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Aura and the Archive: Confronting the Incendiary Fliers of Kommune 1

MICHAEL SHANE BOYLE

> "The more one loses oneself in a document, the denser the subject matter grows."
>
> —Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street"[1]

On May 22, 1967, a fire in a large Brussels department store claimed the lives of over 300 shoppers. The next day the entire front and last pages of West Germany's most popular newspaper, the *Bild-Zeitung*, featured graphic details and photographs of the blaze. In their coverage, the paper dubiously connected the fire to a series of recent anti-Vietnam War protests in the Belgian capital. Since at that time the New Left across Europe had so far refrained from employing destructive tactics, many activists in West Germany took the reporting to be another blatant example of the conservative West German media's strategy of defaming the emerging New Left.[2] Yet within days of the fire, a series of incendiary fliers produced and circulated in West Berlin by the anti-authoritarian activist collective Kommune 1 seemed to confirm the paper's speculations.[3]

The most provocative of the four fliers, labeled simply "#8," read like a manifesto issued by a militant West Berlin Maoist group. It opened with a question that quickly became infamous throughout West Germany: "When will the department stores in Berlin burn?"[4] In addition to corroborating the *Bild-Zeitung*'s coverage that the fire was in fact set by Belgian activists, the flier called on West German students to repeat the action in West Berlin as a protest against the Vietnam War. "Our Belgian friends have gotten the knack of letting the public take part in the humorous hustle and bustle in Vietnam," the flier declared:

> No one needs to shed any more tears for the poor Vietnamese people while reading the morning paper. From now on, a person can go into the clothing department of KaDeWe, Hertie, Woolworth, Bilka, or Neckermann and casually light a cigarette in the dressing room. [. . .] Don't be surprised if sometime soon a fire erupts, if somewhere a barracks blows up, if somewhere the grandstands in a stadium collapse. No more so than when the Americans marched over the demarcation line, when Hanoi's city center was bombed, or when the marines invaded China.[5]

Wann brennen die Berliner Kaufhäuser ?

Bisher krepierten die Amis in Vietnam für Berlin. Uns gefiel es nicht, daß diese armen Schweine ihr Cocacolablut im vietnamesischen Dschungel verspritzen mußten. Deshalb trottelten wir anfangs mit Schildern durch leere Straßen, warfen ab und zu Eier ans Amerikahaus und zuletzt hätten wir gern HHH in Pudding sterben sehen. Den Schah pissen wir vielleicht an oder, wenn wir das Hilton stürmen, erfährt er auch einmal, wie ohltuend eine Kastration ist, falls überhaupt nocht was dranhängt... es gibt das so böse Gerüchte.

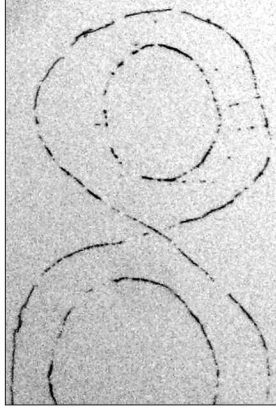
Ob leere Fassaden beworfen, Repräsentanten lächerlich gemacht - die Bevölkerung konnte immer nur Stellung nehmen durch die spannenden Presseberichte. Unsere belgischen Freunde haben endlich den Dreh heraus, die Bevölkerung am lustigen Treiben [redacted] in Vietnam wirklich zu beteiligen:sie zünden ein Kaufhaus an, zweihundert saturierte Bürger beenden ihr aufreghendes Leben und Brüssel wird Hanoi. Keiner von uns braucht mehr Tränen über das arme vietnamesische Volk bei der Frühstückszeitung vergießen. Ab heute geht er in die Konfektionsabteilung vom DaDeWe, Hertie, Woolworth, Bilka oder Neckermann und zündet sich diskret eine Zigarette in der Ankleidekabine an. Dabei ist nicht unbedingt erforderlich, daß das betreffende Kaufhaus eine Werbekampagne für amerikanische Produkte gestartet hat, denn wer glaubt noch an das "made in Germany" ?

Wenn es irgendwo brennt in der nächsten Zeit, wenn irgendwo eine Kaserne in die Luft geht, wenn irgendwo in einem Stadion die Tribüne einstürzt, seid bitte nicht überrascht. Genauso wenig wie beim Überschreiten der Demarkationslinie durch die Amis, der Bombardierung des Stadtzentrums von Hanoi, dem Einmarsch der marines nach China.

Brüssel hat uns die einzige Antwort darauf gegeben:

burn, ware-house, burn !

KOMMUNE I (24.5.67)



Kommune 1, Flier #8, from the Archive "APO und soziale Bewegungen," Free University of Berlin.

It only took a matter of days for the courts to bring charges against two of those behind the provocative texts. For writing the fliers, Fritz Teufel and Rainer Langhans—both university students at the time—were indicted under "suspicion to incite life-threatening violence" and faced stiff penalties of nine months in jail.[6] The charges might have been justified were it not that the fliers were in fact meant to be ironic; their militant rhetoric merely an attempt at satirizing the *Bild-Zeitung*'s groundless insinuations about the Brussels fire. Teufel and Langhans had created the fliers together with other members of Kommune 1 the morning the *Bild-Zeitung*'s story appeared. Yet the joke obviously failed to land with judicial authorities.[7]

The trial that ensued repeatedly made headlines throughout West Germany, due in large part to the defiant and often humorous behavior of the defendants in court.[8] The actual judgment hinged on the meaning attributed to and the intention behind the fliers. Against the prosecution's claim that the fliers were an incitement to violence, the Kommunards' defense attorney Horst Mahler argued for the fliers to be understood as satiric works of art, and thus of no threat to public safety. To this end, Mahler submitted the testimony of no less than 16 notable professors, artists, writers, and filmmakers including prominent figures like Günter Grass, Peter Szondi, and Alexander Kluge. This panel of experts disputed the prosecution's accusations by describing the literary merit and avant-garde character of the fliers. Although the Kommunards were eventually acquitted of all charges, the hermeneutic struggle over the fliers flared back up just 11 days after the close of the trial when two close acquaintances of of Kommune 1, Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, set fire to a pair of department stores in Frankfurt am Main. Soon after the arson attacks, Baader and Ensslin founded the Red Army Faction, marking the start of a two and a half-decade campaign of left-wing political violence in West Germany.

For historians of the German New Left, the contentious history of Kommune 1's arson fliers prompts numerous questions. Were the fliers works of art or crass incitements to violence? Can such static categories even adequately contain the fliers? What might the fliers reveal about the line between artistic forms of political engagement and violent provocation? Did the Kommune 1 fliers influence the actions of Baader and Ensslin? Needless to say, many scholars and journalists have weighed in with wildly different answers to these and other questions over the past forty years.[9] While I am certainly interested in the ongoing debates around Kommune 1, in the essay that follows I take an altogether different approach to discussing the fliers, one which eschews attempts at analyzing the fliers themselves.

As someone who has spent considerable time working in archives examining posters, letters, magazines, and manifestos produced by New Left activists in 1960s West Germany, I find myself increasingly curious about the actual experience of conducting archival work. In particular, I am intrigued by how encounters with the materiality of historical documents impact the very historiographic analysis one brings to bear upon such documents. What follows is a brief reflection on how historiographic analysis is shaped by the oft-ignored relationship between a scholar's knowledge of a document's history and reception, and the experience of being in the material presence of a

document. I am specifically interested in how the knowledge one brings into an archive—among the other baggage (both literal and figurative) researchers carry with them—might shape the very experience of archival research, and how the experience of archival research in turn shapes one's knowledge of the document being studied. To explore these questions, I take my first archival encounter with the Kommune 1 arson fliers as an opportunity to examine the aura that surrounds archival documents. In addition to discussing under what conditions an archival document might be said to possess aura, I pay special attention to how auratic experience affects historiographic analysis. By taking seriously the advice of Performance Studies scholar Shannon Jackson who recommends a "performative understanding of historical documents," I argue that the interpretation one brings to bear on a particular archival document often reveals more about the proclivities and experiences—including the experience of archival research—of the researcher than anything intrinsic to the document itself.[10]

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I open the brown box labeled "Kommune 1" and the first thing I look for are the fliers. The Kommunards made so many and they all seem to be here—multiple copies of each. But as I begin to dig, I realize the contents are barely organized, undoubtedly a consequence of the box's frequent perusal by researchers, artists, and (as I note by glancing at the visitor's list) even former Kommunards themselves. It takes me some time to sort through the hundreds of documents before I finally find the four I am after. I lay them out on the table and turn on the fluorescent desk lamp. Through the window in front of me I see that outside the afternoon sky is a dark gray. A cold wind is whipping through a copse of trees. As I waited on the platform for the train that would take me to the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition Archive of Berlin's Freie Universität this morning, snow began to fall. It is only October.

The four fliers are not in order so I take a moment to arrange them numerically: fliers #6, #7, #8, and #9. They look hardly any different than they do in the books I have seen them reproduced in. Typewritten. A large number corresponding to the flier scrawled by hand serves as a background for each. A plain and straightforward design, save for flier #6, of course, whose words are arranged in a dwindling spiral. In short, they are exactly as I expected—except for their odor. I didn't anticipate that. The forty-two year-old documents have been kept in a box for at least two decades, I remind myself, of course they smell musty. And the texture of the paper is like nothing I had imagined, if I even had had any expectations of such a thing at all. I am bemused that these fliers which caused such a stir are so delicate. I first recognize their fragility when I clumsily remove flier #8 from the box using significantly less care than I admit later to my fiancée, who is studying to be a rare-books librarian. My right hand hits the paper's already creased bottom right corner. A small piece of the most controversial of the fliers which notoriously asks "When will Berlin's Department Stores Burn?" simply falls away.

Although I am finally close enough to touch and smell the fliers—an encounter I find remarkable after having studied reproductions of the "originals"

in books and catalogues for so long—the absent history that their presence before me signifies remains permanently distant. In my long-awaited encounter with the most controversial of the Kommune 1 fliers, I am reminded of Walter Benjamin's discussion of aura as the "here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place."[11] To think of the fliers in this way is of course ironic, not only because Benjamin himself made the careful distinction that, "No document is as such a work of art," but because Kommune 1 would never have given a thought to their fliers as possessing "aura."[12] Nor did they consider them works of art that served the ritual function Benjamin describes as emblematic of auratic bourgeois art. In fact, Rainer Langhans even criticized the experts commissioned by his lawyer to attest to the literary quality of the fliers for trying "to explain our actions as art." These experts, Langhans declared, "believed in art—we didn't. That is a business which works to make life more tolerable." Echoing the German New Left's iconoclastic view that art was an unequivocal "instrument of domination" whose "affirmative character" leaves it empty of any utopian vision of how society could be, only to affirm it as it is, Langhans continues:

> What we wanted with Kommune 1, what we lived and what we believed was: All art must disappear. And be disappeared. Why? Art is always only the tasteless Utopia for the actual dead. For this dead bourgeois world with its wars that are always so beautifully hidden in the background. Artists make it possible for people to feel human. All in order to make them better able to continue with their inhuman life. Since this was clear to us, we tried to make all of life into art, therefore to really live. The artists and intellectuals knew exactly that with this we called into question their entire existence.[13]

It is surely ironic then that Kommune 1's Situationist-inspired actions and sardonic fliers have increasingly become of interest to art historians and even curators. By coincidence, I am carrying in my bag that day a catalogue for a 1991 gallery exhibit in Berlin where Kommune 1's arson fliers were displayed alongside work by now canonized groups like the French Surrealists, CoBrA, and the Situationist International.[14]

While I remain wary to categorize the fliers as art, their aura for me that day remained unmistakable:

> What is aura actually? A strange web of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour becomes part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.[15]

No doubt, Benjamin's enigmatic description of aura is elusive, its phenomenological dimension difficult to rationally comprehend to say the least. As Eugene Lunn explains, aura for Benjamin consists of the "traces left upon art through its successive historical functions as part of magic and ritual, religious worship, and of the secular cult of beauty since the Renaissance."[16] Moreover, Benjamin's metaphysical insistence on the authenticity, authority,

and uniqueness of a work whose "presence" bears the traces of its history raises red flags for a student of performance schooled in deconstructionist suspicions of such things.

Despite these concerns, the aura of the fliers was nonetheless striking. But from where did this aura emerge, and of what consequence should it be to the researcher? Certainly the auratic quality of archival documents should be distinguished from the aura Benjamin describes. The auratic works of which Benjamin speaks remain immutably distant, literally both out of reach and untouchable for the viewer, a necessary condition of their staying sacred. They are, in short, a sight to behold but not to be held. While the preservation methods used to protect some archival documents endows these documents with a similar sense of inviolableness, most archival documents must be handled, and thus demand to be dealt with sensually.

Although the "here and now" of the fliers carried an unmistakable aura for me sitting alone in the archive that frigid Fall morning, was this aura intrinsic to the fliers? Or did it emerge from a disjuncture between my encounter with the fliers in the archive and my previously mediated experiences of them? Among the millions of people who have read these fliers, very few have actually touched or smelled the originals. Most often, the Kommune 1 fliers meet "recipients halfway" via their reproduction in newspapers and books.[17] Before entering the archive that morning, I too had only encountered the fliers in mediated fashion. These previous meetings undoubtedly shaped my experience in the archive and my sense of the fliers' auratic character. Like Philip Auslander's oft-debated critique of the liveness ontology of performance as being dependent on "recording technologies that made it possible to perceive existing representations as 'live'," [18] or Jacques Derrida's argument that the very value of presence in spoken exchanges only comes into being with and against the written word, my auratic experience in the archive depended on my other encounters of the fliers as technologically reproduced and circulated. In saying this, I do not mean to posit my encounter as somehow exemplary, but am only looking to account for the specificity of my experience. A crucial aspect of this experience was, of course, the very material presence of the fliers before me. While I learned nothing new about the history or content of the fliers after having already previously studied reproductions of them, something about touching them, inadvertently smelling them, and even hearing the shuffling sound they made as I moved them around on the desk was striking.

In his famous discussion of aura, Benjamin does not limit aesthetics to Hegelian "beautiful semblance." Particularly in "The Work of Art" essay, he foregoes all notions of aesthetics that conflate aesthetics with art. Instead Benjamin refers explicitly to a notion of aesthetics that predates Enlightenment era conceptions of aesthetics as having to do with truth, beauty, or even the work of art. He turns to the term's etymological roots in the Greek word Aisthitikos, which Susan Buck-Morss notes roughly means "perceptive by feeling." Buck-Morss explains: "The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality-corporeal, material nature. [. . .] It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell-the whole corporeal sensorium."[19] The notion of aesthetics Buck-Morss describes is of course a

far cry from the Hegelian or Kantian conception of aesthetics as being "robbed of its sense."[20] Yet even Kant in his "Third Critique" does not narrow the aesthetic to any distinct sphere of art; the reflective judgement of aesthetic experience hardly need be sparked by a masterful painting.

While there is nothing intrinsic to the fliers that would lead one to categorize them as art, this hardly means my experience of them in the archive did not entail an aesthetic dimension in the sense to which Benjamin refers. And the aesthetic dimension of researching in an archive—the sensory cognition that accompanies archival work—is not without significance. If anything, the auratic experience of a historical document makes evident this oft-ignored aesthetic aspect of archival work. It stands as a stark reminder of the specificity of one's encounter with a historical document. Research and analysis never occurs in a vacuum. There are always conditions of possibility—both institutional and otherwise—for archival research. What brings one into the archive undoubtedly bears upon the ideas one brings out of the archive—no matter whether one critically reflects on or fully senses this fact.

ENDNOTES

[1] Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in One-Way Street and Other Writings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, (London: NLB, 1979), 66. Special thanks to Morgan Wadsworth and Dennis Johannßen for their valuable suggestions for this essay. Ulrike Groß of the Archive-APO at the Freie Universität Berlin was very helpful in the course of my archival research.

[2] Historians and journalists have long noted how maligning the Left had become a hallmark journalistic practice by 1967. This was particularly the case for those newspapers and magazines owned by the powerful publishing empire owned by Axel Springer, the most powerful media mogul in postwar Western Europe. Throughout the 1960s, Springer-owned newspapers regularly attacked New Left groups in West Germany. See for example Hans-Dieter Müller Press Power: A Study of Axel Springer, J.A. Cole trans. (London: MacDonald & Co, 1969); Peter Humpheys, Media and Media Policy in Germany: The Press and Broadcasting since 1945 (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

[3] Founded in early 1967, Kommune 1 was a West Berlin commune originally made up of nine students, artists, and antiauthoritarian activists. If not the most influential group of the German New Left, Kommune 1 certainly remains the most (in)famous. From 1967 to 1969, the group regularly made headlines for the unconventional communal lifestyle of its members as well as the group's creative approach to activism which drew inspiration from the Situationist International, the Dutch Provos, and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. For the most comprehensive history of Kommune 1, see Ulrich Enzensberger, Die Jahre der Kommune 1 (Munich: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 2006).

[4] Unless otherwise noted, all translations originally in German are my own.

[5] The four fliers were distributed by Kommune 1 on May 24, 1967 on the campus of the Free University, Berlin where many of them were enrolled as students. The fliers have since been reproduced in numerous books, journals, and gallery catalogues. See for example Wolfgang Dreßen and Eckhard Siepmann, Nipferd des Höllischen Urwalds: Situationisten, Gruppe SPUR, Kommune 1. Originals of the fliers can be found at the "Archiv 'APO und soziale Bewegungen" located at the Freie Universität, Berlin, Fachbereich Politik- und Sozialwissenschaften, Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft (APO-Archiv), folder Kommune 1 (last accessed 9 December, 2009). For other discussions of the fliers in English, see for example Charity Scribner, "Buildings on Fire: The Situationist International and the Red Army Faction," Grey Room 26 (Winter 2007), 30–55; Simon Teune. "Humour as a

Guerrilla Tactic: The West German Student Movement's Mockery of the Establishment," in International Review of Social History (52: 2007), 115–132.

[6] Teufel and Langhaans were charged under section 111, paragraphs 2 and 306 of West Germany's Basic Law. See the reproduction of the "Anklageschrift" [Bill of Indictment] dated June 9, 1967 and published in Kommune 1's pamphlet Gesammelte Werke Gegen Uns (Collected Works Against Us), 15, located in the International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Kommune 1 Archive, File 2.

[7] It did not take long for the Bild-Zeitung to weigh in on the fliers: "Whoever glorifies this catastrophe which was likely started by radical leftist arsonists, and recommends copying it should be put behind bars! Police and the district attorney should prosecute the creators of these fliers to the fullest extent of the law." Just a day later the paper continued its coverage, this time running another article which claimed Kommune 1 had "direct connections to the Brussels terrorists" responsible for the arson. Their evidence, however, consisted only of an excerpt from flier "#6" in which Kommune 1 quotes an entirely fictional member of the entirely fictional Maoist group "Action for Peace and Friendship of the People" blithely describing the protest action as a "happening." Both of these articles were reprinted together by Kommune 1 as flier "#10" which was distributed at the Free University on May 28, 1967.

[8] For a discussion of the trial in English, see for example, Martin Klimke, "'We are not Going to Defend Ourselves Before Such a Justice System!'—1968 and the Courts," in German Law Journal (10:3, 2009), 261–274. For a full transcript of the trial including commentary by Kommune 1, see Fritz Teufel and Rainer Langhans, Klau Mich (Frankfurt am Main: Edition Voltaire, 1968).

[9] Recently the Kommune 1 fliers have again become a topic of debate in Germany, being invoked in the increasing public discourse around the provocative text The Coming Insurrection by the Invisible Committee. See for example, Cord Riechelmann, "Ein Feuer auf die Erde zu bringen," Jungle World 49 (December 9, 2010).

[10] Shannon Jackson, "Performance at Hull-House: Museum, Micro-fiche, Historiography," in Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History, ed. Della Pollock. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 1998), 261.

[11] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 21.

[12] Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," 66.

[13] Rainer Langhans, Ich bin's: Die Ersten 68 Jahre (Frankfurt am Main: Blumenbar Verlag, 2009), 67. For an influential articulation of the German New Left view of art as an "instrument of domination," see Culture and Revolution, "Art as Commodity of the Consciousness Industry," in Die Zeit (November 29, 1968), 22.

[14] Wolfgang Dressen, Ed., Nilpferd des höllischen Urwalds : Spuren in eine unbekannte Stadt: Situationisten, Gruppe SPUR, Kommune 1, (Giessen: Anabas-Verlag, 1991).

[15] Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 285.

[16] Eugene Lunn, Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 151.

[17] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 21.

[18] Philip Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture (London: Routledge, 2008), 55.

[19] Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," October (62, Autumn, 1992), 6.

[20] Ibid, 9.