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#### IV. The Archive as Artistic Language



# When Document Becomes Art and Art Becomes Document. Several Art Projects Based on Photographic Collections or Archives

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## ABSTRACT

What are the necessary conditions for a photograph to surpass its status as document and to become an art object? What is more important: its aesthetic qualities or the context in which it is displayed? Does the perception of the same photograph change in time? Are there any ethical rigors that we should consider when using in our creations photos belonging to people whom we do not know and/or are no longer alive? These are some of the questions that I have asked (or had to ask) myself over the years as I often used appropriated photographic images in my work.

## KEYWORDS

Time, memory, archive, photography, subREAL.

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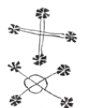
## Introduction

Along with the fast shift from analogue to digital systems, there are more and more photography collections that have been, for various reasons, abandoned or made redundant, thus becoming easier to access by those who want to. In Romania, this phenomenon was accelerated in the years following the 1989 Revolution also by the privatization process the country was engaged in. Every research, design, production, food, medical, media institution held its own collection, smaller or larger, of both written and photographic records. These archives were damaged or lost to a large extent during the process of privatization due to the indifference and, sometimes, the complicity of those involved in it, but also to the fact that these documents were not seen as possible income sources as there was not, at that time, a market for them—unlike the fixed assets those

economic entities owned that could be (and they were) sold in a more or less legal way.

The country, its politicians and its leaders were busy with privatization—the path recommended by foreign experts for the transition from a planned to a market economy—as they wanted to be free from a past that was unanimously perceived as a traumatic one. Few were those who thought that all those visual documents were worth keeping, and they didn't have, anyway, any administrative or decision power in this situation.

For several decades, working with appropriated images has become a quite frequent practice among artists across the globe. It's enough to look into the Photo-Video Department of the Bucharest National University of Arts, where I carry out most of my teaching activity, to see that an increasing number of students build their Bachelor and Master's theses using various photography collections they found or inherited in the family. Working with “archives,” together with using film cameras, represents a critical po-



sitioning against the invasion of digital technology and “smart” phones (sometimes smarter as far as image creation goes than the persons using them) and against the consequences of the wave of insignificant photographs from social networks on the way we treat photographs.

My relationship with photographic image collections is a rather long one. Even though I have had, since early childhood, a fascination (like all children probably) with looking at and leafing through family albums for hours, only in the 1990s I actually started using this kind of pictures as a source of inspiration and actual working material in my creative process.

In the early 1990s, while working as a photographer and editor for *Arta* magazine and being a member of the subREAL group, together with several friends and colleagues, I was trying to establish a photography and dynamic image department at Bucharest National University of Arts (UNArte), where I taught an optional course that was very successful among students. I was taking part in local and international art exhibitions and, at the same time, I was finishing my architecture studies (interrupted in 1980, after just three years) with a Master’s thesis without which I couldn’t have taught at UNArte. A multilayered activity as my whole life has been ever since.

*Arta* magazine, forced both in the 1980s and the early 1990s to change offices several times, owned several cabinets filled with envelopes containing photographs and boxes of photographic films, of which some were used to print some of the pictures in the envelopes. Unfortunately, due to consecutive changes of headquarters and the fact that with every move the space assigned for the editorial room was increasingly smaller, eventually becoming insufficient, all those documents, together with other accounting records and written documents, were stored squashed together, virtually all records of them or classification being lost.

Right after the 1989 Revolution, the Union of Visual Artists (UAP) entered a trou-

bled period when, because of restorations, it began losing studios, galleries, and even its headquarters. In 1991, as UAP could no longer finance the magazine, it was taken over by the Ministry of Culture until 1993, when their financing also stopped. In 1993, the last space where the editorial room was moved to—which couldn’t actually function as an editorial room, but only as storage place for furniture, other fixed assets, as well as all documents accumulated over four decades of functioning—was assigned as a studio place to a young artist. He immediately requested that the room should be cleared in a few days and, since that wasn’t possible, he broke in and moved into the hallway everything that belonged to the magazine. Then, a few days later, some of the objects (typewriters, pieces of furniture) were taken away by UAP and stored somewhere else, while others remained there for several weeks and began disappearing as the building was not secure and didn’t have a doorman. That’s when, together with Călin Dan, the editor-in-chief of the magazine, we decided to store the boxes of envelopes and negatives in a studio I had close by. All these documents remained there for one year. Our curiosity and interest grew slowly but steadily, and we wanted to investigate them and do something based on them. But unfortunately, as it usually happens, we always seemed to have other priorities and couldn’t manage to dedicate enough time to their examination. One thing we started considering was to apply for an artistic scholarship that would provide us with the necessary time and conditions to generate projects based on these materials.

In 1994, we wrote an application to Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin, proposing to move together with the entire photography and negative collection of *Arta* magazine in one of the studios provided by the foundation and to develop, every month, a project based on those visual materials. Our application was successful, and we obtained a studio for one year along with a grant from the Philip Morris Foundation. Although





subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif Király) - *Dataroom (How to Change your Wallpaper Daily)*, Art History Archive series, Lesson 1, installation, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1995. © subREAL.

there were two of us, we worked as one artist (subREAL), sharing the studio and the grant.

This is how the *Art History Archive* project was born, in which we committed to create, for a year, various events called “art history lessons” offered to the public every month in open workshops. These took various forms: installations, talks, art performances. At the end of our scholarship, we had an exhibition in a well-known art center in Berlin (Neue Berliner Kunstverein) and we released a publication that summarized the activity for the year we spent in Berlin (from March 1995 to March 1996).

I will briefly present only a few of these events that became stand-alone projects and used the boxes of photographs of *Arta* magazine. All those images were about art objects, artists and their lifestyle, their work and social life in Romania during the second half of the twentieth century.

In the first project, called *Dataroom*, the walls and the ceiling of the subREAL studio at Künstlerhaus Bethanien (a room measuring 10 x 8 x 4.5 m) were entirely covered in photographs from the magazine’s image collection. The room served as both living and working space for Călin Dan and me, so visitors could see, alongside pictures, our two blankets and daily use objects.

After a month of living in the studio plastered with photographs, they began to fall off, covering the floor, the furniture and the working space. After repeatedly trying to remedy the situation, we realized the potential conceptual value of this process and decided to transform it into a new installation, *Deconstruction, AHA lesson 3*, that was presented to the public during an open workshop.

Another project, called *What Does a Project Mean?*, consisted of an installation with visual references to “small sculpture salons.” For the most part, the *Arta* magazi-





subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif Király) - *What Does a Project Mean?* Art History Archive series, Lesson 2, installation, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1995. © subREAL.

ne archive included negatives and ready for press photographic prints, reproductions of Romanian artists' works published over time in the magazine. For this installation, we chose images representing the sculptures of Ion Irimescu (1903–2005), an important figure in the official Romanian art landscape for over sixty years—before the communist rule, even more so under it, and after it was overthrown. Professor at the Belle Arte Academy of Iași (since 1940), Cluj (in the 1950s) and then at the Nicolae Grigorescu Visual Arts Institute of Bucharest (since 1966), Ion Irimescu was also the president of the Romanian Visual Artists Union (the one that published *Arta*) for a very long time (1978–1990). In all of these positions, he had an ambivalent role: an official decision maker, both politically and esthetically, as well as a subject of times, a prolific creator of small or public sculptures adapted to the formal needs of the moment. In *What Does a Project Mean?*, subREAL uses reproductions of his sculptures, as published over time in the magazine, cut out on the outline and mounted on a simple piece of plywood providing vertical support to the photographic paper.

Viewed from the front, the resulting objects, individually mounted on miniature pedestals, looked, as in an optical illusion, like three-dimensional objects, small sculptures on various subjects—from quasi-abs-

tract allegorical interpretations and generic modernism to traditionalism, folk inspiration or realist-socialist formulas. If the angle changed (a typical movement when contemplating sculptures), the theatrical property, the staging, the two-dimensionality of the “artistic object” were revealed. In the background, at the end of the route among the statue-photographs, another element of the archive was installed: a portrait of the artist

subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif Király) - *What Does a Project Mean?* Art History Archive series, Lesson 2, installation detail, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1995. © subREAL.



in the middle of his studio, surrounded by a selection of images showing Ion Irimescu handing in awards or shaking hands with fellow artists, but at the same time offering awards and distinctions from UAP to political figures. For almost his entire life, he gravitated around political power, being an interface between the political and the artistic community.

The photographs seemed interesting to us as they nuanced a preconception widespread in the 1990s, namely that good artists were excluded and never received any recognition, while awards and benefits were only for those making compromises in the relationship with political power. In those photographs we can see that not only the clients of official commissions and Ceaușescu's portraitists received awards from and shook hands with Ion Irimescu, but also honorable artists and art critics, as well as various artists who, after 1989, became very verbal in their anti-communist and monarchist stance, presenting themselves as former dissidents, discriminated by the infamous regime.

The installation was completed by an application letter from the sculptor to the Bethanien residency (an ironic document conceived by subREAL as a complement to the illusory montage of sculpture reproductions) and a biography of Irimescu reproduced from a monograph dedicated to him that was trying to place him in an international landscape. By this, *What Does a Project Mean?* also referenced the obsession of Romanian art to place itself in sync with universal art. In the early 1990s, the myth of the creator begins to compete with the model of the artist who is a project author; the term "art projects" gains more and more prominence, and the need to adapt leaves behind, in an undecided sea of significations, the most part of the Romanian art after 1945.

*Treffpunkt Kreuzberg. A Voyage Through the Inner Space of Europe* (AHA lesson 7) was made in collaboration with Agentur Bilwet from Amsterdam, and it also took place in the subREAL studio at Bethanien. It contained images from the *Dataroom*

installation in association with three oil paintings, each reproducing a selected photograph from the archive. Basjan Van Stam, one of the Bilwet members, received an envelope with archive photographs of which he painted reproductions. subREAL was thus emphasizing, for the first time, the relationship between the painted photograph and the photographed painting, a theme that would be continued in *Serving Art 3*. The other objects in the installation came from the collections of the two groups, subREAL and Agentur Bilwet, most of them having sentimental value. The participants in the action (Geert Lovink, Lex Wouterloot, and subREAL) were seated in the middle of the installation, around a table, talking over a glass of vodka and a cigarette. The discussion was analyzing the common places marking the political narrative of the then topical Romanian accession to the EU. From time to time, visitors looking at the installation would sit down at the table and take part in the conversation. From today's perspective, we could say it was a "relational art" project *avant la lettre*. The video camera, mounted on the ceiling, recorded images of the table around which discussions carried on. The images were simultaneously displayed on a monitor. Agentur Bilwet, also known as Adilkno (The Foundation for the Advancement of Illegal Knowledge), was a collective of media theoreticians coming from the Amsterdam's 1980s squatting scene.

The projects made during the Berlin residency used the images printed on photographic paper from the *Arta* magazine archive as a starting point. Most of them were art object reproductions (paintings, sculptures, ceramic objects, textiles, design, etc.), images from exhibitions and openings, a variety of other artistic events (art camps, meetings, symposiums, conferences, etc.). Most of them were taken in Romania by photographers hired over the years by the magazine or collaborating with the magazine for various events or specific periods of time. However, there were also many pictures



subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif Király)  
 - *Serving Art 1*, black and white  
 prints of negatives from the *Arta*  
 magazine archive. © subREAL.



subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif Király)  
 - *5 Suitcases*, photo installation,  
 Ludwig Forum für Internationale  
 Kunst, Aachen, 1997.  
 © subREAL.

subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif  
 Király) - *Serving Art 3*,  
 acryl on canvas.  
 © subREAL.



received from foreign art magazines with which *Arta* magazine was collaborating and was exchanging articles. Most of these images were coming from “sister” countries, that is from the group of socialist countries (USSR, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, GDR, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Albania, North Korea, Yugoslavia, etc.), but also from art magazines from Western Europe, USA, Canada or Egypt, India, etc.

Upon the completion of the Berlin residency, the photographs returned to Romania and, by courtesy of Mihai Oroveanu, they were first included in the archive of the National Exhibition Office (Artexpo). In the early 2000s, when the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) was established, they became part of the archive of the new museum together with other photography collections. Around that time, we began examining the content of the boxes of negatives. There, among numerous reproductions from art albums, images from exhibitions and other less interesting things, we found a category of pictures that stirred our curiosity. Most negatives in the archive were in a square format (6 x 6 cm). The magazine’s usual practice was to photograph works of art in wide shots, and then, when transposing them on photosensitive paper, only the object to be published in the magazine would be cut out/reframed from the negative. Therefore, the art work became a detail surrounded by an aura of events, objects, and people.

The following projects, using the negatives from the collection of *Arta* magazine, were carried out during another residency in Germany, at Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart.

For the *Serving Art 1* project, the first of this new series, we selected around 1,200 negatives that were printed in standard size (18 x 18 cm) and organized by theme, depending on a chosen element from the background (people, chairs, vegetation, radiators, photo props, etc.). They thus acquired a dominant position in relation to the art object in the middle of the image, even if the

work of art had been in fact the focus of the photographer’s attention.

For the second project, *5 Suitcases*, we edited the negatives in a reversed manner from what the magazine photographers had done, eliminating precisely the central parts that had been published in the magazine representing the works of art. Instead, we magnified the details we deemed significant representing people, the spaces where the art works were created or photographed, and the objects around them. This is how the concept of the five suitcases emerged. Four of them each contain one of the cardinal areas around the art work. The fifth suitcase, the size of the negative, contains the whole image as a witness.

In the third project, *Serving Art 2*, the same “editing” method of negatives used in the *5 Suitcases* installation is applied, with the difference that in this work we only selected fragments containing people. These anonymous characters helped with taking the photograph, most of the times holding a neutral background behind the art works. Technically, in order to obtain a diffuse and as neutral as possible background, the exposure time used was long, over one second, and the assistants needed to wave the background cloth. This is how the ghostly appearance of art “servants” is explained. The installation was conceived in relation with the architecture of the exhibition space as the intention was to engulf/dominate the space by “blowing up” those marginal characters.

After completing the Akademie Schloss Solitude residency, the boxes of negatives followed the same path as the photographs had, being first included in the Artexpo archive and then in the MNAC one.

Continuing the deconstruction-reconstruction project of the *Arta* archive, in *Serving Art 3*, subREAL commissioned the painter Dumitru Gorzo (a student at that time) to paint reproductions of around 400 selected pictures from *Serving Art 1*. The images were painted on pieces of oilcloth, and the display was done using the technique of wallpaper application. This procedural



translation deliberately mixed up the mediums. Painting undermines the objectivity claims of photography, generating a blending effect of representation, which collapses the hierarchy between secondary and central elements of the image. Copyright was transferred to subREAL group under a contract concluded between the group and the person who performed the job.

The art work, first exhibited in an exhibition at the Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris in 2000, raises several questions such as: (1) What is the author in contemporary art (relationship between concept and financial resources on one hand, and craft on the other hand)? ; and (2) How to apply the relationship *icon* versus *index* to photography and painting? Can a painting be a *document*? Does the right to a good name apply if an individual portrayed in a painting does not agree with the content of the painting or the context where the painting is displayed—an increasingly common situation in case of photographs of people, especially published online?

With this project we basically concluded working directly with the images we appropriated from the *Arta* magazine photo collection, symbolically closing the circle where the work of art was reproduced with the help of the camera and turned into photography, and then photography was, in its turn, transposed (painted) into a work of art.

For the next photographic projects, we decided to continue a certain type of composition rooted in *Serving Art*, but at the same time to create our own archive related directly to our personal experiences in the wider context of the contemporary art world.

The idea behind the *Interviewing the Cities* project took shape during the residencies in Künstlerhaus Bethanien and Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart and was crystallized in Wien during a KulturKontakt residency. Work on the project continued in Amsterdam (Stichting De Appel), Helsinki (Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art), Montreal (Vox Gallery), Strasbourg (Apol-

onia), Turku (Art Academy), Stockholm (IASPIS), Zürich (BINZ Foundation), and Lisbon (Gulbenkian Foundation).

The project tactically used the institutional context of the artistic residencies following two directions: on the one hand, building a subjective archive with agents in the cultural landscape from the cities where the residencies were taking place; on the other hand, the critical investigation of the representation of history with analog photographic means, which had become, at the time of the project, a historical method. The deconstruction operated in *Serving Art* would leave its mark on projects of the *Interviewing the Cities* series.

The *Re-enacting* series included portraits of members of the art community with which subREAL had been in contact during residencies: artists, curators, collectors, architects, etc. The portraits are reenactments of the photography technique identified in the *Arta* magazine archives. If *Serving Art* was about a deconstruction process of some images taken over from an archive, the *Re-enacting* project was rather about reconstruction using a known technical method. This time the art “servants” are the two subREAL members themselves, respectfully holding the background cloth. In a first ver-

subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif Király) - *Interviewing the Cities / Reenacting*, black and white photograph, Harald Szeemann, Ticino, Switzerland, 2004. © subREAL



subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif Király) - *Interviewing the Cities. Listening to Sculptures*, black and white photograph, Bucharest, 2002. © subREAL.



subREAL (Călin Dan, Iosif Király) - *Interviewing the Cities. Framing*, black and white photograph, Amsterdam, 2000. © subREAL.

sion, each portrait was made into a diptych reproducing an object (possibly art object, but not necessarily) that defined the interests of the portrayed person.

*Framing* was a travel diary where photography served as a tool for exploration and deconstruction of some cultural and urbanistic spaces imposed by literature, arts, and the media. The black and white photographs show the two members of the subREAL group holding up a black cloth with a baroque frame in the middle as they used this device to frame a fragment of a site well-known to tourists because of the tourism industry. The series questions the representation policies and the landscape as a social construct.

In *Listening to Sculptures*, Călin Dan and Iosif Király took on the role of two reporters armed with a microphone, headphones and video camera interrogating public figurative monuments. The performative aspect specific to the entire *Interviewing the Cities* project was intensified in this series, critically highlighting both the public sculpture phenomenon and the dominant position of the media in contemporary culture. Focusing the video recording on details introduced a note of mocking, chipping at the monumental dimension of the sculptures.

I continued working with image collections beyond the subREAL projects, which, as they were derived from *Arta* magazine,

focused on art and artists, although opening up to other fields as well. Below I will mention just a few of the projects accomplished as an individual artist, which were presented in several exhibitions and publications.

*Old People Feel the Weather in Their Bones* is a meditation on the limits of photography to “freeze” time. It is a project about memory and getting old, about normality of life in an oppressive political system. Each work consists of a multilayered montage of vintage photographs (shot in communist Romania and taken from my own family albums), superimposed on relatively recent images capturing certain anatomic details of the characters depicted in the old pictures.

In *Echoes* I followed the way certain moments and contexts repeat themselves, how they can be relived from different perspectives. I tried to find visual formulas for the feeling of *déjà vu* and/or *false recognition*. Within these photographic objects, several image layers coexist as photomontages that open like windows allowing views of fragments of images in a more or less obvious relation to the main image.

*Open Sky. Revisiting Public Space*<sup>1</sup> is the name of a digital montage series created by juxtaposing surveillance camera images recorded by political police agents in Bucharest (from 1950 to 1980) and excerpts from the *Securitate* archive with images from

1) Project carried out as a collaboration between CNSAS (National Council for Studying the Securitate Archives), UNArte, and MNAC in 2012.



Iosif Király - *Echoes: Birchis - I*, 2013, photomontage. © Iosif Király.

1) *Tinseltown* (on the architecture of rich Roma from the commune of Buzescu, Teleorman County), *Cross Section* (on the architecture and public spaces of Bucharest in the early 2000s), *RO\_Archive* (on the mutations in numerous lines of work in Romania), *D\_Platform* (on the Romanian Danube area).

Google Maps Street View of the same places as they look today. By joining the two observation/surveillance methods together, I tried to represent how the perception of old surveillance camera images changes when examined through the lens of much more advanced contemporary technologies.

Beside the above-mentioned projects, I also initiated other group projects<sup>2</sup> (together with other artists and/or photographers, but also architects, anthropologists, philosophers) to document in an organized (archived) way the major changes (good and less good) that occurred in everyday

Iosif Király - *Old People Feel the Weather in Their Bones - VIII* (diptych), 2016, digital image. © Iosif Király.



Iosif Király - *Old People Feel the Weather in Their Bones - IX* (diptych), 2016, digital image. © Iosif Király.

Romania over the past decades. They focus on subjects that are many times intertwined, and I can imagine them in the future next to other documentary projects initiated by other groups of photographers or artists. Together they will provide study materials for future historians and researchers from various fields. I find such approaches important, the more so as there is no interest (or vision that today's reality is tomorrow's history) from policymakers or managers of central or local administrations for documenting and archiving the historical period in which they temporarily exercise their power.

Iosif Király - *Open Sky. Revisiting Public Spaces*, digital photo montage. © Iosif Király.

