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Romanian Artist Daniel Knorr Uses Pulverized Police Files For 'Archaeological Art'

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State of Mind (2007) by Daniel Knorr, in an installation view of The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology, MCA Chicago. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

When Germany reunified in 1989, the Stasi worked overtime to obliterate all records of sadistic secret policing. Many classified files were pulverized and buried. By the time the papers were excavated decades later, nothing intelligible could be read. Yet for the Romanian artist Daniel Knorr they'd become more evocative through the transmutation. Since the pulverized documents looked like old stones, he [exhibited them in a museum](#) as archeological finds. Some of those “file-stones” are now on loan to the [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago](#) as part of a [new survey of artists obsessed with archaeology](#).

As archaeologists, artists are considerably freer than their academic counterparts, and the archeological finds on exhibit in Chicago run the gamut from the historical to the personal to the metaphorical. While this freedom can be crippling – especially when academic insecurity tempts artists to self-consciously excavate art history – the impact of archaeology is considerably enlarged when artists start shoveling.

Much of the digging happens in close proximity, whether in place or time or both at once. Scott Hocking documents the disintegration of his native Detroit, dramatizing the ruins of old factories by rearranging them into spaces seemingly abandoned by mystery cults. No professional archaeologist would ever do that of course, but the effect of distancing the immediate past accentuates Detroit's current identity crisis and encourages closer self-examination.

Knorr's Stasi file-stones leverage the shovel of archeology in another way by showing the swiftness with which the most heinous deeds recede into history, forgotten, inscrutable, all too easily repeated. His archeological exhibit is symbolic, but the symbol may be potent enough to make us scrutinize present institutions before their crimes can be committed and pulped. The implication is to dig more deeply into the present, to be more watchful of once and future state police – such as our own NSA.

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