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Hal Foster
An Archival Impulse//2004

Consider a temporary display cobbled together out of workday materials like cardboard, aluminium foil and packing tape, and filled, like a homemade study-shrine, with a chaotic array of images, texts and testimonials devoted to a radical artist, writer or philosopher. Or a funky installation that juxtaposes a model of a lost earthwork with slogans from the civil rights movement and/or recordings from the legendary rock concerts of the time. Or, in a more pristine register, a short filmic meditation on the huge acoustic receivers that were built on the Kentish coast between the World Wars, but soon abandoned as outmoded pieces of military technology. However disparate in subject, appearance and affect, these works – by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, the American Sam Durant, and the Englishwoman Tacita Dean – share a notion of artistic practice as an idiosyncratic probing into particular features, objects and events in modern art, philosophy and history.

The examples could be multiplied many times (a list of other practitioners might begin with the Scotsman Douglas Gordon, the Englishman Liam Gillick, the Irishman Gerard Byrne, the Canadian Stan Douglas, the Frenchmen Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, the Americans Mark Dion and Renée Green ...), but these three alone point to an archival impulse at work internationally in contemporary art. This general impulse is hardly new: it was variously active in the pre-war period when the repertoire of sources was extended both politically and technologically (e.g., in the photofiles of Aleksandr Rodchenko and the photomontages of John Heartfield), and it was even more variously active in the post-war period, especially as appropriated images and serial formats became common idioms (e.g., in the pin-board aesthetic of the Independent Group, remediated representations from Robert Rauschenberg through Richard Prince, and the informational structures of Conceptual art, institutional critique and feminist art). Yet an archival impulse with a distinctive character of its own is again pervasive – enough to be considered a tendency in its own right, and that much alone is welcome.[1]

In the first instance archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object and text, and favour the installation format as they do so. (Frequently they use its nonhierarchical spatiality to advantage – which is rather rare in contemporary art.) Some practitioners, such as Douglas Gordon, gravitate toward 'time readymades', that is, visual narratives that are sampled in image

projections, as in his extreme versions of films by Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese and others.[2] These sources are familiar, drawn from the archives of mass culture, to ensure a legibility that can then be disturbed or *détourné*; but they can also be obscure, retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory. Such work will be my focus here.

Sometimes archival samplings push the postmodernist complications of originality and authorship to an extreme. Consider a collaborative project like *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999–2002), led by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno: when a Japanese animation company offered to sell some of its minor *manga* characters, they bought one such person-sign, a girl named 'AnnLee', elaborated this glyph in various pieces, and invited other artists to do the same. Here the project became a 'chain' of projects, 'a dynamic structure that produce[d] forms that are part of it'; it also became 'the story of a community that finds itself in an image' – in an image archive in the making.[3] French critic Nicolas Bourriaud has championed such art under the rubric of 'post-production', which underscores the secondary manipulations often constitutive of it. Yet the term also suggests a changed status in the work of art in an age of digital information, which is said to follow those of industrial production and mass consumption.[4] That such a new age exists as such is an ideological assumption; today, however, information does often appear as a virtual readymade, as so much data to be reprocessed and sent on, and many artists do 'inventory', 'sample' and 'share' as ways of working.

This last point might imply that the ideal medium of archival art is the mega-archive of the Internet, and over the last decade terms that evoke the electronic network, such as 'platforms' and 'stations', have appeared in art parlance, as has the Internet rhetoric of 'interactivity'. But in most archival art the actual means applied to these 'relational' ends are far more tactile and face-to-face than any Web interface.[5] The archives at issue here are not databases in this sense; they are recalcitrantly material, fragmentary rather than fungible, and as such they call out for human interpretation, not machinic reprocessing.[6] Although the contents of this art are hardly indiscriminate, they remain indeterminant, like the contents of any archive, and often they are presented in this fashion – as so many promissory notes for further elaboration or enigmatic prompts for future scenarios.[7] In this regard archival art is as much preproduction as it is postproduction: concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces (perhaps 'anarchival impulse' is the more appropriate phrase), these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects – in art and in history alike – that might offer points of departure again.

If archival art differs from database art, it is also distinct from art focused on the museum. Certainly the figure of the artist-as-archivist follows that of the artist-as-curator, and some archival artists continue to play on the category of the collection. Yet they are not as concerned with critiques of representational totality and institutional integrity: that the museum is ruined as a coherent system in a public sphere is generally assumed, not triumphantly proclaimed or melancholically pondered, and some of these artists suggest other kinds of ordering – within the museum and without. In this respect the orientation of archival art is often more 'institutive' than 'destructive', more 'legislative' than 'transgressive'.[8]

Finally, the work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private. Further, it often arranges these materials according to a quasi-archival logic, a matrix of citation and juxtaposition, and presents them in a quasi-archival architecture, a complex of texts and objects (again, platforms, stations, kiosks …). Thus Dean speaks of her method as 'collection', Durant of his as 'combination', Hirschhorn of his as 'ramification' – and much archival art does appear to ramify like a weed or a 'rhizome' (a Deleuzean trope that others employ as well).[9] Perhaps all archives develop in this way, through mutations of connection and disconnection, a process that this art also serves to disclose. 'Laboratory, storage, studio space, yes.' Hirschhorn remarks, 'I want to use these forms in my work to make spaces for the movement and endlessness of thinking …'[10] Such is artistic practice in an archival field. […]

A final comment on the will 'to connect what cannot be connected' in archival art.[11] Again, this is not a will to totalize so much as a will to relate – to probe a misplaced past, to collate its different signs (sometimes pragmatically, sometimes parodistically), to ascertain what might remain for the present. Yet this will to connect is enough alone to distinguish the archival impulse from the allegorical impulse attributed to postmodernist art by Craig Owens: for these artists a subversive allegorical fragmentation can no longer be confidently posed against an authoritative symbolic totality (whether associated with aesthetic autonomy, formalist hegemony, modernist canonicity, or masculinist domination). By the same token this impulse is not anomic in the manner disclosed in the work of Gerhard Richter and others by Benjamin Buchloh: the art at issue here does not project a lack of logic or affect.[12] On the contrary, it assumes anomic fragmentation as a condition not only to represent but to work through, and proposes new orders of affective association, however partial and provisional, to this end, even as it also registers the difficulty, at times the absurdity, of doing so.

This is why such work often appears tendentious, even preposterous. Indeed

its will to connect can betray a hint of paranoia – for what is paranoia if not a practice of forced connections and bad combinations, of my own private archive, of my own notes from the underground, put out on display?[13] On the one hand, these private archives do question public ones: they can be seen as perverse orders that aim to disturb the symbolic order at large. On the other hand, they might also point to a general crisis in this social law – or to an important change in its workings whereby the symbolic order no longer operates through apparent totalities. For Freud the paranoiac projects meaning onto a world ominously drained of the same (systematic philosophers, he likes to imply, are closet paranoiacs).[14] Might archival art emerge out of a similar sense of a failure in cultural memory, of a default in productive traditions? For why else connect so feverishly if things did not appear so frightfully disconnected in the first place?[15]

Perhaps the paranoid dimension of archival art is the other side of its utopian ambition – its desire to turn belatedness into becomingness, to recoup failed visions in art, literature, 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. This partial recovery of the utopian demand is unexpected: not so long ago this was the most despised aspect of the modern(ist) project, condemned as totalitarian gulag on the Right and capitalist *tabula rasa* on the Left. This move to turn 'excavation sites' into 'construction sites' is welcome in another way too: it suggests a shift away from a melancholic culture that views the historical as little more than the traumatic.[16]

1   My title echoes Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Notes toward a Theory of Postmodernism', *October*, 12 and 13 (Spring and Summer 1980), as well as Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive', *October*, 88 (Spring 1999) [reprinted in this volume, 85–102]. Yet the archival impulse here is not quite allegorical à la Buchloh; in some respects it assumes both conditions (more on which below). I want to thank the research group on archives convened by the Getty and the Clark Institutes in 2003–04, as well as audiences in Mexico City, Stanford, Berkeley and London.

2   Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews*, vol. 1 (Milan: Charta, 2003) 322.

3   Philippe Parreno in Obrist, *Interviews*, 701.

4   See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

5   To take two prominent examples: the 2002 Documenta, directed by Okwui Enwezor, was conceived in the terms of 'platforms' of discussion, scattered around the world (the exhibition in Kassel was only the final such platform). And the 2003 Venice Biennale, directed by Francesco Bonami, featured such sections as 'Utopia Station', which exemplified the archival discursivity of much recent art. 'Interactivity' is an aim of 'relational aesthetics' as propounded by Bourriaud in

his 1998 text of that title. See my 'Arty Party', *London Review of Books*, 4 December 2003 [reprinted as 'Chat Rooms' in *Participation (Documents of Contemporary Art)*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel/Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006)], as well as Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110 (Fall 2004).

6   Lev Manovich discusses the tension between database and narrative in *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001) 233–6.

7   I owe the notion of 'promissory notes' to Malcolm Bull. Liam Gillick describes his work as 'scenario-based'; positioned in 'the gap between presentation and narration', it might also be called archival. See Gillick, *The Woodway* (London: Whitechapel, 2002).

8   Jacques Derrida uses the first pair of terms to describe opposed drives at work in the concept of the archive in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), and Jeff Wall uses the second pair to describe imperatives at work in the history of the avant-garde, in *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996). How does the archival impulse relate to 'archive fever'? Perhaps, like the Library of Alexandria, any archive is founded on disaster (or its threat), pledged against a ruin that it cannot forestall. Yet for Derrida archive fever is more profound, bound up with repetition-compulsion and a death drive. And sometimes this paradoxical energy of destruction can also be sensed in the work at issue here.

9   Dean discusses 'collection' in *Tacita Dean* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2001), and 'bad combination' is the title of a 1995 work by Durant. The classic text on 'the rhizome' is, of course, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), where they underscore its 'principles of connection and heterogeneity': 'Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order' (page 7).

10 Thomas Hirschhorn, 'Interview with Okwui Enwezor', in James Rondeau and Suzanne Ghez, eds, *Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake*, (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000) 32. Again, many other artists could be considered here as well, and the archival is only one aspect of the work that I discuss.

11 [footnote 56 in source] This will is active in my text too [referring to discussion of the three artists, excluded from extract above]. In the test cases here it varies in subject and strategy: Hirschhorn and Durant stress crossings of avant-garde and kitsch, for example, while Dean tends to figures who fall outside these realms; the connections in Hirschhorn and Durant are tendentious, in Dean tentative; and so on.

12 [57] See note 1.

13 [58] This work does invite psychoanalytical projections. It can also appear manic – not unlike much archival fiction today (e.g., David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers) – as well as childish. Sometimes Hirschhorn and Durant evoke the figure of the adolescent as 'dysfunctional adult' (I borrow the term from Mike Kelley), who, maimed by capitalist culture, strikes out against it. They entertain infantilist gestures too: with its nonhierarchical spatiality installation art often suggests a scatological universe, and sometimes they thematize it as such. For Freud the anal

stage is one of symbolic slippage in which creative definitions and entropic indifferences struggle with one another. So it is sometimes in this art as well.

14 [59] Here 'anomie', which stems from the Greek *anomia*, 'without law', is again apposite as a condition to react against. In *A Short Guide into the Work of Thomas Hirschhorn* (New York: Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 2002), Bice Curiger speaks of 'an insane effort to put everything right' in Hirschhorn, who has indeed adopted a mad persona. ('Cavemanman' in a 2002 show at Barbara Gladstone Gallery). On paranoia vis-à-vis the symbolic order, see Eric Santner, *My Own Private Germany: Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge: Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004).

15 [60] Two further speculations: 1. Even as archival art cannot be separated from 'the memory industry' that pervades contemporary culture (state funerals, memorials, monuments …), it suggests that this industry is amnesiac in its own way, and so calls out for a practice of counter-memory. 2. Archival art might also be bound up, ambiguously, even deconstructively, with an 'archive reason' at large, that is, with a 'society of control' in which our past actions are archived (medical records, border crossings, political involvement …) so that our present activities can be surveilled and our future behaviours predicted. This networked world does appear both disconnected and connected – a paradoxical appearance that archival art sometimes seems to mimic (Hirschhorn displays can resemble mock World Wide Webs of information), which might also bear on its paranoia vis-à-vis an order that seems both incoherent and systematic in its power. For different accounts of different stages of such 'archive reason', see Allan Sekula, 'The Body as Archive', *October*, 39 (Winter 1986), and Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59 (Winter 1992).

16 [61] Hirschhorn in Obrist, *Interviews*, 394. Or, worse, a culture (to focus on the United States after 9/11) that tropes trauma as the grounds – the Ground Zero, as it were – for so much imperial triumphalism.

Hal Foster 'An Archival Impulse' [the full text includes specific discussion of works by Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean and Sam Durant], *October*, no. 110 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, Fall 2004) 3–6; 21–2.