Dictatorship and Theatricality: Performing Memories in the Archive

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During the two months of my research stay at the Open Society Archives I wished to address the notion of archive as the precondition of history for being able to happen as suggested by Boris Groys.[1] Accordingly, the archive can be seen as the time and space when history is (re)presented as well as created. Following this logic, my aim was to examine how memories of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution were being created, staged, and in some cases (re)animated through and in the OSA. From this respect, another important factor is the way an archive can shift from being a passive holder towards becoming an active performer regarding the various modes of remaining.

I.   Research Concept

The research itself covered three phases with an initial step of examining performative strategies of archiving, such as re-enactments, re-performances, and performative memorials. One of the main questions was whether the understanding of documents could be broadened towards live acts, gestures, and movements. I wanted to touch upon a relevant problem posed by Rebecca Schneider in her book entitled *Performing Remains* (2011): 'Can a trace take the form of a living foot – or only the form of a footprint? (...) Might a live act even "document" a precedent live act, rendering it, in some way, ongoing, even preserved? An action repeated again and again and again, however fractured or partial or incomplete, has a kind of staying power – persists through time – and even, in a sense, serves as a fleshy kind of "document" of its own recurrence'.[2]

Regarding Western archives, it seems that the position they are willing and able to offer in most cases is still the position of the holder or the saver, and not the performer. However, Schneider's research made it clear that performative ways of remaining can open up new

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[1] Boris Groys: *Unter Verdacht. Eine Phänomenologie der Medien*, München, Hanser, 2000, 9.

[2] Rebecca Schneider: *Performing Remains. Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, Routledge, 2011, 37.

discursive and practical fields, as it is shown in the case of the OSA as well. Furthermore, the history of discussing and interpreting archives marks a perceptive oscillation among dismemberment and embodiment, absence and presence. No matter whether the archive is handled as a metaphor following Jacques Derrida[3] and Michel Foucault[4], or as an institution formed through various media technologies as discussed by Wolfgang Ernst[5] and Jussi Parikka[6], it is often seen as a dynamic network of material and medial remains of human memory.

Mapping the theoretical background, the second step of the research was a participation in an international workshop entitled *Materiality of Performance – performance residues* in Cologne between the 2-4th May 2018. The workshop aimed at discussing the performance's place within the archive including the challenges of materiality and performativity as well as re-performances and various ways of performative remaining.[7] The relation of material remains and performances poses questions of knowledge formations, chronopolitics, and bodies in and outside the archives. The issue becomes especially problematic during the eras of dictatorship when artistic practices and archives are strictly monitored and controlled by the authorities.

The body of the archive thus represents an assemblage of stored texts and objects, carrying the bodies of their authors or former possessors, open to material decay on the one hand and persistent growth on the other. Although archive materials highlight a certain absence (of the past and the passed, for instance), during interpretation processes they crave for being not only remembered but also (re)presented and (re)animated. They are seeking their own discursive and performative ways (back) to life.

Therefore Schneider's argument can be highlighted once again: 'And yet, in privileging an understanding of performance as a refusal to remain, do we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently? (…) If we adopt the equation that performance does not save, does not remain, and apply it to performance generally, to what degree can performance interrogate archival thinking? Is it not the case that it is precisely the logic of the archive that approaches performance as of disappearance?'[8]

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[3] Jacques Derrida: *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (trans. Eric Prenowitz), University of Chicago Press, 1998.
[4] Michel Foucault: *Archaeology of Knowledge* (trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith), Routledge, 2002.
[5] Wolfgang Ernst: *Stirrings in the Archive. Order from Disorder* (trans. Adam Siegel), Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.
[6] Jussi Parikka: *What is Media Archeology*?, Polity Press, 2012.
[7] Cf. http://tws.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/sites/the-sammlung/Neue_Homepage/Workshops/Materiality_Poster_A3.pdf
[8] Schneider, 2011, 99.

Accordingly, the understanding of performance shifts from disappearance towards reappearance through the performative examples of keeping the past alive. In addition, the image of archive materials as dismembered bodies calls attention to possible 'historiographical choreographies' they can perform[9]. One can imagine such movements as the rise of the dead; however, it is more about the cross-passing of various time layers, resisting linear temporality. As Foucault suggested, the archive suspends the established scheme of space and time order, it can rather be seen as a place to face the heterogeneity of the past causing a continuous experience of displacement.[10] In this way, no remains are fully dead or alive, but are in a constant shift of becoming. The materiality of the archive thus underlines the intermedial and flowing nature of presence and absence regarding the bodies of and in the archive.[11]

As a third and parallel step to the previous ones, I addressed the topic of memories created and performed about the 1956 Hungarian Revolution as a spectacular as well as a repressed historical happening. Throughout the research I focused on the OSA's performative strategies in remembering the revolution because the institution seems more than open to performative encounters with history. Accordingly, the notions of presence and absence, disappearance and reappearance, materiality and immateriality became the most relevant ones. I studied three events that happened at the OSA and connected to the memories of the revolution: *The Trial* (2008), *The Note* (1999), and *The Representation of the Counter-revolution* (1996).

II. Materials

In order to address the various modes of remembering the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, I examined the following areas and materials at the OSA:

1. Records of the Open Society Archives at Central European University: Public Events: Audiovisual recordings of public events (*The Note*: 6th July 1999): HU OSA 206-3-1

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[9] Ernst, 2015, 17

[10] Foucault, 2002

[11] Cf. Ina Blom's point here: 'If the traditional archive is premised on the selection of a few original, exemplary, finite objects and documents, each one attesting to one time and place, how can a world of networked mobilities, – relays, updates, negotiations, associations, and speculations – even be archived? How to decide where connectivity starts and where it ends?' (Ina Blom: Introduction, In: *Memory in Motion. Archives, Technology, and the Social*, eds. Ina Blom, Trond Lundemo, Eivind Røssaak, Amsterdam University Press, 2017, 13)

2. Documentary videos of the OSA's events (*The Trial:* 9-15th June 2018; *The Representation of the Counter-Revolution:* 5th November – 1st December 1996)

3. The Trial of Imre Nagy and his associates – Audio recording and transcripts: HU OSA FL 4073

4. The Trial of Imre Nagy and his associates – Propaganda film, Remembering Snagov: HU OSA 306-0-4

5. The Retrial of Imre Nagy and his associates – Black Box documentary video: HU OSA 305-0-3.1989-078_89-99

6. Exhumation of the Martyrs of 1956 – Black Box documentary video: HU OSA 305-0-3.1989-027_89-45

7. Funeral Ceremony of Imre Nagy: Black Box documentary video: HU OSA 305-0-2

8. Commemorative event on Imre Nagy and the Martyrs of 1956 at Plot 301: Black Box documentary video: HU OSA 305-0-3.1988-027_88-27

9. Records of Aurél Bereznai: Political Trials (1956-1958): HU OSA 300-5-41

10. Records of Aurél Bereznai: Civil Disturbances (1956-1958): HU OSA 300-5-46

11. Press Survey in Hungarian (1956-1958): HU OSA 300-40-10

12. Press Survey in English (1956-1958): HU OSA 300-40-11

III. Performative Strategies at the OSA

Regarding the performative strategies of (re)animating various memories of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution at the OSA, I found the categories of presence and absence as well as time and synchronicity to be the focal ones. Out of the three events, two connected closely to the trial of Imre Nagy and his associates, and the third one related to the narratives created by the Kádár regime of the revolution.

The Trial (9-15th June 2008) was especially focusing on the possibility of bodily presence. As Katalin Jánosi, granddaughter of Imre Nagy highlighted regarding the main consequences of the closed trial against the former prime minister and his associates between 9–15th June 1958: "There was no burial, there was no corpse"[12]. The disappearance of bodies underlined the symbolic layer of the secret imprisonment, legal proceedings, and the following execution in 1958 as well as the exhumation process and ceremonial reburial in 1989. The Kádár regime took a well-known path: when the corpses were hidden, the crimes stayed

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[12] *Rendszerváltás-sorozat: Nagy Imre sírja*, Tények, 25 April 2009

undercover as well. Moreover, without the body of evidence public memory became more easily biased through communist propaganda. The *void* that defined the case was reanimated in a reflective way ten years ago, on the 50th anniversary of the trial in the Open Society Archives' Galeria Centralis. *The Trial* as a performative and memorial event aimed at (re)playing the 52 hour long audio recording of the original trial and opening it up for the first time to the public, following the exact time period and schedule of the event. For seven days in 2008 the audience could thus participate in a unique commemoration which called attention to various ways of remembering and access to the past through intertwining materiality and immateriality.

The form of the auditorium resembled a proscenium stage setting, which consequently suggested that there was something spectacular to look at as it is an underlying characteristic in cases of theatre events or trials, for instance. However, during *The Trial* there was only a visual void to look at. Instead of the performers' (i.e. the participants of the original trial) bodies or images, the bare white walls and black loudspeakers were at the focus of the anti-spectacle. The mere voices of the defendants, judge, solicitors, prosecutors, and witnesses highlighted an absence in terms of the performers' bodies, whereas the communal body represented by the audience served as a reassurance for the victims through their very presence and material energies in the gallery for a whole week. Accordingly, the long gone figures could become alive and part of present history through the act of listening and being present, and in this way members of the audience turned into belated witnesses of a secret event that formed the legitimate basis of the Kádár regime.

The performance entitled *The Note* in 1999 also connected to the consequences of the above mentioned trial, however, it dealt with the retrial of the Imre Nagy case by the Supreme Court in 1989 at the end of which the former prime minister and his associates had been rehabilitated. More precisely, the event at the OSA focused on a specific moment of the retrial, which further highlighted the uncanny and emblematic relation between Imre Nagy and the man who was responsible for his execution, János Kádár. On the 6th July 1989, during the course of the retrial, a note started to circulate among the audience which turned out to spread the recent news of Kádár's death. Since Kádár neither admitted his role in imprisoning Nagy, nor did he even refer to the prime minister by name after 1958,[13] the coincidental fact that he died on the day when his most well-known victim got legal justice offered a symbolic interconnection between the two figures.

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[13] István Rév: *Retroactive Justice: Pre-history of Post-communism*, Stanford University Press, 2005, 54-55.

This interconnection became the main theme of the OSA's performative installation which happened ten years after the retrial, during the exact same time period of the note's original circulation in the courtroom in 1989. During the performance the propaganda film of the Imre Nagy trial was played parallel to the documentary film of the retrial, creating a visual bond between the two extremely different (legal and historical) interpretative strategies. The audience in 1999 could participate in an event which explored synchronicity in terms of death and justice as well as timing.

The exhibition entitled *The Representation of the Counter-revolution* in 1996 aimed at presenting the narrative techniques used by the Kádár regime in order to dominate the interpretation and discourse of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. By repressing the term 'revolution', the communist authorities were to demonstrate their point of view as the only authentic and proven one from the very beginning. At the end of May in 1957, the Party's newspaper, Népszabadság published an article on a coming documentary exhibition organized by the Institute of Party History about the counter-revolution. The article states that 'In ten rooms images and documents present October and November – the way it really happened, causing deadly danger to the Hungarian working class.'[14]

40 years after the historical event, the exhibition at the OSA demonstrated these forms of interpretation as well as the risk of assuming that documents themselves can speak to the public, whereas it is always the collector and presenter of the documents who can provide various narratives and realities to the audience. Regarding human presence, an interesting part of the exhibition was the reconstruction of János Kádár's study where apart from a desk, a lamp, and a chair, Kádár himself was haunting the room through his bodiless voice. The voice was an audio recording of Kádár's last speech representing an authority which even without a physical presence could still maintain some kind of living existence.

I hope that my research was able to open up a discursive field in which the role of the archive shifted from being a passive holder towards becoming an active performer. I argued that the above mentioned events, performances, and exhibitions at the OSA showed how an archive is able to offer an understanding of history that does not only save but also performs. Moreover, addressing the problem of how repressed memories of the Hungarian Revolution can be reconstructed and reanimated in the archive calls attention to the performative function

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[14] *Kiállítás készül az ellenforradalom dokumentumaiból*, Népszabadság, 1957. május 29. – HU OSA 300-5-46:2, Records of Aurel Bereznai on the 1956 Revolution: Old Code Subject Files, Analytic Research Department, Records of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest

of archival materials and the performative nature of our profession as researchers. It also demonstrates that memories gathered and held in the archive are to be activated and performed, and thus the past is also in a constant process of (re)creation and (re)animation.

Finally, I would like to thank for the help of the entire OSA staff, since working at the Archive for two months was a great and productive research phase for me. Special thanks goes to my consultant, István Rév for the supportive and very useful consultations, to András Mink and Örs Tari for helping to find important materials, to Judit Hegedűs and Robert Parnica for guiding me through the archives, to Katalin Gádoros and Nóra Ungár for the administrative help.