Self-Historicization
Artist Archives in Eastern Europe

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My paper reflects on the specificity of the archives kept by some Eastern European artists, and on the impact that artist archives have on changing the understanding of the process of historicizing, and consequently, on the museum itself.

I will explain this by following my own practice, specifically, through certain exhibitions I put on in Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, that contributed to the historicization of Eastern European art and, more narrowly, the historicization of the common cultural space of former Yugoslavia.

In 2006, I curated the *Interrupted Histories* exhibition,[1] which placed a great deal of importance on artist archives.

One of the things that intrigued me was how artist archives impacted the processes of historicizing. Pioneering work in this realm was done in Poland by the KwieKulik duo, that is Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, and in Hungary by György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay. Starting in the early 1970s, KwieKulik collected documents relating to what was then "unofficial" art, art schools, examples of censorship, and similar. Also starting in the1970s, György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay developed the concept of the "active archive" by staging exhibitions and collecting records of and materials on conceptual art, mail art, visual poetry, kinetic art, land art, actionism, and happenings. According to Galántai, the concept of the active archive "generates the very ma-

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1   The catalog of the exhibition: Zdenka Badovinac and Tamara Soban, eds., *Prekinjene zgodovine: Arteast razstava = Interrupted Histories: Arteast Exhibition* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2006).

terial to be archived"[2] through calls for participation, co-operation, exchange, and building of non-hierarchical networks, as well as through combining art historical and artistic methodologies of research. An active archive is future-oriented and employs a dynamic approach to history as an open artwork and as activist artistic practice." Artpool, as their active archive is called, has recently become the constituent for the Central European Research Institute of Art History at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. (fig. 5.1)

Figure 5.1: "Interrupted Histories," Arteast 2000+ exhibition (Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2006) with the documentation of Artpool's "Hungary Can Be Yours–International Hungary" project from 1984 in the foreground and of the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio in the background.

Photo: Moderna galerija.

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2   György Galántai, "Active Archive, 1979–2003," in *Artpool: The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, eds. György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, (Budapest: Artpool, 2013), 15, http://artpool.hu/archives_active.html.

Figure 5.2: Vadim Zakharov, "The Archive of Pastor," 1992–2001 at "Interrupted Histories," Arteast 2000+ exhibition, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2006.

Photo: Moderna galerija.

I also invited Romanian artist Lia Perjovschi to participate in the *Interrupted Histories* exhibition; she has been building her Contemporary Art Archive / Center for Art Analysis in Romania since 1985.[3] In addition to presenting this material on Romanian art she has also collected information on Western art that entered Romania during that time. For our exhibition, she arranged documentary material on a table in small plastic bags, suggestive of evidence collected during a police investigation. In this way she compared herself to a detective sifting through these materials and documents looking for meaning, for hidden and lost ideas, works, and artists.

Also in the exhibition was the archive of the Slovene group IRWIN that began developing its *East Art Map* project in 2003.[4] Its purpose is to connect artists from all over Eastern Europe into a unified scheme that exists alongside their national belongings. As part of this project, IRWIN produced an

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3   *Lia Perjovschi: Contemporary Art Archive / Center for Art Analysis 1985-2007*, ed. Marius Babias and Sabine Hentzsch (Cluj: Idea; Cologne: König, 2007).

4   *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin (London: Afterall, 2006).

interactive online project presenting fifty years of Eastern European art history, an exhibition of Eastern European art from 1950 to 1970, a symposium, and an extensive publication.

In an installation in the shape of a documents binder, Russian artist Vadim Zakharov presented his video archive of the exhibitions of Moscow Conceptualism staged outside Russia. (fig. 5.2)

All the artist archives in the *Interrupted Histories* exhibition were displayed as art installations; that is, as both objects of history and its tools at the same time—tools for self-historicization and thus self-contextualization of one's work, without, however, the ambition to produce a counter-narrative. Rather, the aim was to create tension between major and minor, and official and unofficial histories; tension created by informal histories interrupting the formal ones. I described interruption as one of the most important forces of history.

In the frame of this exhibition I adopted two terms that I still find important for my practice today: these are *historicization* and *self-historicization*.

Historicization

Historicization is, to a large extent, associated with that which is just now arriving in history, as is the case, for example, with the history of Eastern European art. That which is just now arriving in history, however, is not merely a new knowledge that is included in the existing system; rather, it is something that necessarily transforms this system. Historicization, then, is based on heterogeneous histories, which are being simultaneously supplemented and interrupted. Historicization creates knowledge that is constantly interrupting itself. One of the aims of historicization is to oppose the single master narrative of history.

Self-Historicization

Self-historicization is an informal system of historicization practiced by artists who, due to the absence of any suitable collective history, are themselves compelled to search for their own historical/interpretive context. Because the local institutions in the non-Western world that should have systematized neo-avant-garde art either did not exist or took a dismissive attitude towards such art, the artists themselves, in various places, were

compelled to archive documents related to their own art, the art of other artists, and broader art movements and conditions of production. Today, in the work of younger artists, the strategy of historicization is acquiring new forms, associated especially with a critique of new relations in society that are attempting to instrumentalize history. If, until recently, the subject of historicization was mainly post-war avant-garde art, then today—in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, for instance—these subjects also include the cultural legacy of socialism and the Yugoslav Partisan movement.

These terms later became part of the local discourse related to similar institutional or artistic practices. One of the most fascinating projects of this kind is the Temporary Slovenian Dance Archive formed by Rok Vevar, a writer on the contemporary scenic arts theory and history and a contemporary dance historian and archivist. (fig. 5.3)

Figure 5.3: The Temporary Slovenian Dance Archives with Rok Vevar in the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana, 2018.

Photo: Moderna galerija.

In 2012, Rok Vevar established the Temporary Slovenian Dance Archive in his apartment in Ljubljana, where people could access the material two days a week or by appointment. In his self-interview in *Maska* magazine he

describes it as a sort of personal activist initiative. It is exactly this *personal activist* position that I define as self-historicization. It originated from a simple need and passion to historicize the past and the recent creative dynamics in Slovene non-governmental field of (performing) arts which first helped him to understand and then serve something bigger than himself.

> I wanted to see what happened, how, where and why things unfolded, developed, got abandoned, changed and had an effect. I wanted to break out of the vice of fragmentary oral "memoristics"—the collections of anecdotes, inaccurate speculations, and tabloid chitchat commonly prevalent in local environments. [...] Another reason was my realization that there was no institutional database for contemporary performing arts, and contemporary dance in particular, which would enable various applications of collected archival data; not only in Slovenia but in the entire region of the so-called Western Balkans. While this may be normal for cultural contexts even outside of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and other Eastern European countries, the reasons for this deficit may differ greatly from country to country. Thirdly, the TSDA is my attempt at outlining a specific artistic community and its creativity, which I value and see as unique and a fundamentally formative force of my life.[5]

This led Moderna galerija to invite, in March 2018, the TSDA to the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, where Rok Vevar has been performing a living archive-in-progress since then. We have given him one of the exhibition rooms, furnishing it with cabinets, shelves and a desk. Vevar is there every Friday during the opening hours of the museum, available to the users of his archive and visitors to the museum, in a way "exhibited" there alongside his archive. We have signed an agreement with him, stipulating that Moderna galerija provides the TSDA with space for keeping archival material, help and collaboration in carrying out a discursive program, public events, promotional activities, photographing and digitizing, and also technical support, furnishings, and office supplies. The duties of the TSDA as stipulated in the agreement consist of professional care for and processing of the archival material and promotion of the use of said material for research and study purposes. Rok Vevar is further in charge of the concept of the design of the space and collaborates in promoting the archive by giving guided tours. He is free to

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5   Rok Vevar, "Waste Management: Self-Interview on the Temporary Slovenian Dance Archive," *Maska* 30, no. 172–74 (Autumn 2015): 101.

remove the archive at any time, should he so wish. Vevar still hopes that a Contemporary Dance Institute will be founded someday, which would provide his archive with an institutional home. Meanwhile, Moderna galerija has suggested the possibility that his archive could become a permanent part of the Moderna galerija Archives if the necessary conditions were met for the archive to become institutionalized, in which case Vevar could also be employed as archivist.

The TSDA is an indication of several current problems in the field, for example the fact that certain institutions, such as the Slovene Theater Museum, whose remit it is to create and maintain a dance archive, are not fulfilling their mission, as well as the fact that other institutions, like the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, should expand their activities with departments for performing arts and contemporary dance, which would entail meeting special conditions and would require additional funding. What is also highlighted by this case is the precarious worker status of independent curators like Vevar, who has single-handedly carried out an important part of historicizing the local dance scene.

Furthermore, the TSDA, like the *Interrupted Histories* exhibition before it, calls attention to the fact that self-historicizing inevitably alters mainstream practices of history-writing and institutional work. The reason the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova is hosting the TSDA is not simply to help Rok Vevar, but to examine institutional work from a critical and self-critical distance and make this distance visible by "exhibiting" it.

Our point is to show how an institution operates and how non-institutional archives come about, oftentimes resulting from individual initiatives that, subsequently, are incorporated into an institutional structure. This often happens without specifically crediting their originator, who is usually thanked or paid by the institution, while their archive is absorbed into existing classification systems.

The TSDA is also linked to the Balkan dance network called the Nomad Dance Academy, and thus to the group of activist dance archivists, theorists and historians working, since 2013, on the project *Archiving Choreographic Practices in the Balkans*. Like Rok Vevar and the Nomad Dance Academy, Moderna galerija and its Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova have also been working on reproducing the shared cultural space of former Yugoslavia.

Almost destroyed by the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s, this former shared cultural space is now being reconstituted through numerous official and unofficial collaborations involving artists, non-institutional associations,

and increasingly also institutions. In this, Moderna galerija is one of the few institutions intent on preserving these links in the aftermath of the wars of the 1990s. As a matter of fact it was the war in Bosnia that triggered the process of archiving through art, since all too many archives were lost in that war, not to mention people's lives and homes. And searching for lost meaning is also searching for lost truth.

The question of truth thus becomes one of the key questions in art.

Our homes have long ceased to be safe havens where family rituals shape the truth about the world. Which truth have we really lost, if our truth has, in reality, always been mediated, passed down from one generation to the next, or today from one medium to another?

This is exactly what artist archives speak about: that truth has, in reality, never been ours.

An archivist can never fully control the life of an archive; an archive is an open work that repeats a certain reality by repeating the difference between what was present and what was absent. I will give an example of such an archive, or better, an "archival" exhibition I curated together with my colleague Bojana Piškur in 2017, entitled *The Heritage of 1989 / Case Study: The Second Yugoslav Documents Exhibition*.[6] (fig. 5.4) Staged in Moderna galerija, it was a reenactment of the last major pan-Yugoslav exhibition, which was not only the last big comprehensive, national exhibition, but the last to have the adjective Yugoslav in its title. *The Heritage of 1989* exhibition talked about the loss of a common cultural space and also about the loss of the commons, the commons that had been nurtured both by the ideology of collectivism and of brotherhood and unity in multicultural Yugoslavia. In 1987, three artists from Sarajevo, Jusuf Hadžifejzović, Saša Bukvić and Rade Tadić, decided to organize a biennial in Sarajevo that would put the city on the world art map and make it a center for the arts. Wittily, and perhaps a tad wistfully, they dubbed it *Sarajevska dokumenta*, a pun in Bosnian meaning both the Sarajevo documenta (in reference to the Kassel one) and Sarajevo documents, as the show was officially translated. They managed to stage two editions of the biennial and were planning the third when the war put paid to their ambitions. Piškur and I wanted to find out the extent to which the second edition of the biennial in 1989 registered that fateful year and perhaps showed premonitions of war.

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6   *Dediščina 1989: Študijski primer: druga razstava Jugoslovanski dokumenti = The Heritage of 1989: Case Study: The Second Yugoslav Documents Exhibition*, eds. Ana Mizerit and Adela Železnik (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2017).

Figure 5.4: "The Heritage of 1989, Case Study: The Second Yugoslav Documents Exhibition," 2017, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

Photo: Moderna galerija.

To curate the exhibition as carefully as possible, my colleague and I went in search of the surviving documentation of the Sarajevo show, most of which was destroyed in the war. Luckily, Jane Štravs, a Ljubljana photographer, had a number of photographs of the exhibition which were printed for our show. As already mentioned, our exhibition aimed to do more than merely reproduce the historical one; rather, it took an interest in why that show had repressed the sociopolitical reality of the time, quite obvious in the summer of 1989. As a reminder of the domestic and international events of 1989, we mounted front pages of all major Yugoslav newspapers from that time along the walls like a frieze, interspersed with works from the original exhibition we managed to obtain. The newspapers covered virtually the entire six-month period prior to the opening of the Sarajevo show, and they were selected in collaboration with the political scientist Tomaž Mastnak, who also wrote a comparative analysis

of the media then and now. In his view, the media of our time is less informative, more corrupt, and more commercialized than the media then.

With our exhibition, we tried to enhance understanding of not only that pivotal moment in time, but, above all, of our own time, marked so fatefully by 1989. The war that followed the breakup of the common federal state triggered the first refugee crisis in Europe after the end of World War II; the second one has occurred recently and does not look like it will be ending any time soon. Through a number of contemporary works of art and through workshops that brought together refugees of both generations, our exhibition pointed to the organic kinship between the two refugee crises under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

In the 1990s, we did not lose touch with reality as the postmodernists predicted we would; we lost touch with the real, that is to say, with that which we had never had, and which cannot be represented visually or verbally, although it can be touched upon and articulated in reality through art. What the 1990s taught us was that our reality had not disappeared but was becoming increasingly less comprehensible. The new technologies of the time were also making it more and more invisible. We see the impulse to archive expressed in 20th century art first through photography and then through the inclusion of all manner of documentary material, such as press clippings and similar; by the 1990s, the artists had to come up with alternative means to tackle documenting the invisible landscape of the electromagnetic spectrum.

The war in Bosnia was what spurred Slovene artist Marko Peljhan to start developing technologies, strategies, and tactics for intercepting signals and observing empirical and material developments in the electromagnetic spectrum, which led to his ongoing project *Makrolab* (1997–). One of his crucial works dealing with mapping immaterial information otherwise used by the military industry is *Territory 1995* (2006–2009). *Territory 1995* was based on prolonged research into and investigation of information from all manner of sources that allowed the artist to reconstruct the movements of the troops guilty of the Srebrenica genocide, as well as a view of the involvement and accountability of the international community, especially the Dutch UN battalion stationed there.

The work was an installation in two parts: one was a labyrinth composed of glass surfaces printed with maps created by Peljhan with forensic communications mapping software and algorithms. The other part was an archive consisting of military maps, court documents of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and literature related to the Sre-

brenica genocide and the wider context of the brutal wars on the territories of former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1995. The archive also included transcripts of radio conversations that clearly indicated the preparations for the massacre. In brief summation, in 1993, Srebrenica was declared a UN "safe zone," "protected" by Dutch UNPROFOR[7] troops. On 7 July 1995 Bosnian Serb paramilitary troops, led by Radko Mladić, occupied Srebrenica, which prompted Muslim soldiers and civilians to try to escape to the territory controlled by the Bosniaks; eight thousand of them were captured and executed by the Serbs. In 2002, the Dutch authorities released a report on the role of the Dutch Blue Helmets in the massacre, which resulted in the resignation of the Dutch government and the announcement of an early election. The fact that *Territory 1995* is now included in the Van Abbemuseum's collection is significant; this is not just any Western museum attempting to museumize Eastern European art, but a museum in the country whose peace-keeping troops knew what was going to happen in Srebrenica and did nothing to prevent it.

Does all that has been said so far allow us to conclude that there is a certain specificity to Eastern European artist archives, both during the socialist period and afterwards? As we peruse publications with international overviews of artist archives today, we mainly encounter Western names; Eastern European artists are few and far between, and mostly from the socialist period. For many, socialism continues to mean a huge space of non-freedom, censorship, monitored typewriters,[8] confiscated materials, and imprisonments. While it is true that institutions in many places marginalized progressive art, it is also true that some museums in the East nonetheless managed to create important collections and archives. Whichever the case, today we cannot ignore any institutional archive, even if incomplete and originally built by repressive methods. After all, it is thanks to police records that some important materials survive, such as the archive of the material resulting from Andrzej Kostołowski and Jarosław Kozłowski sending their *NET Manifesto* to 350 addresses worldwide in 1971, with the ambition to form an alternative network of connections. At the beginning of the process, each addressee received, in addition to the manifesto, also the list of the other addressees and their addresses. All of the artistic material that arrived from all over the world in response to the manifesto was first presented in Jarosław Kozłowski's apartment in Poznań, and was seized by the secret police. Initially the artists present there were

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7   United Nations Protection Force.

8   Typewriters that were installed with hidden sensors to transmit information.

accused of trying to establish an anarchist organization working against the state, but the affair quietened down and the material was returned, at least in part, within the year. Later this material served as the basis for the program at the students' club space in Poznań where Kozłowski founded the Akumulatory 2 Gallery in 1972.

In the 1990s, when the memory of repressive regimes was still fresh, certain artists made direct references to police records or art institutions' archives from the socialist period.

In 1998, the Romanian duo subREAL (Călin Dan and Iosif Kiraly) made an installation entitled *Serving Art*, which incorporate a series of photographs of museum staff holding backgrounds for works of art being photographed. The photos are from the archives of the *Arta* art journal, which dominated the Romanian national art narrative between 1953 and 1989.[9] These people are in the outer edges of photographs that were to be cropped once the exact format of reproduction was decided upon. *Serving Art* must be understood in the context of the 1990s, when all of Eastern Europe waited with bated breath for secret police records to be made public. Managed differently in different countries, this issue continues to be controversial. SubREAL's work thus points to ideas around public accessibility and the very nature of archival material. The latter is clearly more than just what is classified as such, since ephemeral items not intended to survive in history sometimes speak louder than their official counterparts.

The archives of various state security services have remained an urgent and controversial issue to this day, also because of the numbers of people who would be revealed to have been coerced or manipulated in some way to spy on their friends and acquaintances. Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov experienced that and decided to go public about it. In 1990, he first presented his work *Top Secret* (1989–90) consisting of an index box filled with a series of cards with his drawings and texts revealing his collaboration with the Bulgarian state security, which he stopped in 1983. In 2007, he added a forty-minute video to the index box, in which he reads from the cards.

Slovene artist Alenka Pirman's 2005 work, *The Case. Art and Criminality*, first presented in Moderna galerija's project space Mala galerija the same year, is an entirely different kind of collaboration with the police. The artist staged the project in collaboration with Biserka Debeljak, the curator of the Slovene

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9   For the discussion of another part of this project, see Sven Spieker's chapter in this volume.

Police Museum, and Igor Zabel, a curator at Moderna galerija. The exhibition presented authentic material from police records: documents, photographs and objects relating to the case of a serial killer who raped and murdered several women in Slovenia in the 1970s and then burned their bodies in his stove. Pirman exhibited the documents face down, presenting their undersides to avoid any effect of spectacle which this otherwise notorious case might have caused. This type of presentation would not have been possible at the police museum, whose aim is objective truth. The issue of truth was again at the center of this artistic presentation. The viewers knew the documents were authentic, which fired their imaginations about what was being concealed. The point Pirman was making was that reality was still accessible; she did not believe, however, that it could be objectively classified, especially not through the systems of power.

Repressive Eastern European regimes kept people afraid and feeling they were being constantly watched, surveilled. After the end of the socialist period the feeling of living with the enemy did not fade: first there came the war, then the social and economic crises. This was coupled with incessant hype that contemporary technologies were making the world more and more similar and that we are all now facing a common enemy—capital. I am afraid, however, that a majority of the population worldwide is now choosing to believe in post-truth enemies. The most cynical are those who claim that these enemies are the people coming from elsewhere—the migrants and the refugees, whose numbers are growing. They are coming here with memories of not only their abandoned and destroyed homes, but also of their illegal and perilous journeys to a better world.

In 2017, Slovene artist Nika Autor made a video film *The Train of Shadows*, which opens with a video clip shot with a smart phone, a selfie of a "stowaway," a refugee hiding, together with another refugee, in the undercarriage of a train traveling from Belgrade to Ljubljana. (fig. 5.5) Arriving in Ljubljana they met Nika Autor, who was at the station as an activist helping refugees, and they entrusted the footage to her. The main question raised by *The Train of Shadows* is whether such a video clip can also have a place in the history of film. Based on that, the introductory scene in the undercarriage is followed by numerous scenes from the history of film featuring trains. The film ends with documentary footage of the devastation at the Belgrade railway station where refugees set up an informal camp in January 2017. There they found themselves in the vicinity of improvised parking lots set up by redundant workers of the Serbian Railways who charge for parking to make ends

meet. This brought together underprivileged Serbs and refugees, both with memories of better times.

Figure 5.5: Nika Autor, "Newsreel 63: The Train of Shadows," video, 39', film still, 2017.

Photo: Moderna galerija.

The specifics of Eastern European archives can never be related to the secret police archives, not only because archives like those kept by Stasi and Securitate have long ceased to exist, but also because they never existed in the first place in many parts of Eastern Europe, not even in the most repressive times. Rather than addressing fear of control, this specificity speaks of the wish to change things for the better, and doing that by bypassing existing protocols. In this, Eastern Europe still shares the fate of the many that are not part of the hyper-regulated world and largely depend on informal systems to meet their needs. With every crisis the informal systems grow stronger, bringing together refugees, the unemployed, and artists interested in alternative knowledge and modern-day "piracy." Informal operations often have negative connotations of being related to crime, corruption and the like, although they can acquire positive implications through inclusion in artist archives. Artist archives are essentially informal, non-institutionalized archives. They are a parallel infrastructure for memories that cannot attach to dominant narratives.

The EU has set up a variety of cultural programs in its aspiration to create a common European cultural space, although we all have different visions of what this space should be like. How can we build a collective memory of Europe when it is divided by the Schengen border and when more and more displaced people are coming here? Whose home is Europe, what does it smell like, and what is the truth being passed down the generations? In Europe, museums are asking themselves how to support refugees and are organizing programs to help them integrate in the local communities. The memories of these refugees are like the images recorded on the video clip in *The Train of Shadows*. Our museums and our collections are still too circumscribed and made to the measure of the collective memory of the dominant communities. We will need different, more hybrid institutions in the future, so that art and other diverse material can, together, formulate stories no longer restricted by the classification systems of collections. Museums based on the principles of artist archives will be better suited to such stories.