

Self-Historicization Through Photography and Documentation. Stanisław Ostoja-Kotkowski's Archive in the National Museum in Warsaw



Samohistorizacija putem
fotografije i
dokumentiranja. Arhiva
Stanisława Ostoje-
Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom
muzeju u Varšavi

IZVORNI ZNANSTVENI RAD
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SAŽETAK

Članak se temelji na istraživanju koje sam provela radeći na arhivi Stanisława Ostoje-Kotkowskog (1922.–1994.) — poljsko-australskog umjetnika iz doba hladnog rata koji je živio u Južnoj Australiji — koja se trenutačno čuva u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi. Ostoja-Kotkowski bio je pionir elektroničke umjetnosti, kinetičke skulpture, laserske umjetnosti, računalne grafike i svjetlosne umjetnosti 1960-ih i 1970-ih. Članak analizira arhiv u kontekstu „samohistorizacije” (Badovinac), kojom ovaj umjetnik emigrant stvara svoj umjetnički identitet u Australiji i Poljskoj. Arhiva predstavlja dokaz da samodokumentiranje manje poznatih stvaratelja iz perifernih čvorišta može pomoći suvremenim istraživačima u dekonstrukciji dominantnih povijesnih pripovijesti. Korištenje fotografija u arhivu sagledava se u pojmu „performativnog dokumenta” Amelie Jones, koji nam pomaže da snimke efemernih izvedbi i radnji vidimo kao jednake samim umjetničkim djelima.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

Ostoja-Kotkowski, arhive umjetnika, kinetička umjetnost, interaktivna umjetnost, elektronička umjetnost, samohistorizacija, performativan dokument, emigracija

ABSTRACT

The article is based on the research I carried out on the archive of Stanisław Ostoja-Kotkowski (1922–1994), the Cold War-era Polish-Australian artist living in South Australia, which is currently kept in the National Museum in Warsaw. Ostoja-Kotkowski was a pioneer in electronic art, kinetic sculpture, laser art, computer graphics and light art in the 1960s and 1970s. The article analyzes the archive in the context of “self-historicization” (Badovinac), used by this émigré artist to create his artistic identity in both Australia and Poland. The archive proves that self-documentation by the less-known creators from peripheral hubs is helpful to contemporary researchers in deconstructing dominating historical narratives. The use of photographs in the archive is seen through Amelia Jones’ notion of “performative document”, which helps to see images of ephemeral performances and actions as equal to the works of art themselves.

KEYWORDS

Ostoja-Kotkowski, artist’s archive, kinetic art, interactive art, electronic art, self-historicization, performative document, emigration

BRINGING DOWN THE “ARCHIVE FEVER”

Magdalena Anna Nowak

INTRODUCTION:
WHO IS STANISŁAW OSTOJA-KOTKOWSKI?

The article is based on the research I carried out on the archive kept in the National Museum in Warsaw. The archive was entirely created by Stanisław Ostoja-Kotkowski (1922–1994), the Cold War-era Polish-Australian artist living in South Australia. Not much known in Poland, he gained recognition in his adopted homeland. This has challenged me as a curator at the Modern Art Department in the National Museum in Warsaw in the following ways: how to introduce Ostoja-Kotkowski to the Polish public through archival material? What is the role of the “mediated” representation of art in contemporary curatorial practice? And finally: what is the meaning of this particular archive?

Ostojka-Kotkowski escaped from Poland in 1945 as a young man and found himself in the British-controlled zone in Germany, where he obtained a scholarship to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf from 1946 to 1949. In 1949, he emigrated to Australia and arrived in Melbourne on the ship Fairsea as part of the Australian Government's immigration scheme.¹ There he studied at the National Gallery School in Melbourne with Alan Sumner, a modernist painter educated in Paris and London who worked in Post-Impressionist style, and William Dargie, a conservative official portraits painter, both of whom were heads of the School: Dargie between 1946 and 1953 and Sumner in the years 1953–1962. Sumner was also a specialist in stained glass technique and printing which might have influenced Ostoja who later made several stained-glass designs. Subsequently, Ostoja became a well-known innovator, an artist-scientist who actively participated in the cultural life of South Australia.

However ambitious and prolific, it seems he never entered the viewers' consciousness as a mainstream artist. He was known in the specific circles, mostly of avant-garde artists and theater authors when he was active, but memory of his work faded away after his death. Although June Edwards, an archivist who took care of Ostoja's archives in Australia, explains that “during his life many articles were written about Ostoja and his work, in both English and Polish; radio interviews were plentiful and some television segments were made. His work created a large audience, from a broad spectrum of society...”,² we see a tendency towards oblivion from the 90s onwards. Edwards was among those responsible for his archive held at the State Library of South Australia and the University Library in Melbourne to be inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World register for Australia in 2008. From around 2013 there was a revival of interest into his work started by the researchers from the Australian National University in Canberra (led by professor Martyn Jolly) with the restoration of one of Ostoja's theremins from 1975 in a joint effort by the School of Art, the Research School of Humanities and the Arts, the Research School of Computer Science and the Research School of Engineering. In recent times he was brought to the limelight with his first solo show in Australia after his death, *Solid*

BRINGING DOWN THE “ARCHIVE FEVER”

Light. Josef Stanislaw Ostoja-Kotkowski in McClelland Gallery in Melbourne in 2019, or by publications like the book *Synthetic* by Stephen Jones, published in 2011, where a whole part concerns Ostoja. The result of this “revival” of interest in his work was the discovery of his pioneering work in both the Australian and the international context. Although the precedence in activities concerning art and technology is often attributed to artists from better-known artistic circles in Europe and the U.S., it seems that the careful analysis of his archive might change these optics as I will show at the end of the article. The curator of the 2019 exhibition, Simon Lawrie, describes the artist as follows:

*Ostojka-Kotkowski remains a singular and somewhat isolated figure in Australian art history. He was pivotal in the development of new media art, and at the forefront of international developments in electronic images, lasers, and sound and image production. He also made significant innovations in underground film, stage design, kinetic sculpture, murals, vitreous enamels, stained glass, computer graphics and community art works, while championing education and support for experimental arts.*³

Apart from his artistic path, Ostoja was consumed by some sort of “archive fever”, but not according to Derrida nor in an art historical sense (his works were not critical of the concept of an archive nor he incorporated archival found materials into works themselves, like postmodern artists depicted by Douglas Crimp and Benjamin Buchloh),⁴ but in the literal sense: collecting everything, documenting everything. His attitude towards the archive was then more modernist and positive: as a reservoir of important memory. He took the role of a self-documenting *archont*, collecting photographs, paper clippings, leaflets, and posters concerning every part of his production (commercial or not) — from 1952 until 1993.

In 1993, the National Museum in Warsaw received a gift from Ostoja consisting of 16 handmade albums containing photographs, newspaper clippings, letters and documents concerning his artistic work, around 130 journals and books and 525 colour slides of his computer graphics (made on the Archimedes computer between 1988 and 1992). The albums seem to be a coherent corpus of all materials produced about Ostoja's art, arranged by the date of issue of the articles or production of a photograph. So the artist did not even manipulate the order of documents, he did not put together documents concerning the same event or classify them by theme but abode to a strict chronological rule. During my work with the artists' archives there was only one (KwieKulik archive by Zofia Kulik) that was so well arranged by the artist herself and which gathered such a totality of materials.

The donation was received via the Polish Embassy in Australia, and it seemed that Ostoja considered the National Museum the best institution to take care of his archive,

1
Ostojka's personal papers concerning his immigration to Australia are to be found in the State Library of South Australia under a number PRG/19/9. <https://collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/find/PRG+919/9> (date of access October 1, 2022).

2
Edwards, “Explorer in light”, 32.

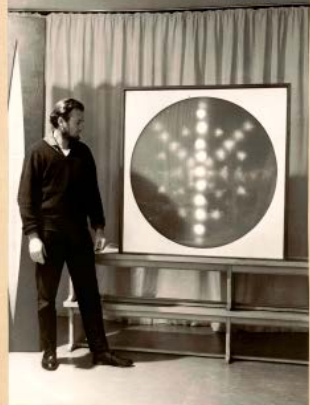
3
Lawrie, “Solid Light: Josef Stanislaw Ostoja-Kotkowski”, 20.

4
Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism”; Buchloh, „Allegorical Procedures. Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art”.

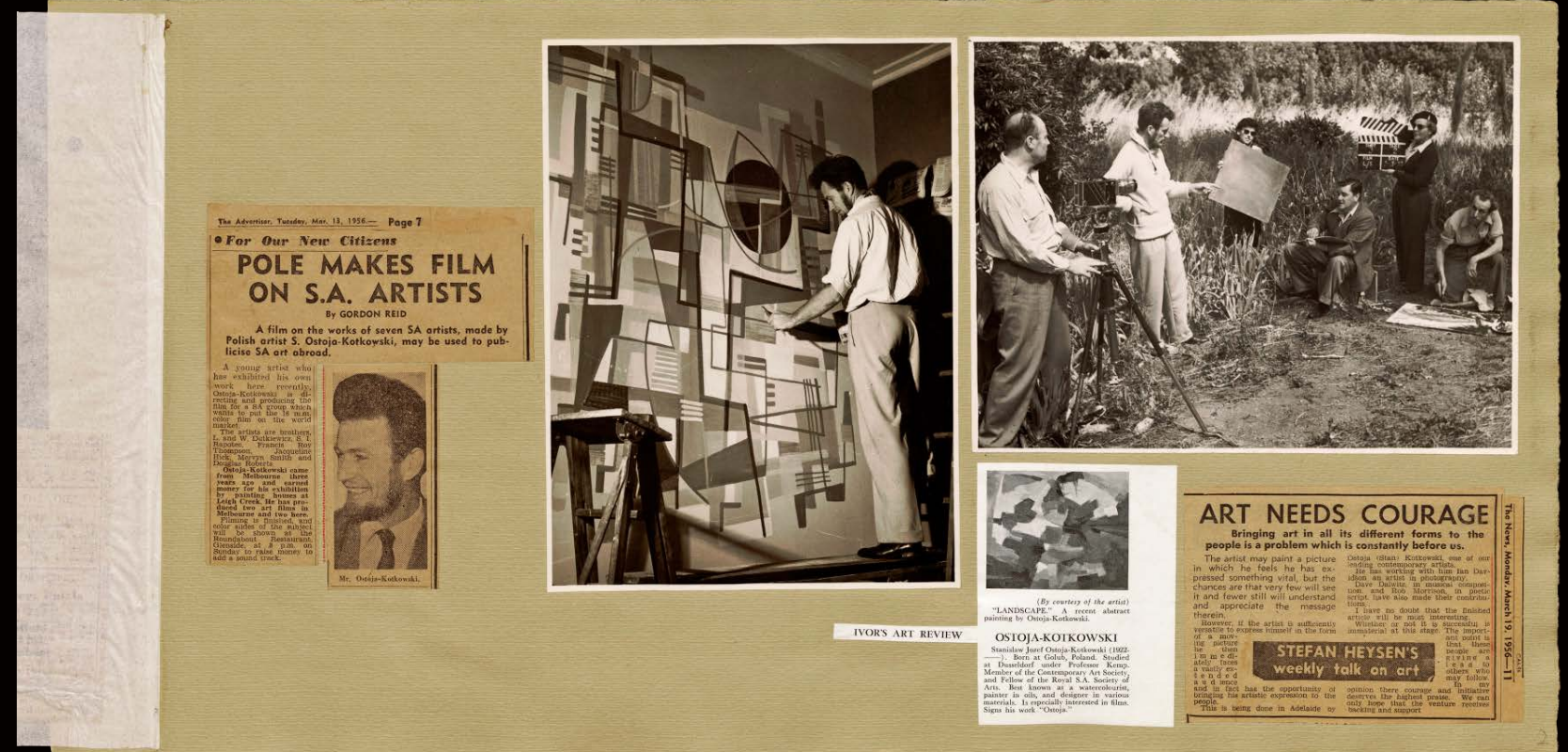


Sl. / Fig. 1 Ostoję u svom studiju u Stirlingu (s maketom scenografije, dok slika) / Ostoję in his studio in Stirling (with a scenography design, while painting), 1960. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoję-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoję-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 1, inv. no. DNM 1 MNW ©National Museum in Warsaw.

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Sl. / Fig. 2 Novinski isječci i snimka Ostojęinih ranih apstraktnih slika te fotografija sa snimanja njegova filma „Sedam mladih australskih umjetnika“ / Press clippings and photograph of the early abstract paintings by Ostoję and a photograph from the set of his film "Seven South Australian artists", 1956. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoję-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoję-Kotkowski's Archive in the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 1, inv. no. DNM 1 MNW ©National Museum in Warsaw

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Sl. / Fig. 3 Ostoję prikazuje svoje „elektroničke slike“ (gore) i kromasonike (dolje) na izložbi u Galeriji Argus u Melbourneu / Ostoję presenting his "electronic painting" (top) and chromasonics (bottom) at the exhibition in Argus Gallery in Melbourne, 1964. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoję-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoję-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 3, inv. no. DNM 3 MNW ©National Museum in Warsaw

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probably because he did not know any curators in other institutions like e.g. Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw or Zachęta National Gallery who could take proper care of his donation there at the time. It seems he wanted his work to be part of the most important collection in the country — implicitly the NMW. The artist's work was also not very well-known in Poland, although he participated in a few exhibitions in the country.⁵ His work was also popularized by the TV program by Ryszard Wójcik "Zatrzymane w kadrze", produced by the Polish Television Channel 2 in the 1980s, where at least two episodes dealt with Ostoja's art. But neither the exhibitions in the 1960s nor those in the 1980s made any impact on the Polish art scene. Although in the 1960s, there was a big interest in abstraction (an important part of Ostoja's production), Polish artists seemed more interested in participating in main currents of modern art defined by the Western art centers like Paris and New York. Especially the exhibition held in 1965 in Kraków, presented two years later in Warsaw and titled "Obrazy plastikowe i elektronowe" could be considered a novelty. It presented not only his abstract "polimer" painting but also his work with television technology. However, it was not much described in the press and the opportunity for Ostoja's art to be somehow embraced by the Polish art scene was missed, which he regretted. Ostoja was able to visit Poland personally only twice since he left in 1945.

One also wonders if the timing of the donation was optimal: after the end of the Cold War and political changes of 1989, the funding of cultural institutions in Poland was changed and partly withdrawn, and because Ostoja's art did not fit in the museum's traditional program (the collections span art from antiquity to contemporary art), there was no special interest in the research of the unknown artist's archive. The promise made by the directors of the institution to prepare a show of the artist's works in exchange for the donation was forgotten. Thus, the archive spent more than 22 years in a museum's basement storage and was recovered only in 2015 and inscribed to the New Media Collection I am in charge of. When I was called in 2015 to "inspect the boxes with unknown items that might be interesting to me", I did not expect them to contain such a treasure.

From my point of view, the most interesting part of the archive is the collection of handmade albums spanning the years 1952–1992.⁶ It is a chronologically organised narrative by Ostoja, who apparently put clippings and photographs into albums on a daily basis. The photographs are not captioned, therefore the responsibility for their identification lies with the researcher. The artist's markings or commentaries are scarce. Although postmodern theory understands archives as unobjective sources, this lack of comments and chronological display enables the documents to speak for themselves, thus creating an illusion of objectivity.

The materials show a complicated career path of an immigrant artist in Australia, and in my opinion, the question of immigration is vital in the archive. To some extent,

Ostoja and other German and Central European émigrés are considered the progenitors of avant-garde art in Australia.⁷ Upon his arrival to Adelaide in 1955, Ostoja "joined" a group of displaced Eastern European artists, including Władysław Dutkiewicz, his brother Ludwik, brothers Dusan and Voitre Marek, Ieva Pocius, Stanislaus Rapotec and Alex Sadlo. It is said that the Adelaide Art Gallery director of the time, Daniel Thomas, termed this émigré group "Slavic Space Age" artists because they were keen to bring modernity into the local art scene.⁸ The way in which each artist from Central Europe left his mark on the Australian artistic scene is further analysed by Zoja Bojić in the article "The Slav Avant-garde in Australian Art" published in 2020.⁹

From the early 1950s, Ostoja painted distorted cubist-like figures and abstract landscapes, which were considered avant-garde in the then-peripheral artistic environment in Australia. When he arrived in Australia, he was freshly out of the Academy in Düsseldorf, where in the post-war years, Expressionism was rehabilitated as a German modern art genre after the Nazi period. There was no avant-garde teaching at the Kunstakademie at the time, and yet, Ostoja was able to profit from seeing international exhibitions and collections at Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf or in nearby Cologne. Klee and Kandinsky became his lifetime inspirations, but in his early paintings and drawings, the influence of his professors Otto Pankok and Ewald Mataré can also be seen. His paintings and drawings in the 1950s are not cutting-edge for anyone acquainted with the European avant-gardes. However, for the Australian artistic milieu, where figurative and classic landscape paintings prevailed, they might have been. In 1951, Alan McCulloch wrote in the Meanjin journal about Ostoja's drawings:

*Here is a rich talent reflecting accepted standards of art in Central Europe, and fundamentally strong enough to withstand the ravages of parochial surroundings and even to gather force from them.*¹⁰

Adam Dutkiewicz, son of Władysław Dutkiewicz — the Polish immigrant painter and Ostoja's friend, suggests that:

*the post-war émigrés artistic expression, with the homogenising view of the time... tended to be perceived as too complex and irrelevant to the Australian context.*¹¹

It seems that the European experience of the artists, as well as the artistic traditions which they brought to Australia, were not regarded as relevant within the dominant culture in the 1950s, which changed only recently. And this was even before Ostoja started to introduce electronics into his art.

⁵ For example, solo exhibition *Obrazy plastikowe i elektronowe* shown in 1965 in Cracow, and in 1967 in Warsaw; group exhibitions *Inter-media photography*, Poznań, 1988 and *We are here*, National Gallery in Warsaw, 1991.

⁶ National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. DNM 1–16 MNW.

⁷ McNamara, Stephen, Wünsche, "Case Studies of Modernist Refugees and Emigres to Australia, 1930–1950".

⁸ Nicholls, "Wład's worlds: Polish Resistance fighter, 'Slavic space age' modernist, legendary Australian artist".

⁹ Bojić, "The Slav Avant-garde in Australian Art".

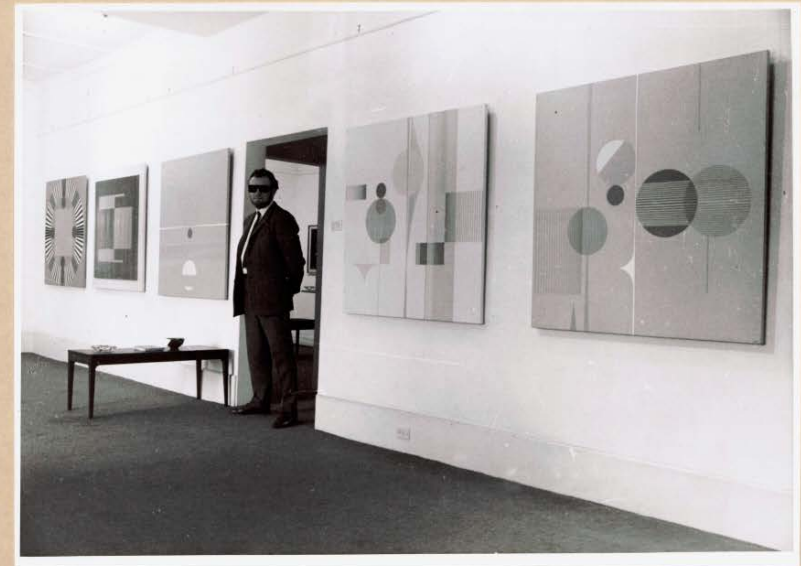
¹⁰ McCulloch, "Art Chronicle: The Drawings of S. Ostoja-Kotkowski", 256.

¹¹ Adam Dutkiewicz quoted in: Lawrie, "Solid Light", 21.



Sl. / Fig. 4 Ostoja stvara svoje „elektroničke slike” / Ostoja creating his “electronic painting”, 1964. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoja-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoja-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 3, inv. no. DNM 3 MNW ©National Museum in Warsaw

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Sl. / Fig. 5 Izložba Ostojinih op-artističkih kolaža u Galeriji A u Sydneyu / Exhibition of Ostoja's op-art collages at the Gallery A in Sydney, 1967. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoja-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoja-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 5, inv. no. DNM 5 MNW ©National Museum in Warsaw

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ART AND TECHNOLOGY
– CREATING
AND DOCUMENTING

In 1962, Ostoja started a collaboration with the Philips Electrical Industries workshop in Hendon (SA) to modify cathode tube television images. With a custom control device, he could manipulate the signal into abstract forms, which he then photographed as there was no other way to preserve them for future viewers at the time. He then displayed the enlarged photographs called by him “electronic images” or “electronic painting”, e.g., in the Argus Gallery in 1964. In my opinion, Ostoja was determined to call them “electronic paintings” in an attempt to inscribe this completely new *genre* into a larger art historical narrative, underlining that it is only the tool that changed. On the other hand, in this way, Ostoja tried to confirm his creativity and skills characteristic of a modernist artist.

However, critics were unwilling to embrace Ostoja’s ideas and to claim these works as a new form of painting. To many of them, Ostoja’s use of light and electronics resulted in a loss of the artist’s soul and a lack of visible emotions. For them, they were made by machine more than by a man, and therefore, they could not be compared to traditional painting.¹² Melbourne art critic Bernard Smith described “electronic paintings” as “moving patterns of light of an impersonal clinical beauty”.¹³ James Gleason, writing about Ostoja’s next show at the Gallery A in Sydney in 1966 titled his review “The Clinical Artist-Scientist”,¹⁴ and Earle Hackett noted that, in Ostoja’s art, there was no place “for sudden irrational gestures with their overtones of emotion”.¹⁵ Ostoja replied:

*Everything with them has to be traditional. Unless you sit down with an easel, a paint brush and oils, to them it is not art. They cannot understand that in this age we have to branch out into new methods. To paint this world of space, surely, we have to use electronics.*¹⁶

It seems that this misunderstanding of his electronic art forced Ostoja to document his art more thoroughly: from June 1962, one album conveys around one or two years of his artistic practice, while from December 1952 to June 1962, there is only one album for almost the entire decade.

I think that the main idea behind the archive was “self-historicization”, the notion famously coined by Zdenka Badovinac during her *Interrupted Histories* exhibition in 2006 in Moderna Gallery in Ljubljana. She explains:

Self-historicization refers to any informal system of historicization that is practiced by artists who, because of the lack of a suitable collective history, have had to search for their own historical or interpretive context. In many parts of the non-Western world, such as Eastern Europe

*during the socialist period and even later, the local institutions that should have systematised neo-avant-garde art either did not exist or took a dismissive attitude towards such art. Consequently, the artists themselves were often forced to archive documents relating to their own art, the art of others, or broader art movements, as well as the conditions of production. [...] The archives of self-historicization include local marginalised art traditions presented by artist-archivists, and not from some external, objective position, as their own personal involvement in these traditions is viewed as essential.*¹⁷

Therefore, Ostoja presents himself as an émigré artist confronted with two main obstacles. Firstly, with the conservative Australian art environment that was not eager to embrace his European background, and secondly, the fact that his introduction of technology into art went against the existing canon and was ridiculed by the critics. As a result, this meant problems with selling his works and securing public funds. On the one hand, in letters and interviews, he presents himself as a lonely “settler at the frontier” between art and technology, struggling with these unfavorable conditions, and on the other hand, in his photographs, he tries to inscribe himself in the existing narratives by consciously creating his image using traditional motives of a modernist artist. Those motives concerned themes like “artist in his studio” or “artist at work”. He also made himself photographed with famous artists or even celebrities and in front of almost all his works. There are many photographs in the archive showing the elaborate equipment he used and backstage preparations, not only finished results. These documents seem both documentary and educational — explaining how the new electronic art is being made.

The documents seem to suggest that Ostoja, aware of his innovativeness, treated the archive as a strategy to earn the deserved recognition in the future since he found himself locked in history between two unsupportive societies: his native, now communist Poland, from which he was estranged, and conservative peripheral Australia. His artistic involvement with the Polish expat community in Australia is also stressed in the archive. Therefore, the albums he composed could be considered as his attempt to become part of Australian collective history without losing his place in Polish history. In both cases, there was a lack of collective memory in which he would be included, e.g. national art history of electronic art. Thus, Ostoja kept his albums in two copies: one was donated to the National Museum in Warsaw, and the other one is currently held in the University of Melbourne Library Special Collections, while the majority of his archive is in the State Library of South Australia in Adelaide. It was also inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register for Australia in 2008. Ostoja’s contribution to Australian culture demonstrates the value of immigration, but his experience was often challenging and paralleled that of other émigré artists there.

¹² Jones, *Synthetics*, 126 and 130.

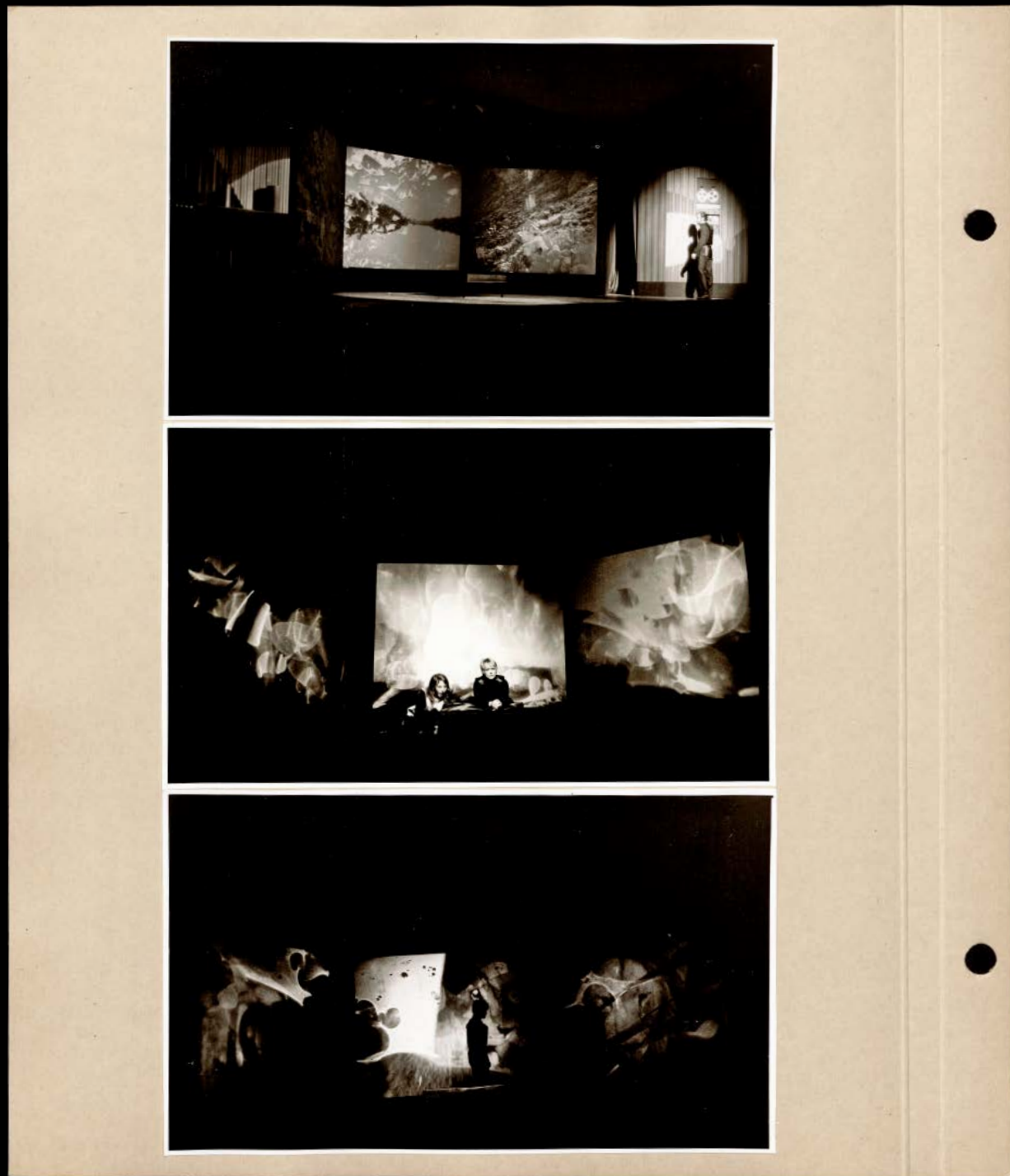
¹³ Smith, “Display emphasises drawing’s value”, 5.

¹⁴ Gleason, “The Clinical Artist-Scientist”, 78.

¹⁵ Hackett, “Electronic Painting: The ‘Images’ of Ostoja-Kotkowski”, 494–495.

¹⁶ Batman, “A Mural for 100 years”, 23.

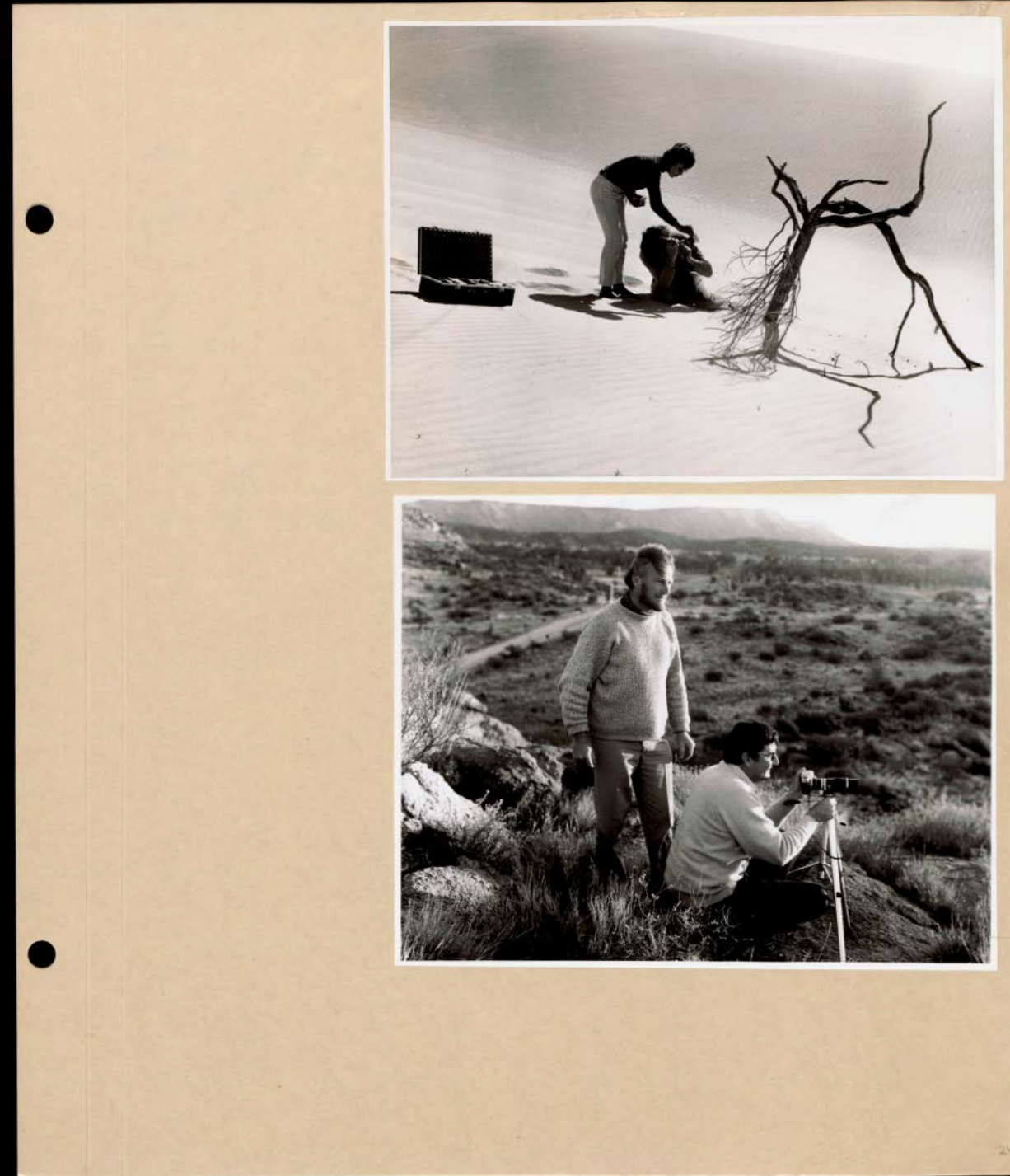
¹⁷ Badovinac, “Self-historicisation”.



Sl. / Fig. 6 Performans *Zvuk i slika* s laserima koji reagiraju na zvuk / *Sound & Image* performance with lasers reacting to sound, 1968. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoja-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoja-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 6, inv. no. DNM 6 MNW ©National Museum in Warsaw

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BRINGING DOWN THE "ARCHIVE FEVER"



Sl. / Fig. 7 Ostoja radi na svom *Zvuk i slika* performansu „Najstariji kontinent (Vremenski jahači)” na australskom Sjevernom teritoriju / Ostoja working on his *Sound & Image* performance "The Oldest Continent (Time Riders)" in the Australia's Northern Territory, 1970. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoja-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoja-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 7, inv. no. DNM 7 MNW, ©National Museum in Warsaw

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Kinetics and interactivity became the focus of his work in the late 1960s and 1970s when he made Chromasonic Towers, Theremins and kinetic sculptures reacting to movement or sound with light. The first Tower was produced in 1970 in Victoria Square in Adelaide during the Festival of Arts. It was approximately 37 meters high and had electric lights enclosed in its construction that were activated by the music played in the square. In 1975, he created another tower in the Civic Square in Canberra, this time using laser light emitted by the laser device he had constructed with the help of Australian University engineers. The idea was the same, although the light technology was much more advanced. The tower was placed in the middle of a fountain, so the reflection of lights in the water enhanced the experience. Lasers were operated by four people inside the tower, who used special controls to “play the light” to the music or surrounding noise.

These so-called community artworks were produced for large audiences and citizens who just happened to be in their vicinity. They were preceded by smaller productions, like *Sonix*, which was commissioned in 1968 for the exhibition *Art of the Space Age* at the Art Gallery of South Australia. It was a “chromasonic unit” activated by music, the computerised notes of which resulted in a series of flashing lights. The softer the note, the softer the glow; the stronger the note, the more violent the flash of light. Ostoja’s *Theremins* were also “reactive environments” (as he called them), the sculptures reacting to the viewers’ movement, made with the help of the engineer Phil Storr. The first theremins had forms similar to his earlier op art collages. This time, they were made with stainless steel plates, acting as an antenna. As viewers were moving in front of them, theremins were producing sounds, although there was no physical contact between them. From the 1950s, Ostoja was involved in the theater and opera as a very successful and praised stage designer. Early on, he introduced projections of light and photographic slides in his designs. This part of his work was complemented with his own unique series of *Sound&Image* presentations: *Orpheus* in 1960 was the first demonstration of chromasonics in Australia; in 1964, during the Adelaide Festival of Arts, he used “Polarchromatics” that produced fluid colours projected onto the backdrop silhouetting dancers performing to multichannel music. The performance included contemporary poetry by Rob Morrison and experimental music by the Dutch composer Henk Badgins. In 1966, in collaboration with the photographer John Dallwitz, he combined the projection of about 400 slide images and photographs from 7 projectors onto the screen with sound deriving from 40 speakers surrounding the audience. In addition, there was a dance performance by Antonio Rodriguez and narration, performed by the actor Alexander Hay, of Ionesco’s *The Mire* and poetry written by a computer. In 1968, Ostoja introduced lasers to his spectacles. In 1970, his *Time Riders* at the Perth festival explored Aboriginal mythology using film, slide projections with dissolves and filter effects, and Australian music and dance.

These short (and sketchy) descriptions show that they were total works of art — *Gesamtkunstwerke* using synchronization of all senses and exploring synesthetic experiences of translating sound into colour and movement. *Sound&Image* were followed by projects called *Laser Kinetics* in the 1970s and 1980s, where he also combined music with changing colours and movement of the laser beams. He experimented with every technology available, developing new ideas like special arrangements of the screen or even using sunlight to create his works.¹⁹ But what remains of his art today? As we now see, in the archive of the National Museum in Warsaw, we have documents of interactive, ephemeral, kinetic, musical art and synesthetic experiences documented only in photographs or explained in words. There was no institutional program for the preservation of ephemeral media art in Australia during Ostoja’s lifetime, so it is obvious that he self-historicized for the sake of remembrance, but can we really experience them now? I think that the concept of the “performative document” introduced to art history by Amelia Jones in her article “Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance Art as Documentation” and followed by Philip Auslander in “The Performativity of Performance Documentation” is crucial for understanding Ostoja’s archive. The “performative document” shifts the idea of the work of art from the singular performative event to its documentation. Jones writes:

*There is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art. Although I am respectful of the specificity of knowledges gained from participating in a live performance situation, I will argue here that this specificity should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledges that develop in relation to the documentary traces of such an event. While the live situation may enable the phenomenological relations of flesh-to-flesh engagement, the documentary exchange (viewer/reader ↔ document) is equally intersubjective.*²⁰

Auslander continues this way of thinking by stating:

*My suggestion [is] that performance art is constituted as such through the performativity of its documentation. [...] Perhaps the authenticity of the performance document resides in its relationship to its beholder rather than to an ostensibly originary event: perhaps its authority is phenomenological rather than ontological.”*²¹

Although for some, it might be difficult to imagine performances of Ostoja without sound or colour, these photographs are not only the source of knowledge but are able to induce affective and aesthetic reactions in viewers. Ostoja’s synesthetic approach is even helpful here when we try to decipher the music from the colourful lines of lasers. By creating his archive, Ostoja might have concentrated on the idea of the photographs as the *evidence* that the performances did

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E.A. “Electronic technology and modern art”, 31.

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Ostoja wanted to use moving sunlight to paint in his *Solaris* project from 1986. He was also one of the first artists to be interested in biofeedback.

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Jones, “Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation”, 12.

21

Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation”, 7 and 9.

Alpha-cadabra-'think' a picture



STAN OSTOJA-KOTKOWSKI with some of the highly specialised equipment used to emit alpha waves.

Controversial artist Stan Ostojko-Kotkowski, creator of the talking display and the electronic light tower, is working on a new brain-bopping invention—mind images.

The bearded artist, considered Australia's leading exponent of technology, is learning to create visual images by activating the alpha waves of his brain.

The waves are emitted only when a person is relaxed.

By a relatively new process called bio-feedback, it is now possible not merely to measure these waves but to train individuals to induce them.

Zen Buddhists, noted for their inner tranquility and

creativity, have a higher level alpha output.

If a person can induce alpha waves at will, it means he can arrest tension, and have some control over his body.

Drug addicts, depressives, alcoholics may be able to control their state by an exercise of the mind.

The process of bio-feedback is being explored extensively by some of the world's leading scientists.

It was to one of these research centres in California that Stan went to study.

It was the Veterans' Administrative Hospital, Sepulveda, run by the Barbara Brown, who is particularly interested in using bio-feedback to experiment with artists' minds.

She believes, like Stan, that art, and instead, call it what you will, could well be the inspiration and salvation of the human race.

The Californian clinic has the most sophisticated machinery to chart bio-feedback processes.

This is done by attaching electrodes to a patient's head.

The electrodes are fixed through the machinery and connected to a display stand of lights.

The lights, arranged in triangles, show in 10 stages the strength of the alpha waves.

"If it is working a blue light shows," Stan says.

"When the alpha waves are stronger orange and red lights flash, and when it is at full intensity all lights flash on."

He maintains that by using bio-feedback he will be able to think a painting in visual form.

"Even at this stage it is possible to put together a sound and light concert through bio-feed technique," he says.

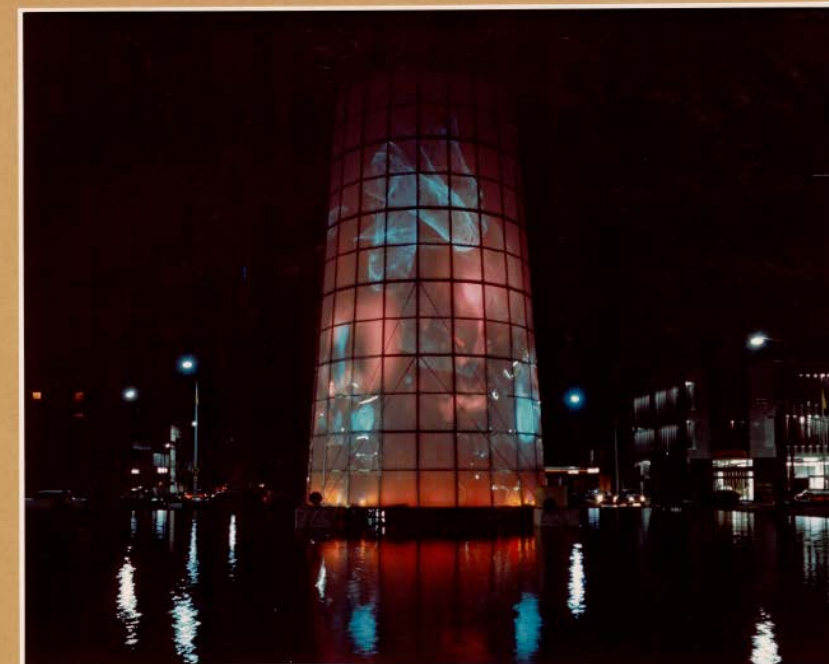
"It would be a rather crude concert but our minds would be doing the work."

SUNDAY MAIL, September 2, 1973

Friday 31 August 1973 - Austr. Broadc. Comm. - Adelaide



BRINGING DOWN THE "ARCHIVE FEVER"



Sl. / Fig. 8 Gore: Isječak članka iz Sunday Maila o Ostojinom projektu upotrebe moždanih alfa-valova za stvaranje slika samo uz pomoć misli; dolje: Ostoja u televizijskom studiju u Adelaidu za vrijeme snimanja emisije o Thereminu / Top: Paper clipping from Sunday Mail with the article about Ostoja's project of using brain's alpha waves to create images with thoughts only; bottom: Ostoja in the TV Studio in Adelaide recording a program about his Theremin, 1973. Arhiv Stanisława Ostojko-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostojko-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 10, inv. no. DNM 10 MNW ©National Museum in Warsaw

Sl. / Fig. 9 Gore: Ostojin laserski kromazonski toranj, Gradski trg u Canberri; dolje: Ostoja s premijerom Goughom Whitlamom koji je njegov Theremin 1975 odabrao za svoju privatnu zbirku / Top: Laser chromason tower designed by Ostoja, Civic Square in Canberra; bottom: Ostoja with prime minister Gough Whitlam who chose Ostoja's Theremin 1975 for his private collection, 1975. Arhiv Stanisława Ostojko-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostojko-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 11, inv. no. DNM 11 MNW ©National Museum in Warsaw

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actually happen, that his works really existed. But today, in the contemporary art context, when particular shots from the performances are sold and circulated in galleries and museums, they are more than that. We can even say that the performances are dependent on documentation to attain symbolic status within the realm of culture. In Ostoja's archive, there are series of photographs showing one work of art and the process of its creation, so this is not only symbolic status at stake here but the whole experience with photographic performative documents. In such a way, curators could explore the relationship between the public and documents here rather than try to recover the original event. The original performance might be lost and irretrievable, but Ostoja's photographs create new, original engagement between art and viewers, by showing not only the performance itself but also all technology involved in its creation, the preparations, research and context that led to it happening in front of the viewers.

CONCLUSION

From today's perspective we can conclude that the role of Ostoja's archival practice is not postmodern but much more postcolonial in the sense described by Piotr Piotrowski in his article "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History" published in 2008. It aims to create and present an (artistic) identity of the Polish-Australian artist and to explain very local and specific (political and social) contexts in which he worked and lived. There is rather work of construction and not deconstruction in his archive, as Piotr Piotrowski wrote:

*Generally speaking, postmodernism stands for a critique of the subject, a deconstruction and dispersal of the subject; post-colonial studies operate with the defense and integrity of the subject.*²²

Ostoja's identity, the Subject, is revealed in the archive, and at the same time, the critique of the "centre" is made. The centre means the mainstream of Western Art at that time because the story of Ostoja disrupts the great narrative of the development of art and technology in which American artists dominated. Local immigrant identity is posited against the imperialism of the West but also against the dominant Australian art scene and market. Ostoja's archive shows how on "the periphery", something very important was waiting to balance the prevailing narratives.

For example, Stephen Jones argues that:

In some way it is possible to make a claim that Ostoja-Kotkowski and the technicians at Philips [Philips Research Laboratories in Hendon, South Australia — my explanation] who assisted him actually assembled the first video synthesizer, given that it was

*producing images by 1964 — at almost the very beginning of the history of video art, although not of electronic visual art.*²³

He shows that Ostoja-Kotkowski might have done it before Nam June Paik, who is generally considered as the pioneer. We know that Nam June Paik manipulated television/video display, but not before 1965 in his work *Magnet TV*, while Ostoja exhibited his "electronic paintings" already in 1964 in Argus Gallery. This is not, however, to set the precedence, but to show that mainstream narratives distort history, which would be more interesting (and decolonized) if we could see the plurality of narratives in dialogue. That is why self-historicization is such an important tool enabling horizontal art history writing, as described by Piotrowski:

*If global art history is to be written according to the standards of "geohistory", that is, taking into consideration the specific meaning of art of the peripheral regions, it must be critical of the hierarchical art history narratives of "vertical" art history. This means that it ought to be developed within a different "horizontal" paradigm.*²⁴

The documents gathered by Ostoja in Australia should be seen in parallel with international history of art and technology, produced in Europe, United States, Japan and other countries. This is also why it is so important to preserve the photographs of ephemeral works of art on the periphery, mostly because the affective experience of the documentation being a motor for researching alternative stories. It is "in absentia" that critical thinking is born.

Ostoja documented the process of his works' production or metamorphosis of one spectacle into another, which distorts the modernist notion of works of art in traditional museums. In Ostoja's archival photographs, we can see the huge amount of technological equipment he used, which, although obsolete today, gives information on what the performances could have looked like at the time of their creation. Hence, it is very interesting in terms of media archaeology. But more importantly, the documentation shows that the work of art is not limited to the effect but includes all the preparatory processes and techniques. The photographs are an access point to the reality of the performance, the only one we have today, so there should be a further change in the museum paradigm of authenticity, authorship and presence.

²² Piotrowski, "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History", 382.

²³ Jones, *Synthetics*, 128–129.

²⁴ Piotrowski, "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History", 380.



Sl. / Fig. 10 Ostoja predaje umjetnost lasera u sklopu Sinkrone radionice pri Prahau – Visokoj školi za napredno obrazovanje / Ostoja teaching laser art during the Synchronous Workshop at the Prahan College of Advanced Education in Melbourne, 1976. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoja-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoja-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 11, inv. no. DNM 11 MNW © National Museum in Warsaw

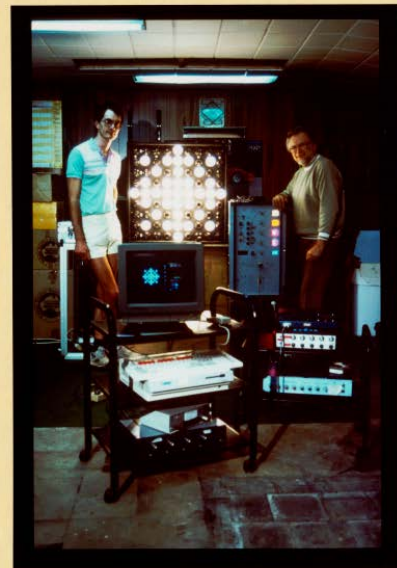
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BRINGING DOWN THE "ARCHIVE FEVER"



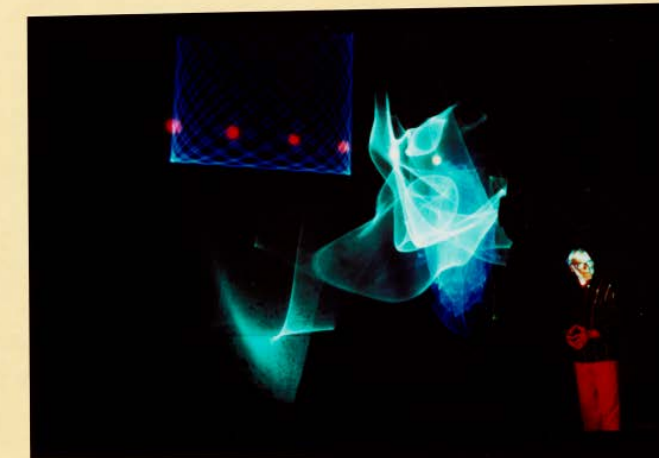
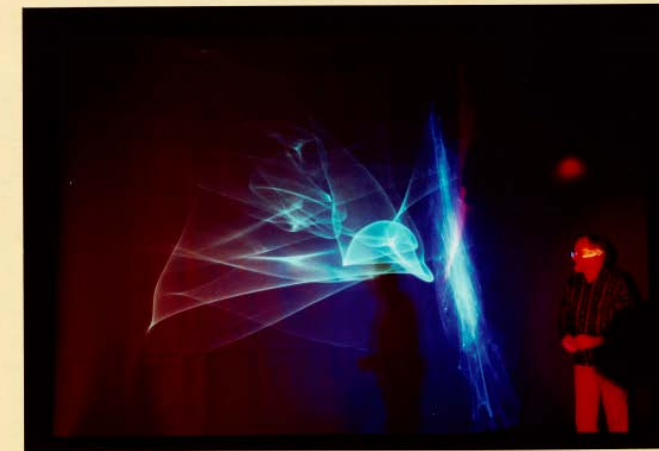
Sl. / Fig. 11 Ostoja, Spomenik Kościuszkom u Coomi / Ostoja, Kościuszko monument in Cooma, 1989. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoja-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoja-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 15, inv. no. DNM 15 MNW © National Museum in Warsaw

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Sl. / Fig. 12 Ostoję i njegova Elektronička snježna pahulja, zgrada BP u Adelaidu / Ostoję and his Electronic Snowflake, BP Building Adelaide, 1989. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoję-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoję-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 15, inv. no. DNM 15 © National Museum in Warsaw

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Sl. / Fig. 13 Ostoję predstavlja lasersku umjetnost za vrijeme Synkronos '91 u Varšavskoj filharmoniji / Ostoję presenting laser art during Synkronos '91 at Warsaw Philharmonic, 1991. Arhiv Stanisława Ostoję-Kotkowskog u Nacionalnom muzeju u Varšavi / Stanisław Ostoję-Kotkowski's Archive at the National Museum in Warsaw. Album 15, inv. no. DNM 15 MNW © National Museum in Warsaw

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