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Between Memory and Document: The Archival Turn in Contemporary Art

There is a story told about the war criminal Ratko Mladic, who spent months shelling Sarajevo from the surrounding hills. Once he noticed an acquaintance's house in the next target. The general telephoned his acquaintance and informed him that he was giving him five minutes to collect his 'albums', because he had decided to blow the house up. When he said 'albums', the murderer meant the albums of family photographs. The general, who had been destroying the city for months, knew precisely how to annihilate memory. That is why he 'generously' bestowed on his acquaintance life with the right to remembrance. Bare life and a few family photographs.

Dubravka Ugresic, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*

He orders Gapka to bring two melons, and immediately cuts them himself, collects the seeds in a paper, and begins to eat. Then he orders Gapka to fetch the ink-bottle, and with his own hand, writes this inscription on the paper of seeds: 'These melons were eaten on such and such a date.' If there was a guest present, then it reads: 'Such and such a person assisted.'

Nikolai Gogol, *The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich quarrelled with Ivan Nikoiforovich*.

Prologue [...]

Chapter 1. The Photograph and the Archive: Theory in Practice

The Archive and the Photograph

The historical links between photography and the archive have not only been widely and critically chronicled, they have also been embodied and performed in various practices, often visionary enterprises of early and late (or post) modernism in art, literature, and their areas of overlap: from Aby Warburg's prescient *Mnemosyne-Atlas* (1924-1929), through the monumental and incomplete project of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* (1927-1940), W.G. Sebald's archival imaginary and his use of photography as the site of commerce with the dead, to Gerhard Richter's heterogeneous *Atlas* (begun in 1964), with its aspiration towards 'comprehensive totality'¹ and its (definitional) 'devastation of that promise.'² The edges that are blurred, in Richter's work, between the catalogue, the archive and the encyclopaedia are similarly undone in the work of another German conceptual artist whose output has great material richness, Hanne Darboven. Her *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* [Cultural History] (1980-1983) is a vast collection of photographs, postcards and documents tracing a century of history and displayed in grids, suggesting, yet refusing to allow, a synthesis between the vernacular and the universal, history and the everyday, the documentary and the aesthetic.³

Such a tension between the historical and the personal is at the very centre of the field I am briefly exploring here. It is worth noting that photographic images establish a hinge between public and private spheres in specific ways. The term 'postmemory' was coined by Marianne Hirsch⁴ to capture that particular intersection as it manifests itself in the trans-generational reverberation of an event. In material terms, postmemory is embodied as the after-image that certain photographs provoke, photographs that seem to hover between an individual's memory and impersonal history. It is possible that one might not have lived through such events oneself, but an image of them pervades the culture one inhabits.

¹ Benjamin Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive,' in *October*, vol. 88 (Spring 1999), pp. 117-145. Reprinted in *Gerhard Richter Atlas: The Reader*, London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2003, pp. 99-114.

² Lynne Cooke, introduction to the exhibition *Gerhard Richter: Atlas*, Dia Foundation, New York (27 April 1995 – 25 February 1996), text available online: <http://www.diaart.org/exhibitions/introduction/54> (consulted on 6 October, 2011).

³ Cf. Dan Adler, *Hanne Darboven: Cultural History 1880-1983*, London: Afterall Books, 2009.

⁴ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Hirsch's 'postmemory' is akin to the theory developed in the field of psychoanalysis by Nicholas Abraham and Marina Torok, who expanded the Freudian system of individual analysis to explore the pathological outcome, in certain individuals, of the traumatic secrets harboured by their parents and grandparents. For Abraham and Torok, the falsification or erasure of the past practiced by people who lived through the Holocaust (for example) and wished to protect the next generation from such horrors, becomes the breeding ground for depression, anxiety and possibly shame in individuals, families, communities and even nations.⁵ For Hirsch, collective experiences of trauma may be distilled in torn or faded individual photographs of someone or something lost though unknown. Exposure to such photographic images intertwines with the stories of those who did live through the events, together penetrating by various cultural means into the very fabric of the self.

Such a notion of course relies on the status of witness held by that form of photography that preceded the inception of digital technologies, with the novel – and newly problematic – relationship that these new technologies establish between the real and the fictional; between historical time and narrative time. In the products of the 'old' analogue technology, the indexicality of the photograph – the fact that, as the capture of a real event on a surface that is sensitive to light, a photograph is a trace, a vestigial record of something that occurred – makes the traditional photographic image itself an archival object. 'The capacity for mechanical inscription,' Okwui Enwezor writes in his excellent introduction to an exhibition covering just this topic, 'the order of direct reference that links the photograph with the indisputable fact of its subject's existence' and that serves as the bedrock of analogue photography, grants this medium a hitherto unknown status with regard to the real, so that as a medium, such photography is able – and seen to be able – to give a phenomenological account of the world as image. Thus, '[p]hotography is simultaneously the documentary evidence and the archival record of such transactions.'⁶

It must be said, as an essential aside, that digital technologies do not abscond from the testimonial status they have inherited from the older technologies whose effects they simulate, but that they effect this indexicality in different ways, in particular in the strength of their exhortation, as Mary Ann Doane notes, to 'Look here!' or 'See this', acting as 'a pointing finger

⁵ Cf. Nicholas Abraham, Maria Torok and Nicholas Thomas Rand, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Surprisingly, Hirsch makes no mention of Abraham and Torok in her erudite study.

⁶ Okwui Enwezor, 'Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument,' in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, (exhibition catalogue), New York: International Center of Photography, 2008, p. 12.

[...] The “liveness” [of such images] ensures its adhesion to the referent just as the index adheres to its object, and the website makes that “liveness” relivable at the touch of a finger,⁷ calling attention, as did their forebears, to the singular instant. If, historically, the capacity of the photograph to capture the extraordinary or the contingent produced wonder, effecting the magic of embalming time, ‘rescuing it simply from its proper corruption,’⁸ this also brings about a certain epistemological anxiety, for such capture of the fleeting moment is not only a preservation, it also paradoxically serves as a reminder of death, of the corruption that *is* proper to time. In the archive, we see writ large what the photograph performs on a modest scale: a dialogue with posterity, a projection into a time to come when that same artefact will be ancient, a souvenir; and contrariwise, a bleak reminder that in the past, death was in the future. The imbrication of past and future in the objects of historical study has a broader political sweep than does a similar interpenetration in the objects of archaeology: Peter Gay once admonished against the dangers of treating all nineteenth-century ideas and institutions in Germany as simply ‘clues of crimes to come,’⁹ in other words as the pre-history of Nazism.

The archive shares with the photograph, then, its status as memento mori: acting as distillations of time and embodiments of memory, they both possess an elegiac, nostalgic dimension together with a dose of inherent anachronism, and while adding to a fund of knowledge, they also readily become sites of devotion to the past. In the case of the individual photograph, the knowledge offered is always fragmentary and partial, but in the case of the archive, in providing amassed (yet indexical) testimony as documentary proof, the offer seems to be one of plenitude, completion. ‘Archive fever’ is the expression coined by Jacques Derrida to express the impulse to accumulate and store in such a way: to collect, categorise and order, in a bid not only to remember and keep, but also to animate, to revivify.

Derrida explores Sigmund Freud’s fascination with the German writer Wilhelm Jensen’s *Gradiva*, published in 1903. This tells the story of an archaeologist, Hanold, whose desire is ignited by an ancient bas-relief of a young woman walking (the meaning of the word *gradiva*). Hanold returns to Pompeii to search for her footprint; returns, in short, hot on the trail of the indexical. For

⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 208.

⁸ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, (ed. and trans. Hugh Gray), vol. 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, p. 14.

⁹ Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 8. The idea of ‘foreshadowing’ is immanent in the attempts of German historians to tease out the polemics of a ‘history of everyday life’ in Germany between the wars, asking whether the ‘historical’ and the ‘pathological’ were intrinsically bound up.

Derrida, the condition of archive fever suffered by Hanold is governed by what Freud called the 'death drive', which is as much a motion towards destruction and annihilation as an awareness of the limits that time puts on us, its objects. Archival desire strives to halt the ineluctability of time's passage, of destruction and death, through an erasure of the difference between the index as sign, and its referent:

[Hanold] dreams this irreplaceable place, the very ash, where the singular imprint, like a signature, barely distinguishes itself from the impression. And this is the condition of singularity, the idiom, the secret, testimony. It is the condition of the uniqueness of the printer-printed, of the impression and the imprint, of the pressure and its trace in the unique *instant* where they are not yet distinguished the one from the other [...] the trace no longer distinguishes itself from its substrate.¹⁰

Indexicality – the trace of the unique, the differentiating imprint – not only governs the formation of an archive, it also determines that which is archivable. But in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, photography and film changed people's notions of what they could record and store, transforming ideas about memory and knowledge alike under the burden of empirical evidence. The indexical vestiges attesting to a past that is perceived as lost, emerge as traces in the present: this notion lies at the core of the then burgeoning sciences of phrenology and forensics, and was also at the heart of Freud's endeavour to mine the human psyche and to explore how, in it, the past lives in the present. (A symptom is, after all, a trace left over from the past, unconsciously excavated, like Hanold's bas-relief, and somatised.) Those traces that are frozen in the photograph and folded into the archive also hold out the offer of a history for the future: time is at once sectioned, abstracted, rationalised, promised. Yet quite clearly, time cannot be entirely controlled. The archive ultimately withholds its promise of completion, simply because life can only be in excess of the representations of life: hence Pierre Nora's cry – 'archive as much as you like: something will always be left out'¹¹ – which also serves Benjamin, or Richter for that matter.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, (trans. Eric Prenowitz), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 99.

¹¹ Pierre Nora, 'Archivez, archivez, il en restera toujours quelque chose!', quoted by Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, (transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 203.

Pierre Nora¹² gives voice, as indeed do Derrida, Paul Ricoeur and Giorgio Agamben, to the destabilisation of the archive as a complete, secure, scientific and objective source of knowledge, not least because the relationship between the archive and memory itself – or what Agamben calls ‘the archive and the witness’¹³ – has never been either fixed or entirely reliable. Contrariwise, not all documents are testimonies.¹⁴ The engagement of both individuals and groups with the past in recollection is famously inconsistent. That an archive contains remnants of the past – indexical traces of something that has taken place – supports certain historical events, but it says nothing of how these events are remembered.

The Archival Turn

The trope of ‘the turn’ has coloured the history of the humanities for over half a century: we’ve had quantitative, linguistic, cultural and spatial turns in the academy. The figure of a corporeal change of position and orientation is used, then, to make intelligible a structure of reflexivity, and importantly, with it, a shift in aesthetic and cognitive direction, if not paradigm. The moves from art object to event to post-production were such turning points. Conceptual, performance and land art, as well as art as institutional and museological critique, and art that prods and vexes identity formation and gender politics might all be framed as such moments of rotation. Such practices have been variously buttressed by significant and influential theory (Thierry de Duve, Lucy Lippard, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster and Nicolas Bourriaud are some of the names conjured).

From the 1960s on, the uncontaminated, idealist and idealised, pure spaces of modernism were radically displaced by different forms and procedures, including the materiality of the landscape at the one extreme, and the deconstruction of the institutions that defined, stored and displayed art at the other extreme. Temporal and sound-based art; video and performance art in their various expressions in the gallery and outside of it; site specificity – whether in architectural spaces, in the landscape or the city – or works that depend in their essence on an interactive relationship with the public, all these have presented themselves as paradigmatic turns. Increasingly, we witnessed the appearance of works that infiltrated, and were infiltrated by,

¹² For Pierre Nora’s own brief précis of his massive academic study on memory work, *Lieux de Mémoire*, see Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*’, (trans. Marc Roudebusch), in *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7-25.

¹³ It is this distinction that forms the core of Giorgio Agamben’s seminal *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen), New York: Zone Books, 1999.

¹⁴ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

other epistemological and disciplinary fields. The 'ethnographic turn' that Foster tapped in the 1990s,¹⁵ based in part on an earlier formulation by James Clifford,¹⁶ and also positioned in the context of burgeoning postcolonial studies, described a crisis of boundaries in the history and theory of art, as much as in its practice. The fashioning of artist as ethnographer accommodated work that spanned a vast range of material practices, grounded on the values of relativity promulgated by the (then newly fashionable) discipline of social anthropology: Jimmie Durham, Mark Dion, Susan Hiller, Lothar Baumgarten, Mary Kelly, Renée Green, Dan Graham, Sophie Calle, Allan Sekula, Phil Collins and Kutlug Ataman are only some of the artists whose names might spring to mind here.

The shift from ethnographic turn to curatorial and then archival turn is neither groundbreaking, nor, strictly speaking, paradigmatic: it is a question of emphasis and degree, with the collection and the archive being at times indiscriminately combined as categories, though perhaps with a greater emphasis on the status of the document in archival art: on what it is that constitutes a document. There is also a vexed definitional question about archive as form or content. Foster uses the metaphor not of a turn but of an impulse, thus paying implicit homage first to Freud, and then more specifically to Craig Owens' early discussion of postmodernism in terms of an allegorical impulse.¹⁷ Although, as Foster acknowledges, an 'archival impulse' is hardly new, he finds archival art with its own character sufficiently pervasive in the early years of the twenty first century as to warrant consideration in its own right. He cites the work of artists such as Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Douglas Gordon and Liam Gillick, as well as Dion and Renée Green, who were also, of course, significant for the 'ethnographic turn,' while Sam Durant, Thomas Hirschhorn and the subtle work of Tacita Dean warrant special and detailed attention. Others that he does not mention but might well have, include Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Roni Horn, João Penalva, Francis Alÿs, Vivan Sundaram, Zoe Leonard and Taryn Simon, to name but a handful.

The features of archival art to which Foster draws attention are the favouring of the installation format in which the artists present found material (image, object, text), with sources at times

¹⁵ Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge and London, England: The MIT Press, 1996. See also Alex Coles (ed.), *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000.

¹⁶ The anthropologist James Clifford broke through a disciplinary divide in his study of Surrealism as a form of ethnography, and became *de rigueur* reading for art historians if not artists in the early 1990s. See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988.

¹⁷ Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Notes toward a Theory of Postmodernism,' in *October*, vols. 12-13 (Spring-Summer 1980).

familiar and drawn from mass culture, and at other times arcane, works 'retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory'. Archival sampling may be based on the Internet, but these artists tend to work with archives that are not properly speaking data bases, calling for 'human interpretation, not machinic reprocessing.'¹⁸ They are, consequently, often museum or gallery based works. The interest in collection and categorisation, as inherited from eighteenth and nineteenth century epistemologies and quests for ordering and understanding the empirical world, is now skewed in favour of narrative and history. With theories of the merging of the realms of the political and the personal imported from feminism and identity politics, and with an increased interest in the history and semiotics of everyday life, every subject becomes, of necessity, a *historical* subject, and the task of remembering and archiving makes everyone his or her own historian: hence Kelly's charting of the development of her infant in *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979), Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995* (1995), Jef Geys' *Day and Night and Day and...* (2002), or Sophie Calle's *Take Care of Yourself* (2007).

The pitfalls faced by such endeavours are clear: like the photograph, the archive itself may become a fetish when it ceases to be a repository of traces 'in the inferential reconstruction of historical processes,' becoming instead a 'surrogate for the missing thing itself.'¹⁹ This is particularly a danger when, rather than using the work of art as the platform on which to construct a kind of meta-archive, as do Anette Messager, Ilya Kabakov or Christian Boltanski, the artist merely takes on board the re-production of an already given array of archival material (I would put Hirschhorn, with whose work I experience an almost visceral conceptual and material antipathy, in this category). The pervasive 'anything goes' mood unfortunately encourages lazy work to piggyback on interesting conceptual structures, for it provides a particularly warm and welcoming environment for the culture of narcissism (and here I use the word 'culture' in its microbial sense). In his discussion of such a phenomenon in site-specific art, Miwon Kwon puts it clearly, in a way that is equally applicable to the traps confronting artists who are moved to document their own lives:

The intricate orchestration of literal and discursive sites that make up a nomadic narrative requires the artist as a narrator-protagonist. In some cases, this renewed

¹⁸ Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse,' in *October*, vol. 110 (Autumn 2004), pp. 4-5.

¹⁹ Dominick LaCapra, 'History and Psychoanalysis,' in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Winter 1987). Reprinted in Dominick LaCapra, *Soundings in Critical Theory*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 55.

focus on the artist in the name of authorial self-reflexivity leads to a hermetic implosion of (auto)biographical and subjective indulgences.²⁰

The perils of narcissism and self indulgence have long posed a problem for twentieth- and twenty-first century art, and I would venture to recommend the necessity of some form of mediation between a confessional, personal history and its adaptation into archive / document based art, with all the narrative or anti-narrative strategies that such an art might enlist. The uses and transformation of the evidentiary, documentary photographic material in contemporary art, whether those materials are the artist's own prior work (as in Marcel Duchamp), or structures in the external world (Bernd and Hilla Becher, Hiroshi Sugimoto); whether they are images that probe the fuzzy boundary between the fictional and the historical (Boltanski); or whether they position themselves as 'historic agents of memory'²¹ (Anselm Kiefer, Daniel Blaufuks) is the topic to which I will dedicate the rest of this short book.

²⁰ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2004, p. 51.

²¹ Okwui Enwezor, op. cit. p. 46.

