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Cultural Therapy and Concern for the Archive. The Case of Documentary Video Archives by Tomáš Rafa¹

Abstract: In this paper, the author explores current perspectives on contemporary art projects through the concept of the archive. By applying a theoretical framework termed “concern for the archive”, the author aims to elucidate complex relationships between the archive as a medium and the situated practices of contemporary art. The paper examines contemporary art as a form of temporary memory storage, particularly through the analysis of Tomáš Rafa’s documentary films. It addresses two key questions: What specific aspects of concern for the archive can be identified in political or activist contemporary art? How does concern for the archive differ from archival care, and why is this distinction important?

In the first section, the author discusses the “zones of contact” in political activist art, highlighting the formation of dialogical structures and distinguishing them from scientific research and purely documentary creation. The second section traces the layers of artistic training in Grzegorz Kowalski’s renowned studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, where the author gained experience in organizing and documenting collective workshops. This part reveals the specifics of documentary video creation with its activist and archival overlaps.

In the final sections, the author outlines a theoretical framework for interpreting documentary video pieces in relation to the concepts of archive, cultural trauma, and cultural therapy.

Keywords: documentary; video; archive; memory; contemporary art; activism; archival care; archival concern; cultural trauma; cultural therapy.

Zones of contact. Political art activism and cultural therapy

Tomáš Rafa has been documenting Europe’s emerging nationalism and neo-fascism since 2009. He has also monitored and documented how Europe has handled the refugee crisis since 2015. The distance we try to maintain to the flow of news images tends to dissolve when we are faced with Rafa’s portrayals. At close range, they confront us with raging mobs who spew out their hatred against immigrants, refugees and other

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minorities. His video reports show panic and despair of refugees at various European frontiers, people fainting from exhaustion, terrified children and parents pressed against barbed wire fences marking national borders. As if to fend off this brutal reality, Rafa also engages in a form of political art activism – with both vitalizing and therapeutic ambitions.²

This is how Joa Ljungberg, the curator of the exhibition *The New Human* organized at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, described the work of Tomáš Rafa. In the following study, I will tackle the relationship between cultural trauma, archive and cultural therapy through the interpretation of his artistic and activist projects. The artist and activist Tomáš Rafa spent several years pondering the question of what to do with the walls that municipal governments had built between two groups of inhabitants. A wall as a given and immovable border has become a central motif in his artistic projects. A border that can only be physically bypassed or – transformed. I will explore the archive of video films that record happenings and creative painting workshops initiated by the artist and activist Tomáš Rafa. They were made alongside the then newly built walls separating the Romani community from the majority population. The whole series is named *The Walls of Sports* and was made between 2009 and 2013 in several Romani settlements located in Eastern Slovakia: in Michalovce (2009, 2011), Sečovce (2012), Ostrovany (2012), and Veľká Ida (2013).

The author ironically appropriated the series title from a term introduced by local governments, as this designation was intended to suppress the problematic nature of the walls in public communication. Lenka Kukurová summarizes the artist's activities in the Romani environment, noting that negotiations with the local authorities, although remaining covert, are always an integral part of the process and have direct influence on the outcome, as the local authorities have censored the paintings on the walls on several occasions. According to Kukurová, painting the wall “can be seen as an active symbolic and perhaps even therapeutic approach to solving the problem”.³ According to Kukurová, the symbolic dimension of *The Walls of Sports* also has a subversive aspect, since the walls are the municipality's property and the municipality is not only responsible for their construction, but also approves final design of the painting. Do *The Walls of Sports* render visible something that would otherwise seem natural to everyone? What is the role of documentary film and photography in relation to the artistic event itself, which represents a collective work resulting from the artist's collaboration with the Romani community, volunteers and, ultimately, the municipality? If we build a wall, we are turning our backs on someone, closing

² Joa Ljungberg, “The New Human,” Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 21. 5. 2016 – 5. 3. 2017. Participating artists Adel Abdessemed, Ed Atkins, Robert Boyd, Esra Ersen, Harun Farocki, Kerstin Hamilton, Daria Martin, Santiago Mostyn, Ursula Mayer, Adrian Paci, Tomáš Rafa, Frances Stark, Hito Steyerl, Superflex and Ryan Trecartin. Moderna Museet. “About the Artworks,” <https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/the-new-human/about-the-artworks/>, acc. on June 20, 2024.

³ Lenka Kukurová, “Umenie v rómskych osadách. Umelecké projekty Tomáša Rafa zamerané na rómsku problematiku [Art in Romani settlements. Art projects of Tomáš Rafa focused on Romani issues],” in *Tomáš Rafa, Art Aktivista. Art and social activism* (Warsaw: Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, 2019), 13.

ourselves off to safety and shielding ourselves from seeing the hopelessness of poverty and social exclusion with the excuse that we are protecting someone on the other side of that wall. A wall is a barrier that we cannot see through. The concrete walls in Rafa's photographs are tall and intimidating. The Romani and non-Romani are absorbed in their work, fully focused on the paint rollers at the end of long rods which touch the surface of the wall and cover it with layers of paint. The children, splashed with paint, are in raptures of joy. What Tomáš Rafa records above all is a great work happening. A selection of unpretentious motifs is used for painting the walls – colors of the rainbow, a recurring enlarged motif of a football, silhouettes of players, and the Romani flag symbol. It was precisely the use of the red *chakra* (wheel), symbol of the international Romani flag on the segregation wall of Veľká Ida in the summer of 2013, that “underlined the ethnic background from which the political decision to build the wall stemmed.”⁴ The concrete brutality of the segregation wall does not disappear behind the painting. It remains as present as if the painting were not there. It can only be overcome by repeated human activity, which will eventually lead to the wall being removed.⁵

Tomáš Rafa's documentary films are arranged into two units and are accessible to the public as an online archive on two web platforms. *New Nationalism. The Documentary Video Archive* focuses mainly on the geopolitical space of Central and East-Central Europe, including Germany and Ukraine. It presents an extensive collection of documentaries shot between 2009 and 2019 and depicting events in public spaces, most often demonstrations and escalated clashes of opinions. Thus, side by side are placed videos recording moments of confrontation and escalated emotions involving different social groups: neo-Nazis, police, pro-Russian sympathizers, anarchists, migrants, representatives of the queer community, hooligans, feminists, religious activists, anti-capitalists, soldiers...⁶ The second set of documentaries from 2011 to 2022, that focuses on activities in excluded communities by recording painting workshops and *The Walls of Sports* series, can be found on a web platform called *Art Aktivista* with the subtitle *Art Therapy in Socially Excluded Locations*.⁷ The specificity of this archive of film documents becomes clearer when we compare it to self-reflexive approaches of anthropological research, as both have *fieldwork* and *collaboration with the community* at their core. Unlike scientific research, its goal isn't really the investigation of a selected community, but rather the creation of alternative structures in form of dialogue (workshop, therapy, biennial) that are continuously being recorded. The archive does not focus exclusively on life in Romani communities, but rather

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ In the following years, Tomáš Rafa, together with other activists, organized painting workshops in the village of Sečovce, which led to establishing the Art Activist civic association and organizing the Sečovce Biennial of Art Above the Walls, and subsequently also to a presentation in the format of an exhibition at the East Slovak Gallery in Košice, curated by Diana Klepoch Majdánková. Art Aktivista, “Exhibition. Sečovské bienále umenia vo VSG,” <https://artaktivista.sk/exhibition-ponad-mury-2021/>, acc. on February 20, 2024.

⁶ New Nationalism Documentary Archive, <https://your-art.sk/>, acc. on February 21, 2024

⁷ Art Aktivista. Art Therapy in Social Excluded Locations, https://artaktivista.sk/category/dok_film/, acc. on February 21, 2024 please, check this page URL, when you go there it says page not found..

follows *zones of contact*. Rafa is interested in the possibilities of activating creative potential (mainly, but not exclusively, in children). Therefore, it is not enough that these people are *recorded* on film, but at this point “one must go further and ask whether in each case the form of such an exposure – framing, montage, editing, rhythm, narration, and so on – encloses them (that is, alienates them and, finally, exposes them to disappearance) or whether it frees them (by exposing them to appear before us, giving them a power of appearance or apparition).”⁸ In *The Walls of Sports* (2012), the apparition is a young Romani preacher. At first, we only hear his voice and then he comes in front of the camera. He quotes the *Gospel of John*, chapter 15, verse 16, and then says: “You may well say that you will never go there and so on, but if God wills and has plans for you, you will come.” The unintentional overlapping of the meanings of coming and plan in a biblical and literal situational sense points to a higher will in the presence of this encounter.

Facing the limits of documentary

Lenka Kukurová described the production process as follows: “Rafa created and edited video footage from these artistic events as well as condensed a process that spanned several days into a few minutes. The videos contain no commentary, and the sound remains authentic, sometimes overlapping with Romani music recorded on the spot. Watching the footage in a sterile gallery setting highlights the contrast and conflict of the two worlds.”⁹ Kukurová’s text implicitly suggests that the protagonists of Rafa’s documentaries are in danger of becoming, not of their own volition, identity props of a gallery spectacle.¹⁰ So the question is: Does Tomáš Rafa’s exposition liberate the Romani from Ostrovany, Sečovce and other locations by giving them the power to appear before us, to reveal themselves as beings worthy of a name, that is – not to be just a mass of figureheads? And if so, how is this power delegated from the filmmaker to the subjects being filmed?

During his studies in Professor Grzegorz Kowalski’s studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Tomáš Rafa acquired skills related to conducting workshops, which proved to be very useful for his work with the Romani people. Based on the experience gained during the workshops, he first paid attention to preparing the situation and then withdrew from it, thus giving participants the freedom to act independently.¹¹ As one of the youngest graduates of the famous studio, Tomáš Rafa relies on the intermedia practices of studio exercises called *Common Space, Individual Space*

⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, “People Exposed, People as Extras,” *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July/August 2009): 17, https://www.radicalphilosophyarchive.com/issue-files/rp156_article2_peopleexposed_huberman.pdf.

⁹ Kukurová, “Umenie v rómskych osadách,” 13.

¹⁰ In an interview with Karolina Plinta, the artist claims that for the first three or four years, he avoided the gallery setting, but the situation changed in 2011 after he became a finalist of the Oskar Čepan Young Artist Award and curators became more interested in his films. Karolina Plinta, “That Is the History. Tomáš Rafa in Conversation,” *Block Magazine*, <http://blokmagazine.com/that-is-the-history-tomas-rafa-in-conversation/>, acc. on February 20, 2024.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

carried out since the 1980s. Students and lecturers, united on the basis of equal rights, jointly engage in communicative situations using exclusively non-verbal means – visual forms, signs, and gestures. The initial position is the individual space that they emerge from into a common sphere of possible interactions. A movement of each participant can trigger a spontaneous reaction of the other. This draws students' attention to the communicative nature of art and develops their sensitivity to the presence of spectators.¹² Among other Professor Kowalski's pupils, Rafa is probably the closest to Artur Zmijewski, who has long been involved in filmmaking in relation to issues of democracy.¹³ Zmijewski also explores the communicative nature of art in his films, using model situations such as workshops to confront conflicting opinions and positions in escalating situations.

One such example is Rafa's film *Them* (2007), which features representatives of antagonistic political and religious groups. But unlike Zmijewski, inserts no narrative into his video films. He does not aim for a critical impulse, but rather invests in an emotionally charged authenticity. He often accentuates this with a shaky camera in motion, for example in scenes where he drives a car into a Romani settlement or enters Romani dwellings. The viewer is repeatedly gnawed by the suspicion that the *exposition* capitulates in advance to show the problem in its entirety. Why don't the elected officials of the municipal councils, whose responsibility was to make the decision to build the segregation walls, appear on camera? Why is there nothing that refers to the reasons why the segregation walls were erected? Rafa's video documentaries therefore seem more like a recording of a happening than an investigative authorial film. Yet they do not make a *trademark image* of the Romani community, their social status, and the extreme poverty. According to Georges Didi-Huberman, a film can only be politically just if it gives space and a face to the nameless, to those who are not part of the usual social representation.¹⁴ In addition to collecting video documentaries, Tomáš Rafa's online archives are collections of affective gestures captured on video and in photographs, revealing the dark, instinctive interfaces of democracy, where freedom of expression mixes dangerously with expressions of hatred, and protection of the community mixes with racism and ethnic exclusion. The confidential or trusting relationship with the camera lens is based on a different principle for the subjects of the second archive, i.e. for instance the Roma from Ostrovany or Sečovce, than it is for the reports from the *New Nationalism* series. However, in both archives, even though they do not explicitly refer to each other, we observe that they complement each other thematically. While the former traces symptoms, the latter suggests and shows possible solutions.

¹² Recording of the film *Common Space, Individual Space* is available at Filmoteka Muzeum, <https://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/kowalski-grzegorz-kowalnia-obszar-wspolny-obszar-wlasny?age18=true>, acc. on August 16, 2024

¹³ The evidence that the artists communicated among themselves is a workshop that they conducted together at the Museum of Contemporary Art Leipzig. GfZK Leipzig, "Artur Zmijewski und Tomáš Rafa: Alien. Workshop," <https://gfzk.de/2015/artur-mijewski-und-tomas-rafa-alien-workshop/>, acc. on February 21, 2024

¹⁴ Didi-Huberman, "People Exposed, People as Extras," 22.

Concern for the archive

In contemporary art, by *concern for the archive* I mean artists working with the complicated temporality of apparatuses representing cultural memory, and I see these practices as alternative returns to unfulfilled beginnings or unfinished projects. In this regard, I refer to Aleida Assmann's assertion that memory as an artistic creation does not derive from making it accessible and ensuring its reliable usability, rather it is, at best, therapy after loss, an inventory of loss.¹⁵ Wolfgang Ernst polemicalizes against the archive as a place and metaphor of collective memory, exploring the archive in a technological sense, as a mnemonic apparatus governed by strict rules like an administratively programmed system. Ernst notes the conflicting modes of time in an archive that is subject to entropic processes and material decay.¹⁶ Contemporary art can effectively draw attention to the precarious position of the archive between order and chaos. Sven Spieker addresses the threats of destruction as well as possible degradation and obsolescence of storage media, all of which affect the transmission of information, using the concept of entropy in relation to the established symbolic order.¹⁷ Jacques Derrida leads us to the concept of violence, the violence of the archive itself, as well as archival violence. What Derrida calls "archive fever," or *mal d'archive*, is the actual manifestation of aggression and a destruction drive, which contradicts the conservative forces and threatens the archive with the possibility of finitude, the possibility of complete oblivion.¹⁸ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay attempted to understand the effects of this destructive drive within the abstract archival machinery, primarily through the study of Israel's state archives, which hold documents about displaced and executed Palestinians. Azoulay warns us not to view the archive solely as an institution that preserves the past, as if its content does not directly influence us, but proposes to define the archive as a shared space based on citizens' rights to access and interact with the archive. Finally, it is Ariella Azoulay who articulated that the essence of the archive lies in violence.¹⁹ Since decolonial practice emphasizes the need to deconstruct and question modernism and its structures of power such as an archive, let us summarize this using two of its main terms: archival care and archival concern.

¹⁵ Aleida Assmannová, *Prostory vzpomínání. Podoby a proměny kulturní paměti*. Prague: Univerzita Karlova Nakladatelství Karolinum (Praha 2018), 403–404. According to Assmann, active and passive acts of forgetting are a necessary and constructive part of cultural practices. Aleida Assmann, Canon and Archive, in: Astrid Erll, and Ansgar Nünning, eds., *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 97–99.

¹⁶ Wolfgang Ernst, "Archive, Storage, Entropy. Tempor(e)alities of Photography," in *The Archive as Project. The Poetics and Politics of the (Photo)Archive*, ed. Krzysztof Pijarski (Warsaw: Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii, 2011), 56–57.

¹⁷ Sven Spieker, "On the Question of Archives and Entropy in Contemporary Art (Legrady, Muntadas)," in *The Archive as Project. The Poetics and Politics of the (Photo)Archive*, ed. Krzysztof Pijarski (Warsaw: Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii, 2011), 120.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression* (transl. Eric Prenowitz) (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3–11.

¹⁹ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism* (London, New York: Verso, 2019), 234–35.

The Greek word “ἐπιμελία” (*epimeleia*) can be translated into English as “care”, but also as “concern”. “Concern” can be understood as a call for reflection, for rediscovery and reevaluation of inherited stereotypes. Concern for the archive goes beyond the physical preservation of records and extends to ethical, legal, and administrative aspects of archives. Concern differs from care in the sense of nurture, such as securing the common good, creating safe spaces and inclusive practice as well as sensitizing relationships. Care and concern/responsibility are closely related, but concern/responsibility goes beyond caring about what we might characterize as fears, doubts, and mistrust of cultural, social, and economic structures built upon the legacy of the nation-state. Care, together with the adjectivized “radical care”, appears more and more often in discussions about art, work, and collective efforts.²⁰ In connection to the right of self-determination, the concept of self-care presents itself, which could otherwise be defined as a parallel to decolonial practice. Rolando Vázquez argues that in contrast with modern aesthetics, decolonial aesthetics posits the primacy of the relation over abstraction and authorship.²¹ In the case of archiving in the postsocialist spaces, “concern for the archive” means questioning our deeply held patterns and beliefs, rethinking our role in the systems that sustain capitalism and nationalism as well as developing awareness of heightened sensitivity to language and dialogic forms of exchange. The concept of decoloniality and self-care might also be associated with collective therapy, in which artistic activities can function and at the same time support historical awareness and cultural self-governance.

Cultural trauma and cultural therapy

Regarding the analysis of the aforementioned works documenting *Walls of Sports*, we can explore the construction of walls both as a factual occurrence and as an imagined phenomenon, employing the term cultural trauma in the context of a social group.²² The key concepts with which Hungarian art historian, art critic and cultural theorist Edit András operates in various sociological and psychological planes are diagnosis, trauma, symptom and treatment. Edit András discusses the concept of trauma in connection with the removal of both physical and mental wall ruins between the former West and the East. Subsequently, she points to the transfer of trauma from the psychological sphere to the cultural area of literary scientist Cathy Caruth. According to Cathy Caruth, one of the effects of trauma is its delay, which allows the

²⁰ Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopolani Hobart, and Tamara Kneese, “Radical Care. Survival Strategies for Uncertain Time,” *Social Text* 38, 1/142 (2020): 1–16.

²¹ Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity. Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary* (Amsterdam: Jap Sam Books, 2020), 31.

²² Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004), 9–10.

individual to suspend his or her shock.²³ One of the central theses of Edit András is that trauma can provoke symptoms of amnesia in relation to collective memory and socialist past. Edit András claims that contemporary artists can instinctively or consciously recommend effective treatment methods.²⁴

Cultural trauma and cultural therapy are exactly what Tomáš Rafa wanted to focus on when he initiated, organized and documented his painting workshops and *The Walls of Sports* series. It may seem to some that care precedes an archive, as if it were an integral part of the creation of archives in their systematic classification and organization which culminates in the archival order. The connection between the practice of contemporary art and archival care is therefore significant in that the result is not necessarily some kind of archival order. The described interest in archive, relationships, meandering, and unfolding can be called decolonial practice, because archive as such is a colonial project and this interest also represents preoccupation with violence, that the existence of archive is also based on.



Fig. 1. Tomáš Rafa, Summer painting workshop for kids in the Romani settlement in Sečovce, 2015, colour digital photography. Courtesy of the artist.

²³ With regards to the discussion over Cathy Caruth's 1996 *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, see: Wulf Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck, "Against the Concept of Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 229–31.

²⁴ Edit András, *Kulturální převlékání. Umění na troskách socialismu a na vrcholcích nacionalismu* [Cultural Dressing up. Art on the Ruins of Socialism and on the Peaks of Nationalism]. Hradec Králové: Galerie Moderního Umění, 2023, 12–24. The Czech publication is a selection of texts from two books written by Edit András and published in Hungarian. Edit András, *Kulturális atöltözés. Művészet a szocializmus romjain*. Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó 2009. Edit András, *Határsertő képzelet. Kortárs művészet és kritikai elmélet Európa keleti felén* [Imaginary Transgression. Contemporary Art and Critical Theory in Eastern Europe]. Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont 2023. For the discussion on the book see: Daniel Grúň, Pavlína Morganová, Martin Škabraha, "Solidarity Could Get Us Out of This Situation. An Interview with Edit András," *Sešit pro umění a příbuzné zóny* [Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones] 36 (2024): 167–88.



Fig. 2. Tomáš Rafa, Painting on the segregation wall in Ostrovany, 2012, colour digital photography. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3. Tomáš Rafa, Summer painting workshop for kids in the Romani settlement in Sečovce, 2017, colour digital photography. Courtesy of the artist.

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