Theory in Studio: The Archive as Expressive Form

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Dan Weiskopf

Christian Boltanski's *Reserve Detective*, 1987, included in the ICP's "Archive Fever" in 2007.

The records of the past accumulate, piling higher each day, and as they do, artists scour them to produce works that have the form and force of historical archives. Hal Foster, writing in 2004, referred to this phenomenon as contemporary art's "archival impulse," and it shows no signs of subsiding. Over the past decade and a half, the art world has been awash in archival art and steeped in its surrounding discourse. Landmark exhibitions include Ingrid Schaffner's *Deep Storage* (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 1997), Okwui Enwezor's Documenta 11 (2002) and "Archive Fever" (International Center of Photography, New York, 2007), and most recently Dieter Roelstraete's *The Way of the Shovel* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2013).

Rigorous theoretical accounts of the concept of an archive may seem helpful in making sense of these practices. But the most frequently invoked theorists of the archive, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, make for an uneasy and less coherent pairing than is typically claimed.

For Foucault, an archive is not a physical storehouse or collection of documents and objects, nor a sociocultural institution for gathering these together. Rather, as he says in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, it makes up "the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events" (p. 129). An archive, in this sense, is intangible and invisible, a taxonomic abstraction that both bounds and orders the collected products of culture.

Derrida, on the other hand, develops his concept of the archive in the context of Freudian psychology and the legacy of Freud's own texts. Archives, for him, are places in which signs of all kinds are gathered together and replicated, psychohistorical battlegrounds in which techniques of inscription vie with submerged desires for erasure and forgetting. "Archive fever" represents the desire to return to the original trace, and also to destroy it.

One stumbling block in these approaches is that they arise out of separate projects that cannot neatly be grafted onto each other. More importantly, though, neither one captures the true range and diversity of existing archival works.
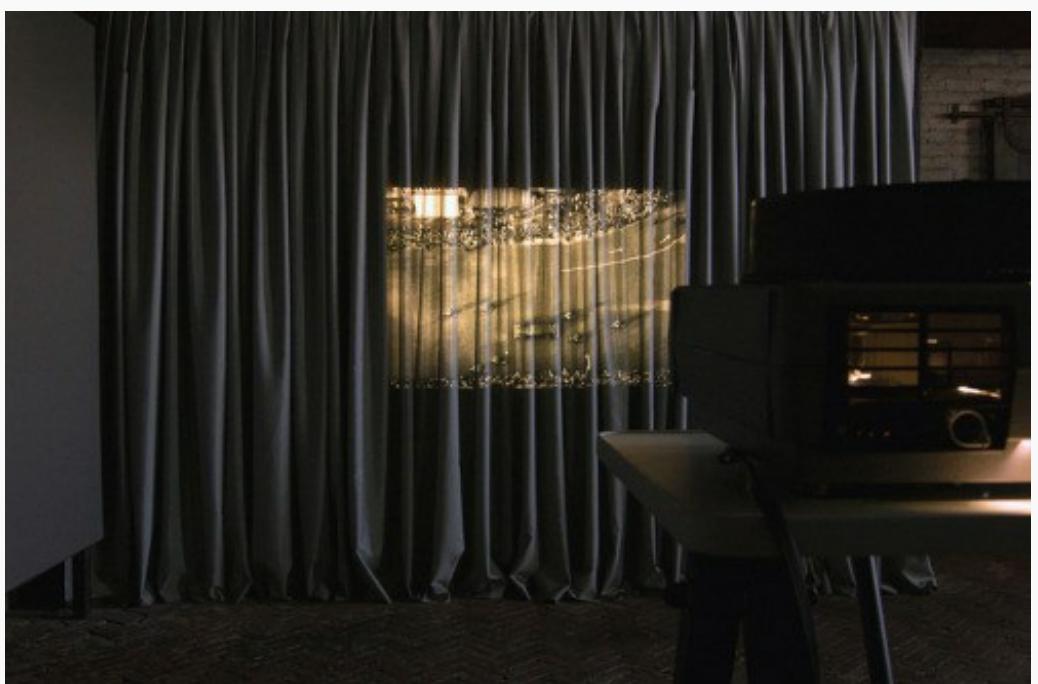
Vesna Pavlović's *Fabrics of Socialism* makes use of propaganda images from post-WWII Yugoslavia; installed at Whitespace Gallery, Atlanta, 2013.

Archival art draws its inspiration and coherence not from theories of the archive but from archives themselves. As Sven Spieker argues in his book *The Big Archive*, its basic form comes from bureaucratic and state archives as they emerged at the end of the 19th century. Paperwork was the lifeblood of these organizations, necessitating the creation of systems for collecting, storing, and managing the enormous volume of documents they produced. Bureaucracy imposed a functional distinction between the registry, where documents still in circulation resided, and the archive, where they were transferred when their useful lifespan had ended. This new cultural form, and its associated technical apparatus of typewriters, carbon paper, card indexes, cabinets, and file folders, provides the template for these works.

These material characteristics of archives, including their procedures for handling and storing the byproducts of the new bureaucracy, were transferred over to archival artworks, and in the process, the archive was reborn as a new artistic medium in its own right. Understanding archival art, then, requires making explicit the rules that determine how archival materials may be manipulated, combined, and arranged to produce new works—that is, the rules that govern the archive as an expressive form.

Vivan Sundaram, *Red Indians*, from "Re-take of Amrita," 2002; digital photomontage, 15 by 25½ inches.

These rules locate archival artworks within a field of distinctions. One of these is *institutional* vs. *personal*. Archives are paradigmatically situated within large organizations (the state, the police force, corporate headquarters), and archival works routinely take these institutional operations as their focus. For instance, in her 2013 exhibition "Fabrics of Socialism" at Whitespace Gallery in Atlanta, Vesna Pavlović displayed photographs, slides, and films centering on the last years of Tito's rule from the Museum of Yugoslav History. These images were originally produced as part of propaganda efforts aimed at solidifying national identity, but extracted and displayed in retrospect they undercut any such utopian dreams. A slideshow projected onto a rippling curtain reflects a distorted image of the past, accompanied by photographs of the stacks of worn film canisters. The overwhelming sense is one of history composed of delicate, crumbling materials.

Other projects subsume more domestic practices of memory and recordkeeping. Consider Vivan Sundaram's project *Re-Take of Amrita* (2001-05), which focuses on the artist's family, particularly his aunt, the painter Amrita Sher-Gil, as seen through the lens of their digitally remixed personal photographs. Sundaram's montages join separate moments in the lives of individuals in a single frame, bringing their past and present selves into focus at once. These unreal scenes plainly indicate that these are not records of any actual events, but rather visual echoes of the operations of memory itself.

Photograph from Jeff Phillips's project "Lost and Found: The Search for Harry and Edna."

Importantly, the archival form shifts its meaning when it is transposed into this noninstitutional context. Families and state bureaucracies produce records for quite different purposes, and as the points of analogy between the two grow more tenuous, works centered purely on vernacular photographic memory-making drift further away from the archive. Pursuit of this line can lead afield into sentimentality. Jeff Phillips's project *Lost and Found: The Search for Harry and Edna* (2014) represents a point where the family archive merges with found photography. Phillips's project comprises the personal slides of an unknown couple going about their lives, throwing parties at home, taking vacations, and so on. Viewers are invited to help discover the pair's true identities, thus turning this private history into a puzzle or detective story. Found images tout their intimate connection to the everyday lives of unremarkable people, but they also display a cruel streak in picking over their subjects' lives like specimens.

Raqs Media Collective's exhibition "Reading Light" was presented in Oscar Niemeyer's iconic Paris building built for the French Communist Party at Place Colonel Fabien. The collective created a set of illuminated signs, typography, and electricity, urging a re-spark of human aspirations.

Two weeks after 9/11, a SoHo storefront on Prince Street was transformed into a photography exhibition, "here is new york," that presented images taken by professionals and amateurs alike of the day of the attack and events in the days that followed.

A second opposition is between works that keep their temporal focus on the *past* vs. the *present*. Archives look backwards, making them a natural medium for historical exploration. But they can equally be of the present, as they strive to capture history as it flows past us. Politically engaged archival works such as those produced by the Raqs Media Collective and the Arab Image Foundation do this most urgently, following the dictum of the Pad.ma group: "Don't wait for the archive." These projects aim not to be chronicles of history but interventions into it, establishing sites for collective self-representation outside of the umbrella of the state and other institutional actors. In their own

way, enterprises like the monumental 9/11 chronicle *Here is New York* do the same, compiling all images of the day regardless of who took them and displaying them in no particular order and with minimal identifying information—a strategy that pushes the collection of records past all sensible systems of classification into a mere blur of accumulation.

This suggests another point of instability in the archive as a medium: archival works have a tendency to collapse into documentary. There is a subtle but crucial difference between using the archival form as an expressive medium and creating something that is straightforwardly an archive. Unless something about the work functions to create tension or distance from the genuinely archival goal of organizing usable bodies of information, artifacts, and records, this separation simply disappears.

Works that successfully convey this sense of distance may emphasize the fragmentary, provisional nature of all records, and dwell in a skeptical state of suspended belief about the realities they attempt to portray. In this regard, Tacita Dean's works are exemplary, particularly the short film *Teignmouth Electron* (2000), in which she presents an incomplete narrative of a doomed sea voyage. Dean's chronicle begins the work of compiling a true record of what happened to the amateur yachtsman, Donald Crowhurst, but trails off, abandoning the story out of exhaustion or an affection for mystery. Lovingly cultivated skepticism has its own dangers, of course, but here it succeeds in transporting Dean's works out of the realm of the semi-documentary.

Installation shot of Michael Rakowitz's *The invisible enemy should not exist*, paper reproductions of objects looted from the Iraq Museum, at Lombard-Freid Projects, New York, 2007.

Another distinction is between archival works that rely on *found* vs. *made* materials. Found materials acquire expressive significance through framing, context, collection, and recombination. Making can be, among other things, a practice of recovery. In Michael Rakowitz's *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007), he and his assistants systematically recreated works looted from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad after the 2003 US invasion. Working from photographs and descriptions of the missing objects, he created paper sculptures made from Arabic newspapers and the packages of Middle Eastern foods, forging a link between disposable cultural representations and these lost artifacts, making something tangible as a way of "addressing a void".

Tacita Dean, *Aerial View of Teignmouth Electron, Cayman Brac 16th of September 1998* , 2000; photograph on paper.

The boundary between finding and making is not always clear, however, and projects like Jenny Holzer's *Archive* (2006) hover somewhere in between. Holzer, like Rakowitz, uses archives as a way of speaking to the void. Beginning with heavily redacted documents taken from the National Security Archive, she created a series of oil paintings that are duplicates of the only publicly available records of the darkest acts at the heart of post-9/11 American government. The painted passages of text and images are crudely broken apart by the censor's monolithic black rectangles, a visual reminder that this information, much of which centers on the interrogation and torture of detainees in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, can be concealed but never truly destroyed. They also hint at the redemptive or destructive possibility of its eventual return.

A final division is between works that are organized around *logic* vs. those that toy with various types of *illogic*. A paradigmatic logical archive is Robert Morris's *Card File* (1962), a rectangular box containing index cards, each of which is inscribed with a dated event that occurred as Morris was assembling the work. The form of the filing system is used to record the steps that went into its own construction, making *Card File* a perfectly reflexive work, an auto-archive that comments only on itself. With its straightforward temporal organization and echoes of rational universal classification systems, it stands for an ideal of the storage device purified of any interest in history, memory, politics, or any other empirical content whatsoever.

Jenny Holzer's exhibition "Archive" at Cheim & Read in New York in 2006.

On the other hand, the same formal devices can be used to subtly erode the notion of logic, erasing it in favor of juxtapositions and associative leaps. This was the avowed goal of the Bureau of Surrealist Research, established in 1924 to create, in André Breton's terms, "an archive of the unconscious." Located in a two-story Paris apartment, the Bureau mimicked the structure of the modern office, with carefully kept records of visitors, phone calls, and correspondence, as well as filing cabinets crammed with folders. All of these activities were organized towards the goal of making blankly mechanical transcriptions of dreams, chance images, and other trains of associative thought, which would be dutifully filed without imposing any preordained system of classification that might disrupt the hidden skein of the unconscious. The Bureau functioned as an office, but it also parodied the office form, inverting its information-handling practices and their implicit values. These systems of illogic highlight the roots of the archive in collage, just as the reuse of found materials highlights its links with the readymade.

The archive as an expressive form originates in the mountainous stacks of the dead records bureau. It may seem strange, then, that archives flourish even as paper storage fades and is supplanted by networked databases. While this might make the archive appear to be an atavism, already a relic itself, the persistence of archival artworks testifies instead to the enduring dream of a past that surrounds us with its traces, a world composed of material records still alive to the touch.

Dan Weiskopf *is an associate professor of philosophy and an associate faculty member in the Neuroscience Institute at Georgia State University. He is the author, with Fred Adams, of* An Introduction to the Philosophy of Psychology*, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.*

The Bureau of Surrealist Research in their Paris office.