

Archival Art: A Code in a Time of Chaos

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Some 20 years have passed since the Internet transitioned from a specialized communications network to a fully commercialized global infrastructure which immediately transformed information storage, retrieval, and exchange in contemporary life. With the advent of the social web, and mobile technology, a culture of sharing has emerged, making it axiomatic that those online have access to more, and more have access to them.

Museums have, as a rule, remained exceptionally slow to open their collections and outreach activities to the greater on-line community. Meanwhile, the content industry proposes new on-line platforms for sharing cultural resources, such as Europeana¹ and Google Cultural Institute.² In recent years artists are increasingly using the archival as a subject. While this creative activity is not to be confused with the actual work of archiving, it does express both the admiration for and questions about the role and function of “archives.”

In this essay I would like to discuss work born from this practice, and propose some thoughts about the narratives they create, as a point of departure for clarifying what we the curatorial community mean by “archive”, as well as the role, function, and authority of historical documents in art.

1. An Archival Impulse

American art critic and historian Hal Foster’s essay *An Archival Impulse*, for October 110, Fall 2004, cites Thomas HIRSCHHORN, Tacita DEAN, Joachim KOESTER, Sam DURANT, Yael BARTANA, Matthew BUCKINGHAM, Tom BURR, Jeremy DELLER, Mark DION, Stan DOUGLAS, Liam GILLICK, Douglas GORDON, Zoe LEONARD, Philippe PARRENO and Walid RAAD as prominent contemporary artists who use historical material reflecting a desire “to connect what cannot be connected,” building context and meaning for the social backgrounds of existing images, products, or stories “to recoup failed visions in art, philosophy, and everyday life into possible scenarios of alternative kinds of social relations, to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia.”

Foster introduces the works as based on an archival impulse. I cite him not to discuss appropriation per se, but rather because I think that Foster deserves credit for his analysis of how these practices for deriving new meaning through collection, combination, citation, juxtaposition, etc. were made central in Contemporary Art. But we should not have the impression that Foster is lumping together all of these appropriation-based practices and over-broad category of “Archival Art.” Foster refers to work which engages in context-building for existing items and images, using vernacular utensils such as paper, diaries, books, or citations of popular iconography. I want to examine individual works by method of production to study each

individually and help clarify this often difficult subject. Of course each artist often adopts different techniques in different work, and in some cases categorizing artists by method is necessarily inadequate. Therefore, in order to create distinctions within the “archival” work category, I’d like to pick up several individual works to study their tendencies and methods.

2. A Manner / Code / Proprieties of Archive

Thinking of the architecture of documentation, the repositories of libraries and museums, and it’s easy enough to picture the task of organisation by genre and era in space. American conceptual artist Mark Dion’s method employs what one might call a classical methodology to categorize and give new meaning, form, and content to excavations at each work’s site. In the exhibition “Microcosmograhia: Mark Dion’s Chamber of Curiosities” (2002), held at the Koishikawa Annex, University Museum, the University of Tokyo, academic samples, scraps, photographs, and detritus were edited and arranged by area—water, above ground, underground, etc.—to build a dynamism and persuasiveness, and imbue the total with meaning, narrative, and presence.

Next, let’s consider work which represents an assembly including the artist’s own creation, what we might call “fabricated archives.” A series of works by Lebanon-Born contemporary media artist Walid RAAD, working as the imaginary foundation

The Atlas Group, nominally researches and documents the contemporary history of Lebanon, with particular emphasis on the Lebanese wars of 1975 to 1991. Here Raad's collection is a matter of creation and imbuing meaning. Although each piece is a fabrication, the whole depicts a sum social situation and daily life of Lebanon with a ring of truth. In a similar vein we might place American Social Practice installation artist Theaster GATES, and *Yamaguchi Story* (2007–2008), whose video, and "Plate Convergence" soul food dinners "in cities with extreme racial and social tension just beneath well-articulated geographical boundaries" honor his fictional mentor Shoji YAMAGUCHI, who escaped Hiroshima for Mississippi, where he created unique new styles of pottery blending Asian and African-American techniques.

Beneath each we find a persuasiveness of even the admittedly fictional created from the impressive scale. It begs the question "why are people are attracted to the act of collecting in the first place?"

Clues may be found in Fiona TAN's works *Disorient* (2009), and *Inventory* (2012). In *Disorient*, produced for her showing at the 53rd Venice Biennale 2009, images of warehouses filled with "oriental" goods in disarray and street scenes related to "the orient" in equal disarray are projected along with images of disoriented and tired people and narrated excerpts from Venetian Marco Polo's *Il Milione* (better known in English as *The Travels of Marco Polo*). *Inventory*, literally a list of commodities, is a 6-screen multi-channel video installation shot inside of London's Sir John SOANE's Museum us-

ing six different formats (8mm film, 16mm film, HD video camera, etc.) projected autonomously on a common surface. Sir John SOANE's Museum is the former residence of the neo-classical architect Sir John SOANE who created the space himself, and is obsessively filled with his collection of paintings, drawings and antiquities. TAN's footage shows paintings and sculptures framed in his neo-classical architecture. In *Disorient*, the objects serve as a metaphor for the vast archives of Asian research and Marco POLO's legacy, whereas in *Inventory*, the collective ambitions of Sir SOANE are on view. Both offer a sense of what it is to be in the possession of a collection, and perhaps the habit of collecting, and simultaneously depict the fundamental humanity of archiving.

Foster also refers to Scottish artist Douglas GORDON's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), in which the artist slows down Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece *Psycho* (1960) from 109 minutes to 24 hours, presenting it in extreme slow motion. As it's an appropriation of one of cinema's acknowledged masterpieces, an important element of the artwork is its reflection on peripheral context, and, creating new meanings from an existing film. Considering found footage work, one might add Bruce CONNER's fair-use *A MOVIE* (1958), the experimental collage of found B-movie newsreel, soft-core pornography, novelty short film, and other source materials. Also, visual artist and composer Christian MARCLAY's *The Clock* (2010), a 24-hour real-time montage of excerpts from films in which clocks are shown in synch with the

actual time in real life.

But these works mainly focus on the catabolic dissimilation of image via montage, rather than direct references to archives. Though not archival, neither do they rely on footage from specific film archives, and therefore departures from considerations of the archive as source of expression.

3. Proprieties of Narrative and Archival Structure

The first thing we note from the above-cited work is that small or large, the point a certain critical mass is obtained is where the "archival" quality of a work emerges. Allow me to illustrate using the example of French sculptor, photographer, painter and film maker Christian BOLTANSKI. *No Man's Land* (2012), Boltanski's contribution to the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale was an overwhelming mountain of abandoned clothing, in an indivisible heap. (The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial is, of course, an international modern art festival which takes place among the hollowing-out communities, rice fields, vacant houses, and closed schools of a 760 square kilometer rural region in Japan) In other seminal work by BOLTANSKI, *The Reserve of Dead Swiss* (1990), a series of works based on photographs selected by Boltanski from obituary notices from Swiss newspapers, and *El Caso* (1987) a collection of photographs of the victims of kidnappings, murders or disappearances published in 1987 in *El Caso*, a Spanish newspaper which specialized in gruesome crimes, we

find masses of portraits, blurred to the extent that the individuals are unidentifiable, morbidly amplifying the image of death, or evoking an image of genocide. In none of these are individual people identifiable. They only work in aggregate, as one indivisible set. When the individual identity has been stripped from a document, and only exists as a part of a whole, it is fundamentally different from an element of an archive, which is essentially an assembly of individual documents.

In *Souki no Katachi* (The Forms of Recollection—The Historical Recollection of Memorial Art) Mayumi KAGAWA describes Boltanski's work as a "play of signifiers"³ because what's important in his work is the fact that images of "mass mortality" are evoked, symbolizing the Holocaust, etc., vs. the identity of each individual portrait. Kagawa contrasts German artist Sigrid SIGURDSSON's *In Face of The Silence* (1988), an "open archive" permanent installation and ongoing collaboration in the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum in Hagen, Germany. When Sigurdsson's installation opened it was composed of scrapbooks with pasted photographs and documents from her own biography—letters, photos, postcards, newspaper cuttings, forms, plans, maps, diagrams and other records of this century—arranged, and often annotated with sketches or texts, in books, bookshelves, vitrines, with a browsing table.⁴ A participatory exercise in collective memory, *In Face of The Silence* gives the impression of a mixture of archive, library and cabinet of relics, but with no fixed arrangement apart from the fact that the shelves are divided up into

compartments. Visitors constantly add to its guestbook and its lending library continues to grow, furthering the process of dialogue and multiplication. Comparing BOLTANSKI's *The Reserve of Dead Swiss* and *El Caso* with SIGURDSSON's *In Face of The Silence*, we can see in the BOLTANSKI's work the tendency is toward a singular message through his groupings, arguably as a "grand narrative", as described by Jean-François LYOTARD. SIGURDSSON's work, on the other hand, deals with an intriguing volume of documents, the identity of each of which is respected, entrusted the viewer to engage at their own discretion. This is the essence of the archival structure, which accommodates multiple approaches and viewpoints. It can be seen as a difference between providing a sense of (ultimately unstated) narrative, or providing a tool set for individual production of narrative, or other form of engagement. In fact, SIGURDSSON was exceptionally fortunate to gain the opportunity for a permanent and evolving exhibition in this format. Part of the success of this format must be accredited the institution. But given these circumstances, such exceptional, rhizomatic, random-access, and participatory work is exciting.

4. The Internet and Temporal Presentation

How then does the life in the era of the Internet, an information system with a similiary rhizomatic organisation, relate to art, and to archival works in particular?

The German photographer Thomas RUFF, studied photography from 1977 to 1985 with Bernd and Hilla BECHER at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Düsseldorf Art Academy). Known for his conceptual serial photography, his monumental "Jpegs" series explores the distribution and reception of images in the digital age, when seemingly all information is coming to be "indexed" by the internet. Regarding to this series, Ruff himself states:

One of the first images that I worked on was a photograph of September 11th, 2001. I was here in New York at that day, and I was down on Canal Street, and I saw the Twin Towers collapsing, and I had my camera with me, a small camera, and I took, yeah stupidly enough, I took photographs. When I came back to Germany, to Dusseldorf, there was nothing on the film. I don't know whether it was just the battery or whether maybe it was x-ray. I really started searching for images like crazy on the internet, and I found a lots those images. And I realized the internet is an incredible source for distributing images.⁵

Importantly RUFF's series relies on Jpegs (common lossy compression low-resolution digital images primarily for on-line consumption and rapid sharing), rather than "archival quality" high-resolution print ready imagery as his source material. The result is that in printed reproduction the images are rough, and this pixelated materiality speaks to the images' role as information fragments assembling and disassembling in

a compressed, copied, and distributed deluge which swirls around us. Their aesthetic of rough pixels, appropriately enough, need to be seen with a certain critical distance to come into focus.

BOLTANSKI too has a response to the chaos the internet brings, when asked about his archive production for the Benesse Teshima art site permanent installation *Les Archives du Cœur* (2008–) in an interview for ART iT magazine:

If I speak about the internet as an archive, for example let's search for "Christian BOLTANSKI," and say you get as many as 200,000 results (note: we do and the result is 172,000 results). Obviously no one can read all of them, nor understand all of them. On top of that half of them are mistaken, but you can't judge which one is correct and which one is incorrect. It's absolutely ridiculous.⁶

BOLTANSKI's point about regarding the Internet as an archive is correct. Search engines' ability to qualitatively evaluate "information" is no match for Internet's capacity for indiscriminately adding and distributing it. We still need to rely on our own wits to sort through the vast and daily convulsively expanding data-sphere and make anything meaningful of it.

How then, do artists at the forefront of contemporary art deal with this period of informational excess. Camille HENROT is a French artist who works in video installation, sculpture, drawing, and assemblage. Her *Grosse Fatigue* (2013), awarded the Silver

Lion of the 55th Venice Biennale, is a 13 minute color video created during her 2013 fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. which tells the story of the universe's creation using screens, bodies, computer desktop, and computer windows, and explores themes including insanity, madness, euphoria, and information overload. HENROT's contrast of the gravitas of Museum-appropriate subject matter, against the rap-like spoken-word poetry narration and Internet browsing-like speed of exposition strike a revealing balance for a world seen via monitors.

Rehearsal for a Reunion (with the Father of Pottery) (2011/13) Simon FUJIWARA's video and installations about re-engagement with his estranged Japanese father the lines between fiction and auto-biography are rarely obvious, but this is precisely what where the centripetal force of the art lies. In one scene the artist casts a white man to rehearse meeting his own father while in the same space exhibiting several pottery works of unknown origin. The negotiation doesn't go well, and seemingly unable to reach an agreement, the exchange gradually becomes heated. The viewers' interest is drawn away from the relationship between the artist and his father, and towards the exchange between the artist and the actor. The installation's clever structure follows the video development, wherein the meaning and the background of the pottery, set there from the beginning, comes to be seen in a new light.

Both of these works, by HENROT, and FUJIWARA, give a sense of dramaturgic

facility in interpreting context for existing goods, images, behaviors, and stories, and in creating new stories through recontextualization. At the same time the more meticulous the narrative seems designed the greater the impression that we are facing a constructed reality.

American artist and filmmaker Ryan TRECARTIN structures his art practice as a mis-en-scene on a timeline. In high contrast to the intricate planning of HENROT and FUJIWARA, TRACARTIN's loose plot are filled with an overwhelming jumble of information born due to the highly collaborative nature of his process. We the viewer are, rather than having been provided a tightly-constructed narrative, given an excess of information to pick through. *Any Ever*, created with his creative partner and long-term collaborator is Lizzie FITCH, and presented at PS1/MoMA in 2011, is an experiment in theatrical production made with a posse of his close friends, unspools as an infomercial for kitsch iconography, overdone makeup, raging party scenes, dated video effects, commodity anxiety, and spiritual nihilism in one hot mess of "scene" creation. In the 55th Venice Biennale 2013 four films by Ryan were featured, *Junior War*, *Comma Boat*, *CENTER JENNY*, and *Item Falls* (all 2013). For each of the four films a viewing area was built styled around the visual language of the corresponding film. In *CENTER JENNY* kids in a post-future world study their ancestors via a video game, leading to an increasingly cruel competition for dominance. It was the most narrative of the four. Rather each film had in common

a saturation of self-documentation, information excess and love of life in a broken world. TRECARTIN's world of chaos seems to pose a question whether we plan to join his plugged-in journey, or switch off.

5. Recoil from “theft” of the known

The tendency in contemporary expression to rely on the word “archive” deserves further exploration. The works mentioned in this essay tactfully use multiple information sources. The fact that those works are gaining attention could be attributed to the fact that people living in society today are increasingly familiar with the need to absorb massive volumes of information, in the context of the Internet's growth from the late 20C. But these and other artists are successfully depicting aspects of contemporary life requiring the archiving instinct, among other instincts such as fabricating new intellectual discourses which draw out our ability to make sense of vastly expanded spheres of memory and access to knowledge.

Let's say that we already take the “shared” aggregate of knowledge as archival. Can we say that the impulse to create new expressions comes from within the existing intellectual system and relations? Or, is this a function of the vastness of the world of art, so that we are on a pendulum in intellectual discourse which will surely experience a counter-balancing swing. To “appropriate” has meant to “plagiarise”, until it becomes an expression nested in new knowledge and common sense. We can't help but to expect

unique expressions to emerge, deviant from our current sense of issue or social norm, deviant from existing manners and codes of expressions. How will museums manage to engage this information agnostic generation? How will we the curators preserve, and encourage it?

(translated by David D'HEILLY)

*1 Europeana is a portal site for digital archive platform by EU with which one can integratively search digitalized cultural heritage including paintings, books, movies, photographs, maps, and literature.

*2 Google Cultural Institute is a portal site run by Google Inc. to conserve and share cultural heritage such as art, history, and world heritage.

*3 Mayumi KAGAWA *Souki no Katachi Kioku Art no Rekishi Ishiki* (The form of recalled memory—The consciousness for history of mnemonic art), Suiseisha, 2012, p.241.

*4 Ibid., p.216.

*5 Thomas RUFF, “On JPEGs and Previous Key Series,” February 12, 2010 at Aperture Gallery, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKfim0Q_yIA (Accessed January 10, 2016).

*6 An Interview with Christian BOLTANSKI by Andrew MAERKLE, *Art iT*, August 2, 2010 http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_itv/SBQKgzwLPdbMtre1ycY4/?lang=ja (Accessed January 11, 2016).

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