's home. Partum presents and discursively stabilizes the materials from her archive before they are classified as artistic or documentary within the scope of forthcoming exhibitions. It is in that sense an anti-exhibition—a concealment of works of art within their unstable and mutable archive.

VALIE EXPORT: From Personal Archives to Research Center

Another format of *non-exhibition* that mobilizes the boundaries between private and institutional and also aims to open the archive to the public was implemented within the framework of the VALIE EXPORT Center Linz (VEC), Research Center for Media and Performance Art.²⁶ It is not *sensu stricto* a representative/exhibition space but a spatial arrangement that has a disposition of an exhibition.

The center simultaneously fulfills the goals of giving space to the potentially limitless archive material collected by EXPORT and of opening such a space up to researchers. It is located in a building of the former tobacco factory that made the cigarette brand (Super Export) from which the artist took her chosen name, and the center came to life as a joint venture between educational, cultural, and municipal institutions of the city of Linz.²⁷ The collection comprises

well over 100,000 archival materials, such as notes, sketches, concepts, correspondences, drafts, screenplays, preparatory studies, models and many other items. VALIE EXPORT's personal library of several thousand books and magazines, containing pivotal works in the fields of media theory, film stud-

Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø (Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 211.

26 VALIE EXPORT Center Linz, *Research Center for Media and Performance Art*, <https://www.valieexportcenter.at/en>.

27 It is a cooperation of the City of Linz with the LENTOS Art Museum Linz and the University of Arts and Industrial Design Linz.

ies and fine arts, feminism, philosophy, and literature, is also available for research.²⁸

The center is run by Sabine Folie, who curated several comprehensive exhibitions of EXPORT's archives under the title *The Archive as a Place of Artistic Research*, and Dagmar Schink, a managing director who, in her curatorial statement for the *Transfer* show at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies in Vienna in 2018, defined VALIE EXPORT's practice as "research driven"—focused on contemporary anthropology of visual culture, "on the physical, societal, and technological types of relations between body and space."²⁹

The transformation of the artistic archive into a research center implied that several procedures had been introduced in keeping with research center requirements to permit access to files, materials, and records. However, other functionalities were also afforded here to create a representational space.

Research was thus not a secondary supportive instrument but, as in the case of many other institutionalized archives, a constitutive feature—a main factor of the institutional concept. The center is conceptualized not only as a place of reflection on the collection of documents from VALIE EXPORT's private archive, or of meditation on EXPORT's legacy, but it can also stimulate "an endless subdivision of storylines they [the archives] have not themselves set up"³⁰ by opening them to researchers from different backgrounds.

It is worth mentioning that VALIE EXPORT's archives were presented for the first time to the public *as archives* only in 2011, at the comprehensive genealogical exhibition at Kunsthau Bregenz curated by Yilmaz Dziewior. In fifty-seven large display cases, many of VALIE EXPORT's main works were placed "in the context of their genesis by means of preparatory conception drawings, statements, and collages as a well as photos."³¹

Exhibiting the archive is also one of the activities of the VALIE EXPORT Center. As mentioned before, a comprehensive traveling exhibition curated

28 See VALIE EXPORT Center Linz website, <https://www.valieexportcenter.at/en>.

29 "Transfer: Extracts from the VALIE EXPORT Center Linz," 01/03—30/06/2018, curated by Dagmar Schink, IFK International Research Center for Cultural Studies, Vienna, www.valieexportcenter.at/en/transfer-extracts-from-the-valie-export-center-linz-within-the-framework-of-ifk-art.

30 De Baere, "Potentiality and Public Space," 110.

31 Yilmaz Dziewior, "Introduction," in *VALIE EXPORT: Archiv*, exhibition catalog, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: Kunsthau Bregenz; König, 2011), 21.

by Sabine Folie was dedicated to the “context variations and transformations that result from the process of artistic research and end up leading to a work of art.”³² For the purpose of the exhibition, the curator developed a very complex and theoretically invested diagram, containing several references to the archival theory that aimed “to show the abstract, hidden, and multi-layered dimensions of the contents of the archive, and to illustrate the artist’s personal thoughts on the archive as part of artistic practice.”³³ The diagram acted as a conceptual framework for the presentation of archival objects and works of art outside the center, while at the center a series of curated selections—called *Glimpses*—conceptualized by Folie have been implemented by the research team at regular intervals of three months. *Glimpses* examine the diversity of roles and positions occupied by VALIE EXPORT (“the artist as...” principle) and also represent the artist as the primary archivist of her artistic, curatorial, and educational work. Through these exhibitions the afterlife of the archive is curated and controlled by professional discourses.

The aim of the center is also to create an opportunity for professional researchers to access material in both real and digital space. The organizing principle of the archive in both sets of translations is to construct as little as possible,³⁴ in other words, to transfer “the proliferating system of the *wild order*”³⁵ implemented by the artist into the new spatial arrangements without transforming its logic. In that sense, the archive becomes a collective work of the artist, curators, and researchers. The digital space (still in progress), on the other hand, is conceptualized as a rhizomatic structure that enables dynamic connections between particular materials in all possible ways.

The real space that rearticulates and exhibits the system implemented by EXPORT represents an open spatial arrangement evoking the idea of acces-

32 Sabine Folie, “Context-Variations: Research—Archive—Oeuvre of VALIE EXPORT” in *VALIE EXPORT Forschung—Archiv—Werk / Research—Archive—Oeuvre*, exhibition brochure, ed. Sabine Folie; exhibition at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, June 9–August 12, 2018. The notion of “context variations” recalls the title of EXPORT’s cycle of photographs titled *KONTEXT-VARIATIONEN: ZUSTANDSÄNDERUNGEN > BEDEUTUNGSVERÄNDERUNGEN (Zur Mythologie der Zivilisation)* [Context variations: Alterations of state > Alterations of meaning (On the mythology of civilization)] from 1971.

33 Folie, “Context-Variations,” 9.

34 I would like to thank Dagmar Schink for generous help with my research and the information that she provided me during my visits to the VEC in 2019 and 2020.

35 Folie, “Context-Variations,” 9.

sibility while at the same time recalling the notion of an artist as public intellectual. Within this arrangement the aesthetic of the archive (fig. 9.3) is complemented by the aesthetic of the library (fig. 9.4).

Figure 9.3: *The archive at VALIE EXPORT Center, Linz, 2019.*

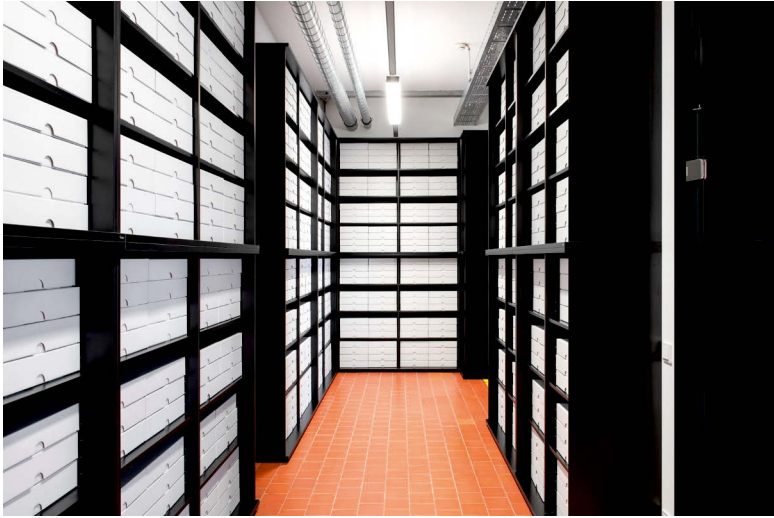


Photo: Violetta Wakolbinger

A constitutive feature of this non-exhibition is the artist's private library, taken directly from VALIE EXPORT's own apartment and transferred to the specially designed shelves at the center. The library is an indicator of EXPORT's network of contacts (catalogs of exhibitions, projects), diversified but consistently cultivated interests, and proof of her expertise and professionalism. If the archive is the backstage of the artistic practice, the library is the backstage to EXPORT's archive, positioning archival objects as effects of EXPORT's extended research and intellectual labor. In addition, the library is open to use and performatively complements the concept of the center as a space devoted to research. We can discover here *the artist doing research—the artist at work*, as all the notes and remarks made by VALIE EXPORT are still preserved in the books' pages (and are gradually being transferred to digital space). Most importantly, however, the library functions as a frame: a stable base from which to access unstable and boundless material accumulated in

Figure 9.4: The library at VALIE EXPORT Center, Linz, 2019.



Photo: Violetta Wakolbinger

the archive that includes, in addition to professional work, also private correspondence and notes. If every archival document and artefact contains “an abundance of evidence relating to cultural, aesthetic and social contexts of a certain point in time,”³⁶ the library’s collection of books and notes constitutes a certain stabilizing *con-text* for the materials gathered in the archive. EXPORT’s practice itself continues to focus on the contextual conversions of meanings. Sabine Folie has argued that “since the beginning of her artistic activity in the late 1960s, VALIE EXPORT has been devoted to the contextual shifts and variations of bodies and subjects in ‘processes of civilization.’”³⁷

The library is a hypertext constituted by published works and unpublished notes made by the artist. It is a new form of a display of the artistic research that as a practice “continuously takes place in an in-between, the space between archiving knowledge production and active artistic thought ceaselessly

36 Barbara Büscher, “Lost and Found: Archiving Performance,” in Büscher and Cramer, *Fluid Access*, 66–82, 69.

37 Folie, “Context-Variations,” 7.

able to adopt different contours.”³⁸ Henk Slager, in his essay on “Critique of Archival Reason,” argues that today the archiving display strategy implemented by artists often directs itself merely “towards the verb, i.e. on how we institute, and thus also on how imagination and artistic thinking can be instituted in a different way.”³⁹ VALIE EXPORT’s private library, established as part of the VALIE EXPORT Center Linz, Research Center for Media and Performance Art, is a perfect example of such an attempt.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to go back to Peter Osborne’s text mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Osborne writes:

The artistic archive is no longer a documentary archive that surrounds the works of the collection with interpretative materials but a combined archive of works and documents in which “the scene, the stage” of the fate of works are laid out, in a functional equivalent to the transformative space produced by the passion and love of the ideal private collector.⁴⁰

The fragmentation and incompleteness of Ewa Partum’s archive reflects not merely historical circumstances related to the fate of the art history of “communist Europe—marked by repression, immigration and missing archives—often conceptualized as interrupted history, interrupted development,”⁴¹ or to the limited accessibility of technical means of documentation behind the “Iron Curtain.” It results from and tells the story of Partum’s artistic attitude that influenced and shaped her practices of care and maintenance. Her practice of self-historicization is and was directed merely not toward the accumulation of traces of her activities but rather toward amplification of her activities by self-instituting, i.e., assuming different institutional positions and strategies within art infrastructures.

38 Slager, *The Pleasure of Research*, 83.

39 Slager, 83.

40 Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, 129.

41 Łukasz Ronduda and Florian Zeyfan, “Introduction,” in 1,2,3... *Avant-Gardes: Film/Art Between Experiment and Archive*, exhibition catalog, eds. Łukasz Ronduda, Florian Zeyfan (Warsaw: Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle; Berlin, Sternberg Press: 2007) 8–11, 9.

VALIE EXPORT's archive, on the other hand, is a manifestation of the artist's research-driven approach and her need to master her artistic output through the archival gaze. The archive is understood as a place of creative work, a material component, a basis, or a pivotal fragment of the artistic practice ("*The Archive as a Place of Artistic Research*," as Sabine Folie has it): simultaneously a source and a by-product of the artistic process. Its boundlessness also reveals EXPORT's striving for completeness, her tendency to control and stabilize the meaning of her artistic output, transforming the archive in its afterlife's institutional setting into a VALIE EXPORT "heritage." The word "heritage" indicates also that something has been left behind, abandoned. Paradoxically—and here we can refer to the undeclared disposition of the archive—the need to master the archival gaze created a circumstance that enabled the artist to leave the archive behind her and invite others onto the stage.

Both artists, in different ways, mobilized the potential of an archive's situatedness within artistic infrastructure as a switch between the professional and private spheres. In Keller Easterling's words the switch is "an active form that modulates a flow of activities." It is a "lever or dial in determining unanticipated dispositions."⁴² In the same way, artistic archives accumulated and formed by Partum and EXPORT and identified as key to their practices allow an undeclared disposition of their artistic practices to be revealed. As a result, both practices can be read as opposing rather than parallel, corresponding, or correlated artistic endeavors. In terms of their archival strategies, Partum subordinated the archival gaze to the artistic one, which privileged the politics of radical reduction, instability, and mutability as well as a direct intervention into reality. EXPORT, on the other hand, mastered the archival gaze within the research-based artistic practice informed by discourses on "space and time, contingency, science, technology, quantum physics, anthropology, [and] behavioral science,"⁴³ concerned with the epistemic dimension of art, i.e., with the production of knowledges.

Undoubtedly, the feminist practices of Partum and EXPORT took different turns in the 1980s and '90s. EXPORT developed her media-oriented investigation into inscriptions, conventions, and social apparatuses that regulate the body⁴⁴ into a critique of digital capitalism and examination of the

42 Easterlink, *Extrastatecraft*, 76.

43 Folie, "Prologue to a Script," 22.

44 Folie, 22.

fragmented mediatized subject while Partum, after revisiting the medium of performance, arrived at the artistic formula that directly intervenes in the biopolitical dimension of life and the consequences of real politics for the lives of women in marginalized locations. From the perspective of their archives, that is, considering their archival practices, these developments seem logical and immanent.