The term *subversion* began to appear in art with greater frequency in the 1980s, particularly in reference to the practices of artistic "appropriation" associated with the strategies of critical art. The word has a dual meaning, and both senses of it are fundamentally critical. The etymology of the word (from the Latin *sub* "from below" + *vertere* "to turn") suggests that criticism can be a physical act: overturning an object, transforming it – even destroying it – in the process of appropriation. Subversion in this sense can be understood as a method or technique for creating a work of art through the decontextualization and recontextualization of existing images from art or from the broader visual culture. At the same time, the more commonly-understood sense of the word posits a critical stance, usually toward the dominant culture. But it suggests a protest from a position deep within the reality being criticized, not from the outside. As Grzegorz Dziamski put it, "Subversion entails imitating the object of criticism, or even identifying with it, but with a subtle shift in meaning. The moment when the meanings shift is not always evident to the viewer. It isn't direct criticism; it is criticism full of ambiguity."  

The term *subversive* is especially appealing to me in that first meaning – the sense of physical manipulation of materials. That meaning is very helpful when attempting to classify, define and analyze subversive media techniques, in that it enables us to discern a group of techniques that use similar principles for creating a work of art – the principles of decontextualizing and recontextualizing existing media material appropriated for artistic practices. I call techniques that have these characteristics "subversive". And the word *strategy*, as used in my title, enables us to link the two levels of meaning of the word *subversive*. A *strategy* combines both the theoretical aspect of artistic activity – the artistic agenda or concept – and the practical one (the methods and techniques for carrying out the agenda or concept). In the broadest terms, a strategy is the combination of standpoint and technique, as postulated by Benjamin; thus, following this same line of thought, I regard subversive strategies in the field of media arts as the combination of certain subversive techniques (for example found footage, video scratch and software art) with specific artistic positions and concepts (such as critical or analytical art).

**Technique and Standpoint**

The history of subversive techniques in the media arts began in the field of photography: in the photo-montage and photographic collage techniques utilized in the artistic stances of the Dadaists, constructivists...
and surrealists; in Duchamp's photographic ready-mades; and in the photographic *Atlases* and *Archives* of Aby Warburg, André Malraux and (a bit later) of Gerhard Richter. In time-based, linear media for the mechanical reproduction and distribution of images, such as film, subversive techniques had a rebirth in the form of found footage. This technique has been used in various ways by situationists, structural-cinema artists, Fluxus and in pop. Video came up with the next incarnation of subversive techniques: video scratch (also referred to as found footage video). Video scratch artists have been particularly active in socio-cultural criticism. Through the subversion of the meanings of the images analyzed, they wished to re-examine contemporary visual culture, to reveal its unconscious assumptions and veiled preoccupations, and to jar their audience out of the habitual, routine modes of perception fostered by the dominant culture. In the context of critical art of the 1980s, the term *allegory* was used to describe subversive strategies; such strategies were treated as allegorical by, for example, Hal Foster in *Subversive Sign*. About critical artists practicing subversion in the 1980s, Foster wrote: “each treats the public space, social representation or artistic language in which he or she intervenes as both a target and a weapon. This shift in practice entails a shift in position: the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art object”. Nevertheless, allegorical strategies, although they are also based on the techniques of decontextualization and recontextualization of existing media material, encompass a much narrower range of artistic standpoints than subversive strategies do. They are limited to semiotic operations, and do not include subversive strategies like "cool" found footage or generative software art connected with the criticism of technoculture.

In the interactive media, especially the internet, subversion has attained a whole new status, thanks to the fact that hypertext, and indeed software in general, is composed of fragments of existing media material. Subversive techniques are going through a revival in the form of net art, software art, and above all, browser art, which provide users with tools for the transformation of a downloaded digital ready-made in the form of a web page. In my opinion, software art can be considered a subversion of proprietary software. Artists whose work impersonates existing proprietary software turn its attributes inside out and (just like the critical artists of the 1980s) reveal what was previously hidden; they reveal neglected possibilities and potential in technoculture. And when speaking of subversive techniques in the internet, we also have to mention hacker activities (computer virusses, defacements) as well as artistic and/or cyberactivist fake sites.

In computer games, game patching – a form of software art – is a subversive technique utilized in cyberactivism, cyberfeminism and analytic
strategies. Machinima – making videos based on images taken from computer games – is also worth mentioning.

Sensus Communis

It should be emphasized that on the level of content as well as technique, the aim of the subversive strategies under discussion is to make the shared symbolic space an area for the negotiation of values. These strategies also serve to establish a critical or reflective stance toward that space. In terms of technique, the user-friendliness of subversive methods makes the production of works of art more egalitarian. They become tools for activating participation in shared symbolic space, in creation of one's own images and in the criticism of existing ones. What is more, as such, they are the best current response to Benjamin’s call for a shift in emphasis from the content to the production apparatus.

Subversive strategies that use others' images or materials raise questions about the politics of copyrights. They ask which symbolic values should remain shared public property and which can be privatized. In this, subversive strategies seem closely linked to the idea of sensus communis and the well-being of public space originating in the Enlightenment. This kind of thinking is particularly important in Internet space, where subversive artistic productions both express and legitimize such phenomena as open sources, free software and creative commons.

In recent subversive strategies focussed on problems of the public space, one can observe a weariness with critical practices (the practices of radical criticism of material appropriated for artistic activity). Especially in video and film, there seems to be an increasing emphasis on a wish to revitalize certain values and symbols that contemporary visual culture has abandoned or forgotten. It is a wish to present the past in a new light, to make tradition and history more contemporary. As David Joselit wrote in An Allegory of Criticism "Subversion is clearly related to avant-garde models of revolution but it is also quite distinct from them. Whereas the revolutionary paradigm suggests a clearing away of tradition and the establishment of a new – perhaps utopian – social order, subversion seems arrested at the initial moment of destruction, having few, if any, programs for a new society". Andreas Huyssen wrote that many of the tactical activities undertaken by artists of post-modern critical faction in the shared space of cultural symbols were an effort to discover a common historical awareness and a shared experience of temporality. This clearly distinguishes many post-modern artists from their avant-garde predecessors, whose programs were based on a negation of tradition, on starting all over from scratch, establishing their own utopian visions as both the point of departure for history and its ultimate aim. Like Huyssen, I nevertheless view the avant-garde as a post-modern tradition, and see the post-modern subversive techniques I've described as continuations of
such avant-garde practices as collage, photomontage and the ready-made.

Three very interesting examples of the use of the subversive techniques of found footage and video scratch are film and video works by Józef Robakowski: *6,000,000, Art Is Power* and *In Memory of L. Brezhnev*.

### 6,000,000

Józef Robakowski made his first found footage film – *6,000,000* – in 1962 (it is also one of the first Polish found footage films[^10]). At the same time he was working simultaneously in two artistic groups – *Pętla* (Loop) and Zero 61, and he consistently negated the established boundaries between various media, between art and the real world, and between the audience and the artist. In his work he harkened back to the rationalist anti-art traditions of Dadaism and Constructivism; even at that early stage he was already concentrating not on the creation of completed works, but on the rational construction of techniques and contexts for producing works. These techniques allowed the artist, first of all, to deconstruct the values of traditional art and, second, to intervene in the surrounding reality.

In *6,000,000* one can discern early signs of the transformation of Robakowski's artistic practice into a fluid hybrid tactic typical of the neo-avant-garde artists. Through the film's highly formal structure, the artist is playing a tricky game with artistic tradition; at the same time, through the subject matter, he is delving deeply into the socio-political sphere. By dealing with the Holocaust, Robakowski seems to be carrying out Benjamin's mandates regarding responsibility for the past, for memory and its particularly traumatic aspects. In *6,000,000* Robakowski attempted to combat the process that Huyssen called "creative forgetting", in which memory and forgetting are inextricably entwined: Memory is (much as Freud viewed it) another form of forgetting, and forgetting is a form of "hidden memory". This dialectical process of shaping recollections strongly influences contemporary public discourse about historical memory. Robakowski seems to be treating this discourse (and all of contemporary visual culture) as part of what Huyssen termed amnesia:[^11] the elimination of tension between the past and the present in the culture of the "eternal present". In *6,000,000*, by summoning up the most traumatic images of the Holocaust, the artist criticizes contemporary efforts to make the horrifying past more tolerable, more “user friendly”. The work seems particularly apt nowadays, in an era of the "merchandizing" of the historic memory – an era in which museums are starting to resemble theatres, and the link between capital and the culture of remembering is becoming more and more apparent.[^12] In *6,000,000* Robakowski revives the memory of the Holocaust, "an event that has seemingly ended, never to recur, but which may recur, despite the

(apparently contrary) course of history". 6,000,000 was also the result of certain formal explorations of Robakowski’s, who had been experimenting for with photography and film. He gradually became interested in analyzing the attributes of these media for the mechanical reproduction and distribution of images. 6,000,000 is an attempt at constructing a new rational technique for expression through the use of existing film images, and also illustrates the beginnings of Robakowski’s interest in the material dimension of film. The work is full of various kinds of formal experiments, for example the interweaving of photographic negatives and positives. Through the structure of the film, the artist is striving to present the subject in an innovative manner; his experiments with editing, with different types of shots, focus and with cut images, all serve his aim of diverging from the norm in this type of presentation.

In these aspects of Robakowski’s film, we can see a balance – typical of early found-footage films (such as Bruce Conner’s A Movie) – between a highly formal, cold approach to found material on the one hand, and, on the other, a desire to create a specific sort of representational narrative.

In Memory of L. Brezhnev and Art Is Power

Ever since An Objective Transmission (1973), Józef Robakowski has been experimenting systematically with television technology. And ever since he wrote Video Art: A Chance to Approach Reality (1976) he has been trying to formulate a theory of the relationship of artists (including himself) to that medium. In that essay he emphatically differentiates between television and video, regarding former as being in complete opposition to the latter despite the fact that in terms of technology television is identical to video art. "Television ... the most evocative tool for reflecting reality ... [is a medium that] was immediately assigned the function of the mass expression of the wishes of those who control this miraculous 20th-century invention. Video art is the opposition, undermining the utilitarian nature of television as an institution; it is an artistic movement that, through its independence, lays bare the mechanisms of manipulating other people and pressuring them by telling them how to live." We can view In Memory of L. Brezhnev (1982) and Art Is Power (1985) as illustrations, as it were, of that thesis. These are video works based on the use of existing media material recorded from a television screen. They are part of the My Very Own Cinema series, which the artist has been working on since the late 1970s. Robakowski has called the series "a way of remembering myself, of recording my state of mind and gestures ... [and] the powerful emotional states that have accompanied real life." He wrote: "My Very Own Cinema is something I work on when nothing is working out .... It is a direct projection of the thoughts of the person doing the filming. Unconstrained by fashions, esthetic rules and established linguistic codes, it is close to his life." It is worth emphasizing that the works In Memory of L. Brezhnev and Art Is
Power expressed the artist's utter opposition to the political reality of the state of martial law in Poland in the 1980s. This same protest is expressed in other of Robakowski's works from this period, such as the exhibition Newspaper (Exchange Gallery, 1982) and the film Notebook (1980/81).

Technologically, the development of My Very Own Cinema was closely linked to video as a medium, particularly with the appearance of portable home video equipment that allowed an unprecedented intimacy between the medium and the cameraman’s life. Thus in both theory and practice, My Very Own Cinema can be viewed as the culmination of the long process of exploration and experimentation that Robakowski undertook in the 1960s and ’70s in his quest for a new cinematic form that was neither feature film nor documentary.20

Robakowski's work in the 1970s was dominated by his analytical interest in the structure of the medium he used, and in In Memory of L. Brezhnev and Art Is Power this is broadened to a penetrating semiological analysis,21 as well as active critical exposés of the ideological content of television in Poland’s Socialist era. These "guerilla semiotics" can be traced in Robakowski’s steadily neo-Dadaist tendencies (which started as early as his Zero 61 days), manifested in his numerous acts of transgression, intervention and provocation aimed at infringing or criticizing the established norms.22

All of these characteristics mean that these two films seem to combine two elements constantly present in Robakowski’s work: on the one hand, the conceptual/analytical exploration of the nature of the medium and its language; and on the other, the urge to deconstruct and unmask the contradictions and lies in the targets of his criticism. In Art Is Power and In the Memory of L. Brezhnev Robakowski exposes the totalitarian origins of the images he uses, exposing the painstakingly camouflaged cult of the individual and the sacral nature of the Communist government ceremonials.

I would like to consider Robakowski's subversive works (and the artistic position they arise from) in the context of critical art of the 1980s, which is associated with such terms as allegory, the post-modernism of resistance and poststructuralist post-modernism.23 These terms refer to artistic trends that developed in opposition to the dominant trends of the time: neoexpressionism and transavantgradism, which were part of a reactionary attempt to return to traditional artistic values and forms. As Hal Foster writes, allegorists using subversive techniques "made criticism of spectacle their raison d’etre". These artists employ existing materials
from the visual mass culture of late capitalist societies, treat them "more as an element that constructs reality than as one that is transparent to it" and explore their inadequacy in light of the social, political and/or cultural reality they represent.

It's important to emphasize, though, that Robakowski's position in the 1980s, with its profound involvement with the socio-political sphere, was a continuation (or rather a new incarnation) of the subversive position he had assumed as early as the 1960s. As I've already mentioned, Robakowski has, on many occasions, taken a critical position in public discourse. An important paper delineating his subversive attitude is "I Manipulate!", in which he wrote: "In art, 'playing at manipulation' is an unworthy and exceptionally shameful notion. It is generally felt that a true artist is a sincere person who experiences deep feelings about his or her own existence, and who is rooted in great suffering and passion. An artist is a distinct, specially endowed ODDITY, shrouded in the mystery of his or her own peculiar ways. At the same time, the question of whether or not I am an artist is of enormous interest to me. Because I can state categorically that throughout the entire life of my art, I have been feeding on manipulation that serves to blur my personal image. I'm convinced that an artist is a kind of deceitful fraud, a social canker, whose lifeblood is manipulation for his or her own ends, as a defense against annihilation – that is, against public acceptance and recognition." Robakowski aroused genuine indignation in artistic circles with this sort of declaration. In "I Manipulate!" he clearly states that engaging in games, subversion and provocation is an important part of his art. Subversion, in his case, is a position and technique of transgressive changes in the mentality of both the artist and the audience/participants in his artistic activity.


2. Subversive techniques that do not involve the use of existing media material – for example pastiche – are outside the scope of this article.


5. Cf. the writings of Craig Owens and Benjamin Buchloh from the 1980s.


9. Avant-garde as understood by Peter Burger

10. Tadeusz Makarczyński's 1957 *Life Is Beautiful* is generally regarded as the first Polish found footage film. Some Polish documentary films made from archival materials also came close to being qualified as found footage productions. Cf. Jay Leyda's *Films Beget Films*, *London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1964*]


12. The film 6,000,000 is part of the Epitaph series, which Robakowski continues to work on to this day. It is about memory and ways of preserving the memory of the dead.


14. Robakowski took some of the material from Wojciech Słowikowski's film *Warmia*, and some from old German military documentaries.

15. A group production of the Film Form Workshop, the first Polish video installation.


17. *In Memory od L. Brezhnev* is a video-film; the image from a TV monitor was recorded with a 16mm camera. This mixing of techniques and media is characteristic of Robakowski.

18. Robakowski continues to work on *My Own Cinema* to this day – see the video-film *From My Window* (1987 – 1999) and *Conversation With a Mother* (2004).


21. In the 1970s Robakowski frequently examined his own art and theory in light of the views of structural semiological theorists such as Christian Metz, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco.

22. For the conceptualist and minimalist tendencies also present in the work of Robakowski and the groups he co-founded, see: Lechosław Olszewski’s "Gdzie jest człowiek: działalność akcyjna Warsztatu Formy Filmowej", in Living Gallery, Łódź: Łódzki Dom Kultury, 2000


24. The interventions in which Robakowski used imaginary characters seem especially interesting in the context of his subversive position. The character Józef Korbiel, whom Robakowski invented while working with the group Zero-61 in the 1960s, is particularly noteworthy. Korbiel is the name Robakowski used to sign some deliberately kitschy works, such as Lady with a Necklace and Mr Gnat's Epitaph, which were intended to make the artist appear pathetic and to relieve the public's overserious regard for art and artists.