

# The Censorship of Memory

Cristina Albu

Vlad Basarab's performance *The Censorship of Memory* constitutes a reflection both on the distortion of historical evidence under oppressive political regimes and on the inevitable transformation of personal memories. Supported by the National Council of Education in Ceramic Arts, *The Censorship of Memory* was presented in Seattle in March 2012 within the framework of the Projects Space initiative dedicated to promoting experimentation in the field of ceramics. Heavily interested in the malleability of clay, Basarab has repeatedly explored not only the transformation of matter, but also the plasticity of ideas and identity.

*The Censorship of Memory* was staged in an improvised office space built by the artist out of lumber and burlap. In a three-hour long performance, Basarab seemingly embodied the role of a disciplined state official that submissively contributes to the censorship of historical knowledge by tearing off pages of world encyclopedias and covering them in kaolin slip. This Sisyphean activity was paired with images of a more violent act of knowledge destruction. In a video projection shown against the back wall of the makeshift office, Basarab cast numerous volumes of the very same encyclopedia in a kiln and set them on fire. As he methodically whitewashed the text on each page, crackling flames engulfed the books. The images of the two processes overlapped since the apparently blank sheets of paper were left to dry on strings at the back of the room and became a jigsaw puzzle screen for the video images. At the end of the performance, the kaolin-covered pages remained intact as a proof of the ultimate indestructibility of the past despite its unavoidable transformation.

Basarab's assiduous orchestration of book destruction brings to mind the conceptualist practices of John Latham and Huang Yongping who have similarly dwelt on processes of knowledge interrogation and transformation. Yet, *The Censorship of Memory* is not so much a neo-Dadaist act of contestation of preceding values as a mystical encounter with the indelible traces of the past. Basarab's practice simultaneously evokes repressive state censorship and willing self-censorship. His repetitive act of covering up information



and conspicuously exhibiting its traces is evocative of the compelling urge to reminisce. According to him, "we censor the truth willingly and unwillingly by revisiting and reinterpreting memories". A native of Romania who currently resides in U.S., the artist is deeply familiar with the systematic obliteration of historical evidence under communist regimes, as well as with the desire to conceal the past in the post-1989 period – whether this act is associated with the destruction of documents concerning past affiliations of individuals with the security police or with the personal need to move past traumat-

ic memories. Basarab does not suppress the correlations between his performance and reminiscences of communist censorship and oppression, yet he does not want to restrict its meaning to a specific historical context. Ultimately, he hopes that his work can serve as a universal meditation on the painful struggle of constructing and transforming individual and collective memories.

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