

## Contemporary Art and Alternative Queer Archival Strategies in Central and Eastern Europe

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### Abstract:

*The purpose of this talk is to list and map some existing queer archives/collections in the post-Communist region but also to look for an alternative archival materials that might be used by general public and scholars or activists for research-related, education, or social purposes. One of the most visible, durable, and impactful resources, which are available, are visuals produced by contemporary artists or filmmakers, who document, recreate, or imagine queer past of their cities or countries. This creative engagement with local LGBTQ histories inspires further scholarly investigations, rediscovers forgotten queer stories and people and disseminates them through contemporary visual means. These artistic involvements with queer archiving seem to be the most important, unbound and popular alternative to the official institutions which often depend on changeable political context in a region, where cultural and historical organizations rest almost exclusively on the state's financial support, which is less and less available for progressive projects in a period of increased conservatism and nationalism. Hence, my presentation will focus on selected examples of artworks, which take an archival approach to LGBTQ past and imagine a way to powerfully document queer history outside the conventional archival institutions -- through other cultural and academic networks.*

**Keywords:** Queer, Archive, Art, Central and Eastern Europe.

There are few institutionalized, easily accessible public LGBTQ archives in Central and Eastern Europe, because of the relatively recent development of the queer movement and studies which started mainly in the 1990s.. Another reason behind this scarcity is the persistent impact of homophobia on public archival institutions, libraries, and universities, which results in a lack of the stable financial support necessary to keep an archive alive, organized, and available.

Thus, in the majority of cases one deals with private archives or collections of dispersed materials gathered by LGBTQ organizations, broader cultural institutions or individual activists, or historians. The future of these collections is uncertain and precarious, depending only on individual perseverance, although they are very significant. It is also noteworthy that this is how queer archives originated in many countries, including the biggest one: ONE Gay and Lesbian Archives at USC Libraries in Los Angeles. It is a debatable idea, but this Californian archive might be a model for how LGBTQ

collections should be incorporated into larger academic or public archival and library institutions, to preserve continuity and to offer professional care by trained archivists, and not only devoted volunteers. The word “incorporated” in this context does not mean disappearing into larger collections, but retaining a separate identity and space in a bigger archival or academic institution.

The purpose of this text is to list and map some important queer archives and collections in the post-Soviet region and their institutional strategies. Another aim is to look for alternative archival materials that might be used by the general public and scholars or activists for research-related, educational, or social purposes. Some of the most visible, durable, and impactful resources available are visuals produced by contemporary artists or filmmakers, who document, recreate, or imagine the queer past of their cities or countries. This creative engagement with local LGBTQ histories inspires further scholarly investigation, rediscovers forgotten queer stories and people and disseminates and popularizes them by contemporary visual means.

These artistic involvements with queer archiving seem to be a serious alternative to the official institutions, which often depend on the changeable political context in a region where cultural and historical organizations rely almost exclusively on the state’s financial support. This funding is less and less available for progressive projects in a period of increased conservatism and nationalism (always homophobic in Eastern Europe). Hence, my presentation will focus also on selected examples of artworks, which take an archival approach to the LGBTQ past and imagine a way to powerfully document queer history outside the conventional archival institutions—through other cultural networks and micro-narrations. The role of visual arts in queer archiving confirms that it is a field which requires a variety of creative strategies, including fiction, myth and pictorial seduction, as in many countries the communication of queer history is still a frontier to be defined.<sup>1</sup>

There is a need for both the queer and the artistic take on the archival order to open it up, disrupt, update and enrich. Uncovered queer resources have an important role to play in the study of the history of both sexuality and intimacy and the underground or subcultural social movements and cultural initiatives. Moreover, queer archiving in its variety plays an important political and activist role which counters persistent contemporary forms of silencing. In this context, archiving is seen as an action against the enforced invisibility and amnesia imposed by the dominant culture.

Many authors have theorized the unique precarious character of queer archives, for example Ann Cvetkovitch who, writing from an American perspective, argues that LGBTQ people had to struggle to preserve their histories, hence their collections originated in grassroots oppositional activities. Queer archives often depend on personal and ephemeral resources and traces as they concern spheres of privacy and invisibility forged around sexuality and intimacy.<sup>2</sup> This affective and endangered quality of queer archiving makes it a perfect subject for artistic explorations but a difficult one for institutional preservation and continuity. Thus I would like to start from some examples of organized LGBTQ archives in Central and Eastern Europe, where queer rights have been constantly contested, and this type of archiving continues to play a subversive role.

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<sup>1</sup> Karin Quimby and Walter L. Williams, *Unmasking the Homophile in 1950s Los Angeles. An Archival Record*, in: *Queer Frontiers. Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000) p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 8.

## Selected Queer Archives

The first East Central European archive or collection that I would like to mention is **Hungarian Háttér Archive**, which has been active since 1997, and is part of a bigger Hungarian LGBTQ organization called the Háttér Society founded in 1995 (“háttér” means “background” in Hungarian)<sup>3</sup>. It is an example of a queer archive which literally shares a space with a major LGBTQ rights organization, and its declared aim is to preserve and spread LGBTQ heritage and culture. The Háttér Archive does not have its own building, but some of its database is already online. The Háttér represents a model of an archive as a section of an LGBTQ organization. The majority of Eastern European archives represent this type, as a library and documentation space of NGOs. The future preservation of their collections can be precarious, without any official institutional support by public or university libraries. Right now the Háttér Archive is permanent and depends on a variety of grants, donations, and volunteer work.<sup>4</sup>

Another model is represented by the **Center of Queer Memory** in Prague, established in 2015. It is a unique institution with its own building, combining a queer archive and a museum, with regular opening hours. The gallery space enables the presentation of exhibitions based on the collection. It is a nonprofit public institution run by the Society for Queer Memory, supported by the City of Prague and private donors. It holds not only an archive of written documents and artefacts about LGBTQ past in the Czech lands but also a collection of transcripts of biographical interviews with LGBTQ seniors. The Centre of Queer Memory is truly exceptional in the Central and Eastern European context, with its cultural, social and academic mission, program of exhibitions and independent status.<sup>5</sup>

A third type of queer archival presence is represented by **ŠKUC LL** in Ljubljana, Slovenia. It is a model in which a queer center found its place in the broader context of alternative arts and activism in the country. The ŠKUC Association is a home for many organizations and originated in the Slovenian student movement of 1968. Since the 1970s, ŠKUC has been the most important association for alternative, nonprofit culture in Ljubljana, in the visual arts, music, theatre, film, publishing, and social activism for civil rights. It is also a documentation center and an institution which promotes marginalized and fringe subcultures. There are many countercultural activities and groups under its umbrella, and support for the LGBTQ movement is one of them. They publish *Revolver*, a magazine for culture and politics with a homoerotic drive, *Kekec*, a gay tabloid, and the lesbian magazine *Lesbo*. Because of its involvement in civil rights, part of ŠKUC is a LGBTQ club, there is also a **Lesbian Library and Archive** (2001) and organization, ŠKUC LL (1987), connected with the association. The Lesbian Library and Archive belongs the Network of Autonomous Libraries in Ljubljana.<sup>6</sup>

Lesbian archiving initiatives tend to be more present as the need to counter invisibility is even stronger. Therefore Poland also has its own lesbian archive—the **OLA Archive** in Warsaw identifies with the feminist movement, which is very active in this country and strongly supports LGBTQ rights. The OLA Archive has functioned on and off since 1996, as an information center, library and archive for and about lesbian women. OLA depends on donations and volunteers, publishes a lesbian literary magazine, *Fury One*, and organizes film evenings, social and educational gatherings. It is an independent institution which struggles to continue working and depends mainly on private grassroots organizing.

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Anna Borgos and Sandor Nagy for information on The Háttér Archive.

<sup>4</sup> See: [en.hatter.hu/service/archive-and-library](http://en.hatter.hu/service/archive-and-library), accessed April 25, 2017. I would like to thank Nagy Sandor and Anna Borgos for information about this archive.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.queerpamet.cz/inpage/centre-of-queer-memory/>, accessed April 25, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.ljudmila.org/sigrd/ll/>, accessed April 25, 2017.

Queer archival activism is especially important, political and subversive in Russia, where Putin's 2013 "gay propaganda" law tries to re-criminalize queer speech in the public sphere and distribution of any positive information about homosexuality. Under the Soviet Union's information controls, self-expression in print by gay men and lesbians was not permitted, so access to official (criminal, medical) archives is essential to study the subject. But, as Ira Roldugina (Higher School of Economics, History Department, Moscow) argues, "there are many administrative and deliberate restrictions on access to the materials on the LGBTQ history of Russia, the Soviet Union and its queer citizens. The policy of the state aims at the strongest possible conservation of documents about political repressions in general. Many resources remain classified in the FSB (Federal Security Service) and MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) archives throughout the country. There is a 75-year restriction period on the access to this type of documents and archivists conceal various sensitive and personal sources"<sup>7</sup>, which are crucial for research into personal lives. So there is a political agenda to continue silencing the experience of homosexuals in the Soviet era, when male homosexuality was considered a crime and female homosexuality a medical, psychiatric condition, classified as "sluggishly manifesting schizophrenia"<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore the only "public" LGBTQ archive in Moscow and Russia takes on special significance. Set up in the 1990s, it is the private initiative of one woman, the French culture scholar and translator Elena Gusiatsinskaya. She keeps the archive in her private apartment open for researchers on Thursdays. She is a literary scholar and a facilitator of queer writing, so the archive is focused on queer literature, materials about queer themes from Russian press and personal documents of the first Russian LGBTQ activists. She started the archive with another queer scholar, Viktor Oboin, who focused his collecting on a variety of gay and lesbian initiatives and journals that blossomed in Russia in the 1990s, the Yeltsin years, after the decriminalization in 1993. But due to the lack of stable financial support and location, Oboin donated his part of the archive to University of Amsterdam Homodok<sup>9</sup> in 2000, while Gusiatsinskaya decided to keep her collection in Moscow, to work with local activists and researchers.<sup>10</sup> Moscow Gay and Lesbian Archive is a unique, but in many countries the only possible type of LGBTQ collection, publicly open but located in a private home; luckily Gusiatsinskaya's archive has been already mostly digitalized.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the relative difficulties of accessing and distributing archival materials related to Soviet homosexuality, I will discuss artists and art projects that might function as an alternative perspective on and source of knowledge about this subject. Through visual art, the history of homosexuality behind the Iron Curtain attains an additional edge and contemporary visual aura, which helps to illuminate, communicate, and mediate cryptic historical stories and archival missions. My examples deal only with male homosexuality due to its former illegal demimonde status, which gives artists dark and abject but also concrete material to work with<sup>12</sup>. These are engaging representations of illicit desire and sex, love, crime and punishment but also subversion and resilience, all subjects of great romances and great tragedies, but most importantly, precious micro-historical narrations of human lives, which give a broader perspective on the political and social history of sexuality and masculinity in the region.

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<sup>7</sup> Quotation from Ira Roldugina abstract submitted for IFLA WLIC 2017 Conference.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia. A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other*, (Duke University Press: Durham and London 1999) P.29

<sup>9</sup> Now the Homodok collection is part of the IHLIA LGBT Heritage located in the Public Library, Amsterdam.

<sup>10</sup> Dean Healey, From Stalinist pariahs to subjects of "Managed Democracy: Queers in Moscow 1945 to the present", in: *Queer Cities, Queer Cultures*, edited by Jennifer V. Evans, Matt Cook, (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2014), p.105.

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Ira Roldugina for some information about this archive.

<sup>12</sup> Data about male homosexuality is easier to find as it is registered in legal files under Article 121.1, while female stories disappeared in all the Soviet medical cases of schizophrenia.

## Queer Archival Art

**Jaanus Samma**, in his research-based art, investigates clandestine Estonian gay life and subculture in the Soviet period of criminalization, when his country was known as the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. In 2015 at the Venice Biennale he represented Estonia with a multimedia installation *Not Suitable for Work: A Chairman's Tale* inspired by the tragic life of Juhan Ojaste (1921-90) a war hero, a devoted family man and kolkhoz chairman of several collective farms in the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> In 1964 he was sentenced to prison and one and a half years of hard labor for homosexual acts, after enduring a degrading trial, losing his social status, career and family. After his imprisonment he moved to Tartu, and as an ex-convict was able to get only low-status jobs, yet allegedly he became notorious his active social and sex life. There is no happy end to his story: the chairman was murdered in 1990 by a Russian marine who was a male prostitute..

Samma discovered this legendary character of the chairman by doing interviews with elderly gay men in Estonia in 2011, for an audio collection of *Stories* of gay life in the 1970s and 1980s. Upon discovering this fascinating and emblematic character the artist created a semi-fictitious artistic narrative based on gossip and some real archival research. He went to the National Archives and found the court files, from which he learned that to make a case and to prove the illegal homosexual acts, the police had to force men to inform on each other. A younger lover of the chairman informed on him. The artist read all the provoked testimonies surrounding the trial.

In the project, Jaanus Samma uses some archival materials and images, a compilation of the criminal files, putting the documents into an elaborate installation of art objects, props, photographs, video films and a sound piece set in an Baroque opera loge, to create an overall voyeuristic reconstruction of the story. *NSFW: A Chairman's Tale*, as an exhibition, mixes historical documentation, fantasy imaginings and the elegant aesthetics of opera, to follow the chairman story but also to evoke the social and political context of homosexuality in the Soviet period.<sup>14</sup> The conjured vision of the chairman is a symbolic composite figure that, according to the artist, tells a larger story of struggle in a system where a person cannot be free, where gay sexuality exists in a dangerous underground.

*NSFW: A Chairman's Tale* is both an archival and an artistic project, which received distinguished awards and was widely exhibited in Estonia and abroad.

As an artist and researcher Jaanus Samma conveys the Soviet reality of gay sexuality and existence in a very personal and engagingly cinematic way, through one dramatic biographical narrative uncovered from the past but open to more universal and contemporary references. Employing a variety of media, the installation puts the viewer in the middle of the story, which is often uncomfortable, difficult, sexually explicit and disturbing to watch, hence the high drama of opera, a queer medium itself, is an appropriate and alluring stylization applied to this raw and traumatic source. This case exemplifies how one emotionally, visually and erotically powerful work of art recovers and locates silenced historical narratives, placing them at the very center of the current cultural arena of memory and debate. Because art and exhibitions not only document but also perform queer history, this re-enactment has a contemporary resonance.

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<sup>13</sup> See the catalogue Jaanus Samma, Eugenio Viola (ed.) *not suitable for work: a chairman's tale* (Sternberg Press 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Travis Jeppesen, In The Studio: Jaanus Samma, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/in-the-studio-jaanus-samma/>, accessed April 22, 2017.

In 2016 *NSFW: A Chairman's Tale*, was shown in the Museum of Occupations in Tallinn. This is a museum dedicated to the 1940-1991 period in Estonian history when the country was occupied by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. This placement testifies to the official acknowledgment of silenced and traumatic queer history, by allowing homophobic legislation and its consequences to take center stage in a musicological reconstruction of political repressions. Significantly, in 2015-16 the Estonian parliament passed a gender-neutral civil partnership act, the only one currently in effect in the former Soviet Union, which is the best proof of a strong need to overcome the negative heritage in the country.

**Yevgeniy Fiks** is another politically engaged artist driven by the queer archival impulse and curiosity to document and commemorate Soviet homosexuality and its emotional and urban spaces. Fiks—a Russian-American-Jewish emigre artist—devoted many of his projects to the ideological role that homosexuality and homophobia played during the Cold War, both on the American and the Soviet side, and also in the Communist Party in both countries. Additionally, the artist has been working on the hidden topography of gay life in communist Moscow. In a series of paintings, *Pleshkas of the Revolution* (2013), and a photo-book, *Moscow* (2013), he represents the main Soviet covert gay cruising or cottaging grounds—in Russian, “pleshkas”. These sites which allowed the criminalized minority to meet up were at the same time major and symbolic urban spaces of the USSR, commemorating the communist revolution and its heroes. Thus those urban landmarks, buildings and monuments played a double role, both very public and very private, clandestine and illicit, as they were appropriated by men seeking sex with men. The sites archived on Fiks’ paintings and photographs include the Marx Monument, the Bolshoi Theatre, Alexandrovsky Gardens, and the Lenin Museum.

The Lenin Museum plays a special role here, as the public toilets in its basement were one of the main cruising places between the 1940s and the 1980s. The figure of Lenin is historically symbolic, almost as a gay icon, as his government decriminalized homosexuality in Russia shortly after the October Revolution of 1917<sup>15</sup>, which started more than a decade of relative tolerance and promise of personal and cultural freedom in the new state.<sup>16</sup> Then, in 1933, Stalin re-criminalized homosexuality, making it punishable by five years of hard labor. Furthermore a special section of the KGB was devoted to arresting homosexuals, and until decriminalization in 1993, around 60,000 men were prosecuted.<sup>17</sup>

This context of repression is important to remember while looking at the deserted cityscapes documented by Yevgeniy Fiks. His depictions chronicle the locations, but also show how official public spaces and political monuments can be queered even at times of the most severe persecution.<sup>18</sup> The oil paintings by Yevgeniy Fiks are executed in the mock Soviet realist style, to create a space in the Soviet visual culture for gay everyday history and presence. The photographs are taken in a simple and haunting documentary style, and presented in the book in chronological order, according to the period in which certain haunts were popular, to give a full overview of Moscow cruising from the 1920s to the 1990s.

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<sup>15</sup> After 1917, the antisodomy law, was discarded together with the rest of the tsarist legal codes. See: Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia*, op.cit. p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> In its archival role Fiks’ book *Moscow*, even concludes with the first publication in English of a 1934 letter by British a communist living in Moscow, Harry Whyte, written to Joseph Stalin. The letter offers a Marxist defense of homosexuality, as a reaction to re-criminalization. See: <http://yevgeniyfiks.com/artwork/2184584-Moscow.html>, accessed April 28, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Nicolas Plagne, Russia, in: *The Dictionary of Homophobia. A Global History of Gay and Lesbian Experience*, edited by Louis-Georges Tin, translated by Marek Redburn, (Arsenal Pulp Press: Vancouver 2008) p. 400.

<sup>18</sup> Agata Pyzik, *Cruising Past: Photographer Yevgeniy Fiks Resurrects Moscow Forgotten Gay History*, “The Calvert Journal”, July 17, 2013.

The artist visualized the history of hidden Moscow and its sexual underground, but the images are empty. They are allegories of living a life of enforced secrecy. Without inside knowledge, the depicted sites appear devoid of queer meaning, as they were for the regular inhabitants of the city in the past. This emptiness reflects the silence surrounding sexual dissidence in Soviet culture, where any open form of gay self-expression was impossible, so all that is left then are traces that need to be decoded. This would be impossible without first archiving them, as the artist did in his images.

Jaanus Samma and Yevgeni Fiks work to resurrect the forgotten Soviet past to speak to the troubled present, as they are both researchers and activists. The artistic testimonies of former repressions are intended not only to counter the official historical narratives but also to resonate in the face of current persecutions or inequalities still happening in this part of Europe. So their artistic archives speak against the past and the present, to foster a better future. They are brutally real and idealistic at the same time, expressing the utopian premise that an archive or an art work can actually change something. But they are not alone in their belief in the democratic potential of the archive or the archival principle.

### **Archival Discourse and Queer Utopia**

Archival discourse has been explored by many disciplines in the last twenty years. The queer and artistic approaches to the interdisciplinary subject additionally complicate the field, and make trouble in the archives of knowledge, similarly to feminist and postcolonial deconstruction of archives. The queer perspective struggles against the annihilation of memory caused by homophobia, and the “death drive” (Freudian/Derridan) of heteronormative cultural and political systems, countered here by the homoerotic pleasure principle. The artistic approach proposes a variety of mainly alternative strategies and techniques of visualization and visual communication, to complement or question the amnesia or the routine of the official institutionalized history.

In the foundational text on archival revision, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1994-1995) Jacques Derrida argues that control of the archive is connected to political power, as the power wants to control the memory. Thus democratization can be measured by the level of open participation, interpretation and access to the archive. From this point of view, the queer visual critical interventions into the Soviet archives conducted by Jaanus Samma and Yevgeni Fiks might be interpreted as representative of recent acts of empowerment and democratization, regaining or reparation of memory. What is more, in his Freudian psychoanalytic reading Derrida theorizes that the archive combines two conflicting forces, the death drive of destruction and annihilation or forgetting and the oppositional preservation drive, which is linked to the pleasure principle.<sup>19</sup> Samma’s and Fiks’ projects literally connect those two archival impulses, overlapping death and sex, trauma and desire, in their visual testimonies of a gay eradication and an erotic fever of survival.

Archival strategies were common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially in contemporary art, where artists are often collectors, researchers, curators, historians or anthropologists, who use their visual and aesthetic skills to communicate and to challenge. In 2004, Hal Foster wrote about the prevalence of an archival impulse at work in contemporary art, a tendency which is part of the memory industry in current politics, culture and academia. What is special about this artistic approach is its involvement in retrieving alternative knowledge, the practice of counter-memory to question the amnesiac spaces of the official memory industry.<sup>20</sup> As exemplified by the queer archival approach in Samma’s and Fiks’ pieces, this is exactly what the artists have been doing, uncovering silenced resources to impact on the present and the future of social relations. Foster writes about the surprising utopian demand in archival art, which tries to turn excavation sites into construction sites, where the uncovered material might help

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.10-12. See interpretation by: Marlene Manoff, *Theory of the Archive from Across the Disciplines*, [www://muse.jhu.edu](http://www://muse.jhu.edu), p. 11-12, accessed April 29, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Hal Foster, *An Archival Impulse*, in: *The Archive. Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Charles Merewether (London, Cambridge: Whitechapel, The MIT Press 2006) p. 143-148; Hal Foster, *An Archival Impulse*, “October”, no.110. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, Fall 2004).

to create new hopeful scenarios. In psychoanalytical terms, the return of the repressed is supposed to heal us, not to haunt!

As queer archival art is often based on past traumas and oppression, it has a melancholic quality, but there is also a tendency to overcome dark visions and to move forward into a more optimistic perspective, to create new constructions of the past and the future, to show the abundance, resilience and joy of underground life. The queer archive as an activist institution directed toward the future, preservation and education for the future, generally tries to play this hopeful and slightly utopian role. It is also visible in some examples of queer artistic projects, which are less melancholic than the brilliant but gothic works by Jaanus Samma and Yevgeni Fiks. To discover them, we need to move outside the fearful geography of Soviet criminalization of homosexuality, to Central European countries, which were less legally repressive. Poland, which has never criminalized homosexuality, is one of the countries where much more freedom was possible.

The activism and pedagogical topicality of queer archiving in the current conservative climate inspired a Polish artist Karol Radziszewski to set up an artistic and scholarly collaborative project, the *Queer Archives Institute* or QAI (2015 – ongoing). It is a nonprofit artist-run organization dedicated to the research, collection, digitalization, presentation, exhibition, analysis and artistic interpretation of queer archives, with a special focus on Central and Eastern Europe. The inaugural exhibition was organized at Videobrasil in Sao Paulo, 2016.<sup>21</sup> The artist's special and pristine installation employs strategies of institutional archival, librarian and museum display, comprising glass cases with documentary materials: photographs and press clippings with screens showing video interviews with participants of LGBTQ movements. The combination of Central European and Brazilian resources shows Radziszewski's intention to open up a space for transnational comparative collaboration of activists and researchers, on which he would draw in his installations of rare queer materials. Radziszewski's project fits exactly the categories of archival art described by Hal Foster, as it seeks to display forgotten historical information and depends on found object, text or image. Moreover the quasi-archival architecture, almost "theatralization" of the archival, underscores the found yet constructed character of archival structures and knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

The special value of Karol Radziszewski's art project in his native Poland is the rediscovery of forgotten gay initiatives from the 1980s, the last decade of communism. In many Central and Eastern European countries, the first gay and lesbian social activities publications, semi-legal organizations and events started in the 1980s. They have been mostly forgotten, relegated to specialist historical studies, lost due to the lack of proper archiving and disappearance of the participants, and overshadowed by the much more visible and documented wave of LGBTQ movements in the 1990s, after the political transformation. In the context of gay history of forgotten activism the artist recovered, attractively visualized and mediated to communicate to the contemporary audience, the activities of pioneering gay activist Ryszard Kisiel from Gdańsk in the 1980s, the period of Solidarity movement and martial law. Radziszewski's project *Kisieland* (2009) reused and illuminated several hundred transparencies from the 1980s documenting queer performance events organized by the circle of Ryszard Kisiel, the founder and publisher of the first communist-era gay magazine called *Filo*. These pictures, taken at the time of a state police crackdown on homosexuals, known as Campaign Hyacinth, document the freedom, joy and safe haven found in the private social setting away from a hostile public atmosphere. Radziszewski's project showcases an alternative, non-martyrological history but also enables the reappearance of a private gay archive, which so far did not find a place in historical discourse.<sup>23</sup> What is more, the project presents a more optimistic model of queer archive and queer past, discovering spaces and figures of joy, pleasure, resistance and survival, as it documents gay gatherings and drag shows in a private setting. A lot of work has already been done on trauma and repression, so the focus

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<sup>21</sup> <http://queerarchivesinstitute.org> and <http://www.karolradziszewski.com/index.php?/projects/qai/>, accessed April 28, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Hal Foster, *An Archival Impulse*, in: *The Archive. Documents of Contemporary Art*, 145.

<sup>23</sup> Tomasz Basiuk, *Kisieland*, <http://www.karolradziszewski.com/index.php?/projects/kisieland/>, accessed 28 May 25, 2017

on private resistance and pleasure seems to be the future of scholarly and artistic work in or on the queer archives, especially as they become more available, through digitalization.

Significantly, what unites both the archival and artistic approach to the LGBTQ past is a belief that if queer people (activists, historians or artists) do not preserve their own history, most of it will simply disappear through neglect and marginalization. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is an impulse of survival that drives queer archival and erotic fever everywhere, regardless of whether it is in Los Angeles or Moscow.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Joseph Hawkins for inspiration to write this text.