# "Destroy, she said": THE ARCHIVE BETWEEN ARCHIVO-PHILIA AND ARCHIVO-PHOBIA[1]

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*Abstract*

This paper is based on a talk given at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest in February 2020, in the context of an international conference organized by the Artpool Art Reasearch Centre, titled *Artpool40 – Active Archives and Art Networks*. It centers on the destruction of archives as art practice. It focuses on specific examples of artists – several from Eastern Europe, but not only – who destroy archives not in an effort to reach for a metaphysics of annihilation, but as a set of concrete techniques aimed at the demonstration that, on the contrary, to paraphrase

[1] The English version of this article was first published in Emese Kürti and Zsuzsa Laszlo, eds., *What Will be Already Exists. Temporalities of Cold War Archives in East-Central Europe and Beyond*, Berlin: transcript, 2021, pp. 37-47.

Umberto Eco, there can be no such thing as an "ars oblivionalis" and that even the most robust act of destruction creates its own memory, monument, and archive.

**Key words:** art, archive, destruction, socialism, post-socialism, Eastern Europe

In this article, I will be concerned especially, if not exclusively, with one extreme form for artists to engage with archives, one that may at first glance strike us as very much counter-productive: their destruction. Of course, for good reason, we tend to associate the creation of an archive with an act of positive production—by which I mean the accumulation of records or the preservation of such an accumulation of records—, much as we tend to associate the liberating or emancipating potential of archives with our ability to preserve an obscured history's documents and artifacts and to make these accessible to a broader public. We generally credit archives with an evidentiary or testimonial function, and that function presupposes the material integrity of the *arkheion*, its place of consignment. By contrast, we tend to associate the destruction of archives with vandalism and what in German is called *Geschichtsvergessenheit*, the forgetting or neglect of history and its memory.

In Eastern Europe as much as in, say, Latin America, the archive has become the central trope around which the question of what has been called "forgotten histories"—i.e., histories that were repressed or expunged from the official record during the period of communism—evolves. The Eastern European artist archive—an archive created by or adopted by an artist—here often fulfills functions that official archives cannot or do not want to fulfill, and helps write the history of previously invisible minorities, as is the

case for example with Karol Radziszewski's *Queer Archive Institute*, which chronicles gay and lesbian life in Eastern Europe, incorporating an existing archive compiled by a participant in Poland's underground gay scene during the Cold War; or Dan and Lia Perjovschi's *Contemporary Art Archive* (CAA), which contrasts the secrecy and closure of Cold War archives with the globally networked knowledge of an archive that sees itself less as a static container of information than as a dynamic process of knowledge formation. In order to fulfill their documenting function, these archives rely on an intact archival substratum—what above I have called its *arkheion*, the Greek term for the building in which an archive is housed, and one that we could also call its medium—so that the traces stored in that archive may remain as legible as possible.

This said, in truth, the (tentative) *destruction* of or in archives—and the very question if an archive can be destroyed, above and beyond the partial or full expunction of its holdings—is as much part of the history of the archive as their positive accumulation. In fact, the archive has always included an element of destruction, since the more or less regulated destruction of records is the prerequisite for the archive's ability to accept new accessions. In 19th-century archive theory, the successful creation of what was referred to, with a metaphor common at the time, as a healthy "archive body" or "*Archivkörper*" relied on regulated cycles of accession and destruction, cycles that in their turn bore witness to changing constellations of administration, secrecy, and power.[2] However, such destruction, carefully noted by archivists and hence by no means an instance of a mythological "destruction

[2] Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive. Art from Bureaucracy*, Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 2008, p. 20.

without a trace", by and large followed the model of what we might refer to as "constructive (or creative) destruction", i.e., a type of destruction that results in a renewal of the archive's productivity, rather than in its paralysis or destruction.[3] For example, in the 19th century administrative bureaucracy, the files that circulated in an office or company were given an archival accession number the very moment they were created, signaling their future obsolescence.[4] In this way the bureaucracy succinctly mirrored what Sigmund Freud was finding out roughly at the same time: information is touched by its demise, by its withdrawal from active circulation, the very moment it is created; or rather: that such withdrawal is the very condition of its creation.[5] In an archive, documents may accumulate and become opaque, they may even disappear, but there is no regulated mechanism for erasing or "forgetting" such information as expunged, since such erasure or expunging will generally leave behind new traces, entries in logs or de-accession lists, etc.[6] In a different context, the semiotician

[3] See: Sven Spieker, ed., *Destruction*, Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 2017, pp. 17-18.

[4] Spieker, *The Big Archive*, pp. 35-49.

[5] Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974.

[6] One of the few theorists to have addressed the problem of destruction in relation to the archive was Jacques Derrida, who devoted his *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression* to the possibility, hinted at in Freud's speculations about a *todestrieb* or death drive in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", that while we generally assume that destruction affects an archive from without, there may also be a destructive, "an-archival" principle, a death drive, within the psychical apparatus itself, destroying in the process any ambition we may have to summon an archive to bear witness. While any notion that such an anarchival drive or force could be or become subject to representation in art is unthinkable—the reason being that this anarchival principle signifies

Umberto Eco, in an article tellingly titled "Ars oblivionialis—forget it!", has described what I am referring to here as the impossibility of creating systematic forgetting; the use of signs to forget other signs will only ever result in new signs, neutralizing the desired effect. Instead of aiming at all-out systematic forgetting, Eco suggests, one might adopt a different strategy that would try to think forgetting or destruction not as instances of full erasure—the metaphysical concept of total destruction—but instead as a strategy of *confusion* or *disarray*.[7]

A compelling example for the strategic use of confusion and disorder (rather than physical annihilation) as a means to bring about strategic forgetting in an archive was Andrea Fraser's 1998 intervention in the archives of the Bern Kunsthalle, entitled *Information Room* (1998). Fraser installed the usually inaccessible archives of the Bern Kunsthalle in the gallery, but in such a way that the documents and books whose spines with their titles and call numbers would normally face the visitors were now facing the wall. In this way, visitors were effectively blinded; they could not pre-select what they were pulling from the shelves, eliminating in this way the sway that an archive's meta-architecture, its organizational system of classification, has over its user. As Fraser writes: "The program I developed for the information room included installing the entire archive and the entire library in the

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nothing if not the end, the death, of all representation—I would venture to say that artists such as Christian Boltanski or Anselm Kiefer in their work appear to intend to create outlets for such a tendency. We could also mention Ilya Kabakov in this context whose archive-based early installations, including the *The Big Archive* (1993)—routinely end in a space where for no discernible external reason the archive as a concrete, rationally organized space breaks down and disintegrates into random heaps of rubbish.

[7] Umberto Eco, "An Ars oblivionalis—Forget It!" in: *PMLA* 3, 1988, pp. 254-261.

gallery […]. The trick was that all the books and archive boxes were to be installed with their spines to the wall, so that while visitors would have access to the material, they would not be able to pre-select what they pulled from the shelves."[8] Fraser does not destroy the archive of the Bern Kunsthalle; she creates a state of entropy that relegates the task of ordering to each individual orderer. To make the archive accessible in its regular format, with the call numbers facing forward, would have tied their disclosure to the format of the archive, its specific mode of presentation and sequencing of records. By concealing that order, Fraser allowed for random combinations of different records that would have been impossible had the original archival order been preserved. As a strategy that allows the archive to continue to exist but that at the same time radically throws it into disarray, Fraser's project introduced destruction into the archive, understood not as metaphysical annihilation but as a strategic form of subversion of a seemingly neutral order and its channeling of information.

What comes to the fore in Fraser's approach to the Bern archive is not the Derridean *anarchive* (the annihilation of the archive) but instead a more constructive approach to destruction, the use of disorder (destruction) to shift the emphasis, in our approach to archives, from universal categories of ordering to a more affect-driven approach that integrates contingency and chance into our traffic with the archive. Taking Fraser's approach to institutional critique as my departure point, rather than focus on destruction alone, I want to locate an artist's attitude towards the

[8] Andrea Fraser, quoted in Karin Prätorius and Anika Hausmann, "Questions for Andrea Fraser", in Beatrice von Bismarck et al., *Interarchive. Archivarische Praktiken und Handlungsräume Im zeitgenossischen Kunstfeld / Archival Practices and Sites in the Contemporary Art Field*, Köln: Walter König, 2002, p. 86.

archive between what I'm calling *archivo-philia*, on the one hand, and *archivo-phobia* on the other, with both of these attitudes connoting a spectrum for possible affective responses to the archive, ranging from production and construction to all-out destruction. The two poles of my antinomy (archivo-philia vs. archivo-phobia) are not of course mutually exclusive; an artist may, for example, destroy an archive as part of a performance—a clear instance of archivo-phobia—yet at the same time, he or she may preserve the remains of that act of destruction, forming another archive (an instance of archivo-philia).[9] Archivo-phobia and archivo-philia together mark the point at which artists rethink the archive, treating it not as a static principle within whose orbit they figure as mere passive objects, but adopting towards it a range of *attitudes* that seek to assimilate archival techniques and procedures for artistic work. We could easily create a map of 20th-century art based on artists' attitudes towards archives and documents: thus, Surrealism with its interest in registering the facts of the unconscious (André Breton even founded his own archive of surrealism) was fundamentally archivophilic, even as it was critical of the archive as an instance of representation; Futurism, on the other hand, was generally archivophobic, although in the post-1917 Soviet Union, Futurists learnt to reconcile their archivo-phobia with institutionalized archivo-philia, as several pre-1917 Futurists assumed positions in newly founded Soviet (art) museums; while

[9] As such, the opposition between archivo-philia and archivo-phobia is less an objectifiable, self-contained entity than the outward limit of a graded field of possible responses. In this sense, too, this opposition is not to be conceived as static or unchanging, but as dynamic and changeable. As several of the art practices discussed below hint, such dynamism also works to question or weaken the dichotomy between archivo-philia and archivo-phobia.

Dadaism with its disdain for the archive and its concomitant obsession with the preservation of the detritus of everyday life (including its discarded documents) was both archive-phobic and archivio-philic at the same time.

Of course, in a very basic sense, all (analogue) archives, to the extent that they choose to preserve certain records over others, involve a (more or less regulated) element of archivo-phobia. As I mentioned, in order to make the archive survive, an archivist has to select and expunge records that would otherwise exceed the archive's storage capacities, usually based on a clear mandate for its mission and function, and not without carefully noting the de-accession in all manner of archival lists. In 1970, the recently deceased John Baldessari made a mockery of this procedure when, not least due to space constraints in his studio, he destroyed all of his paintings created between 1953 and 1966, and then proceeded to bake cookies with the ashes. The resulting installation consisted of a bronze plaque that listed the destroyed works' birth and death dates. Baldessari's act of cremation constitutes an active intervention in the idea that an artist biography needs to follow a linear trajectory whose outward manifestation is the accumulation, the archive, of material works. By the same token, Baldessari contests the idea that artistic work is confined to the creation of aesthetic objects, replacing the painterly creation of lone masterworks with the multifarious activities of a self-archiving artist for whom accumulation and destruction are less the metaphysical goalpost's in the life of an ingenious artist than cultural techniques, *Kulturtechniken*, that respond to practical rather than purely esthetic demands. In this reading, the destruction of the post-auratic work of art, or its archive, is not an act of barbaric sacrilege but responds to necessities and constraints

(including space constraints) that are not by definition different from those that operate in the non-art sphere.

In Baldessari's *Cremation* project, the artist's auto-destruction of his archive is not tantamount to total erasure, as parts of the existing archive are used to create a new archive. The all-consuming respect for the archive's rationally founded *arkheion*, its system of classification based on an institutionally founded mission, gives way, in Baldessari's case, to an emphasis on artistic conduct and a radically expanded view of the artist as contesting the chronological logic of his or her own biography that considers every single work part of a linear temporal trajectory. Consider in this context also the case of Hungarian artist Sandor Altorjai who in 1979, the last year of his life, reassembled nearly all of his previously made works into new ones, mixing an archivo-clastic urge to destroy his own archive with a concomitant archivo-philic urge to create new works from the ones that were collected in that archive. Unlike John Baldessari, who made a new work out of the ashes of his archive, Altorjai folds his own archivo-clasm into an act of archivo-philic construction that preserved some degree of recognizability for the existing artworks, a procedure Gyorgy Gallantai has described very well when he wrote that "the destruction of his [Altorjai's, S.S.] own works through reuse, and the integration of his old works into new ones are rooted in an approach which, looking at it from the perspective of the past, respects only intellectual values."[10] While this is no doubt true, the destruction's success also depends on the skill with which Altorjai, much like Baldessari, used a broad variety of quite practical manual techniques to change the aggregate state of his works.

[10] György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, eds., *Artpool. The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, Budapest: Artpool, 2013, p. 245.

I am particularly interested in instances where archivo-phobia and archivo-philia co-exist, challenging the assumption that archival destruction must be thought of as an instantaneous act, and resulting instead in the construction of counter-archives that contest the normative chrono-logical regimes that undergird the nexus between archive and state power. A prominent example here is GDR artist Cornelia Schleime, who in 1989 participated in the occupation of the Stasi headquarters in Erfurt and who subsequently worked with select copies of certain pages of her own Stasi file by collaging into them frivolous and provocative photographs of herself that covered up the original typed pages which had chronicled the surveillance of her private life. On the one hand, Schleime is engaged in an act of archival destruction as she interferes in the rigidly observed formal protocol that regulated the construction of these surveillance protocols. By effectively using the existing pages and by turning their absurd pronouncements—"Her apartment is sparsely furnished with furniture that is meant to look modern"—into captions for her own subversive collages, Schleime acknowledges that the destruction or expunging of the Stasi archive is imaginable only as a process of active assimilation and exploration (by turning the archive around, by making it her own) and not as a process that follows the metaphysical phantasy of a destruction without a trace. Again, Schleime's collages are archivo-philic and archivo-phobic at the same time: if on the one hand they destroy the original Stasi record by obfuscating it at least partially, on other hand, they also create a new record or archive on its basis, a counter-archive that opposes the de-humanizing effects of the official archive with a different kind of production, one that includes Schleime's identity as a woman with her own dreams and phantasies, and one that uses

archive technologies such as photography and the typewriter in ways that directly contradict their official de-humanizing function. Crucially, both the destructive and the constructive pole of Schleime's work with her Stasi file amount to *work*, more precisely, her (Schleime's) work, suggesting that it is no longer the archive but the artist's process of working through the archive that assumes center stage. It is here also that we need to locate the (self)-archiving activities of Eastern European artists during the Cold War—from Jiři Kovanda to Tomislav Gotovac—, activities for which construction and production in and of the archive were only two, if fundamental, techniques for becoming archive workers rather than archival objects.

The insight that archivo-philia and archivo-phobia do not exclude each other was fundamental to the aftermath of 1989. The random destruction that accompanied the opening of the Stasi archives in Berlin's Normannenstrasse in 1989 was a clear instance of archivo-phobia based on the realization that the archive was central to state power and control, perhaps even identical with it. This destruction gave way, however, to the realization that in order to document the repression by the GDR's security apparatus and punish those responsible, archivo-phobic rage and archivo-clasm would need to give way to archivo-philic preservation. By the same token, with respect to unofficial art in Eastern Europe, it seems clear that any effort to research the Cold War and chronicle its repressions cannot do purely with the iconoclasm that typically accompanies archivo-phobia, even when the archives in question are those of the former secret police. For example, when György Gallantai published the contents of the Festö (Painter) dossier online—the extensive documentation by informants and operatives of the Hungarian Secret Police that had chronicled Gallantai's and

Artpool's activities in Balatonbóglar—this act was among other things an acknowledgment that the history of these art activities, including Artpool's, cannot be written without these police files. Just as it is impossible to imagine decolonial or post-colonial history without colonialism, so too, it would be foolish to assume that the history of unofficial art in certain parts of Eastern Europe could be written without taking into account the state's surveillance, including its archives, under which (or perhaps better: with which or alongside which) that art developed.

In Eastern Europe, when artists left their countries for the West, this was often an occasion for the destruction of their archives, either through the artists' own agency or at the hands of the state. When Cornelia Schleime left the GDR for West Germany, for example, her entire early work was left in the GDR with friends, but ended up falling into the hands of the police. As a result it disappeared without a trace. By contrast, when the Romanian artist Ioan Bunus left his country, in September 1982, he burnt part of his archive in the courtyard of his studio in Oreada, an action of which there are no photos. At the same time, the artist sent another part of the same archive, consisting mainly of drawings, to his friend Károly Elekes, the leading figure of the artist group MAMŰ in Târgu-Mureș. As Madalina Brasoveanu reports:

> "Bunus wrote to Elekes that he may do anything he wants with his drawings if he, Bunus, manages to flee to Austria. Then, in late September 1982, Elekes received a postcard from Bunuș, sent from Vienna, and decided to burn all the remaining drawings of his friend. He did so together with his colleagues in the MAMŰ group. They organized an action outside the city, where they built a structure on which they mounted the drawings to be burned, taking the shape of one of

> Bunus's drawings. The resulting action and installation are called *Memorial Bunus*."[11]

It is as if once Bunus' permanent exile was confirmed, the part of him that had still remained in Romania—the remaining half of his archive—could safely be cremated; he ceased to exist in his homeland. At the same time, the delegated, ritualized destruction of Bunus' archive and its recording by photographs created a monument to Bunus's disappearance, reminiscent in a sense of Baldessari's transformation of his paintings into cookies, and his careful registration of the destroyed works' days of birth and death.

Photography, in a sense the most quintessential archival medium, is also at the heart of *Art History Archive 3. Dataroom Deconstruction*, (1995) by the Romanian artist group subREAL. In 1993, subREAL temporarily assumed custody over an extensive archive of photographs associated with *Arta*, a periodical that between 1953 and 1993 was Romania's only official art magazine and as such a real sourcebook for the history of postwar Romanian art. subREAL used this archive to create lived-in installations they referred to as "decaying data spaces", on account of the fact that the often badly damaged or aged images with which they literally plastered the walls would slowly fall to the floor, creating an increasingly messy environment.[12] At the same time, the group developed thousands of negatives that were part of the *Arta* collection but that had never been developed because they were considered irrelevant for the ongoing publication process.

[11] Madalina Brasoveanu, e-mail message to the author, 30.7. 2019. I thank her for this reference to Bunus.

[12] See Sven Spieker, "SubREAL During the 1990s: Ironic Monuments, Tainted Blood, and Vampiric Realism in a Time of Transition", *ARTMargins Online*, 10.7.2013. Consulted 31.10.2020.

Unlike the carefully cropped and edited final images the artists used to paper the archive-studio at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien, these negatives showed photographic work in progress, and included camera props, the presence of anonymous helpers, and stage sets in the process of being created. By developing and including these negatives, subREAL exceed their role of passive custodians by changing the aggregate state of one part of the collection (the negatives), much as had been the case with Baldessari and Altorjay. Of course, subREAL do not, as the latter two artists did, literally subject the collection entrusted to them to destruction. But by assimilating their archive into their living space and by incorporating into the collection elements that had been excluded from it, they fundamentally altered its aggregate state. In this respect, subREAL's project could be compared to the work of US artists such as Mark Dion who often subverts or "messes up" existing exclusion zones and taxonomies. For example, for his *Schildbach Xylotheque* (2012), which he created for documenta 13, Dion added six "modern" volumes to an already existing 18th-century collection of books made from tree bark. The point was to represent wood from those continents not represented in Schildbach's collection. As in the case of subREAL, Dion appears to suggest that the destruction of archives, much like Eco's *ars oblivionalis*, is difficult to achieve if we think of it as a total annihilation without a trace. As was the case with the other examples discussed in this article, for Dion, to work with an archive as an artist is an active process of assimilation with its own affective charge, a charge that may even include destruction—again, not as a metaphysical or "anarchival" force but as a material media technique, a *Kulturtechnik*.

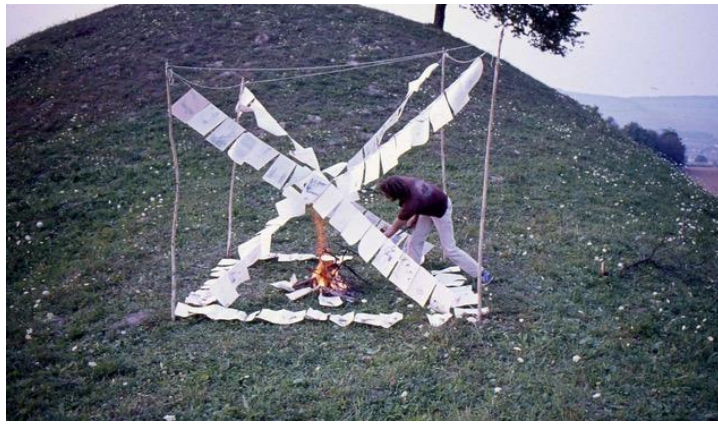

Fig. 1. MAMŰ, "Memorial Bunuş", action, Vizeshalmok, Târgu Mureş, 1982. Photo: Károly Elekes. Courtesy of Károly Elekes és Ioan Bunuş

Fig. 2. subREAL, "Deconstruction: Art History Archive series, Lesson 3", installation, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1995. Courtesy of Călin Dan and Iosif Király.