



*Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 29–36

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## 'The Reconstruction of the Past is the Task of Historians and not Agents'

Operative Reenactment in State Security Archives

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**ABSTRACT:** State security archives in Eastern Europe are shedding new light on the operative practices of the secret services and their interaction with performance art. Surveillance, tracking, undermining, disruption, writing of reports, and measure plans were different operative methods to be carried out in continuous repetitive processes. This paper argues that, through these repetitive working processes, state security agencies were permanently engaged in different forms of reenactments: of orders, legends, report writing, and inventing measure plans. With this operative reenactment, state security agencies not only tried to track down facts but also created 'fake facts' serving their agenda. These 'fake-facts' were then again repeated and reenacted by informants endlessly to be 'effective' in the surveillance and elimination of performance art.

**KEYWORDS:** operative reenactment; performance art; state security archives

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# ‘The Reconstruction of the Past is the Task of Historians and not Agents’

## Operative Reenactment in State Security Archives

KATA KRASZNAHORKAI

Approximately two decades have passed since reenactment in performance art<sup>1</sup> started to influence contemporary cultural theory in exhibitions,<sup>2</sup> and later in game-changing books, such as Rebecca Schneider’s *Performing Remains*.<sup>3</sup> It has also been more than twenty years since the first national secret service archives in former socialist

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1 The term ‘performance art’ is used here to describe all performative artistic strategies by visual artists, i.e. happenings and actions. Although the term ‘performance’ was rarely used in Eastern Europe in the analysed period, it is an umbrella term that covers all tendencies in live-art actions that did not originate in theatre or musical performance. The term ‘reenactment’ has become increasingly ubiquitous in recent years, used lavishly to simply describe a ‘re-doing’ of any cultural activity. In this essay, it refers to Rebecca Schneider’s definition, relating to a certain type of historiographic analysis that takes place in a ‘syncopated time’, with the involvement of the bodily experience in memory, in: Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011), partly published in an earlier version: ‘Performance Remains’, *Performance Research*, 6.2 (2001), pp. 100–08.

2 See, for example: ‘A Little Bit of History Repeated’, curated by Jens Hoffmann, at the KW Berlin from 16 to 18 November 2001; ‘Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art’, curated by Sven Lütticken, at the Witte De With, Rotterdam, from 27 January to 27 March 2005; and ‘History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Reenactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance’, curated by Inke Arns, at the HMKV Dortmund from 6 to 23 September 2007.

3 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains*.

European countries started to (partly) open their doors for scientific research: first the Stasi Records Archive ( BStU) in Germany in 1990, followed by archives in Budapest (1996), Warsaw (1998), Bucharest (1999), Sofia and Prague (2007), and finally Tirana (2017). However, although the accessibility of these archives has since led to research in history, sociology, and literature, until recently, no systematic, comparative, and analytical research was undertaken on performance art in relation to secret service operations.<sup>4</sup> Nor was the interrelation between the state security archives and performance art reconsidered from the perspective of reenactment strategies.

The scope of this paper does not allow me to give a hint of explanations for these issues. This paper aims to provide a preliminary, rough outline highlighting only the potentials of analysing the relation between reenactment strategies in state security methods and in performance art. This analysis hopefully contributes not only to the understanding of the relationship between secret services and the performance art scene but also, in a broader context, to the interrelation between reenactment strategies in art and ‘operative reenactment’ by the state security. Furthermore, this paper attempts to shift focus to the possibilities that lie in the intertwined relationship between reenactment theory in performance art and operative theory in secret service practices.

Analysis of secret services’ records and documents on performance art shed new light, not only on the systematic oppression of subversive art forms that opposed state-socialist cultural directives but also on the reenactment strategies of secret service informers who performed in order to effectively disrupt performance artists and prevent performance art from becoming public.

But why were performances, happenings, and actions — mostly carried out by almost unknown artists in marginal places in front of

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4 *Artists & Agents. Performancekunst und Geheimdienste*, ed. by Kata Krasznahorkai and Sylvia Sasse (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2019) (forthcoming in English) and the exhibition ‘Artists & Agents’ curated by Sylvia Sasse, Kata Krasznahorkai, and Inke Arns at the HMKV Dortmund from 26 October 2019 to 19 April 2020. The exhibition magazine is free for download here: HMKV Exhibition Magazine 2/2019, ed. by Inke Arns, Kata Krasznahorkai, and Sylvia Sasse (Dortmund: Hartware MedienKunstVerein, 2019) <[https://www.hmkv.de/files/hmkv/ausstellungen/2019/AGENTS/05\\_Publikation/HMKV\\_AGENTS\\_Magazin\\_DE-EN.pdf](https://www.hmkv.de/files/hmkv/ausstellungen/2019/AGENTS/05_Publikation/HMKV_AGENTS_Magazin_DE-EN.pdf)> [accessed 20 February 2020].

small audiences — so alarmingly dangerous in the eyes of the state security? The potential of being reenacted was one of the decisive reasons that performance art became one of the most surveilled spheres of art in certain countries, such as in Hungary or the German Democratic Republic. From the perspective of the secret service, this artistic genre was a nightmare for several reasons: (1) it was a (in some cases spontaneous) live event, so real-time-control during an action was almost impossible; (2) it had no prior screenplay and was thus not eligible for prior control and censorship; (3) it was in some cases an improvised action, so officials only knew about the performances either shortly before or after the event, and sometimes only realized during the performance what was happening; (4) the majority of the performances took place in public spaces, such clubs, the basements of museums, or outdoors, but also in private flats that were also under surveillance, but where it was harder to ‘get in’;<sup>5</sup> and (5) the genre was supposed to have originated in the West and therefore had the potential to infiltrate the youth with ‘nihilistic’ and ‘anarchic’ ideas. Most importantly, performance art as a live event could be reenacted anywhere and anytime without providing a tangible object of surveillance. It had no manifest output — unlike sculpture or painting, which were easily recognized as art. One of the major difficulties for the state security was to detect *what* and *how* to put under operative control, and how to *re-act* what was seen or reported.

Before proceeding with an overview of reenacting and re-acting between the state security and performing artists, the difference between reenacting and re-acting must be clarified. ‘Reenacting’ refers to the acting out of a fixed role constructed by state security officials, with which the informant had to identify. As a result of a successful reenactment, the bodily (in style and manners) and mental (in ideology, cultural definitions, etc.) identification with the person under operative control would ideally be reached. In the state security terminology of the GDR and Hungary, this was called the ‘legend’

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5 On the relationship between public and private spheres of the surveilled places of performances, see Kata Krasznahorkai, ‘Surveilling the Public Sphere: The First Hungarian Happening in Secret Agents Reports’, in *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-based Art in Late Socialist Europe*, ed. by Katalin Cseh-Varga and Adam Czirak, Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 127–38.

— the role that an actor played and with which they later became identified. It was these ‘legends’, or life stories, that were tailored to the operative scenario (the task the agent or informant had to fulfil), which was agreed upon in writing at the time that the informant was ‘taken on.’<sup>6</sup> As in the special case of surveilling performance artists, it was difficult to obtain relevant information from these artists’ closed circles, and thus informants of central importance had to come from their innermost circles, usually close friends of the surveilled person. These informants had to perform their ‘legends’ and re-enact these roles in similar, repetitive manners also in the most intimate situations. That led in some cases to the formation of multiple personalities within one person. The permanent reenacting of these different personae often resulted in broken identities and serious disturbances in the personalities of those artists, who had to be informants and artists in one. Reenacting roles and identities prescribed by officers and integrating these roles into one’s personal life produces a crucial idea regarding the theoretical implications of reenactment formulated by Sven Lütticken in 2005: ‘If one is always re-enacting roles partially scripted by others, one might just well use re-enactment against itself by recreating historical events.’<sup>7</sup>

‘Re-acting’ was the state security officers’ methodology for using information in the reports that were delivered via the effective operation of agents using and reenacting ‘legends’. Re-acting was at the core of the officers’ tasks once a report was delivered to them. The key instrument for operative staff to counter performance art was the systematic writing and archiving of reports; both surveillance and report writing were carried out following guidelines created by the secret service itself. These guidelines were meticulously orchestrated, highly repetitive and monotonous. Once a report had been handwritten and delivered, the process repeated itself: first the document went to the secretary to be typed (if it was classified as important enough), then

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6 ‘MfS-Dictionary: Werbung’, *Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv*, ed. by Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik <<https://www.bstu.de/mfs-lexikon/detail/werbung/>> [accessed 17 November 2020].

7 Sven Lütticken, ‘An Arena in Which to Reenact’, in *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, ed. by Sven Lütticken (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005), pp. 17–60.

sorted in many different operative files and forwarded to higher levels if necessary. There were certain artists who were surveilled and 'operatively treated' for more than a decade by at least three (but often more than ten) long-term informants. One can imagine that in the flood of reports, in some cases written every other week, there was a continuous flow of surveillance, handwriting, typing, and forwarding, a cycle that repeated itself again and again and again. Actual 'actions', like tapping phones or house searches, were rather rare in this monotonous flow of mostly repetitive information gathering about the surveilled persons and stand in stark contrast to the obsessive repetition and emphasis of the supposed 'danger' emanating from this new artistic form. These paranoid fears were triggered by the rhetoric of the documents themselves, particularly by the ongoing, almost mantra-like repetition of the dangers that socialist society was facing from performance artists, with some sentences repeated verbatim in many reports over a number of years. This was the permanent reenactment of fake facts produced in order to create internal enemies, based on the repetitive evocation of prefabricated fictions. Repeating how dangerous these 'negative-nihilistic' artists were for society also gave legitimization to the massive personal and financial efforts that kept the machinery of state surveillance alive for more than twenty years.

It is thus unsurprising that artists were not only monitored by the state: the secret services also attempted to discuss, define, and, in any case, intervene in this new development in art. It was thus crucial for the secret service to develop theoretical tools to detect whether an action or artist was a threat to socialist society or not. The Hungarian secret service repeated the definition of 'the happening' over and over again in countless reports and operational plans to emphasize and enhance the assumed danger. As a consequence, the fake facts led, in the case of some artists, to attempts to criminalize and pathologize them;<sup>8</sup> in other cases, the artistic activities of the underground were actively hindered by the closing of locations, the disruption of performances

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8 Kata Krasznahorkai, 'Heightened Alert: The Underground Art Scene in the Sights of the Secret Police — Surveillance Files as a Resource for Research into Artists' Activities in the Underground of the 1960s and 1970s', in *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)*, ed. by Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015), pp. 125–39.

in public spaces, and public undermining of an artist group's work.<sup>9</sup> In other cases, the secret service acted against performance art with performative methods resulting in 'counter-performances' as acts of subversive affirmation.<sup>10</sup>

One report compiled by an unofficial informant with the former GDR state security reads: 'The principal content of "action art" is the production and subsequent destruction of decadent artistic forms, and the documentation of the sequence of motions involved.'<sup>11</sup> It is this 'sequence of motions', the continuous serialization of movements and situations, which led to a certain 'Stasi aesthetic' in documenting artistic actions, with the aesthetic of the archive itself creating a kind of involuntary 'archive art'. For example, this absurd aesthetic is manifested in a photo series made by a secret service agent photo-documenting people visiting the illegal gallery of Gabriele Stötzer in Erfurt. This photo series gains a certain 'artistic' value due to the minimalist and serial aesthetic depicting people opening the door to a banned gallery: fifty different persons, always from behind, documented in the very same moment.

Reenactment strategies were also a form of the artistic reclaiming of the archives after the system change. After 1990, artists turned to their own state security records as a new source of artistic material. The absurdity of the fabrication of danger with the repetitive mantra of irrelevant, seemingly unimportant, and banal details is the focus of the German artist Cornelia Schleime, who left the GDR in 1984.

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9 Such was the case with the GDR group of artists gathered around Galerie Clara Mosch, which was systematically deconstructed by the Stasi with the help of the group's photographer, Rolf-Rainer Wasse (Codename 'Frank Körner') as a central informant.

10 This interference is described by Sylvia Sasse as 'subversive affirmation' of the state security. For more detail, see: Sylvia Sasse, 'KGB: The Art of Performance. Action Art or Actions against Art?', *Artmargins*, 30 December 1999 <<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/449-kgb-or-the-art-of-performance-action-art-or-actions-against-art>> [accessed 28 February 2019], and in the forthcoming publication Sylvia Sasse, *Subversive Affirmation* (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2022).

11 BStU, MFS, BV Karl-Marx-Stadt, Auswertungs- und Kontrollgruppe, AKG — 10088, 18.10.1977, 'Information über ein Treffen der Kunstschaffenden des Verbands bildender Künstler der DDR in Leussow', Comrade Siegfried Lorenz, 00094, cited in Sylvia Sasse, 'Stasi-Dada. Was KünstlerInnen aus ihren Geheimdienstakten machen', *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, 16 February 2016 <<http://geschichtedergewegung.ch/stasi-dada-gabriele-stoetzer-las-im-cabaret-voltaire-aus-ihren-akten/>> [accessed 20 February 2018].

She used exactly this repetition of sentences and recurring phrases from her photographic records and reenacted her own files by restaging repetitive phrases and descriptions of her personal and artistic life written by unofficial informants and officers in her series *Looking Forward to Further Collaboration Nr. 7284/85*.

What does the research on reenactment strategies of the state security concerning performance artists contribute to performance theory? Above all, the archives document the actions of the secret services themselves and their operative practices, not the artistic actions. The secret service archives can thus be treated as a reservoir of state performative practices. Repetitive actions and strategies to reenact long contradicted what was thought about performance art, an art form considered to be one that could not be saved, documented, and repeated.<sup>12</sup> The state security noticed very quickly, indeed in 'real time', that this was not the case; in fact, performance art *can* be documented and saved, and, confirming the state security's greatest fear, performance is never a singular action by any means. They noticed very early on that it was exactly the reenactment potential that represented the greatest threat to socialist state order. It was also clear that performances or their documentation had nothing to do with dematerialization or the documentation of so-called dematerialized events either, a fact that had already been a prominent mantra of performance theoreticians from the 1970s to the 1990s.

A wave of new research focuses on reenactments in recent years, showing that performance is never a 'singular' or 'dematerialized' event. Rebecca Schneider, for example, invites us to think about 'performance as a medium in which disappearance negotiates, becomes materiality'.<sup>13</sup>

This 'disappearance becoming materiality' is grounded in the vast amount of physical material on performance art in in hundreds of thousands of handwritten and typed pages in state security archives, documents that constantly re-act and reenact scenarios, 'legends', and operative measures. Nevertheless, reenacting is also manifest in writing the endless reports and measure plans. Thus, operative reenactment

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12 This is claimed by Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 146.

13 Schneider, *Performance Remains*, p. 106.



takes place not only in ‘becoming the enemy’ (in this case, an artist) but also on the archival level, as the reports and operative plans were triggering the urge to act and re-act constantly based on past events to prevent them in the future. This temporal dimension of reenactment in the interaction between state security and performance art provides a good illustration of how Schneider’s concept of syncopated time is constructive for the theory on the interrelation between performance art and operative reenactment: nowhere is the non-linearity and in-betweenness of time more present than in the minutiae of the records, which, when read today, offer a new presence of the historicity of performance art in relation to state power.

When thinking about artists using these archives as artistic material or about researchers who use the archives for creating new histories of performance art, we can concur with Schneider when she says that the performative basis of the archive is ‘that it is a house of and for performative repetition, not stasis.’<sup>14</sup> This is even truer in the case of state security archives.

No state security officer would have ever thought that the archive of the archive based on their reenacting strategies would become one of the sources of research on performance art and theory. As one secret agent training manual states: ‘The reconstruction of the past is the task of historians and not agents.’<sup>15</sup> Today’s art historians have to be alert not to unwittingly perpetuate the narrative set up by fictionalized facts in state security records.

As we now live in a thoroughly performative world, one that is more and more focused on presence, and where the mediatized notion of ‘live’ surveillance has political urgency, the reconsideration of operative reenactments in state security is not only relevant for art practices but for the overall understanding of citizens’ power of presence and its relation to state power.

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14 Ibid., p. 108.

15 ‘Az információs munka elméleti és módszertani kérdései [The Theoretical and Methodological Questions of Information Work], Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára Budapest [Historical Archive of the State Security Services Budapest], 2 vols. (1977), 1:ÁBTL A-3005/30/1, p. 38.

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