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# **A R C H I V I N G   A N D   M E M O R Y**

**Issue number 2, fall 2012**



**Media | Arts | Politics**

**incirculation.ca**  
**an online interdisciplinary journal**  
**Department of Art History & Communication Studies**



## **IN CIRCULATION**

Issue Number 2, fall 2012

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### **CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:**

Special thanks to the faculty and staff of the Department of Art History & Communication Studies at McGill University.

### **ABOUT US:**

IN CIRCULATION is an interdisciplinary journal based in the Department of Art History & Communication Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. The journal is an annual peer-reviewed journal, published electronically in the Fall of each year. Each issue will address both historical and contemporary realities. Drawing on the diversity of the bilingual city in which it is based, the journal will explore the circulation of aesthetic, political, and cultural ideas. Without making any specific ideological claims, we nonetheless believe that scholars and artists can take an active role in creating a better world.

Each issue calls for a discussion of the theories, styles, methodologies, and ideologies that appear to have run their course. That is, we seek to re-discover, re-theorize, and re-conceptualize the thinkers and artists for whom others in the scholarly community have already delivered the eulogy. We seek papers that illuminate the relevancy of past thinkers, methodologies.

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**From the Editors**

**“ON FORGETTING, AND THE ARCHIVE”**

At precisely the moment in which media content becomes immaterial, and our access to this content outpaces our ability to process it, the impulse becomes one of archiving. We seek to control, rather than collect. The paradox of infinite storage is that an individual can maintain a massive archive larger than many institutions of the past, and yet we lack the tools to properly extract and analyze this information. In light of this sea change, curation has become an invaluable skill. The archivist is the last refuge for the humanist, one who believes in the “civilizing powers of reading the right books,” as Sloterdijk puts it in his essay “Rules for the Human Park” (2002). But what have we given up in this turn? What sorts of artistic and scholarly approaches and methodologies are being employed to deal with this new relationship to “information”? What do we risk in thinking about the collected cultural production of a civilization in terms of extraction and analysis?

Is the promise of information and communication merely a smoke-screen for greater neo-liberalism reform and increased technologization, or a further example of the corporatization of the university? Does the discourse of immaterial labour further mystify and obscure the exploitative social relations capitalism is based upon, particularly the very material labour that supports our technological networks and devices? The core values seem to remain communication and information; qua Nietzsche, is there a virtue in forgetting? Are there artistic responses that make use of ephemerality or singularity? The articles and art work included in this issue explore the use of and materiality of the archive and the ways in which the act of archiving has the potential to change the meaning of works of art, information, or objects.

We problematize the role of the archivist, thinking through the necessity of this position alongside a critique of Enlightenment humanism. What questions should be asked of the curator? Can we locate the historical moment where this shift in orientation toward the past has taken place? What can be said about the contemporary state of cultural memory? What political responses are available to us? Without a Fascistic burning of the past, how can we think about overcoming the momentum of history in a way that opens up new social imaginaries that still make room for individuality and social justice?

The concept of history looms large in these questions. The west has long been obsessed with imagining its own destruction, and this generation is no different. Perhaps we're not the millennial generation but a generation of millennialists, awaiting the end of an age. Hannah Arendt reminds us that we cannot know the consequences of our actions in advance, and that we can only truly judge a life once it's over. She's not alone in this view. But she also knows we must continue to act. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche describes man as distinct from his fellow animals because man can make promises. What does it mean to be a type of animal that can make promises? Or break them? Forgiveness is the flipside of that coin. Memory and forgetting are interlinked ontologically.

Forgetting is also deeply linked in our cultural imaginary with truth. The mythological River Lethe, one of the five rivers of Hades, was the river of unmindfulness from which any who drank would suffer complete forgetfulness. The Greeks contrasted truth to forgetfulness, as their term for truth, *Aletheia*, meaning unconcealment (famously explicated at length by Heidegger), contains the word *lethe*, meaning literally concealment. In Norse mythology, the All-Father Odin's Ravens Huginn and Muninn, (or Mind and Memory) were always at risk of not returning. Memory is a precarious thing. How do we negotiate the tension between being mindful of the past and being overrun by its momentum? Many turn to collecting, and what is an archive if not a collection? For Walter Benjamin, collecting is a passion and "every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memory." He describes a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order, the chaos of the library stacks versus the order of its catalogue. Collecting is a process of renewal, "to renew the old world—that is the collector's deepest desire." The "mild boredom of order" is by the anticipation of collecting. Baudrillard must surely have been thinking of this piece by Benjamin when he wrote "Systems of Collecting." Baudrillard also sees collecting as a passion, and passion always has an object. "While the object is a resistant material body, it is also, simultaneously, a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone. It is all my own, the object of my passion (7)." Such objects are either utilized or possessed, the latter of which he describes as an "enterprise of abstract mastery whereby the subject seeks to assert himself as an autonomous totality outside the world (8)." Collecting is about control, not about utilitarian function, but displaced desire. When an object becomes a "piece" to a collector, it stops being defined by its function. When we amass gigabytes upon gigabyte of unlistened-to music and unwatched movies, can we deny the truth of these arguments? What can the archive offer that distinguishes it from our obsessive personal hoarding?



The grand narrative put forth in the work of philosophers of history such as Hegel, combined with the eschatological obsessions of Christian metaphysics, seems to have resulted in an obsession with imagining the demise of our own civilization. Perhaps only then we can pass judgment – one suspects it is not a coincidence that Judgment Day is a common synonym for the Apocalypse. Such an orientation towards death can be productive in so far as it reflects a desire to inject meaning into everyday life, an attempt to interrupt the banality of post-industrial labour. Yet our desire for “The End” is also paralyzing in that it destroys our capacity for imagination, for dreaming and thereby creating a future. Action itself has become stymied by our failure to understand its own indeterminacy. Francis Fukayama famously declared the “End of History” following the collapse of the Soviet Union, arguing that the modern techno-capitalism of Liberal Democracies had emerged as the victor. The decades since have made this argument look quite ridiculous, but as of yet we have not articulated a clear alternative. Franco “Bifo” Berardi sees this as a death of the future, our inability to imagine what comes next. Rather pessimistically, he claims that the only politically valid response is suicide.

We are not willing to give up quite yet. In the late-nineteenth century, in the wave of disappointment following failed rebellions- the revolutions of 1848, the Paris Commune- even if not making a decisive break on formal grounds, still dealt with the themes of loss and overcoming. What can we learn from this time that may help aid us in our own moment of crisis, of intense disappointment? *Archiving and Memory* contends with the ways in which, in these contemporary times, we continue to grapple with many of the same issues that marked archiving projects of prior centuries. At the same time, the papers in this volume raise questions about the archive and its ability to make a claim on history. As Michelle Shawn Smith reminds us in *Photography on the Color Line* (2004), “the archive is a vehicle of memory, and as it becomes the trace on which an historical record is founded, it makes some people, places, things, ideas, and events visible, while relegating others, through its signifying absences, to invisibility (8).” In this sense, the creative works and critical essays compiled in this issue serve to consider the ideological function of the archive not only in the moment of its conception but also across space, time, and place. What do we remember, how do we remember it, and in what ways is power embedded the act of remembering?

Joseph, Cheryl and Alan

## Interview with Dan Fishback

### “AIDS, CULTURAL MEMORY, AND PERFORMING WITH ARCHIVES: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAN FISHBACK”

Jessica Santone

#### Abstract:

Performance artist Dan Fishback’s 2011 solo show *thirtynothing* aimed to create a dialogue between his coming-of-age narrative and the history of the AIDS epidemic. Both born in 1981, Fishback and AIDS share a great deal: anxiety, melancholy, loss, and humor. As the performance unfolds, Fishback takes his audience into and through several layers of archives – an art history slideshow, excerpts from published memoirs, his parents’ home videos, and found documentary footage – to project an imagined intergenerational dialogue between emerging queer artists like himself and the queer artists, writers, and performers working in the 1980s and 1990s who died of AIDS. Viewing the performance, one is propelled into a search for lost friends. In Fishback’s animated and stimulating conversations with these documents, one feels included as well in the work of building a larger network. A push-and-pull between loss and desire motivates the work, and the artist’s process. In this interview, we discuss the process of assembling research for the production, as well as the exploration of cultural memory that plays out in the performance.

Since 2003, Dan Fishback has been writing and performing in New York.<sup>1</sup> His work has dealt with questions of queer, Jewish, and radical identities – usually through the lens of navigating cultural memory and reanimating historical narratives. In *thirtynothing*, Fishback addressed the legacy of AIDS as part of the cultural history of the gay community, and as formational for queer identities in the twenty-first century. I had the privilege of seeing a workshop of the performance live while Fishback was an artist-in-residence at Brooklyn Arts Exchange (BAX) in January 2011. I watched other versions of the show, including the month-long run at Dixon Place in New York City on DVDs lent by the artist, which seems fitting given the sense of mediated remove that the artist engages with during the performance. Throughout the piece, the audience is introduced

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Fishback, 2010, <http://www.danfishback.com/>.



to a variety of materials – books, paintings, home movies, interviews, music, toys, television, and photographs – that ricochet between the personal and the cultural, and between the past and the present. With these materials, Fishback adroitly conveys the creativity of youth, the melodrama and pretensions of adolescence, and the sense of community that one approaches or seeks in maturity.

As Ann Cvetkovich has observed, the AIDS epidemic “has had an indelible impact on the urgency and passion with which gay and lesbian publics have raced against death to preserve a record of lives and publics.”<sup>2</sup> Fishback’s performance echoes that archival impulse, but the motivations are slightly different. While both have aimed to recuperate the place of mourning in the cultural history of queer lives, Cvetkovich situates the history of activism in the archive and Fishback manipulates these archives to create the seeds of activism. In the archival aspects of his performance, the artist teaches the audience how to desire these aspects of a cultural past – and how to pursue it. Playing with archives enables Fishback to make visible important gaps in knowledge. Dan Fishback and I reflected on his performance in the spring of 2012, and talked about the development of the project in its various parts.

**Jessica Santone:** One of the most compelling aspects of *thirtynothing* is the way that you interweave multiple stories. You also foreground the role of storytelling in your various anecdotes, including a bit that you do at the beginning about superheroes where you describe for the audience your childhood enjoyment of superhero action figures, an enjoyment which you say was about having the “editorial control” to make up different stories with the various characters. There seems to be a parallel between the superheroes of He-Man’s universe and those who fought in the real life battle against HIV-AIDS in the 1980s. How was your search for heroes and their stories at the heart of this project?

**Dan Fishback:** The point of the He-Man bit is that all you ever see with He-Man [the show] is He-Man, but there are dozens of other way more interesting people in his world who were the only ones I ever cared about. All you see in gay culture is He-Man, and you never see the other folks. My whole adult life has been about trying to magnify the experiences of the non-He-Mans of the queer universe. Coming into my sexuality in the mid-late nineties and being a young adult in the early aughts was a really alienating experience, and I didn’t know why. I just thought gay culture sucked, and gay people sucked, and that gay life was just big, waxy muscle bodies in boring dance clubs,

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 269.

buying clothes, and not caring about the rest of the world. I thought those things because this army of queer culture had been decimated by AIDS, and the only thing left was commerce – the gay culture that could be sold to me. My whole adult life, I've been making art about the experiences of non-normative queer people. At some point, I started to realize how that story of non-normative queer people was completely defined by AIDS, and how my lack of access to their stories was completely defined by AIDS. AIDS was the thing that was standing between me and a broad and diverse articulation of queer experience.

**JS:** Given that difficulty which you realized in the process of beginning this work, how did you go about finding the stories and books and artworks?

**DF:** In the dumbest ways. I got this amazing anthology, *Loss within Loss*, essays by living artists about their dead artist friends who had died of AIDS.<sup>3</sup> I went through lots of anthologies like that. *Loss within Loss* was particularly meaningful because the essays were so intense. Once you start reading about artists who died of AIDS, the same names keep popping up. For years, I had been in rooms with Penny Arcade when she would talk about people she had known, so I had a sort of catalogue of names in my head from that, and from other elders in my community. I connected the dots. I breezed over a lot because, if something didn't really speak to me, I wouldn't belabor it, or if someone was, I felt, too famous already, I wouldn't really belabor it. When I first started the project, a lot of people started asking me questions about Keith Haring, but I didn't really research Keith Haring because he's already a legend and the work doesn't really speak to me. I wanted to focus on people who I had never heard of before – with the exception of David Wojnarowicz, who I ended up including because of the scandal with *Hide/Seek* [at the National Portrait Gallery in November 2010], and Essex Hemphill, who I had known [of] previously but whose work I find so jarring that I really wanted to include it. With the exception of them, everyone in the show I had never heard of before I started this research project. And there's a bunch of artists and writers who ended up on the cutting room floor, who I couldn't really fit in the show. Some of them I liked the best. There's a writer named Sam D'Allesandro, who I think I read in the version of the show at BAX last April – an amazing short story writer and poet, whose work just knocked my brains out. I discovered him at a reading that Sarah Schulman organized where she assigned literature by people who'd died of AIDS to be read by other writers. That was in conjunction with the opening of the *White Columns* exhibit for the ACT-UP

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<sup>3</sup> Edmund White, ed., in cooperation with Estate Project for Artists with AIDS and Alliance for the Arts (New York, N.Y.), *Loss Within Loss: artists in the age of AIDS* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

Oral History Project.<sup>4</sup> Dale Peck read this Sam D'Allesandro story and I was like who the fuck is that?! Pretty much everyone in the show, I had that response to. I read about Mark Morrisroe and I was like who the fuck is that?! I read about David Feinberg and I was like who the fuck is that?! [These were] people where I just wanted to be their best friend, and they seemed familiar, and it seemed like they were articulating things that I understood to be true and unspoken, writing and art that I wished I'd experienced earlier. A lot of the show is about wish fulfillment. My teenage years were defined by art and music by really radical women, which was great, and I'm really thankful that they were there to substitute for people who could more accurately speak to my experience, but I would've much rather have had David Wojnarowicz than Ani DiFranco.

**JS:** That makes sense. It's a really wonderful thing to approach the archive as something that you're meandering through in a certain way, but also following the gravitational pulls of certain individuals. I'm really impressed by how one does that, because I think it's difficult to know how to trust your intuition. You say it would've been really great to know David Wojnarowicz's work in high school, but I wonder if you in high school would've known to look at it. Do you know what I mean?

**DF:** I wish I'd had access to it. With David it's funny because – this has almost never happened to me – I read that book in college and have no memory of reading it.

**JS:** This is what I mean. I think the question I want to ask then is, did you need to be thirty or twenty-nine rather to make this project?

**DF:** I don't know. One cannot imagine reading *Close to the Knives* by David Wojnarowicz and not remembering it.<sup>5</sup> When I read it now, I think, how is it possible? I have things underlined from college. I didn't read it for class; no one assigned it to me. I found it; I read it; I blocked it out for some reason. To this day, I have no idea [why]. There was some sort of traumatic experience that I had with that book [so that] I was not emotionally capable of retaining it. Did I need to be thirty to make the piece? Probably yes. There was a sort of slingshot aspect to it. I was experiencing the absence of these artists for such a long time. I'm reaching the age [now] when a lot of them died. Mark Morrisroe was thirty when he died. All these artists' experiences speak to me right now because I've lived through those years. But as soon as I pass those years,

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<sup>4</sup> White Columns, "ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993; a multi-faceted exhibition incorporating the ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT; and a new installation by fierce pussy," White Columns – Exhibitions, 2010, <http://www.whitecolumns.org/view.html?type=exhibitions&id=524>, accessed 4 May 2012. Accompanying this exhibition, Sarah Schulman curated a reading series "Writers with HIV/AIDS" from September 20 to October 4, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> 5 David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: a memoir of disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

suddenly I'm older than David Feinberg, I'm older than Essex Hemphill. Then I'm going to need them even more. On the one hand I was anticipating that need; on the other hand I was starting to wonder why there was less and less context for my life. There's not a lot of documentation for older queer people, and as I get older I'm more and more curious.

**JS:** Given this relative lack of materials, you end up doing a lot with it in the performance.

**DF:** I could've done a lot more research than I did. At some point, I stopped myself because I wanted to remain in ignorance a little bit. A lot of the impulse for the show came from a riot-grrl zine aesthetic, which has always been really close to me. It feels like a very natural impulse to find things I love and want to share them with people. At the show's dumbest moments, it's like a show-and-tell. My director Stephen Brackett and I often in the early stages of the project referred to *thirtynothing* as a 'performance zine,' and we toyed around even with having that be the subtitle of the show. The way that the projections are structured is such that they look like they're in a notebook; everything looks like it's part of a journal. We wanted to amplify this idea that it's a zine, that it's cobbled together – a fanzine as it were, because I'm a fan of all of these people.



Dan Fishback, Performance still from *thirtynothing*, October 2011, Dixon Place, New York, NY. Image courtesy of the artist.

**JS:** You call them the 'dumbest' moments in the show, but for me they're also the most brilliant moments of the show. The show-and-tell aspect of the performance is really

great – for a number of reasons. There is an excellent moment at the beginning, when you first introduce Mark Morrisroe, in which you say that Google won't tell us much, the public library isn't that much better, and the private library isn't any better either, so you had to pay an NYU student to request a book by interlibrary loan. I'm really taken by the way that this is not just a show-and-tell, but also narrates how you got there. I'm wondering if a lot of the research was done precisely in that way, if you had to do a lot of 'tracking down'?

**DF:** Some of the [research] experiences weren't really eventful stories, but lovely moments. Oftentimes, especially with the images, in order to acquire them, I had to talk to people who knew the artists very well. To get the Patrick Angus image, I talked to a man named Douglas Turnbaugh, who was very close with Patrick and edited a book of his [work].<sup>6</sup> We wanted to include that narration of hunting things down in the show because, like I was saying before, as much as the show is a show-and-tell show, it's also a show about absence. It's a show about the presence of absence: how is the absence of these men a presence in my life? By carving out that negative space, we were trying to approach a portrayal or dramatization of that emptiness. Part of that emptiness is a search for the thing, and not necessarily always getting to the thing. For instance, if I really, really wanted to, I'm pretty certain that I could've figured out a way to read the full text that Ramsey McPhillips wrote about Mark Morrisroe. [In the show, Fishback tells a story about his failed attempt to acquire an unpublished biography of Morrisroe, written by McPhillips.] In part I didn't pry because I wanted to honor [Ramsey's] initial impulse to not send it – and I honestly don't know if it was an impulse not to send it or just a casual forgetfulness, that he didn't regard the question that much. But for the purposes of the show, I wanted to stay in that moment of not knowing or of desiring the thing. The desire seemed like something that I wanted to share with people more than the thing that I was desiring. We wanted to leave people with the sense that they'd only just skimmed an enormous realm of facts and people and art, that they'd just gotten a little bit of it. Ideally, everyone walked out of the theatre and Googled some names.

**JS:** Is that something that you really hoped would happen, that there would be this practical response on the part of the audience?

**DF:** Yes, that was one of our number one priorities. Through guiding people through my experience of this search, that they would feel the need to do a similar search. By dramatizing the ways in which I was clumsy or stupid in that search, [I hoped] people

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick Angus, *Strip Show: paintings by Patrick Angus (1953-1992)*, with an introduction by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh (London: Editions Aubrey Walter, 1992).

would feel less scared of failure. I cast myself as a fool in some situations, and tried to be brutally honest about my cowardice, my fear, so that everyone in the audience who was dealing with their cowardice and fear would suddenly feel like fear was less of a big deal; because that guy on stage got through it, and everyone's applauding *him* at the end of the show, so maybe *my own* weaknesses aren't really such a big deal. More than any project I've ever worked on, we were audience-focused in this show. We wanted the audience to have a very specific experience, and we wanted to guide them through it. The first version of the show we put on stage was very abstract. This was November of 2010. We did a three-night run in San Francisco. The reaction was also very positive, but it wasn't the specific reaction that I wanted. A lot of people were very curious in ways I didn't want them to be. They weren't curious about the artists I talked about; they were curious about *me*. As I started to change it to make it more audience-focused, and as I started including more of my own personal narrative in it, the reaction was becoming more what I'd intended. In the full production in New York, people were coming up to me and saying the things that I hoped they would say: 'I never realized that I had this history' 'I had no idea that AIDS was so huge on this scale' 'I had no idea that there were so many artists who died.' Sometimes, I'd say that it's possible to know that AIDS happened and not know the scope of it in the same way that it's possible to be a boy who's attracted to other boys and not know you're gay. I remember being attracted to boys and not being attracted to girls and being like 'I'm not gay' even though there's nothing logical about that. I knew with my brain that a gazillion gay people died of AIDS in the late eighties and early nineties, and that they weren't dying at that rate anymore, but for some reason, I never sat down and thought, well, what's the effect of that? It's weird that that has to be articulated.



Dan Fishback, Performance still from *thirtynothing*, October 2011, Dixon Place, New York, NY. Image courtesy of the artist.

**JS:** Inasmuch as the show is aiming to produce this effect in the audience of curiosity and discovery of these artists and other artists like them and other writers like them, to what extent were you also interested in community building with the specific audiences that you addressed?

**DF:** I was very interested in that. Community building is a good way of putting it, or community strengthening. One of the reasons why I wanted to highlight the work of artists who were documenting certain non-normative queer experience is because it's really easy, if you're just coming out, to look at the gay world and think it's stupid, because the stupidest things become most popular generally. It's only once you get older that it's possible to find an alternative queer culture and an alternative queer community. By magnifying the names of that community's heroes or its predecessors or its forebears, it creates a sort of pride and continuity...

**JS:** Maybe the word you're looking for is density?

**DF:** Yeah. I use the word continuity because I'm borrowing it from the Jewish institutional culture world, where there's a lot of talk about the continuity of Jewish life. There's a sort of hysterical anxiety in a lot of Jewish institutions about fear that people will stop being Jewish, and that you have to create "continuity" between the generations so that Jewishness continues. I think there are beautiful things about that desire and also really problematic things. But I feel that desire for queer people. So many younger queer people don't have any connection with their history [or] with the older generations. I live in a community where there's probably more intergenerational interaction than most queer communities, but there still isn't enough. In the programming that we did during the production – every Sunday during the production, we would have a different program at Dixon Place – the goal was to get a lot of likeminded queer people in the room who are, on some level, part of the same community but might not necessarily be interacting that much.

**JS:** Were those the same people who attended the show do you think?

**DF:** A lot of them attended the show *after* they came to one of the programs. Each program definitely had its own target audience. Our first program was a panel about intergenerational gay communication – really focusing on a queer male intergenerational interaction – and, if there is a generation gap, why does it exist? There was actually a lot of debate in that session as to whether a generation gap existed. That was definitely the most awkward and stimulating of the programs. We had a panel that was me, Ira Sachs, the filmmaker, the very legendary drag queen Mother Flawless Sabrina, who's been a drag mentor since the sixties, Michael Tikili from Queerocracy



and current ACT-UP, and contemporary artist Carlos Motta, who also does a lot of work with Queerocracy. And we had one much younger person who does HIV outreach amongst queer youth. At one point we realized there was this divide between people who had intergenerational sex and people who did not. Younger people who were attracted to much older people knew more about queer history, and younger people who were not, didn't. Coming to that realization was very awkward. It took a lot of people hedging their way into revealing things about themselves. It was very, very, very fascinating. Some of the best moments of the *thirtynothing* month-long project were moments after the shows where older people would hang out in the [lobby] bar and just talk and tell stories, and younger people would listen. Those moments were exactly that I wanted. One of the best nights, Justin Vivian Bond came and sat at the bar and started talking about people who V knew who died in San Francisco. Crazy stories. Inspiring stories. People we would have been friends with. People who we would've loved. I've been listening to Justin tell stories in bars for years and I'd never heard about these people. It was amazing to see this gaggle of younger queer people hanging on every word. That's what I wanted more of.

**JS:** It's really exciting that your work ends up having this multiple presentation that it appeared as the show, but also was nestled into this series of talks in October 2011, and has this afterlife in the conversation at the bar.

**DF:** And in the gallery. The way the gallery was structured, I invited certain queer cultural figures to loan an object that was either the work of a gay artist that they had known who had died of AIDS or just reminded them of someone. Those were placed on the wall along with explanations. In some cases, it was an actual object the person made, and in some cases it was just a reminder. Filmmaker Stephen Winter loaned an ACT-UP t-shirt that he had bought with Ortez Alderson, an activist who he wanted people to know about. I had said, "Think about someone who you want younger people to know about who they probably don't know about." Performance artist Jennifer Miller lent sheet music from the composer Billy Swindler, who I had never heard about.... People could mill about in the lobby and just read those things and experience those things. It's much more than a performance, it's a project, and it's ongoing now since I'm turning it into a book.

**JS:** The kinds of materials that you're talking about are really interesting to me. In the scholarship on queer history, a lot weight is placed on what might have once been considered more peripheral materials to a traditional archive, like gossip and diaries and mix-tapes and a t-shirt as a possession that was once held.

**DF:** We had an insert from a mix-tape on the wall.

**JS:** Exactly. It's been suggested that these kinds of things might provide stronger evidence of the affective relationships and desires that structure queer community in a way that reconfigures the archive. Some have gone so far as to suggest that archives themselves are queer in their instability or "eccentricity" of the documents they contain.<sup>7</sup> You obviously found yourself mining these kinds of archival materials in particular as much as the books and the exhibition catalogues. What do you think is the value of amassing this affective archive, or as Ann Cvetkovich puts it, 'an archive of feelings'?<sup>8</sup> Do you think it was crucial to pull these things together for *thirtynothing*?

**DF:** Totally. I think a lot of queer people, especially queer artists, have this formative experience of not seeing their lives as legitimate, and not seeing their lives represented around them – looking at the way human experience is represented around them and feeling totally alienated from it. A lot of us feel this mission to make sure that future queer kids – and really our projection of ourselves as children – to make sure that those phantom children no longer feel this alienation. It creates this drive to document everything, to archive everything, to make sure that everything is in public, everything is visible, everything is accessible, so that any queer kid can find it and be like 'Oh, okay, I get it. I'm not alone. I'm like *that* person.'

**JS:** This reminds me of something that you say in one version of the show that I've seen, that being queer and being Jewish are maybe the same thing. In terms of this sense of cultural memory and this impulse to document everything, to archive everything, it seems like there's an important connection here in terms of the way that these communities are diasporic or hidden.

**DF:** Yes, except Jews are diasporic from a theoretical place and queer people are diasporic from othing. There needs to be a center; there needs to be an [emotional] homeland. There is, but it just isn't articulated. There is a queer experience and, by "a" queer experience I mean a matrix of queer experience – it exists and it's interconnected. When you tap into that, it feels so good. The more I feel tapped into some kind of unified queer experience or queer history, the more relaxed I feel, the more happy I feel, the more dignified I feel. Working on *thirtynothing* has made my life

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Reed, "Design for (Queer) Living: Sexual Identity, Performance and Decor in British Vogue, 1922- 1926," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 12, no. 3 (2006): 377-404; cited in: Julia Bryan-Wilson, "We Have a Future: An Interview with Sharon Hayes," *Grey Room* 37 (Fall 2009), 78-93. See also: José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Act," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 5-14.

<sup>8</sup> Cvetkovich writes, "The archive of feeling is both material and immaterial, at once incorporating objects that might not ordinarily be considered archival, and at the same time, resisting documentation because sex and feelings are too personal or ephemeral." Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 244.

tangibly better. I feel better. I feel happier. When I tell people I'm working on a project about AIDS, they [say] 'Aww,' like I must be so bummed out to be thinking about AIDS all the time. But the truth is that experiencing and hearing about the lives of these people, I feel like I'm gaining a gazillion new best friends. They bring me a lot of solace and I'm really glad that I'm getting to know them.

...

**JS:** There is this definition of what being gay means that you give at the end of *thirtynothing*, where you propose that defining the culture relative to the community of care that met the challenge of dealing with AIDS at the personal level in the 1980s and early 1990s was really significant. How will the legacy of AIDS in the cultural memory of gay lives affect new histories of that community? How do these archives in the show help transform a sense of history more broadly?

**DF:** I think that AIDS proves something about queer people. It proves that, at some kind of core, queer people have the capacity to be not just moral, but really ferociously moral. There's something about our disconnection from conventional society and conventional expectation that allows us, at our best, to radically defy social structures to a radically moral end, which is a very different unifying principle than the conventional gay male unifying principle of fucking.

**JS:** Or promiscuity<sup>9</sup> in general?

**DF:** Promiscuity is such a loaded word.

**JS:** "Promiscuity" then – because I think there's a presumption that that's a unifying principle.

**DF:** "Promiscuity" – I think promiscuity is great; I think having multiple sexual partners is great. I don't think that those things in themselves are shameful or stupid. I do think that they are, however, on a practical level, a very poor way to unify a culture or community. I think that different kinds of queer people benefit from each other. I feel an intense

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am referring to Douglas Crimp's 1987 argument that "it is our promiscuity that will save us" – that is, the invention of 'safe sex' as a community-based response to AIDS prevention had a significant impact on the spread of the epidemic because of it showed respect for 'promiscuity,' which he defines as "a positive model of how sexual pleasures might be pursued by and granted to everyone if those pleasures were not confined within the narrow limits of institutionalized sexuality." Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 253. Elsewhere, Crimp discusses morality in the response to AIDS: "AIDS didn't make gay men grow up and become responsible. AIDS showed anyone willing to pay attention how genuinely ethical the invention of gay life had been." Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: essays on AIDS and queer politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 15. For Crimp, this ethical stance is based on a radical approach to sexual pleasure that *preceded* the AIDS epidemic.

kinship with my gender-queer friends, with my dyke friends, with my trans friends. That's not a community of fucking, that's not a community of promiscuity, that's a community of having a shared experience of disconnection, a community that understands how that disconnection can serve you and challenge you to be better, and challenge you to care about people, and to challenge you to not judge people, and to challenge you to be a more ethical person and part of a more ethical community. AIDS proves that to me. That's the lesson of AIDS: that gay people saved each other when everyone else wanted us to die. The more people learn that lesson – the more people realize that that is the lesson of the early years of AIDS, the more queer people will feel dignified in their queerness, the more queer people will be more moral in their queerness, the more queer people will be more moral as citizens, as family members, as friends. They'll be better. Through learning about the early years of AIDS, I became a better person. That's one of the reasons why Sarah Schulman is such a provocative and important thinker – because her ethical standard is so clear, and the way she articulates that ethical standard to queer history is so bold. It's sort of impossible to have a conversation with her about these topics without having an existential crisis about whether or not you're a good person, whether or not you can live up to these standards. The idea [for *thirtynothing*] was that, by putting my own experience with her on stage, and my own crisis of these questions on stage, other people would have a similar experience. Other young queer people would ask themselves, 'Would I have, could I have risen to the challenge of my forebears? Could I be this moral? Does my queerness challenge me to be this moral?' In a way, that's what I've always been trying to approach in my work, and this is the clearest statement of that. There is some kind of – I don't want to say universal queerness, but there is some kind of centrally accessible queer ethic that is good and moral, and hidden from people, and it's our responsibility to expose it. So that everyone knows – especially suicidal young queer people. It could literally save their lives.

**Art Project**

“FOLK FILM ARCHIVE WEB”

Jean-Marc Chapoulie

**Résumé:**

Folk Film Archive Web est une entreprise de collectage de films pour créer une Cinémathèque 2.0. Ce fond d'archive une fois disponible sur internet sera livré à la recherche scientifique, l'examen anthropologique, l'analyse cinématographique, et l'étude culturelle et politique.

FFAW n'est pas simplement une collecte de données de la culture populaire comme le fit en Angleterre l'anthropologue Tom Harrison en 1937 (Mass Observation) ou plus proche de nous – une proximité aussi dans le titre avec son œuvre Folk Archive - l'artiste Jeremy Deller qui a voulu rassembler tous les objets et les images qui représentaient à ses yeux une version non-officielle de la Grande Bretagne. FFAW est une extension de ces démarches conjuguées dans le domaine des nouveaux médias, et nous allons développer ce même regard d'observation scientifique et artistique mais en le posant sur des films. Le cinéma a toujours en effet été lui même un enjeu d'observation depuis son invention, Étienne-Jules Marey utilisant cet outil dans cette visée : observer le monde pour mieux le comprendre.

“J'ai eu me sentiment que le cinéma était, parmi les arts, celui qui accompagnait réellement l'entrée dans le contemporain, et au fond quelque chose comme mon entrée retardée dans le siècle.” Alain Badiou, *Cinéma*, Paris: ed. Nova édition, 2012.

”Ce qui est impossible, ce n'est pas le voisinage des choses, c'est le site lui-même où elles pourraient voisiner.” Michel Foucault, *Les choses et les mots*, Paris: ed. Gallimard, 1966.

Depuis son invention, le cinématographe s'est révélé comme un art qui vampirise son temps, les personnes, les coutumes et les rituels, mais aussi les autres arts

(photographie, théâtre, peinture...), ce qui en fait un art social et politique par excellence, on pourrait dire le meilleur marqueur d'une civilisation.

Le cinématographe est une pratique naïve à ses débuts. Les opérateurs Lumière et Edison font des films en même temps qu'ils apprennent à en faire, ils définissent pleinement un statut d'amateur. Qualification aujourd'hui assez négative mais qui dans les années 20 permettait aussi de décrire les premières expérimentations artistiques. Au-delà de l'industrie cinématographique qui rapidement prend les devants de la scène, une multitude de pratiques apparaissent au vingtième siècle. Un film peut être un film amateur, de série B, il peut être produit par une webcam par hasard, un caméscope le dimanche, il se noie dans l'infinité d'Internet, réapparaît en sexe tape, se projette dans une réunion de vente, mute en document sociologique ou historique, finit à la télé à minuit, ressuscite sur la cimaise d'un musée.

### **Des figures folkloriques au Folk Film Archive Web**

Dans cette multiplicité, la perception que l'on a d'un film rappelle celle d'un anthropologue ou d'un ethnologue qui observe des pratiques actuelles vécues au présent afin d'y déceler des signes d'une culture du passé. Ne sommes nous pas devant un film Lumière, bien installés dans nos fauteuils, en train d'observer des usages quotidiens, des pratiques scientifiques, à étudier des rituels ou des systèmes de croyance ?

Dans cette position de voyeur, je poserai mon regard sur une figure - au sens de motif - de la culture populaire : le folklore. Depuis les premières recherches de l'Académie celtique en 1804, chargée de recueillir les traditions, coutumes, suivie par l'introduction du terme par l'anglais William Thoms en 1846, le folklore (de *Folk*, peuple, et *lore*, savoir) n'a eu de cesse de constituer une alternative à un pouvoir central, en étant lié à la définition d'identités locales.

À partir du fond d'archives Lumière, la première étape de cette recherche sera donc de discerner et de nommer des figures folks. J'entends la notion de folk non pas comme un art qui serait le produit spontané, l'art du peuple suivant la conception romantique. Mais comme une création continue et qui n'est pas interrompue aujourd'hui. Folk Film Archive Web témoigne d'un refus des hiérarchies normatives en histoire de l'art, ouvrant son territoire de cueillette à la culture populaire et folklorique, dans l'imagerie publicitaire, documentaire, amateur. Lorsqu'on cherche à comprendre la naissance et le devenir des œuvres dans l'histoire de l'art entendue comme histoire des images, il doit s'ouvrir quelque chose qui n'est pas – ou pas encore - artistique. C'est sur cette hypothèse de

recherche qu'il nous a semblés indispensable de réagencer les chaînes de films qui constituent l'histoire du cinéma. Une chaîne de films dont chaque maillon est une figure folklorique.

### **Du vélo voltigeur des frères Lumières aux films de BMX postés sur le web**

FFFW est une généalogie, une suite de films disparates qui établissent une filiation. Par exemple, en se tournant vers les pratiques locales, en observant des gestes effectués à l'intérieur de leur propre culture, la figure du voltigeur à vélo est devenu la première figure Folk d'une recherche généalogique. Le film des frères Lumières, n°17, tourné dès 1896, montre un cycliste dans une rue de Lyon, faire de la voltige avec son vélo. Elle amorce sans le savoir, une chaîne, une communauté de formes particulières, des migrations et des relocalisations de savoirs créant des sens communs populaires. L'exercice périlleux sur un vélo du cycliste filmé par Lumière est passé par une performance filmée à New York par Edison, à un sport de résidence pavillonnaire Californienne dans les années 70 (BMX), ou par un film de Jean Rouch *Moi un noir*, à une danse Africaine en vélo sur Face Book, à une pratique presque équestre dans un film de fiction (RAD), à un sport de ballon en vélo (Radbball) et enfin aujourd'hui à une figure emprunté à la moto dite burn out, sur Youtube.

Le film des Lumière tourné en 1895 est antérieur au film d'Edison de 1899 où l'on retrouve cette figure du vélo. On sait par le décor, la rue des usines Lumière, que l'action fut sûrement improvisée, une image volée peut-être, un ouvrier qui montre ses tours de vélo avant de rentrer chez lui. La notice du catalogue nous apprend que le cycliste s'appelle Francis Doublier. Google nous apprend aujourd'hui que cet homme était un projectionniste Lumière émérite après avoir été longtemps apprenti dans l'atelier de mécanique de l'usine. Cette vue est donc assez proche de ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui un film de famille. Les Lumière ont considéré les quatre Doublier un peu comme leurs enfants. On est saisis par la vie qui se dégage de cette vue. Les opérateurs Lumière ont cette unité stylistique anonyme et tacite. Il s'agit de la révélation de la mobilité du monde à peine mise en scène, c'est-à-dire simplement cadrée. Cette vue n° 17 montre une pratique qui n'est pas encore un art ou un sport, la voltige à bicyclette est au mieux un hobby, une disposition innée pour le vélo.

Le film d'Edison est d'un style différent et d'une tout autre finalité. Nous assistons à un spectacle filmé, à une attraction devant un fond peint et qui enchaîne rapidement devant nos yeux, des figures de voltige comme une succession de tableaux. L'exercice est maîtrisé, bien rodé. Ce film perpétue, avec cette vue, l'esprit des attractions foraines



et du théâtre populaire que le cinéma, précisément, menaçait de remplacer. Ces fantaisies filmées sont tournées nostalgiquement vers leur propre passé dont elles entreprennent de conserver l'archive et d'inventer la fable : fakir, jongleur, voltigeur à vélo.

C'est entre ces deux mouvements que la figure du vélo voltige tangué : le document d'un côté, et la fable ou la légende de l'autre. C'est dans ces deux mouvements que le cinéma a aussi évolué : le documentaire et la fiction.

Le BMX est une légende qui naît en 1968 en Californie. Les figures de voltige en vélo sont toujours celles pratiquées par Francis Doublier (de nouvelles figures sont aussi créées et désormais répertoriées) mais l'influence du moto-cross et du gazon comme terrain de jeu autour des pavillons sont les deux nouvelles composantes de cette pratique. Le BMX est une figure Folk qui permet aux jeunes amateurs, à moindres frais et près de chez eux, de faire de la moto avec un vélo.

Avec le film de Jean Rouch *Moi un noir* achevé en 1959, nous assistons à Treichville, loin de l'environnement résidentiel et pavillonnaire à « une danse à vélo ». Nous sommes face à un documentaire, du côté des Lumières, et pourtant ce film est le déclencheur d'un cinéma moderne prolongé par la Nouvelle Vague. Il est peut-être le film qui a permis l'ouverture de l'obturateur de la critique cinématographique. Il est une « dissolution des genres » qui déchaîne « les puissances du faux », c'est-à-dire un effondrement des lignes entre le documentaire et la fiction. Comme l'écrivait André S. Labarthe dans son *Essai sur le jeune cinéma* (1960), *Moi un Noir* n'est « ni un film de fiction, ni un documentaire, il est l'un et l'autre, mieux : l'un multiplié par l'autre (...) C'est un véritable scaphandre autonome qui nous transporte au cœur de la subjectivité noire (...), sa fonction est d'aller au-delà de l'objectivité du document ».

Que penser alors de ce film réalisé à l'aide d'un téléphone portable d'une autre danse africaine sur vélo, comme si le vélo était à la fois un compagnon de danse, une baguette de chef d'orchestre, ou un instrument de musique, mais silencieux ? Il est évident que ce film retrouvé sur Facebook, n'a aucune intention de produire une « belle image », ni même un débat sur la nature de l'image, documentaire ou fiction, sinon peut-être de pousser jusqu'à aujourd'hui la fusion des genres. N'attend-il pas lui aussi un regard critique contemporain ?

En prélevant des films ici et là, dans différentes strates du passé, l'image est décontextualisée, abandonnée où les rencontres réglées par le jeu des intervalles

viennent éveiller des significations transversales. Attention, en appliquant à tous ces films glanés sur la toile, les grilles de lecture de l'Histoire de l'art, il ne s'agit surtout pas de leur trouver des vertus qui ne sont peut-être pas les leurs. Je pense, à ce stade, que ce geste d'archivage motivé par le regroupement autour de la figure folk va plutôt renforcer le sens de l'archive dans ce qu'elle a de fantôme. C'est plus que le fantôme à vélo dans la machine qui est le sujet mais le fantôme *de la machine* (de la boîte du cinématographe au caméscope HI8), qui produit déjà l'évènement qu'il enregistre.

### **Un collectage nomade de films pour une cinémathèque 2.0**

Le cinéma est très souvent abordé dans une vision de l'altérité. Le cinéma aurait le caractère de ce qui est autre. Il est même appelé à devenir autre, c'est-à-dire à « s'altérer » continuellement, en modifiant ses propres qualités dans un processus infini. Et pourtant, chaque territoire : l'industrie du cinéma, le cinéma amateur, la télévision, Internet, l'art vidéo, etc., envisage sa propre histoire de façon linéaire, de façon parfois « ethnocentrique », en privilégiant son propre groupe social (cinéaste, artiste, amateur, internaute). Attention, je ne dis pas que cette histoire n'a pas intégré les influences des autres domaines artistiques (peinture, littérature, etc.), mais plutôt qu'elle refuse de voir une porosité entre les pratiques d'image en mouvement. Le voisinage entre tous les pratiquants du cinéma est d'ailleurs souvent opposé, parfois hostile. Le filmeur du dimanche avec son caméscope n'a aucune chance d'être chroniqué dans *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, de figurer dans la sélection *D'un certain regard* à Cannes, et de passer sur Arte en prime time. Dans les faits, la réalité est tout autre, le dernier film de Brian de Palma, *Redacted*, a été tourné avec un caméscope, pour montrer les images de violences de la guerre en Irak du point de vue d'un soldat cinéaste amateur. Donc pour pouvoir passer d'un territoire à un autre, dans le cas présent du cinéma amateur au cinéma industriel, il faut se déplacer. Il y a des lieux mais aussi des chemins. La vie sédentaire ne peut engendrer d'expérience du lieu, il faut que tout ces « quelque part » se retrouvent sur une trajectoire de mouvement. Ainsi mon attitude sera celle d'un chercheur nomade entre ces différents territoires de l'image en mouvement, passant d'une cinémathèque à un musée, d'une cave à une bibliothèque. Mais aussi celle d'un piéton d'Internet qui voyage de site en blog. Le premier exemple qui peut illustrer tous ces *déplacements* est donc celui du vélo.







## Articles

## “THE EXCESS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE”

Estelle Blaschke

**Abstract:**

In the late 1980s, Bill Gates, cofounder of Microsoft, recognized, as many others did, that the market for images was to become one of the growth sectors of the new digital economy. With the creation of Interactive Home Systems, which was renamed Corbis in 1995, he envisioned a “databank of a million pictures” comprising photographs and photographic reproductions of art, “unique and comprehensive archive of images of all kinds.”<sup>1</sup> Targeting the individual consumer rather than traditional clients in the press, publishing and advertising industry, Corbis, and its major competitor Getty Images, accumulated vast amounts of visual material and copyrights to dispose of endlessly reproducible resources and by this, control the future dissemination of digital images. What made the digital form of photography (and film) so appealing to Corbis, as to anyone involved in the archiving and the management of photography collections and facing space, time and monetary constraints, both in the commercial and institutional context, was the idea of immateriality. The economic potential of the digital image relied on the idea of immateriality and the substitution of the material object. The article traces the creation of a digital image archive fuelled by the fantasy of “collecting everything” and the potential of selling it – and the ultimate failure in doing so. Through the case of Corbis, it will explore the implications of the economical paradigm on the archive and on the accessibility of collective visual memory.

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The invention of digital imaging reanimated the fantasy that had infused photography from its early days on: the fantasy of ‘collecting everything’, of accessing “enormous collections of forms”, as Oliver Wendell Holmes had advocated for with regard to

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Gates, Nathan Myhrvold, and Peter Rinearson, *The road ahead* (New York: Viking, 1995).



stereoscopic views, ‘classified and arranged in vast libraries, as books are now’.<sup>2</sup> To facilitate the development of such collections, Holmes suggested the formation of a “comprehensive system of exchanges, so that there may grow up something like a universal currency of these bank-notes.”<sup>3</sup> Like Holmes, Paul Valéry applauded the economic potential of photography and its siteless and time-less reproducibility when stating in his 1928 essay ‘The Conquest of Ubiquity’: ‘like science, it [the reproduced work of art] becomes an international need and commodity.’<sup>4</sup> Yet, understood in relation to the development of an increasingly democratic process, Valéry explicitly related the gains of mechanical reproduction to the empowerment of the individual. Liberated from the location of its performance and its temporal continuum, the mechanical reproduction would enable the individual not only to access and participate in the experience of art, but also to choose when and where to do so. Thus, as Valéry envisioned, various types of reproductions would soon spread into the private space, individually programmed, to ‘satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort[...] at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign’, and as simple as ‘water, gas, and electricity are coming to our houses from far off.’<sup>5</sup>

It is precisely this juxtaposition between the liberation of experience on the one hand and its privatization on the other hand that is illustrated in the digital painting by Louie Psihoyos, ‘The Information Revolution. 500 monitors’ of 2003 (*Figure 1*). Situated in the very centre of a panoptic structure, we see the dark silhouette of a person in front of a white, glaring light, comfortably leaning back in a chair. Conveying an atmosphere of leisure, the person is surrounded by a grid of colorful, brightly illuminated screens. While the image suggests a maximized visual experience, the boundaries between entertainment and control, monitors and monitoring, the observer and the observed are blurred. Thus, it may be interpreted as corresponding perfectly to the Zeitgeist increasingly present since the early 1990s: the idea of the ultimate transformation of everyday life facilitated by the progress of communications technology and its electronic apparatuses.<sup>6</sup> Yet, it embodies, intentionally or not, the very critique of such a concept.

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<sup>2</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 3 (June 1859): 738–749.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 740.

<sup>4</sup> “La Conquête De L’ubiquité,” in *Oeuvres*, 2nd ed. (Gallimard, 1960), 227. (Original quotation: Telle que la science, elle devient besoin et denrée internationaux.)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See: Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital*, 1st ed. (Vintage, 1996); Carl Shapiro and Hal R. Varian, *Information Rules: A Strategic Guide to the Network Economy*, 1st ed. (Harvard Business Press, 1998); Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Boston: The MIT Press, 2001).



But rather than discussing the dichotomy between the enhanced accessibility provided by digital imaging on the one hand and on the other hand the loss of information in the process of digitization, this chapter focuses on the intrinsic relation between the fantasy of 'collecting everything' and the idea of earning money from it. It thus aims at drawing attention to the economic potential of both, archiving and reproducing photography. This idea of commodification seems to appear with every major technical development of the photographic method as a medium of storage and dissemination, creating new standards, new markets and new networks. Building on the recent scholarship that has been critically investigating the multiple material manifestations of photography,<sup>7</sup> this chapter furthermore aims at exploring the idea of materiality with regard to the digital form of photography and the way digital materiality shapes the archive and is shaped by the archive. This relation and the implications of the economical paradigm on managing vast photographic collections will be examined through the history of the 'visual content provider' Corbis, a company, founded by Bill Gates in 1989 under the name Interactive Home Systems (IHS). What made the digital form of photography so appealing to anyone involved in the archiving and the management of collections and facing space, time and monetary constraints, both in the commercial and institutional context, was the idea of immateriality. The digital image was understood as an image without physical carrier, reduced to a binary code, an image 'produced without the intermediaries of film, paper or chemicals.'<sup>8</sup> (Sasson 2004: 186). The economic potential of digital imaging as well as other forms of photography precisely relied on this: the idea of immateriality and enhanced mobility. As Holmes had suggested in 1859 in his plea for the sales potential of stereoscopic views: 'Form is henceforth divorced from matter'.<sup>9</sup> The anticipated potential of analogue photography lay in substituting an object by an image, and by this in replacing the 'immobile and expensive' form of an object depicted in the photograph. The same reasoning was applied to digital imaging. While the digital reproduction of images was not considered the equivalent of the original photograph, its quality was adequate and could therefore be rendered marketable. And, since the picture market, in contrast to

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with desire : the conception of photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997); Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, eds., *Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Joanna Sasson, "Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction," in *Photographs objects histories : on the materiality of images*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (London: Routledge, 2004), 186. See also Joanna Sasson, "Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction," in Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, *Photographs, Objects, Histories. On the Materiality of Images*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 186-202.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Stereoscope and the Stereograph*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, N°3, June 1859, 738-749.

the art market of photographs, does not deal with the photographic object, but with the intangible rights for reproducing, using and publishing the images, the shift from the analogue to the digital was interpreted as a mere continuation of existing practices. Digital imaging promised to be a further step in the continuous search for higher efficiency in the reproduction technique, management and exploitation of images. Thus, it was assumed that the digital reproduction, compared to analogue 'matter', was mobile and inexpensive and as such, would inevitably replace of its analogue predecessor. And just as photography had superseded previous reproduction techniques, above all lithography and engraving and their related professions and businesses during the early nineteenth century, a new market with new rules would emerge and eventually replace existing businesses.

The idea of immateriality and enhanced mobility was so powerful that it 'captured the imagination of the cultural heritage community' and private companies alike (Trant 1995: 262). Numerous institutions and private companies involved in the archiving of collections sensed the opportunity not only to reduce the volume of their collection by preserving the digital surrogates, but also to earn income from their digitized holdings. Accompanied by a widespread debate on the impacts on knowledge production and the dissolution of 'the archive' as an authoritative body,<sup>10</sup> digital imaging led to major financial investments and emergence of new business ventures. While most of the players in the traditional picture market, embodied by photography agencies and commercial image banks, were hesitant or simply did not have the financial means and the technological know-how to invest in digital technology, the possibilities of digital imaging were considered so promising, that it attracted companies alien to the picture market. Companies, such as Corbis and its major competitor Getty Images.

When forming the company IHS in 1989, Gates envisioned the creation of a distribution service for digital images, simulating and satisfying the alleged needs of modern society and the modern individual. In his book *The Road Ahead*<sup>11</sup> published in 1995, Gates unfolds his vision of an information society and his motivation for creating IHS. The chapter 'Cyber-Home' presents in particular the construction plan for Gates' own private home, which was planned to be equipped with "news coverage and entertainment at the touch of a button".<sup>12</sup> An individual choice of images, recordings, films and TV programs would be displayed on several synchronized wall monitors. Gates specifically mentions

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<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson, *The road ahead*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

photography: as the first private user of a ‘databank of a million pictures’ comprising photographs and photographic reproductions of art, he imagined a “unique and comprehensive archive of images of all kinds.”<sup>13</sup> With the help of wide-ranging data registers these images were intended to be easily retrievable. The establishment of IHS would therefore serve the implementation of the illusion of ubiquity for profit-making purposes. In contrast to most photographic agencies and commercial image banks, that primarily target the press, publishing and advertising industry, the IHS business model was designed for an additional and highly potent group of customers: the individual consumer.

Parallel to the idea of immateriality, the business model of the IHS distribution service was based on two assumptions: First, it relied on the hypothesis that the ‘information high-way’, whose infrastructure in the early 1990s was still rudimentary, would soon allow for the transmission and reception of large amounts of data, including images. This technological development would automatically stimulate the demand and create a desire for digital images and subsequently generate new marketing opportunities. IHS would benefit from this infrastructure by installing, as many feared, “a tollgate on the information super high-way.”<sup>14</sup> And indeed, by heavily investing into the digitization and the technology for storing and disseminating images, IHS aimed at controlling the anticipated stream of digital images as such. Second, Gates believed that ‘just as software had replaced hardware as technology’s most valuable product, so too would content eventually replace instruction sets as a basis of digital value.’<sup>15</sup> Digital content, be it visual, aural or textual information, would become the capital of information technology. And this capital needed to be amassed.

For Corbis and Getty Images the imperative of the subsequent years was the accumulation of as much visual material as possible to establish a comprehensive collection of images, or as Corbis projected, a ‘digital Alexandria’ or an ‘Encyclopedia Britannica without body text’.<sup>16</sup> The company’s aim was to be ‘*the* place for pictures on

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.; See also: Anne Friedberg, *The virtual window : from Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Jane Lusaka, Susannah Cassedy O’Donnell, and John Strand, “Whose 800-lb. Gorilla Is It?,” *Museum news*. (1996): 34.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Rapaport, “In His Image,” *Wired*, November 1996. Original quotation: But the philosophical underpinning of Interactive Home Systems and its later incarnations - first Continuum, then Corbis – was based on a grander notion: Gates’s belief that just as software had replaced hardware as technology’s most valuable product, so too would content eventually replace instruction sets as the basis of digital value.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

the Internet', assuming that there was a clearly defined amount of images worth owing. The development of a particular thematic grid, or 'gridded territory' (Rose 2000: 564) determined on the images needed to built this place, a place composed of potentially profitable images, and, in view of the prospective clients, a place dominated by American and Western visual regimes and visual histories. To distinguish itself from existing photographic agencies and image banks, the Corbis collection would allow the client to find everything in one place, thus saving time and accounting efforts. However, as the history of Corbis shows, the accumulation of 'virtually anything imaginable'<sup>17</sup> proved to be far more difficult than anticipated and bore unforeseen consequences.

### ***Banking on images***

In the early 1990s, Corbis negotiated non-exclusive licensing rights with photographers and a number of museums to market their collections. The latter seemed particularly appealing: museum collections represented a pre-selection of acclaimed art works certified by the authority of the cultural institution and thus promised to be valuable and profitable.<sup>18</sup> In turn, many museums, especially smaller ones were seeking co-operations with private or institutional partners at the time, as they were aware of the need to engage in the digitization of their holdings for promotion and editing purposes.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the museums were to benefit not only financially from the arrangement, since part of the generated profit was to be shared with Corbis, but also through the indirect promotion of their collections.<sup>20</sup> However, many museums balked, or gave their consent for a very limited period of time, as they feared a loss of control over the use of their holdings especially given that copyright legislation had yet to be adjusted to reflect the rapidly changing technology. The key concern of photographers and institutions was that Corbis initially claimed a separate copyright protection, arguing that the digital reproduction of an artwork or photograph could be considered as fundamentally distinct from its original. Through the potential adjustment of color, brightness, and contrast, the digital reproduction could be interpreted as a unique work of art. In addition, the museums feared that Corbis would take possession and commercialize a wide range of

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<sup>17</sup> David Bearman, "Archival Strategies," *The American Archivist* 58, no. 4 (1995): 261.

<sup>18</sup> "Initially, Corbis wanted only "selected images from selected classis", Swan says. The more they saw, however, the more they wanted. "Then they wanted all the images from the selected classic." See foot note 21, p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Lusaka, Cassedy O'Donnell, and Strand, "Whose 800-lb. Gorilla Is It?". Original quotation: "The reason Corbis is working with museums is because we believe they are a critical element to have in the archive, an asset we will use to make money through re-licensing commercially and making products – such as CD-ROMs – for consumers."

<sup>20</sup> Patricia Failing, "Brave New World Or Just More Profitable?," *ARTnews*. 95, no. 9 (1996): 114.

art works, which were regarded as common property. The company countered these allegations by stating that the copyright protection applied only to the digital image, the visual surrogates of the primary materials produced by Corbis and argued that it was not preventing anyone from reproducing and subsequently disseminating the same original work of art.<sup>21</sup>

At that time, the marketing opportunities for digital images were virtually non-existent. Both, marketing opportunities and the desire for digital images had to be created. The initial product, comprising largely of digital reproductions of artworks, was first directed towards private individuals rather than professionals. It was only later that the company would target the established customers of the picture market, namely advertisers, editors, and designers.

One marketing tool, Corbis's CD-ROM's, such as *A Passion for Art: Renoir, Cezanne, Matisse and Dr. Barnes*, *Volvanos: Life on the Edge* and *Leonardo da Vinci*, were conceived as virtual multimedia exhibitions. Through the licensing of a selection of images, 'students, teachers and surfers' were encouraged to 'create their own documentaries by doing moulded searches.'<sup>22</sup> This description suggests that Corbis had only a vague idea of the potential users and uses of digital images in the beginning. However, the sales figures for the CD-ROMs were hardly satisfying and bore no relation to the considerable financial investments in the digitization and the development of a comprehensive databank system.<sup>23</sup> And, as one might expect, the concept of a separate copyright, the 'divorce from matter' and the appropriation of images through the digital medium was not viable. The amassing of visual content by means of cooperation with museums and photographers proved to be too complicated, too time-consuming and was soon to be abandoned.

From 1995 on, the year that Corbis adopted its name,<sup>24</sup> the company was forced to reconfigure its business model to counter the rights issue and to gain a leading position

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<sup>21</sup> "Whose 800-lb. Gorilla Is It?"; See further reading see also: Barbara T Hoffman, *Exploiting images and image collections in the new media : gold mine or legal minefield?* (London, U.K.; Cambridge, Mass.; London, U.K.: Kluwer Law International ; International Bar Association, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Rapaport, "In His Image." Original quotation: "Students, teachers and surfers would be able to create their own documentaries by doing „moulded searches“.

<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Doug Rowan, former chef executive of Corbis stated that „CD-ROMs technology is seen as an expedient – training for the ultimate transition to online.“ See Rapaport 1966.

<sup>24</sup> The company name Corbis refers to the Latin word 'corbis', meaning basket. The choice of this name can be interpreted as a reference to the 'shopping cart' that will later become the icon of electronic commerce.

in the picture market. What followed was the acquisition of a myriad of photographic collections and the takeover of a wide range of photographic agencies and commercial picture archives. The policy of acquisition and the merger of collections is a common practice in the history of photographic agencies and commercial archives: holding as many pictures as possible is the principle and the catalyst of the picture market. Yet, with the emergence of digital images and the creation of a new industry, the picture market was radically transformed. Owing to their substantial investments, Corbis and Getty Images absorbed a diversity of collections and companies replicating the pre-digital market environment.<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, photographic collections of unparalleled scale emerged.

Corbis' aim was to cover a wide variety of subject areas, including fine arts; political, social and cultural history; entertainment; science and technology. In 1995, Corbis purchased the Bettmann Archive, which had previously merged with United Press International (UPI), which in itself was an amalgam of various collection such as ACME and Pacific & Atlantic; in 1996 the holdings of the agency Sygma, with a corpus of approximately 40 millions images were added, as well as those of various smaller collections, such as the Ansel Adams estate and the Andy Warhol Foundation. Aside from the accumulation of material stock, such as the Bettmann Archive, UPI and Sygma, thereby alleviating problems of copyright, Corbis established several commission contracts for mining institutional collections, among them parts of the prints and photographs collection of the Library of Congress. Interestingly, both Corbis and Getty Images consciously sought out and purchased historic collections of 19th and early 20th century photography, in an attempt to recycle 'visual history' and exploit the vague notion of collective memory. Enriched through time, these photographs were considered highly valuable. They deepened the collection and provided the company with credibility. And with the digitization, these historical photographs gained an added market value – the digital form, and the ability to be used and reused in new and different ways. It is indeed through the digitization that these photographs were integrated into a new economic cycle. Moreover, in order to flesh out the thematic grid,

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<sup>25</sup> In the early 1990s the picture market is composed of a variety of smaller agencies, specialized on specific themes, photojournalistic news agencies as well as stock photography agencies, such as Comstock and The Image Bank, a subcontractor of Eastman Kodak. Stock photography as a genre appeared in the early 1970s. Drawing its name from the concept of producing and storing great quantities of images, stock photography aims at providing inexpensive, often stereotypical pictures, mainly for the advertising industry. Anticipating the radical transformation in the field of communications, Corbis und Getty Images quickly become major competitors on the picture market, as most traditional agencies had underestimated the impact of digitization.

several photographers hired by Corbis set out to systematically capture potentially profitable objects, themes and sites that were yet missing from the collection. Of particularly promising subjects, various views and constellations were photographed: the Eiffel tower during all seasons; by day or by night; as close-up, panoramic or aerial view; with one person, two or more, crowded; in black and white or color, etc. These contemporary photographs added to the purchased photographs of the Eiffel tower in construction, portraits of its engineer, The Eiffel tower during various decades, drawn or painted. Taken together, Corbis pursued the approach of purchasing and commissioning photographs to be able to respond to any given request, and by this, building customer loyalty. According to Corbis's corporate information, the company today represents the work of more than 30,000 photographers and has a stock that totals over 100 million images.<sup>26</sup>

Operating at that time with the largest concentration of high-quality scanners, Corbis engaged in digitizing vast numbers of photographs.<sup>27</sup> In 1996 the digitization of the purchased collections operated at full stretch. Soon, about 1,000,000 scans were at Corbis' disposal; with 40,000 images added each month, the company was scanning around the clock.

As scholars have argued, the digitization and the digital image displayed on the screen reemphasize the illusion of transparency, privileging, once more, the perception of the image content, rather than its context.<sup>28</sup> Digital imaging accentuates an aspect of photography that is indeed an important characteristic of the medium, but one, which may have prevented us from understanding the multiple functions of the medium (Edwards, Hart 2004):<sup>29</sup> that is its quality as a depictive device and as a means of creating multiple reproductions. The seemingly effortless reproducibility of digital images and the ease with which digital information is copied, altered and combined, has prompted the comparison of digital imaging with the idea of reproductive cloning.<sup>30</sup> A concept that may well be invoked by the opening page of the Corbis website of 2002, ultimately pointing to the company's understanding of the medium (*Figure 2*). The microphotography of spermatozoon buzzing in various directions and accompanied by

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<sup>26</sup> See Corbis corporate fact sheet, updated November 2009 [www.corbis.com]. One should bear in mind that these figures remain vague, as this information is essentially addressed to the press.

<sup>27</sup> Scanning technology used : Heidelberg Topaz, Creo Scitex Ever Smart.

<sup>28</sup> Marlene Manoff, "The Materiality of Digital Collections: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 6, no. 3 (2006): 311–325.

<sup>29</sup> Edwards and Hart, *Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction*.

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, "Photogenics/Fotogenik," *Camera Austria*, no. 62–63 (1998): 5–16; Batchen, *Burning with desire*.



the heading 'The possibilities are endless', construes the notion of digital imaging as a quasi-natural resource, endlessly reproducible, endlessly combinable.

### ***The revenge of materiality***

However, while the digital technology certainly accelerated the mobility of images and changed the way images were produced, stored, distributed and viewed, digital imaging was far from being 'inexpensive' and 'immaterial'. Corbis, as many others invested in the digitization, the development and the recycling of historical collections, encountered a myriad of problems, mainly originating in the materiality of photography. These problems related not only to the materiality of the analogue holdings that Corbis had purchased, but also to the materiality of the digital images, an aspect that had been neglected for a long time. It is indeed only since recent years that the myth of the immateriality of digital imaging, and digital holdings in general, has started unraveling. Yet, the materiality of digital images is distributed across many more levels and appears more scattered, and is therefore harder to identify and to interpret. The materiality of digital imaging and its undeniable dependency from the analogue holdings unfold when describing the functioning of Corbis and the problems that the company encountered with the creation of their products.

The initial objective of reproducing 40,000 photographs per months and ultimately reproducing the entire collection was soon curtailed. Not only were the costs for the digitization, including the handling, the indexation, and post-production soaring, but further complications arose from bringing together the different collections and their individual classification systems. Some collections were not necessarily conceived for re-use, information was missing or erroneous, files were lost, the copyright could not be traced or existed under different rights regimes. Corbis, like many others, had misjudged the difficulties in migrating the existing, often very heterogeneous metadata into a new visual database, and underestimated the very importance of both, a well functioning database and the development of an effective search engine. By primarily concentrating on the accumulation of image content and by conceiving the photograph and the digital image merely as two-dimensional resources, the company had underestimated the time and labor needed for turning digital data into a valuable product. Yet, the economic value does not only rely on the image content, but is primarily constituted through the information attributed and the services associated to the image. In other words: in the picture market, the value of a photograph or a digital image is composed of the image content *and* the way it is formed, interpreted, distributed etc., thus, the context it appears in. Both are intertwined and cannot

separated. The 'materialization' of the digital image product, however, is not some kind of automated process, but needs to be carried out for each individual image and relies on the evaluation and interpretation by individuals. The materialization of the digital image is, therefore, not only the precondition for the commercial exploitation, but also for its very existence.

The heavy investment in the purchase of 'content' of the early years was followed by the comprehensive editing of the analogue and the digital material and the development of a 'context'. This process is carried out to this day. The conversion of the holdings into digital form and their development into digital products consist in multiple steps. First the analogue material is thoroughly examined, with duplicates identified. Information related to the photograph (i.e. caption, photographer, copyright) are verified, researched and eventually corrected in order to render the image exploitable. In a second step, the Corbis editors select photographs for the digital reproduction according to their relevance, their re-use and sales potential, and the physical condition of the analogue negatives and prints. The photographs are digitized as highquality scans of approximately 60MB, serving as the raw, uncropped version. This master file is considered the 'original' digital file. The actual visual products are modified and resized versions of the raw scan. Formatted in different dimensions, they are available as low-resolution image for 'Web & Mobile', as small, medium, or large size images. The image resolution, thus, infuses the intended end product and their potential uses. Following the digitization and the formatting, all available text information is incorporated into the electronic file, including the caption, the provenance, the available sizes as well as the copyright. The attribution of categories and the detailed indexing of the image are carried out by the editor and the indexing department. Thus, reflecting the methods of the traditional picture market, the creation of a digital image product is embedded in a detailed production process built upon the idea of economic efficiency and the division of labor. Finally, the digital images products are displayed on the Corbis website, the virtual picture store, searchable and retrievable in different formats and at varying prices.

In the display of the individual images on the Corbis website, the digitized photograph takes up approximately half of the screen surface and appears in combination with all sorts of information listed as 'Image details'. *Massive Crowd on Beach at Coney Island* (Figure 3), for example, a black and white image of a crowded beach by the American news photographer Arthur H. Fellig (Weegee) is accompanied by information on the image category (archival), the historical collection the image belongs to (Bettmann), a condensed and more detailed 'original' caption and the digital archive number. The

location (Brooklyn, New York, USA) and the photographer (Weegee) are hyperlinked, referring to the image classification and the searchable keywords. Special emphasis is put on the indication of the copyright, be it in the form of the digital watermark inserted into the image or information concerning the model and property release. The image, placed on the right-hand side, is framed by a dark grey background, evoking, though inversed, the viewing mode of a light table supported by the luminosity of the computer screen. Besides, the configuration of the screen design, combining both image and text, reminds the design of accession cards used in library or museum collections. The various information accompanying the image and its prominent display points to an essential, yet strangely ignored aspect: one does not search for an image, but for the text associated with the image. Reflecting the archival structure, image query tools have always been, and still are, largely based on text. Hence, the image *Massive Crowd on Beach at Coney Island* is visualized and materializes through the textual information associated to it. The image echoes the information attributed to the image, deduced from the analogue object, and its interpretation.

As with digital holdings in general, the materiality of digital images is furthermore articulated through the supporting structures required for the archiving, the display and the distribution of the products. As Manoff and others have argued, 'We access electronic texts and data with machines made of metal, plastic, and polymer. Networks compose of fiber optic cables, wired, switches, routers, and hubs enable us to acquire and make available our electronic collections.'<sup>31</sup> It is especially the acute energy consumption for the maintenance of the servers, hosting large digital image collections, which has become not only a growing cost factor, but is also increasingly raising ecological concerns.

On a more abstract level, the rhetoric employed by Corbis for advertising their products and services may also be seen as indirectly contributing to their materialization, infusing them with value. Interestingly, this rhetoric oscillated for many years between two concepts: between the appreciation of the photograph as an object with a particular genealogy on the one hand, and the two-dimensional endlessly reproducible and 'a-historical' image on the other hand. In its search for a functioning business model and business philosophy, Corbis deliberately positioned itself between philanthropy and business, as evidenced by the visual and verbal rhetoric used by the company.

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<sup>31</sup> Manoff, "The Materiality of Digital Collections," 312.

In *The Road Ahead* Gates argues against the concerns of museums regarding the uncontrolled proliferation of digital images by claiming that the 'exposure to the reproductions is likely to increase rather than diminish reverence for real art and encourage more people to get out to the museums and galleries.'<sup>32</sup> This argument recalls André Malraux's idea of the 'Musée Imaginaire' (Museums without Walls) and the potential of photography as a medium for studying and popularizing art.<sup>33</sup> Yet, as Doug Rowan, the former CEO of Corbis stresses in an interview from 1996: 'This is not a 'not-for-profit' organization'<sup>34</sup>. And Bill Gates is no altruist. Tellingly, the allusion to the concept of the library appears repeatedly. The coined reference to the Library of Alexandria, for instance was eagerly picked up by the media during the mid-1990s, picturing that '[Corbis] may swell into the world's most comprehensive digital reserve of the imagery of mankind.'<sup>35</sup> For the magazine *Wired*, 'Corbis is more than the ultimate digital stock image house. It may be the first online, for-profit library'. In turn, Corbis viewed itself as 'the prototype of an all-content-on-demand, public access, private library',<sup>36</sup> further blurring the line between public and private ambition.

Corbis used the idea of the library as an institution dedicated to the public by turning it into a tool of its own self-promotion, and as a catalyst for the digitization. However, the functioning of the company and in particular the organization of its holdings clearly contradicts this idea. First, it benefits stakeholders and not the general public. Second, the Corbis digital archive is not structured according to the metonymic principle of the library, the 'Nebeneinander' of elements (juxtaposition), but operates with a hierarchical system, as will be developed later on.

Yet, Corbis does not use this cultural vocabulary for mere marketing purposes. With the references to the Library at Alexandria and the idea of the Museum without Walls, and particularly the liberation and promotion of the work of art through the digital reproduction, the company seeks to legitimize its business model. The digitization as a technological invention, one strongly supported and developed by Corbis as well as Getty Images, is framed within a wider cultural history of technological innovation. These efforts of legitimization emerge at a time, the mid 1990s, when the commercial benefit of digital reproduction, namely its sales potential is still purely hypothetical, and

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<sup>32</sup> Gates, Myhrvold, and Rinearson, *The road ahead*, 259.

<sup>33</sup> André Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 123. English translation: The reproduction does not compete with the masterpiece: it evokes or suggests it] „La reproduction ne rivalise pas avec le chef-d'oeuvre présent: elle l'évoque ou le suggère."

<sup>34</sup> Rapaport, "In His Image."

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

at a time of considerable unease with regard to the new technology. This dichotomy and the appropriation of collective memories becomes evident with the illustration for a *Newsweek* article, showing a color negative of then Corbis CEO, operating a view camera directed towards us, the spectator (*Figure 4*). With this representation Corbis explicitly seeks to position its efforts not only into a history of photographic techniques. It also creates a clearly delineated, rather plain, but reassuring visual narrative of human and political achievement, arts and entertainment, deeply entrenched in Western visual history. Corbis mobilizes cultural history as a marketing strategy to legitimize its policy and, by this, alleviating anxieties on the consequences of a new technology. It also mobilizes cultural history to counter the widespread criticism on the appropriation and control exerted by Corbis, and private companies in general, over visual cultural heritage.

However, in addition to the soaring costs for the development of viable products and the archiving, Corbis experienced additional problems with the market for digital images itself. As mentioned earlier, the demand for digital images was developing rather slowly. The transition from a business relying on the service and the direct contact between the client and the agency editor to an electronic commerce based on the individual search and the electronic delivery faced considerable resistance, especially among professionals. This resistance also resulted from the fact that this shift threatened to, and indeed did, significantly reduce the number of picture editors and, thus, replace an established profession.

As the example of Corbis shows, the materiality of digital imaging manifests itself in the visible and invisible metadata attributed to the images, the copyright, as well as the software and the hardware required for their archiving and distribution. The characterization of photography as a 'multilayered laminated object', as suggested by Joanna Sasson and others, could therefore also be applied to digital imaging.<sup>37</sup> It is especially the merging of collections and the development of digital imaging products that surfaced the various layers of photographic materiality. And although digital imaging may be perceived or considered as flat or ephemeral, it produces 'matter' that is indeed material when considering the substantial investments needed for the development of digital imaging products, the maintenance of the collection as well as the efforts put into the conservation of the digital data. What also becomes evident is that a digital image does not have a value in itself, but needs to be 'materialized' to

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<sup>37</sup> Sasson, "Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction," 186.

become valuable. Yet, this value, or ‘exchange value’<sup>38</sup> and the conversion of an image into a ‘visual currency’<sup>39</sup> depends on the development of a demand and of market structures, but developing these structures proved to be arduous, complicated and time consuming.

The Corbis example also reveals – and this is also valid for others archives and collections, be it in the commercial or the institutional context – that the digitization does not replace the analogue holdings, but forms parallel archives. The digital archive is not a replica but rather a ‘trace’ of the archive. It establishes its own archival paradigm by distinguishing between a digital ‘master’ file and various compressed versions, between the ‘original’ and the ‘copy’. Thus, on the one hand Corbis preserves the analogue holdings (such as the Bettmann Archive, UPI and Sygma) *and* maintains a digital archive. In the case of Corbis, which transferred its analogue holdings to Iron Mountain, a specialized long-term preservation facility located in a former limestone mine in rural Pennsylvania (*Figure 5*) in 2001, the digitization has resulted in the geographic divide between the conservation and archiving of photographs, and the circulation and distribution of their digital surrogates. Yet, the artifact does not become obsolete with the digitization. It is quite the contrary. The information related to the photographic object, in particular the copyright indication, and its initial context and use are crucial for their very existence in digital form and a precondition for building a product from digital data.

### Finding pictures

From a total of 100 million photographs owned or managed by Corbis, ‘only’ four million pictures are displayed on the website today, which drastically reduces the number of visible and circulating images belonging to the Corbis collections.

The question of accessibility is indeed pivotal. On the one hand this question relates, of course, to the control and the ‘authority’ of the archive. On the other hand, the archival systems providing access and allowing the fast retrieval of the holdings are an essential part of the economic potential of archiving. In the commercial context, an image is worthless, if it cannot be found quickly. And an image is non-existent, if it cannot be found at all. Thus, the economic potential of archiving relies not only on the

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<sup>38</sup> Edwards and Hart, *Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> *The burden of representation : essays on photographs and histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

accumulation and long-term storage of holdings, but is also reflected in the various tools and methods for managing and accessing a collection. The history of image query tools is particularly illuminating with regard to photographic agencies and commercial image archives, as their business is largely based on the pertinence and the fast retrieval of their holdings.

In the past, the service of image providers consisted of searching for and filtering a selection of pictures according to the clients' needs. Essential to this, was the specific knowledge of the archivists and editors that derives from dealing with a collection on an every-day basis. In the case of digital archives, however, it is the client himself, who performs this task with the help of electronic search engines. Consequently, the primary concern and, and the very problem for commercial image suppliers lies in rendering their products as accessible as possible and in navigating the client through the vast quantity, the visual oversupply, the plethora of digital images. The challenge for Corbis with its four millions digital holdings, as with most digital archives, is displaying, on the one hand, the abundance of the collection and the variety of images the company has to offer. On the other hand, the search engines must provide not only a relevant selection, but must find *the* image.

The development of editing and managing tools for these massive picture collections, namely the development of electronic databases and efficient, user-friendly search engines is not a straight story forward success, but one of continuous experimentation and slow progress. The changing interfaces and search mechanism of the Corbis website bears witness to this process. The search field for entering keywords for instance, was integrated rather late, in 1999, two years after the launch of the first Corbis website, which mainly functioned as a billboard for the company's URL address. (*Figure 6*) The advanced search options appear more prominently on the portal in the design of 2002 and developed into a multi-optional search field, as shows the current website, combining the search by keywords with search options related to the location, date, photographer, collection, availability, copyright and formats, among others (*Figure 7*). To respond to different search scenarios, the client is given several options to access and search the collection. With its menu unfolding and the various fields and boxes, the present interface indeed reminds of a form, or control board, if not a mixing console. Corbis' quest for an evermore efficient search engine points not only to the difficulties in finding images, especially with regard to the radical increase in digital image production; it also demonstrates that image research tools are becoming more important than ever in the accessing and use of digital image archives.

Yet, regardless of the on-going improvement on the search options and the revision of metadata, the Corbis database and the search engine are far from being flawless. The search results often generate a too broad selection lacking pertinence and include repetition. While this is due to the sheer quantity of images corresponding to the image query, it also results from the fact that each image is conceived and treated individually within the digital archive, not considering if it formerly belonged to a series of photographs of one object, topic or event. Moreover, the photographic image has, paradoxically, proven to be quite resistant to its indexing and retrieval, although it has widely shaped archival practices as an efficient medium of information storage. The polysemic nature of photographs, and visual representations in general, often hinders unambiguous classification, especially with regard to large collections.

In recent years, Corbis and other companies involved in digital information and image management have therefore developed additional tools and methods for structuring the data overload. While the continuous efforts in developing a mechanism capable of recognizing the image content by means of color and form are still in progress, Corbis is structuring its vast visual corpus through the rating of images. The rating is hidden to the person accessing the digital archive. The images are assessed with regard to their sales potential and accumulated revenue, to their present-day relevance and artistic quality. Besides the labeling with a basic category, among others fine arts, archival or entertainment,<sup>40</sup> the editor ranks an image according to one of the five levels: the highest rating carries the abbreviation SS for 'Super Showcase'.<sup>41</sup> The rating of the images has become a crucial tool for structuring the masses of images, as it determines the order in which the search results are displayed on the website.

With the creation of a rating system and other marketing tools to highlight certain collections, the digital archive functions according to a hierarchical system. This system replaces the metonymic system, the principle of the library, which characterizes the analogue photographic archive. However, in an attempt to counterbalance the effects of this hierarchization, that is the reduction of the 'visible' digital holdings, and in order to underline the depth and variety of the Corbis collections, the search engine mixes

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<sup>40</sup> Corbis distinguishes between two major categories, that is "creative" and "editorial". There exist two subcategories for "creative" pictures, namely Rights Managed and Royalty Free and five subcategories for "editorial": documentary, fine arts, archival, current events and entertainment. See also Frosh, Paul. *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry*. Berg Publishers, 2003 and Bruhn, Mattias. *Bildwirtschaft: Verwaltung Und Verwertung Der Sichtbarkeit*. Weimar: VDG, Verlag, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> The different levels are marked SS (Super-Showcase), S (Showcase), B, C, D; most pictures belong to first three categories.



different picture categories, be it documentary, archival, current events, entertainment, etc., and includes lower-rated images along with 'picture gems'<sup>42</sup>.

Reflecting the industry's current development, Corbis also works on the widespread 'profiling' of its customers and the analysis of search behaviors. With the access to the Corbis website and the image inquiry, and in particular through the registration, the researcher or client leaves numerous traces behind, also referred to as the 'digital footprint'. These traces are analyzed in order to keep track of the client, but more importantly to automatically anticipate his potential request, his 'taste' and consumer attitude. While one may argue that the profiling enhances the navigation, it is also seriously challenging the paradigm of the archive. Because, instead of providing more or less unbiased and universally valid search results, the results are shaped according to the individual client. The results, the visualization of the images, are the sum of one's previous inquiries and search behaviors. This also means that, to some extent, the client is mirroring himself in each image or piece of information requested. As part of this individualization of the results of an archival request, the displayed selection is furthermore molded according to the client's specific location, i.e. accessing the Corbis website from the United Kingdom compared to France, for instance, influences the search and its results. Consequently, electronic databases and search engines are in the process of developing from a simple text based documentation to a multilayered mechanism of visible and invisible information and metadata, and of predetermined choices and decisions.

In consequence, Corbis, as any commercial archive in the digital age, exerts control over its collection in two ways. First, it controls the access to its analogue collection by deciding on what is digitized and what remains only in an analogue form. In this respect, the digitization may be regarded 'as an insidiously repressing technology, enabling institutional control over what is made accessible'<sup>43</sup> With this in mind, it was especially the transfer of the analogue holdings to the remote preservation facility Iron Mountain that was widely condemned in the media and in the writings and works of artists.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Gary Hayes, "Under Iron Mountain. Corbis Stores 'Very Important Photographs' at Zero Degrees Fahrenheit," *National Press Photographer's Association*, n.d., [http://www.nppa.org/news\\_news\\_and\\_events/2005/01/corbis\\_cave.html](http://www.nppa.org/news_news_and_events/2005/01/corbis_cave.html). Original quotation: Several freezers currently protect 28,000 "Very Important Photographs" at zero degrees Fahrenheit, including some famous gems like "Albert Einstein Sticking out his tongue" and "Marilyn Monroe Having Skirt Trouble on a Subway Grate."

<sup>43</sup> Sasson, "Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction," 187.

<sup>44</sup> See the most prominent works addressing the issue: Hal Foster, "The Archive without Museums," *October* 77 (1996): 97–119; Batchen, "Photogenics/Fotogenik"; Allan Sekula, "Between the Net and the

Given the geographical location, this transfer theoretically limited access to the analogue holdings and reduced the 'visible' pictures to those selected for digitization. An idiosyncratic search, vital to any scientific examination of the collection is thus considerably limited. Moreover, the disproportion between the digitized and non-digitized holdings is rather unlikely to improve, since Corbis has shifted, like many others, from the systematic digitization to more careful and selected projects, such as the digitization of card catalogues and reverse sides of photographs as well as the digitization on demand.<sup>45</sup> Second, the control is wielded through the search engine. The current development shows that the control over a collection is exercised not only by controlling the digital technology, but also the technology to render a collection accessible through the programming of a search engine – 'a power that has equal potential to be democratizing and passive, or repressive and active'.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the question about the 'ownership of the printing press' that determined 'the politics of the use and the access to the images'<sup>47</sup> has shifted towards the technology used for finding and searching for images.

Today, the references to a 'digital Alexandria' have been dropped from the Corbis business rhetoric. One reason for this may be that the visual content providers face tough competition from a new generation of digital image archives, such as Flickr, Google Images, Facebook and Youtube. In under five years, the picture sharing website Flickr, for instance, has accumulated more than four billion digital images provided by and exchanged among their users.<sup>48</sup> Many professional photographers and public

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Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs)," *October* 1, no. 102 (2002): 3–34. Further note artworks by Alfredo Jaar: *Lament of the Images* (2002), installation work displayed at Documenta XI, Kassel, 2002 and Ines Schaber: *Culture is our business* (2004), photographs and dia-projection presented in the framework of the group exhibition "No Matter How Bright the Light, the Crossing Occurs at Night" at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Corbis solicited a group of photography conservators to develop a preservation plan to stop the deterioration process of large numbers of negatives. In keeping with this plan, in 2002 Corbis transferred the Bettmann Archive and UPI files to Iron Mountain, an underground storage facility located in a former limestone mine north of Pittsburgh. The information protection and storage company, also called Iron Mountain, holds the documents and data of approximately 2,300 clients, including government departments, private companies as well as libraries, museums and media corporations. Temperature and humidity controls ensure the long-term preservation of the analogue materials. For a selection of approximately 28,000 'icons of photography' – a set of vintage negatives of bestselling and best known pictures – the preservation plan foresees storage at -4 degrees Fahrenheit, thereby freezing the negatives. The preservation plan for the Bettmann Archive and UPI was also the model for the long-term preservation project, Sygma Initiative. The analogue archive of the former picture news agency is preserved in Garnay, in Paris since April 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Sasson, "Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction," 187.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> [<http://www.flickr.com>].

institutions use Flickr for promoting their collections, and since 2008 Flickr has been in cooperation with Getty Images in the area of image licensing. But as the example of Flickr shows: lacking the archival authority (in the form of consistent classification and indexing), the problem of finding a specific image has become even more complex.<sup>49</sup>

### ***The in/discipline of the archive***

In conclusion, one may claim that the efforts and difficulties encountered by Corbis in establishing a commercial archive and turning it into a profitable business exemplifies what scholarship has characterized as the 'in/discipline of the archive' (Rose 2000: 567). This in/discipline reveals itself in the materiality of both, the analogue and the digital form and the idea that a photograph cannot be conceived without taking into account its performance within the archive as well as the fact that an archival system is predicated on the manual efforts of the archivists and editors, and by extension, their know-how and rigor. This rather fragile dimension of the archive tends to be covered by and contradicts the concept of an archive as a robust, authoritative body.<sup>50</sup> This fragility may also point to the discrepancy between the notion of a quasi-automated, ideal (and idealized) archive and to the actual practice of the archive, especially in a commercial environment. Being an eclectic compilation of collections and lacking the institutional authority, the Corbis digital archive has no epistemic value per se. Through the abundance of styles, themes and categories (*Figure 8*) and the individualization of search results it becomes a serendipitous juxtaposition of images, an archive of 'everything' that is potentially marketable and that has been sold in the past, reflecting and nourishing the notion of taste in consumer culture. The sheer impossibility in setting boundaries and creating a narrative impairs on the essential function and purpose of an archive, that of 'making sense'. Yet, the Corbis endeavor informs about how the reproducibility of photography repeatedly activates the fantasy of the archive; about the ways by which photographs and digital images are transformed into commodities; about the economic potential of reproducing and archiving, and the ambiguity of photography as an object and as a medium of the archive.

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<sup>49</sup>One would certainly need to question if the concept of the archive applies with regard to the participatory websites mentioned in this paragraph. See André Gunthert, "L'Image Partagée," *Études Photographiques*, no. 24 (November 2009), <http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/index2832.html>.

<sup>50</sup> See also Allan Sekula, "The body and the archive," in *The Contest of meaning: critical histories of photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); Foster, "The Archive without Museums."

Figures



Figure 1: Louie Psihoyos, "The Information Revolution. 500 monitors", 2003 © Louie Psihoyos



Figure 2: Corbis website, Nov 3, 2002 © Courtesy: Archive.org

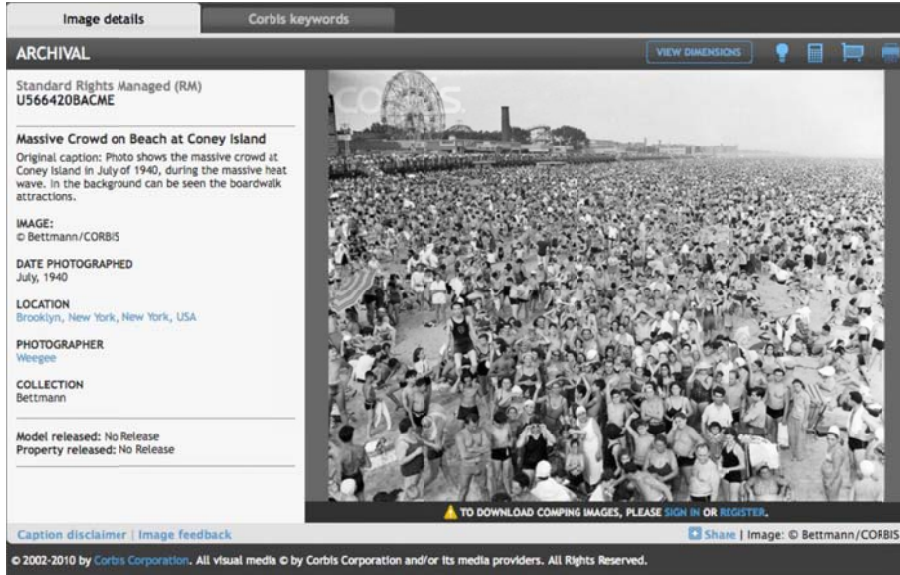


Figure 3: Weegee, “Massive Crowd on Beach at Coney Island”, 1940 © Bettmann/Corbis



Figure 4: Doug Rowan, former Corbis CEO, in: Kate Hafner, Picture this, Newsweek, 26.06.1996 © Jayne Wexler





Figure 5: Sylvia Otte, Corbis Corp., Iron Mountain Preservation Facility, Boyers, Pennsylvania, 2003



Figure 6: First Corbis website, April 5, 1997

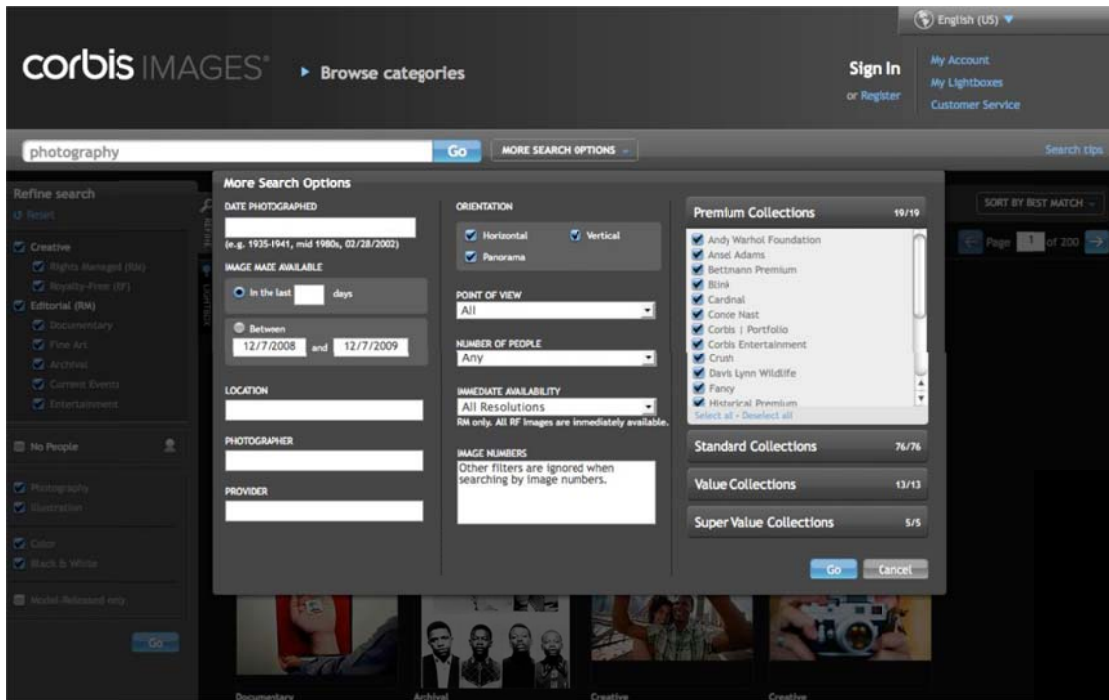


Figure 7: Corbis website, advanced search options, November 12, 2009

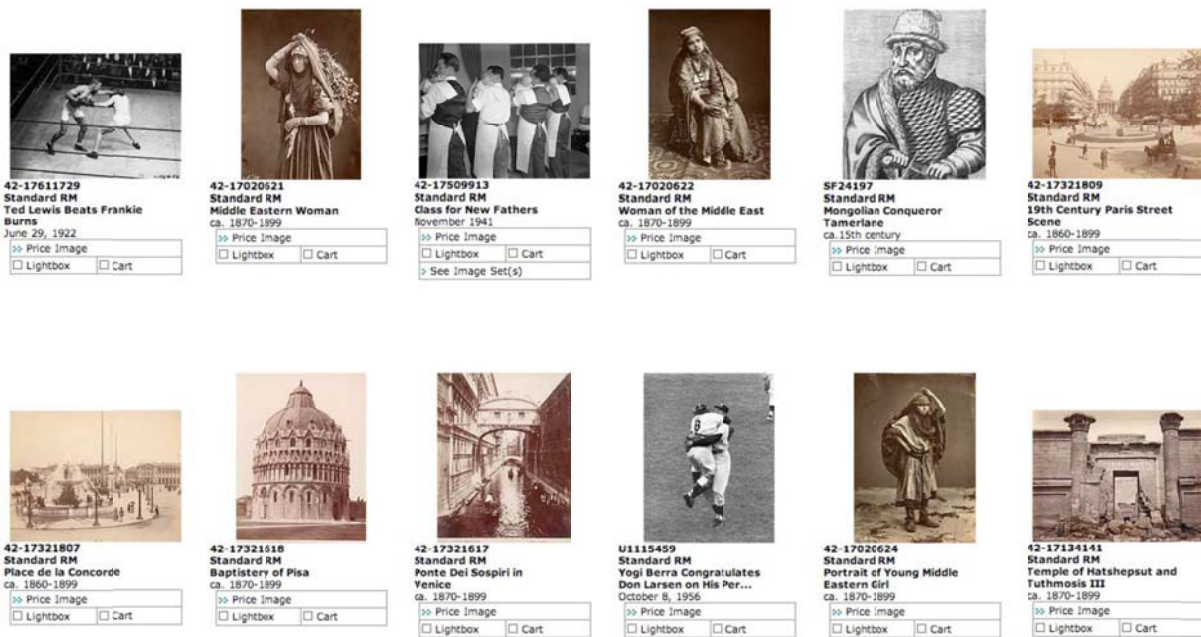


Figure 8: Corbis website, detail 'Standard Archival Collection', June 2008

## “FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHY AND MEMORY: SHIFTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART”

Nina Velasco e Cruz

### **Abstract:**

This article aims to use an analysis of three works by contemporary artists to discuss the complex relationship between family photographs and memory when removed from their everyday family context and placed in the field of art. One of the best-known social functions of photography is to serve as an aid to individual and collective memory. This becomes even more evident in the case of family photographs, which help construct a chronological narrative for a particular family group. However, what happens when these images are taken from their usual contexts (be it the homes of family members or museums and archives of daily life) to become part of works of art? This article will use the works *Bibliotheca* (2002) by Rosangela Rennó; *I am my Family* (2008) by Rafael Goldchain and *Time Capsule* (1997) by Eduardo Kac to reflect on how contemporary art can reveal new perspectives for this type of photographic practice.

### **Introduction:**

The discussion of the artistic nature of photography and its insertion into the field of fine art dates back to the birth of the technology. Walter Benjamin, in his classic essay (1987) written to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the invention of photography, gives a brief history of the discourse surrounding the heated debate on the new technique's legitimacy as an artistic tool. Clearly this is no longer a valid question today, a century and a half later, with the very concept of art having undergone significant changes (as Benjamin himself foresaw when writing on the impact of reproductive technologies, among them photography, on artistic works) and with modern art institutions long having dedicated substantial space to this kind of imagery.

Recently, the important role played by photography in contemporary art has been the subject of much discussion, leading some authors to consider the photograph as a metaphor or synonym<sup>1</sup> of contemporary artistic practice. For some authors, photography

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<sup>1</sup> Phillipe Dubois, *O Ato Fotográfico* (Campinas: Papyrus, n.d.); Andre Rouillé, *A Fotografia: Entre Documento e Arte Contemporânea*, Senac São Paulo. (São Paulo, 2009); Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph As Contemporary Art 2e*, 2nd Revised ed. (Thames and Hudson, 2009); François Soulages, *Estética Da Fotografia - Perda e Permanência*, Senac São Paulo. (São Paulo, 2010).



is not just a legitimate artistic technique, but also a synthesis of the aesthetic process that governs the entire production of contemporary art. Here, we are not referring to works by photographers who are considered artists or photographs gaining prestige as works of art (as seems to have happened in the 50s, after Steichen held the first major exhibition entirely dedicated to photography at the MOMA), but rather, and most importantly, the various hybrid practices that benefit from the logic of photography, with or without the images that result from this technique.

However, the reverse of this argument has been little explored: how can some works of contemporary art help us to reflect on the practice of vernacular photography? What happens when photographs, originally taken with no artistic pretensions in a home and family environment, are shifted to the context of the institution of art? More specifically, how do well-established social practices such as domestic photography and family albums gain new meaning when recontextualized by contemporary artists?

Several authors have pointed out the existence of a "memory culture" in current society, which can be seen through the recurrence of retro fashions, the restoration and revitalization of historical centers and the proliferation of documentaries and biographies, among many other examples<sup>2</sup>. In the field of contemporary art, it is also possible to identify a series of works that give prominence to the issue of memory, many of these using photographs. Christian Boltanski is an example of a world-renowned and consensual artist who has done just this.

The article outlines some thoughts regarding the complex relationship between family photographs and memory from the unconventional perspectives adopted by artists who work with this subject. Since the 60s, a number of artists have, in fact, been working in this direction<sup>3</sup>. From the vast amount of works available, we shall choose three artists who each use different strategies in their works, providing us with the scope to develop different theoretical and conceptual questions for artistic and photographic practice.

In *Bibliotheca*, Rosangela Rennó presents an installation made up of 37 acrylic tables, within which photographic albums are displayed with a description of their origin and

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<sup>2</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Seduzidos Pela Memória – Arquitetura, Monumentos, Mídia* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 2000); Beatriz Sarlo, *Siete Ensayos Sobre Walter Benjamin*, ed. (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008); J LeGoff, *História e Memória* (São Paulo: Editora da Unicamp, n.d.); Éric Méchoulan, *La culture de la mémoire, ou, Comment se débarrasser du passé?* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 23.

date. On the walls of the gallery, a *mapa-mundi* shows the geographical locations where these albums were acquired by the artist. Also forming part of the installation is a metal archive cabinet containing catalog cards describing the content of each album as well as providing more detailed information about their history. Visitors to the exhibition do not have access to the interior of the albums, merely this verbal descriptive archive. Here we can already discern some reflections on the relationship between family albums and memory as well as between photographic images, narration, memory and imagination.

In *I am my family*, Rafael Goldchain presents a series of self-portraits created based on old photographs of his family. Descendant of a Jewish family from Poland, Rafael Goldchain (born in Argentina and living in Canada) seeks to recreate family ties lost over the course of his personal history through these photographs of his family predecessors. The images that make up the piece are highly theatrical, visibly posed and all with more or less the same type of aesthetic, inspired by the style of early twentieth-century portraits. Here, questions about representation, simulation or "playing", portraits and memory are raised in an original and relevant manner.

*Time-Capsule* by Eduardo Kac is a performance piece, which was televised live, in which the artist inserts a chip containing personal information in the form of a bar code into his own ankle. Kac then registers himself with a satellite monitoring service normally used for tracking endangered animals. On the walls of the gallery room, nine sepia photographs are displayed showing members of his family enjoying leisure time in Poland, prior to the war, which resulted in their death or exile. Through this work the artist articulates concepts such as virtual memory, post-memory and control in contemporary society.

### **Family albums and memory: Bibliotheca**

If, on one hand, we can say that, since its invention, photography and memory have always been linked, on the other, we cannot say that photography is memory<sup>4</sup>. However, one of the main functions of domestic photography is to serve as a memory aid for the family group. Family photo albums help to construct an individual and

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget me not photography & remembrance* (Amsterdam; New York: Van Gogh Museum ; Princeton Architectural Press, 2004); Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*.

collective identity through the references created by the images and the oral narrative that accompanies them<sup>5</sup>.

The practice of organizing photos into albums goes back to photography's very beginnings. The first commercial photo albums, however, only appeared with the popularization of portrait photography following the invention of Disdéri's *cartes-de-visite*. From 1860, these albums began to contain studio-produced images and become part of the furniture of bourgeois family living rooms<sup>6</sup>. With the emergence of the so-called "Kodak culture"<sup>7</sup> in the early twentieth century, family albums lost their ostentatious nature and began to be filled with snapshots of everyday life. Nevertheless, the logic of the collector was still apparent, with rare moments such as parties, vacations, rites of passage etc. being the subject of focus. Despite having undergone several changes during its century of existence, the album remains a privileged place for constructing the family narrative, acting as a memory aid for the individual members.

However, when family albums leave the private domain of the family, the historical family environment and the web of relations and knowledge from which they originate, the way in which they are interpreted changes and they now become a figuration of a particular era<sup>8</sup>. In the context of "memory culture", these photographs are now found in iconographic museum collections, which aim to safeguard the visual memory of the mores of the time, place and culture from which they came, or are even sold and consumed in antique fairs as relics or objects to be collected and adored.

Rosangela Rennó is admittedly a collector. One of her obsessions is to collect family albums of anonymous subjects, purchased in public markets in the cities she visits on her travels. The installation *Bibliotheca* uses part of this collection in an unusual and disconcerting way. The artist places dozens of photo albums in acrylic display cases, reproducing the covers on the top of these cases. The public can see the materiality of the albums through the sides of the display cases, but is prevented from touching them, as is often the case in exhibitions of historical documents. Their covers, however, give us clues as to the era and subject of each album, alluding to the intimate repertoire of the public, whose families possibly have similar looking albums or who have flicked

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<sup>5</sup> Martha Langford, "Speaking the Album," in *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, ed. Annette Kuhn and Kirsten McAllister (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, The Public and The Politics of Sentiment* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Langford, "Speaking the Album," 23.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot versions of life* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Miriam L. Moreira Leite, *Retratos De Família: Leitura Da Fotografia Histórica* (São Paulo: Edusp, 1993).

through similar albums of others. The metal archive cabinet that forms part of the installation offers information on each album: quantity of pages and photos, state of conservation and a narrative created from the images. It is unknown whether this narrative is fictitious or true, but it is the only means for us to catch a glimpse of the photos that are in front of us, but to which we are denied access.



View of instalation Bibliotheca (2002), Rosangela Rennó

Martha Langford, in her analysis of the collection of photo albums at the McCord Museum of Canadian History<sup>9</sup>, highlights the importance that oral narration plays in this social practice. An album functions as a memory aid for a narration and its structure resembles more the logic of oral discourse than the linearity that governs written discourse. In her research, Langford collects several interviews prompted by albums about which there is little known information beyond the images themselves contained within. Despite not necessarily corresponding to the original history that gave rise to each album, all interviewees were able to create coherent narratives connecting the images presented with their own personal memories.

One can assume that the records describing the history of each album displayed in the gallery are the product of Rosangela Rennó's subjective reading of the photos they contain. The public is led to share this reading, but also to create a remembrance of

<sup>9</sup> *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums.*

their own through the images formed by the artist's narrative. Here we have a two-way street: the photographic images generate verbal images that generate mental images. Memory and imagination, two similar mental processes<sup>10</sup>, are triggered at the same time, blurring the line where one starts and the other ends. When reading the imaginary narration created by Rennó from the photos, the observer creates mental images corresponding to his or her own memory.

Thus, the collection of albums presented by Rosangela Rennó goes further towards realizing the universalizing intention underlying every collection project by omitting the particularity of the photographic images and by using the memory of each subject/observer to multiply the potential images they can depict. Unlike the humanistic universalism present in Edward Steichen's famous exhibition *The Family of Man*, in which the great variety of images (taken in various countries from all continents) aims to highlight the similarity that characterizes human nature, Rennó's collection seeks to achieve universality through the sum of all differences, leaving each individual the task of creating their own images.

### ***I am my family: "this-has-been-played" or "this-has-been"?***

Roland Barthes' view of photography is already well known from the two texts the author wrote on the subject (*The Photographic Message* and *Camera Lucida*). If at first, Barthes shows he is still strongly committed to the structuralist method by asserting that photography is a message without code, the book written in the style of an essay that seeks to further explore his thoughts on photography proves somewhat less categorical. Deliberately devoid of a systematic and reductive methodology, *Camera Lucida* proposed a method to balance the debate between the subjective and the scientific that, for Barthes, would not resolve the issue of that specific object: the photograph. Despite believing that the nature of photography lies in its referential power, summarized in the *noema* "ça a été" ("that-has-been"), this essence was only revealed from a single private photograph (so private that it was never shown to the public), the "only photo that in fact existed" for the author<sup>11</sup>. For all the criticism received by what would be the "essentialist view" of Roland Barthes<sup>12</sup>, this reference to his book constantly appears in

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Warnock, "Memory: The Triumph over Time," *MLN* 109, no. 5 (1994): 940.

<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (Fontana, 1984), 109.

<sup>12</sup> John Tagg, "What Do the Images Do", Winter 1998; Antonio Fatorelli, *Fotografia e Viagem: Entre a Natureza e o Artificio* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 2003); Martin Lister, *La Imagen Fotográfica En La Cultura Digital / The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (Barcelona: Paidós Iberica Ediciones S a, 1997).

studies on family photographs<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps this is precisely because it was a family photograph of his mother aged five with her brother in a winter garden that provided the key to constructing his ontology.

François Soulages, in his bid to find what would be the "photographic aesthetic", however, suggests the Barthesian *noema* be amended. He believes photography is not characterized by "that-has-been", but rather by "*ça a été joué*" ("that-has-been-played")<sup>14</sup>. The author uses Cameron's work to highlight the theatrical nature of every depicted object. From what he calls the "aesthetic of the portrait and the 'playing'", in which theatricalization is an "unavoidable" process<sup>15</sup>, Soulages aims to arrive at a "general aesthetic of 'that-has-been-played'"<sup>16</sup>, which characterizes the entire aesthetic of photography. The work by Rafael Goldchain causes us to reflect on the boundaries between "that-has-been" and "that-has-been-played".

Goldchain tells us that this work arose from a desire to pass on his cultural family heritage to his youngest child. Born into a Jewish family in Poland that spread out around several American countries during the persecution following World War I, Goldchain spent his childhood and adolescence in Santiago, Chile, in a secular family in which little was said about the past. As an adult, Rafael emigrated twice, first to Israel where he attended a Zionist university and later to Canada in order to study art and photography. The artist himself ascribes his preoccupation with the question of identity and his origins to this condition of exile<sup>17</sup>.

The one hundred self-portraits that comprise *I am my family* are part of this research. From a handful of family portraits recovered from relatives spread out in several countries and his own memories and post-memories, the artist creates a kind of family typology. He represents various characters, some entirely imaginary, inspired by stories told by his parents, and others based on the few photographs of his ancestors that he has managed to recover. Despite the characters featured being convincingly represented (clothes, makeup, pose, accessories, post-production all very believable), at no time is the observer led to believe in the veracity of these photographs. The theatricality is explicit, both due to the neutral backdrop against which the artist poses and the contemporary nature of the photographs. No effort has been made to make the

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<sup>13</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*; Rose, *Doing Family Photography*.

<sup>14</sup> Soulages, *Estética Da Fotografia - Perda e Permanência*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–71.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Raphael Goldchain, *I Am My Family*, 2008, 16–18.

photos look aged. It is immediately obvious that these are recent photographs.<sup>18</sup> Even the title of the exhibition serves to remove any doubts: we are facing the artist himself, as the first person pronoun indicates.



Self-portrait as Doña Balbina Baumfeld Szpiegel de Rubinstein (2008), Rafael Goldchain

Here, the simulation or "playing" of these photos evinces a much-debated process concerning memory: the fact that it does not necessarily correspond to that which happened<sup>19</sup>. Photography and memory can be misleading, but not deceitful. What matters is not the faithfulness of the image (mental or photographic) with the past event, but the imaginative and emotional connection between the two. It was not just any photograph that reunited Barthes with his mother; only that particular photo formed this connection. In the case of Goldchain's self-portraits, we are aware that we are not

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<sup>18</sup> In other works, such as *Amor e Felicidade no Casamento* (Love and Happiness in Marriage) (2007) by Jonathas de Andrade, the appearance of the passage of time has been created through image manipulation, simulating the deterioration of the photos in post-production (<http://cargocollective.com/jonathasdeandrade#564032/amor-e-felicidade>).

<sup>19</sup> Warnock, "Memory."

looking at actual images of his ancestors, but this does not prevent us from sharing his visual memory.

The piece also highlights the function that both memory and photography play in the construction of individual identity. Celia Lury<sup>20</sup> suggests that, just like how the creation of narratives aimed at remembrance played a key role in the process of individualization, the proliferation and ubiquity of images in modern times have been prerequisites for constructing the modern subject. Photography would fulfill a significant role in this process by allowing the subjects to establish themselves as objects.

Goldchain performs an interesting exercise in self-reflection through the research he carried out on his genealogical origins, finding elements in the past images of his ancestors that live on in his own facial features. The encounter between these two moments in time occurs as much in the iconographic research published in the book resulting from the installation as in the final results of the self-portraits themselves.

### **Time Capsules: photography, digital technology and memory**

The artistic career of Eduardo Kac has not prioritized photography as an expressive medium. Affiliated to the so-called media art genre, his research usually centers on the issues that new technologies pose to the artistic world. His best-known works are part of what the artist himself calls Transgenic Art, a field controversial for overlapping art and science as well as for dealing with ethical questions about how far it is permissible for man to intervene in the process of creating life. However, *Time-Capsule* is of particular interest due to its reflection on time and memory, evident from its title and the presence of old photographic images in the gallery.

The installation-event occurred simultaneously at Casa das Rosas (São Paulo), on Brazilian national television and virtually on the Internet. In the gallery, there was a stretcher, seven sepia photographs taken in Eastern Europe in the 30s, a computer and a robotic finger connected to a microchip scanner. The artist inserted a microchip into his own ankle with a special needle and then scanned the implant generating a unique 16-character signal. Kac then registered himself via the Web in a database used to track animals. Here Kac is clearly making a critique of the society of control<sup>21</sup>, in which digital technology plays an important role. However, the question raised about the concept of memory is done in a subtler manner.

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<sup>20</sup> Celia Lury, *Prosthetic culture : photography, memory and identity* (London: Routledge, 1998), 105.

<sup>21</sup> An issue previously discussed (Cruz, 2004, p. 94).



The photos displayed on the walls of the room are part of the artist's personal collection and are what he calls "family mementos". These photos show his ancestors enjoying leisure time in Poland before the persecution of World War II. These are moments that the artist himself did not witness, but to which he has a strong emotional relationship through the memory inherited from the narrative of his parents and the photographs.



Sepia photo, Eduardo Kac, showed at Casa das Rosas Gallery, SP (1997)

Kac wishes to contrast two ways to encapsulate time, one modern (photography) and the other contemporary (the chip). For the artist, photography functioned as a kind of social "time capsule" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, the artist believes that photography's power as a force of truth was being undermined by digital technology and the growth in the quantity of images at the turn of the century. The increasingly common nature of the manipulation of digital photographs and of the body itself, with surgical procedures becoming more affordable, leads to a growing distrust in the representational power of the image as a basis for memory and personal and collective identity. Indeed, the malleability of the photograph with the advent of digital technology has resumed the discussion on its essence prompting some authors to claim there has been a radical ontological change<sup>22</sup>.

Lister<sup>23</sup>, however, recalls that the discussion of digital technology's threat to photographic practice in the 90s placed too much emphasis on the technology. For him,

<sup>22</sup> Rouillé, *A Fotografia: Entre Documento e Arte Contemporânea*; Soulages, *Estética Da Fotografia - Perda e Permanência*.

<sup>23</sup> Lister, *La Imagen Fotografica En La Cultura Digital / The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, 252.

there would now be consensus among several authors (he cites Rosler: 1991; Robins: 1996; Kember: 1996; Lister: 1995 and Slater: 1995) that the technology could not be understood outside of its cultural usage and isolated from historical circumstances and that digital technology's impact had been overestimated. With regard to the production of family images, digital technology does not seem to have fundamentally changed people's trust in the indexical power of the photographic image. Gillian Rose<sup>24</sup>, in a recent study on the practice of domestic photography, believes that one of the main reasons the traditional form of family photography survives today is precisely because of its indexical nature.

In *Time-Capsule*, the chip functioned as a contemporary time capsule, a kind of external memory coupled to the artist's body. Kac thus leads us to consider the impact of digital technology on the very concept of memory. The term "digital memory" naturally assigns a mental and subjective function to appliances and devices. The usual model of digital memory as a means for data storage has been augmented by the possibility to store *and* delete, download *and* upload, to recollect *and* project or invent<sup>25</sup>.

The concept of mediated memory appears relevant here. Van Dijck<sup>26</sup> does not distinguish 'true' or mental memory from 'false' memory or memory that has been distorted by technology. This concept attempts to account for the lack of distinction between one and the other, in that not only do the mediums transform the past event, but we also choose and create certain technologies based on a particular cultural logic.

What is interesting in Kac's piece is precisely the co-existence of these two forms of mediated memory: on one hand, the photographs provide access to the externalization of the artist's memory (or post-memory) and, on the other, the chip functions as a form of external memory that becomes internalized through the surgical procedure. Either way, these are mediated memories, as conceptualized by van Dijck.

## Final thoughts

As mentioned earlier, the intention of this article was to outline some thoughts on family photography using works of contemporary art. We touched on some key points regarding one of the principal functions of this practice: memory. This subject appears

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<sup>24</sup> Rose, *Doing Family Photography*.

<sup>25</sup> José van Dijck, *Mediated memories in the digital age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 50.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

particularly relevant in the context of today, on one hand, due to the frequency with which the issue of memory has been appearing in contemporary cultural studies and, on the other, by the widespread distrust in the medium of photography as a memory object<sup>27</sup> (van Dijck) with the advent of digital technology.

In the case of the installation by Rosangela Rennó, the presence of family albums in their traditional analog format seemingly centers the discussion on the social role of photo albums, which has already been considerably explored. However, the denial of access to the photographic images and the presence of an archive cabinet containing information on them renders an analysis of this work useful for reflecting on the important role narration plays in using photography as an entry point to the past and also integrates this practice into a collective social institution aimed at remembrance: the archive. The artistic process of taking these objects and ascribing new meaning to them in the installation through their manner of exhibition creates new perspectives, expanding the range of questions to be considered by those interested in the study of visual culture.

The piece by Rafael Goldchain directly challenges two traditional photographic processes: family portraits and self-portraits. By creating a series of disconcertingly theatricalized self-portraits, Goldchain emphasizes something that is apparently not part of the social practice of family photography: simulation or "playing". However, as we have discussed, there is constant tension in the photographic aesthetic between "that-has-been" and "that-has-been-played", from which family photography cannot escape. This tension is also present in the mental process of memory itself, which at times is confused with the action of imagining.

Eduardo Kac's experiment is of particular interest as it updates the issue of memory to incorporate the advent of digital technology. By contrasting sepia family photographs from the early twentieth century with the chip inserted into his body, Kac seeks to lay bare the differences between two different ways of encapsulating time. For the artist, the photos that function as the object and representation of his post-memory are complemented by the new form of mediated memory provided by digital technology. The discussion of the loss of photography's indexical nature with the malleability of digital images is thus placed in the context of the social practice of photography as an aid for maintaining family integration and memory.

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<sup>27</sup> van Dijck, *Mediated memories in the digital age*.

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## “ART WITHOUT ARTWORKS (?): A REFLECTION ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MEMORY OF MEDIA ARTS FROM A MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY PERSPECTIVE”

Dr. Pau Alsina and Vanina Hofman

### **Abstract:**

The aim of this paper is to study the processes related to the construction of the memory of Media Arts, which is a group of artistic practices that have been emerging during the last four decades in parallel with the increasing presence and development of the Network Society and Media Culture. Coming from a highly experimental and unstable context in their early years, these practices are progressively becoming institutionalized, initiating a dialogue with the mainstream Contemporary Art world. Consequently, it is taking place a turn in the processes involved in Media Arts preservation, that nowadays have to deal not only with the unstable nature of their underlying material, but also with their increasing symbolic and economic value.

In order to address the memory construction, remembering and oblivion paths in Media Arts realm, we would like to propose herein the suitability, significance and value encountered in the media-archaeological perspective. Media Archaeology is an emerging field that digs into the socio-technological context of today's technologies, merging together discourses, material and technical elements. In other words, what the next pages will investigate is the connection among Media Arts, Materiality and Memory through the lens of three key notions studied by different media archaeologists: the agency of technologies in the archaeological process (as it is understood by Wolfgang Ernst), the *variantology* approach (term proposed by Sigfried Zielinski) and the *topoi*, which constitute recursive topics in media history (as studied by Erkki Huhtamo).

### **1. HOW WE UNDERSTAND MEDIA ARTS**

Media Arts is one of the many terms used to define a group of heterogeneous artworks and artistic practices mediated by a wide spectrum of electronic and digital technologies<sup>28</sup>. Media Arts are usually described as process-oriented or processual practices, which are connected to an environment that explores, researches and experiments the intersections and convergences among art, science and technology.

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<sup>28</sup> In the context of this work we will treat Media Arts as a whole, consciously avoiding the complex debates on how to designate, catalogue and build taxonomies of these alive and continuously changing practices.

According to Siegfried Zielinski, Media Arts can also be approached as a new artistic praxis. In his words, although all kinds of artworks require media in order to be perceived by others, “the prefix media was designed to facilitate its delineation of new artistic praxis opposed to traditional ‘old ones’”. Thus, media are understood as mass media or information and communication technologies in this context, while the association with arts staked their “claim for tapping into historically developed markets, distribution channels, and discourses”<sup>29</sup>.

Neither the former nor the latter component (i.e. media representing the “new”, and art connecting with its pre-existing context) went through without been questioned and debated. Discussion was raised whether Media Arts were as innovating as they claimed, or with which other artistic moments, but also technological and scientific ones, were linked. In parallel, a deep tension between Media Arts and the more established Contemporary Art world has emerged<sup>30</sup>. Throughout their trajectory Media Arts were not able to fit easily into the mainstream art world -and still are not-, neither in production-exhibition-market terms nor in academic-research ones. The conflict between the “new” and the “established” has its well-known antecedents in Art History; in fact, one could claim that this is the reason why art has a history<sup>31</sup>.

### 1.a. The material condition of Media Arts

In the context of Art History, especially when considering idealist aesthetics and formalism, material is a mere carrier of artistic ideas. Thus, matter becomes just an objectivation of the idea. The influence of formalism in Art History, as well as the establishment of the evolutionary analysis of forms in time (together with its contextualization as a key objective in Art History) has given place to two assumptions. On the one hand, matter has been considered a subordinate of form (in this sense matter has been named “medium” or more recently “channel”.) On the other hand, matter, as the physical constituent of the artwork, becomes a material: a container of information with very little meaning and interest compared with the contents emerged from its formalization. The Art History trajectory, where narratives have always acted as

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<sup>29</sup> Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep time of the media : toward an archaeology of hearing and seeing by technical means* (CambridgeMass.: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> More information about this controversy can be found in the 11<sup>th</sup> special issue of Artnodes Journal coordinated by Media Art Historian Edward Shanken, under the title “New Media, Art-Science, and Contemporary Art: Towards a Hybrid Discourse?”:

<http://artnodes.uoc.edu/ojs/index.php/artnodes/issue/view/n11>

<sup>31</sup> Paraphrasing Georg Simmel when he refers to the history of culture in *Simmel on culture*, ed. David Frisby y Mike Featherstone (Sage Publications, Inc., 1997)

a key discursive element, traditionally disregarded the agency of artworks' materiality. However, today it is clearer than ever before that in order to understand the artworks within their context, it is of paramount importance to understand both the technical and material sides as discursive processes too.

Hence, following this long established formalistic tradition in Art History (that became highly relevant with the Conceptual Art forms), many theorists have labeled artistic practices that are linked to electronic and digital technologies as immaterial due to the central role that information plays in the artwork's constitution. In other words, the processuality of information that shapes the core of media artworks has been traditionally conceptualized as abstract and immaterial. However, although Media Arts practices have commonly been considered as immaterial, there is still a technical materiality behind them that supports such process-oriented dynamics.

The material condition of (Media) Arts has consequences in their conservation-restoration, documentation and archiving processes. By this, we are neither trying to reinforce a technological determinism in art practices, nor implying that materiality is the only reason that explains Media Arts life-span; indeed there are other aesthetical, conceptual, cultural, social and economic issues involved. Nonetheless, the materiality of Media Arts constitutes a key aspect that helps us to understand the problematic nature of their preservation and the processes of constructing their memory and their narratives.

Thus, at first sight, the description of Media Arts as immaterial is opposed to the inherent materiality of their electronic-digital technologies in hardware terms (e.g. sensors, micro-controllers, storage devices, passive components, networks), in the properties of components (e.g. variations of magnetic field, voltages or pulses of light) and up to some extent in software level (e.g. operating systems, compilers, programming/scripting languages, protocols). For instance, the zeros and ones produced as part of the functionality of Media Arts works are indeed composed by several layers, starting from low-level source code up to analog components that are used for the physical communication. These zeros and ones can be considered immaterial when analyzing them in aesthetical terms, but in fact they cannot exist outside a particular material form<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Jean-François Blanchette, «A Material History of Bits», *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*; Bruce Sterling, «Digital decay», in *Permanence through change: The Variable Media Approach* (Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003).



Having said that, it is also true that the materiality of a stone sculpture and the materiality of Media Arts might need different approaches throughout the artworks' life span (creation, production, exhibition, communication, conservation, restoration, documentation, disappearance, recreation). In particular, as far as "shelf life", duration, future perspective and preservation of artworks are concerned the consideration and understating of material specificities is a crucial issue.

The wide range of materials and techniques applied in Contemporary Art, and later on, in Media Arts, has raised great challenges to traditional conservation-restoration theories. Most of these materials, instable and/or subjected to obsolescence, resulted in the emergence of disruptive preservation frameworks and techniques whose goal has been to deal with artworks survival, putting at the same time in question the appropriate duration of the work<sup>33</sup>. This gave space to fresh approaches to preservation; the "preservation through change" core statement of the Variable Media Network can be seen as a changing paradigm in preservation strategies, but it is not the only one<sup>34</sup>.

In such projects, the issue of how to confront material aging has given place to deeper philosophical and ontological discussions. The seemingly simple question "How to preserve artworks based on an unstable and fast obsolete technology ecosystem?" gave place to another more profound question: "What *is* actually the artwork?" Is the material experience, the idea, the artists' intentions, or, maybe, a mixture of the previously mentioned? What aspects of the artwork should be preserved in order to maintain its identity? Can documentation replace or become the artwork? Which place do objects have in the construction of the Media Arts memory? Are we heading towards a Media Arts memory without artworks?

But there is even something more. Jean-François Blanchett has addressed the "false immaterial" condition of Media Arts from a different point of view. He states: "This purported immateriality [of Media Arts] endows bits with considerable advantages: they

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<sup>33</sup> Scott McQuire y Natalia Radywyl, «From Object to Platform. Art, digital technology and time.», *Time & Society* 19, n.º 1 (2010): 5–27.

<sup>34</sup> Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, y Caitlin Jones, eds., *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach* (Montreal: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, and The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, 2003). For further information about important milestones in preservation approaches see also the documentation of the Symposium Modern Art: Who Cares? (1997). Other relevant projects are Media Matters, Capturing Unstable Media, DOCAM, Inside Installations, Digital Art Conservation, etc. A key reference of online archives is the Rhizome ArtBase. Pioneer institutions in this area include: Tate Modern, Daniel Langlois Foundation, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, ZKM, Ars Electronica Center, etc.

are immune from the economics and logistics of analog media, and from the corruption, degradation, and decay that necessarily results from the handling of material carriers of information”<sup>35</sup>. This acclaimed immateriality (the “purified forms”) leads us directly to another concern: What else is hidden in the center of Media Arts analysis when immateriality discourses appears?

Electronic-digital technologies, as every technology, express and depict their times. In this particularly case, information and communication technologies embodied the informational paradigm in the Network Society<sup>36</sup>. The analysis of the characteristics of the Network Society goes beyond the scope of this paper (e.g. rhizomatic production and distribution of knowledge, ubiquity, collaboration and interdisciplinary practices, but also “programmed obsolescence”, surveillance and digital divides and the different opportunities to access and use those current technologies). If we oversee the technology-material anchor of Media Arts with Network Society, we will also lose their contextual (political, economic, social, ideological) dimension, which essentially means that we may miss the socio-technical environment in which the processes involved in the construction of Media Arts memory take place.

To summarize, Media Arts’ preservation requires a reflection on the relation between material and information (or immaterial) aspects of such artistic praxis. Labeling Media Arts only (or principally) as immaterial, prevents us from facing the complex and multifaceted material dimension of such practices that we have just described. In technical terms this implies that is impossible to develop suitable preservation strategies, because “if you don’t preserve it in some material form, you are not preserving immateriality: you are preserving nothing”<sup>37</sup>. For this reason we should take into consideration how the comprehension of the specific material characteristics of Media Arts results in the reflection of the ontological status of this praxis: which are the entities that need to be preserved? From a contextual point of view, the materialistic approach to Media Arts questions the processes of memory and cultural transmission in a certain socio-technical context.

The relation of Media Arts with their materiality described herein helps us to introduce the central idea of this paper and the message that intends to convey: how Media Archeology could contribute to the comprehension of the construction of the Media Arts

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<sup>35</sup> Blanchette, «A Material History of Bits».

<sup>36</sup> Manuel Castells, «La Sociedad Red» (Alianza Editorial, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Sterling, «Digital decay».

memory. In the following section we will examine indicative concepts that could be employed to achieve this.

## 2. MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY: THE INVENTORS, THE PIONEERS, THE FOOLS....

Contemporary societies are currently living the so called times of history, which is opposed to another form of temporal awareness: memory, which corresponds to traditional, non-industrialized societies<sup>38</sup>. Memory is, by nature, multiple, alive, ever changing and linked to a certain human group; it is built collectively, but expressed individually<sup>39</sup>. History, on the other hand, is the crystallization of memory that belongs to everybody and at the same time to nobody; history narrates facts that have been already interpreted and fixed, but for this very reason they are transmittable in the “globalized, mobile, and deracinated world of today”<sup>40</sup>. Although living times of history, contemporary western societies are experiencing in parallel a memory restoration as another social, political and cultural mode to (re)construct the past. The re-birth of memory in the context of a self-consciously postmodern, postcolonial and multicultural society aims to challenge “the founding myths and historical narratives that have hitherto given shape and meaning to established national and imperial identities”<sup>41</sup>. Considering the above, memory seems to have developed a double function. Primarily, it is understood as the way in which traditional societies build their past, and therefore, forge their social bonds. Lately, it has become a tool for dissidence, for re-visiting untold stories, a twist to stare at abandoned geographic zones and suppressed human groups.

As already described in the previous section, Media Arts can be seen as a new artistic praxis, that generated a deep tension with the established Contemporary Art scene, which is reluctant to accept the former as part as the “official” Art History. Media Arts challenge the historical narratives of art, which have forgotten a wide range of practices that are based on the information and communication media –only with counted exceptions. In this context, we can understand why the word “memory”, in its contemporary (dissident) use, sounds so loudly and appears repetitively when reference is made to Media Arts preservation (e.g. construction of a memory, absence of memory, necessity of a memory, danger of losing the memory and so on).

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<sup>38</sup> Pierre Nora, «Between Memory and History: Les lieux de Mémoire», *Representations* 26 (spring 1989): 7–24.

<sup>39</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> Nora, «Between Memory and History: Les lieux de Mémoire».

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

The critical intervention of Media Archaeology in the history of media and culture can be seen as a way to bring back the notion of memory into current history times. The Media Archaeology Perspective (from now on MAP) is a research framework that enables the construction of “alternate histories of suppressed, neglected, and forgotten media”<sup>42</sup>, considering those “dead ends, losers, and inventions that never made it into a material product” or those researches never legitimized; indeed, all the previously mentioned elements have also contributed to the present landscape of media and actually have important stories to communicate. MAP tracks and revisits the moments when a multiplicity of new technological notions is introduced or proposed (it delves into the grain of the new), while there is not still an established and definite notion that prevails. Authors like Zielinski, Huhtamo, Parikka, Hertz and Lovink adopted the Foucaultian concept of archaeology, as a methodology to reconstruct the past, to apprehend the local and to review the mainstream narratives and the submerged stories. This allows examining the official History of Media, far away from the metanarratives of progress, teleology or supposed origins which are yet to be revealed.

The theoretical framework and the set of tools for investigation that MAP proposed go beyond the disciplinary borders allowing researchers to “roam across the landscape of the humanities and social science and occasionally leap into arts”<sup>43</sup>. In their foundational book (*Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, 2011), Huhtamo and Parikka explained that MAP is not considered an academic discipline yet (“there are no public institutions, journals, or conferences dedicated to it”), but a seed for a future “traveling discipline”, a concept that the mentioned authors borrowed by Mieke Bal. They also described this under-construction field of knowledge (or a nascent discipline in Zielinki’s terms), as a “bundle of closely related approaches” converged in a nomadic way, so as to explore archives and collections of artifacts (textual, visual and auditory), “emphasizing both the discursive and the material manifestation of culture”<sup>44</sup>.

This emerging field has roots established in different traditions, such as in Media Studies or in the actual interpretation of Post-structuralism. MAP could also be linked to the actual developments of other material-semantic methods involved in Science and Technology Studies (STS), as it is expressed for instance in the Actor Network

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<sup>42</sup> Erkki Huhtamo y Jussi Parikka, eds., *Media Archaeology* (Berkeley & Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2011)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Theory<sup>45</sup>. There are really interesting and fertile connections between all the previously mentioned areas, which are waiting to be explored and evolved in order to assess the material culture in a more active way than its regular approach from History. Covering all these connections does not fall within the scope of this paper, as it will lead us to different overlapping paths that will require further explanations; instead, as already explained before, we will focus on the Media Archaeological perspective.

Among this fertile mixture of approaches that composes MAP, we were particularly triggered by three key contributions, which can be considered strategic pathways to approach the memory of Media Arts in different and highly creative ways, truly respectful to Media Arts singularity, heterogeneity and variability. First, the agency of machines in the (re)construction of the past in Wolfgang Ernst thought; second, the *variantology* as defined by Sigfried Zielinski; and finally, the *topoi* of Erkki Huhtamo. Taking this as a basis, we will examine three aspects that need special attention in the process of constructing the Media Arts memory: the materiality, the geography and the timeline of Media.

### **2.a. Agency of machines: (re)visiting the past and the construction of memory**

Kittler's follower, Wolfgang Ernst, positions his media-archaeological approach as an epistemological alternative to the supremacy of historical narratives of media. Media Archaeology is a method and at the same time a way to practice media criticism, an analytical tool closely connected with the Foucaultian notion of archive and those disciplines that cope with material culture. Ernst's core idea relies on the "awareness of moments when media themselves, not exclusively humans anymore, become active 'archaeologists' of knowledge"<sup>46</sup>. Ernst identifies apparatuses as active "archaeologists" or even more, as authors of knowledge that liberate human from their subjectivity and the "culture inclination to give sense to data though narrative structures"<sup>47</sup>. In his own words: "Technical media have already developed a true media memory that differs from human remembrance"<sup>48</sup>. An indicative example is photography, which not only becomes an object of research of media-archaeologists, but also "a media-archaeological

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<sup>45</sup> Actor Network Theory is a theory that asserts the agency of nonhumans. It is also described as a "material-semiotic" method, and it was developed by science and technology studies scholars like Michel Callon, Bruno Latour or John Law.

<sup>46</sup> Wolfgang Ernst, «Media Archaeography. Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media», en *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications and Implications* (Berkeley & Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2011), 239–255.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

technique of remembering the past in a way that is radically alternative to historical discourse”<sup>49</sup>.

Considering machines agency as a key notion to approach the processes involved with the construction of memory, brings us back to the issue of materiality. The transmission and (re)construction of memory highly relies on media: material fragments, relics, non-discursive and non-anthropomorphic elements. Ernst has drawn an analogy between artifacts (machines) as hardware and historical discourses as software. Even though one is complementing the other, artifacts seem to have been overlooked in Media Arts studies: “in a digital culture of apparent, virtual, immaterial realities a remainder of the insistence and resistance of material worlds is indispensable...”<sup>50</sup>. Different types of media show variations of the expectative of future, as it was analyzed before in this text: “the probability of an old painting surviving until the present is much higher than that of a complex scenographic like a diorama...”<sup>51</sup>.

In Media Arts realm, *La Máquina Podrida* [The rotten Machine] by Brian Mackern is a very interesting example of a machine that turns into a media archaeologist. *La Máquina Podrida* used to be the laptop of the Uruguayan artist Brian Mackern: his digital and portable working-space from 1994 until 2004 when he decided to auction it. Mackern not only put on sale the computer, but also its whole content. This included his own works and an extensive collection of early Net Art together with related information<sup>52</sup>. Whoever decided to acquire *La Máquina Podrida* could also gain complete access to decide the fate of its invaluable content. For instance, the potential purchaser could conserve, re-sell, use the original content for further recreations, continue the artist’s work or even delete it. Despite Mackern’s lack of interest in preserving *La Máquina Podrida*, it was acquired paradoxically -or not- by a museum, whose principal mission is to conserve their purchased items<sup>53</sup>.

*La Máquina Podrida* has constructed an alternative memory of pioneering Net Art with its self-ruling capabilities of recording and erasing that is bound to persist through the conservation activity of museums. The work embedded in this obsolete equipment contains some active links and some others error-404 dead ones, a fact that portrays

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<sup>49</sup> Wolfgang Ernst, «Let There Be Irony: Cultural History and Media Archaeology in Parallel Lines», *ART HISTORY* 28, n.º 5 (noviembre 2005): 582–603.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> For further information on *La Máquina Podrida* visit the webpage: <http://netart.org.uy/subasta/#english>

<sup>53</sup> For further information visit the site of the purchaser: Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo (MEIAC) <http://www.meiac.es>

the duration of media environments within the Network Society. This “true media memory” differs from the original collectors decisions and, in general, from human’s remembrance; it manifests a concept (memory process) far from what humans decided to maintain, and foreign of the ways they decided to do it (including strategies like the “purgatory of Net Art” transformed to off-line versions and their survival in the form of documentation) that also involves the related narratives.

As in the case of photography, *La Máquina Podrida* can be the object of a historical and an archaeological approach at a content level, whereas at structural level it is a subject, an archaeologist of physical realities different from those perceived by humans. By recognizing machines as active “archaeologists” that triggered a media memory according to non-historical laws, Ernst introduced the idea of a technical memory, an alternative method to approach Media Arts’ memory. In this sense, we were dealing “not with ‘narrative memory’ but with calculating memory – counting rather than recounting, the archaeological *versus* historical mode”<sup>54</sup>. This situates Media Archaeology close to mathematics, while the agency of machines appears in parallel to the human agency. Looking at the machines, like Mackern’s *Rotten Machine*, we suspend for a moment our subject-centered interpretations, without any kind of technological determinism that reduces culture to technology, to reveal “the techno-epistemological momentum in culture itself”<sup>55</sup>.

## 2.b. Variantology

Siegfried Zielinski’s *Anarchaeology* (a term introduced by Rudi Visker as a reaction to Foucault’s Archaeology of Knowledge)<sup>56</sup> or *variantology*<sup>57</sup> is a pathway to approach MAP. While Ernst finds a complementary relation between the material task of Archaeology and the narrative contribution of History (metaphorically as a hardware-software dynamic), Zielinski -following Foucault’s genealogy developed by Nietzsche- found that Archaeology and History diverged in the way they assess and consequently reconstruct the past.

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<sup>54</sup> Ernst, «Media Archaeography. Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media».

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Zielinski, *Deep time of the media : toward an archaeology of hearing and seeing by technical means*.

<sup>57</sup> Zielinski’s project *Variantology / Media Archaeology of the Arts & Media* was “conceived as an international research and exchange project. A central part of it is the development of an open and temporal network of outstanding scientists, artists and scholars who engage with the deep time relations of arts, sciences and technologies”. For further information visit <http://entropie.digital.udk-berlin.de/wiki/Variantology> or <http://variantology.com>, where it is also possible to find the reference of the five publications on the Variantology workshops that took place between 2004-08.

The objective of Zielinski's *Anarchaeology* is to uncover or encounter dynamic moments of the past when "things and situations were still in a state of flux, where the options for development in various directions were still wide open, where the future was conceivable as holding multifarious possibilities of technical and cultural solutions for constructing media worlds"<sup>58</sup>. This means also "to enter into a relationship of tension with various present-day moments, relativize them, and render them more decisive"<sup>59</sup>. However, the mere encounter with such situations is not enough to "expand a largely ignored aspect of conventional history"<sup>60</sup>, since they should always be accompanied by surrounding discourses.

Reviewing the dynamic moments of the past unveils a variety of presents; this results in a relativization of the historical narratives. Considering the limited scope of this paper, we will only focus on the relativization of regions. In *Variantology 3: On Deep Time Relations of Arts, Sciences and Technologies in China and Elsewhere*, Zielinski, Furlus and Minkwitz pointed out:

As we move with the authors from Europe to the Far East and back again it becomes absolutely clear that the history of the media cannot be written with only the former industrial metropolises of the world in our sights, beginning and ending there.<sup>61</sup>

This same statement could also be applied to other geographical areas. For instance, the panel "Variantología Latina" (ISEA 2010, Ruhr) organized by Siegfried Zielinski and Andrés Burbano had as a topic the exploration of the deep roots of media history in Latin America. This implied an inquiry on the knowledge, technology-culture, machines and tools developed in different territories of Latin America, before colonization and prior to the equivalent European discoveries which were legitimized by historical narratives<sup>62</sup>.

In 2010, after acquiring *La Máquina Podrida*, the same museum bought Brian Mackern's webpage: The Net Art Latino Database. This same year Nilo Casares

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<sup>58</sup> Zielinski, *Deep time of the media : toward an archaeology of hearing and seeing by technical means*.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Siegfried Zielinski, Eckhard Furlus, & Nadine Minkwitz, eds., *Variantology 3 : on deep time relations of arts, sciences and technologies in China and elsewhere* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008).

<sup>62</sup> ISEA2010 RUHR Conference / Latin American Forum I - Variantologia Latina: <http://www.isea2010ruhr.org/conference/thursday-26-august-2010-dortmund/p29-latin-american-forum-i-variantologia-latina> - visited 2nd May 2012.



curated the exhibition “LA MÁQUINA PODRIDA AKA LA DESDENTADA 1999-2004. Todo el net.art en un portátil de Brian Mackern” [*THE ROTTEN MACHINE AKA THE TOOTHLESS OLD THING 1999-2004 All net.art in a laptop*]. The Net Art Latino Database is more a repository of links, a possible map of Net Art in Latin America or a collection rather than a proper database. According to Lila Pagola “more than a database, it looks like a conceptual artwork”<sup>63</sup>. Irrespective to the way we choose to label it, The Net Art Latino Database is formed by a subjective selection of the early period of Net Art productions where Mackern belongs to. At this point it is important to highlight a long-standing issue of innovative Latino Media Art works, which pass completely unnoticed, ignored or isolated within a reduced community. From an external spectator perspective (foreign to the Latin American context), this commonly leads to an assumption of a “blank” space related to media artistic production. Unexpectedly and in parallel, the lack of documentation and information of the preceding artistic projects creates a feeling of a perpetual initialization phase among the actors of the internal Latin American artistic scene<sup>64</sup>. In this context, Mackern’s collection has the peculiarity to address artworks that nobody has focused on: Net Art that belongs to geographical areas that are invisibilized, not cited and not “central”. In this sense, Mackern has made a quite symbolic decision to set an inverted map of Latin America built in ASCII code (reproducing the idea of Joaquín Torres García) for the front page of his database.

The Net Art Latino Database -and its symbolization- relativizes regions and challenges the logic of center – periphery. For this reason, it constitutes a suggestive paradigm of a *variantological* approach to arts, which rethinks the geo-political distribution of Media Arts’ mainstream narratives.

The claim that Media Arts lack geographical borders is a very disputable topic. Although, from a conceptual, aesthetic and/or political point of view, delimiting borders goes against the very nature of Media Arts, it is also true that art production and preservation conditions radically differ from one context to another. Thus, if in our analysis we underestimate the relation between Media Arts location and the places where historical narrations have emerged, it is very likely that we will also misjudge the past(s) of Media Arts, and consequently their present(s).

### **2.c. Topoi**

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<sup>63</sup> Lila Pagola, «El mapa invertido del net.art latinoamericano», in *netart latino database* (Badajoz: MEIAC, 2008). The authors of this paper have provided the translation of this text.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Huhtamo has based his contribution to MAP on previous research from authors like Foucault, Kittler, Benjamin and the previously mentioned media archaeologist, Zielinski. The specificity of Huhtamo in his approach to MAP lays emphasis upon the recurring discursive patterns observed in the relation between media and society along history, a process that he designated as *topoi* (“topics”). *Topoi* involve recursion of topics. Recursion implies something different from repetition; it means reappearance with changes. In Huhtamo’s words *topoi* are “recurring cyclical phenomena that (re) appear and disappear over and over again in media history”<sup>65</sup>. He exemplified these cyclical phenomena through time-based practices (e.g. magic lantern, early cinema, virtual reality).

Thus, if Erkki Huhtamo studies media in terms of *topoi*, what we will find if we transpose this recursive model from the analysis of media to the processes of memory construction? Do Media Arts memory-construction processes present some traceable, recurrent, *topoi* in the way they assess the transmission of artworks and artistic ideas throughout time? Is it suitable to propose the *topoi* of “preserving the unpreservable”<sup>66</sup> (i.e., preserve practices that for different reasons are resistant to endure) when studying Media Arts?

The construction and transmission of memory of non-objectual or processual artistic practices like those encountered in Media Arts are not new features of culture. On the contrary, we can trace their antecedents as far as it allows us our remembrance and the available documentation. For instance, we can connect Media Arts memory with the oral tradition - various researchers are working on this interesting inquiry path. Additionally, we can relate Media Arts with others time-base artworks, like music, theatre and performance. We can also, associate Media Arts with “destruction artworks”<sup>67</sup>, ephemeral-oriented productions, that appeared together with the XX century and still continue today. Media Arts are partially linked with those former artistic forms, whose intangible or ephemeral materiality raises the challenge of maintaining and transmitting the memory of time-based, processual practices. The primary source of recognizing the artistic gesture of such practices is not affiliated to objects, but to processes. Some studies on Media Arts have been exploring the common ground they share with broader families of time-based and process-oriented arts, in order to position them conceptually,

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<sup>65</sup> Erkki Huhtamo, «From kaleidoscomaniac to cybernerd: Notes toward an archeology of the media».

<sup>66</sup> John D. Powell, «Preserving the unpreservable: A study of destruction art in the contemporary museum» (MA Museum Studies, University of Leicester, 2007).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

aesthetically and historically. On top of it, this connection triggered the development of strategies and tools for their preservation<sup>68</sup>.

While the processual behavior affinities with prior artistic expressions are constantly explored, Media Arts have also shown clear novelties and specificities that are related to the mediation of communication and information technologies, supporting by this way an analysis from a recursive perspective. In other words, although the detachment of arts with the object-oriented practices is not new, Media Arts add a new dimension to the material manifestation of the artwork because their building blocks are technology-dependent (both in software and hardware terms). This means that they require a defined –and sometimes deterministic- technological environment to be executed; an environment that is opaque to direct human reach without accessing the underlying technological tools that are used to assemble the artwork. Considering the ever-changing technological ecosystem (software and hardware components are rapidly replaced, discontinued or become unsupported), Media Arts are also subject to a fast degree of obsolescence (which is something different from ephemeral). Simon Biggs expressed it in this way:

Euripides remains interpretable today because the 'code' it is written in (whether the original or a translation) is open to humans to read. In the case of digital media (...) the code is written to be read by a machine. It is the case that machines and their codes become obsolete and stuff becomes irretrievable.<sup>69</sup>

Hence, a mix of old and new questions and challenges on Media Arts preservation has come up. This includes pre-existing approaches to maintain processual, ephemeral-oriented and time-based arts and newly introduced ones that go beyond their antecedents. Media arts restore and renew the challenge to preserve the memory of non-objectual practices, reintroducing the *topoi* of “preserving the unpreservable”. Media Arts also put on question what an artwork is, a fact that makes difficult the delimitation of what has to be maintained and inherited. They are resistant to be transmitted but, as scores for music, plays for theater, documentation for performance

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<sup>68</sup> See for instance: Rinehart, «The Media Art Notation System: Documenting and Preserving Digital/Media Art», *LEONARDO* 40, n.º 2 (2007): 181–187; Louise Poissant, «Conservation of Media Arts and Networks: Aesthetic and Ethical Considerations», s. f.

<sup>69</sup> Simon Biggs, as part of the debate entitled «Shelf-Life», encountered in the discussion list of the Institute for Distributed Creativity (2007). Here it is possible to start a discussion on the usefulness of the open-source code and copy left licenses, in order to improve the life expectancy of Media Arts. This complex topic goes beyond the scope of this paper.

or ephemeral oriented practices, and as tradition (bonds of a community) for oral stories, Media Arts have the chance to find an old-new way to persist.

### 3. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this paper we have sought to address different sides of Media Arts memory, emphasizing on the importance of their material condition. Media Arts' materiality has received minimal attention compared to the importance given to their immaterial side (i.e. the information processes that constitute the core of the Media Arts practices). As we have already pointed out, although the focus on the information aspects might be crucial for studies related to Media Arts aesthetics, labeling Media Arts as immaterial does not account the fact that they are implemented in a technological environment; this means that we cannot interact, visit or visualize them outside their particular material form.

We have therefore proposed indicative ways to analyze processes and challenges for the construction of Media Arts memory from a media-archaeological perspective. Contrary to Hertz's interesting contribution: "...I think a synthetic approach may be more constructive than a media archaeology of media art. In other words, one could say that we need a history to rewire before we can do a rewiring of the discipline"<sup>70</sup>, we believe that there is already a contemporary historical narrative to be revisited, which is composed by certain technologies, artists, artworks and geographical areas, while others were left aside. In front of a legitimized historical narrative, the notion of memory becomes a tool of dissidence at different levels and, at the same time, MAP a concrete way to implement the critical review of mainstream stories.

Thus, we have analyzed the construction of the Media Arts past from three archaeological concepts. First, following Wolfgang Ernst, we retook the issue of the human-centred agency in memory construction, complementing it with machines' agency. The author considers MAP to be closely connected to the perspective of media themselves within the archaeological process: "The media-archaeological gaze, accordingly, is immanent to the machine. Human beings, having created logical machines, have created a discontinuity with their own cultural regime"<sup>71</sup>. Thus, the introduction of machines as active archaeologists and at the same time the idea of

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<sup>70</sup> Jussi Parikka y Garnet Hertz, «CTheory.net»: <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=631>, accessed December, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Ernst, «Media Archaeography. Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media».

technical memory has given place to an alternative -or parallel line- from which to comprehend Media Arts' past.

After machine's agency, we presented Zielinki's *variantology* as a vehicle to question the geographies where Media Arts stories are being constructed. Despite the long-standing claim that Media Arts practices are reluctant to be confined in geographic borders, we have given examples where geographies do matter in the construction of memories. Another important contribution of this paper is to highlight that underestimating the relation between Media Arts practices and the locations where they emerged could lead to a misunderstanding of both Media Arts past and present.

Finally, we have chosen the idea of *topoi*, meaning the recurrences of events, as a way to offer a broader timeline from where it is possible to connect -and at the same time to differentiate- the construction of Media Arts memory with previous artistic forms. This timeline allows mapping the emergence of singularities and novelties, but does not represent them as a progress-oriented, linear and teleological history. Instead, Media Arts appear to be connected with previous occurrences of history in the form of *topoi*.

These three concepts – agency of machines, *variantology* and *topoi* – can be considered as a starting kit of tools that could be used to construct a Media Arts' memory, sensible to the material condition and geographical status, within the spiral of time that marked its emergence.

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**Book Review**

“FROM MYSTIC WRITING PADS TO VIDEO INSTALLATIONS,  
 ANTHOLOGIZING THE ARCHIVE:  
 A REVIEW OF CHARLES MEREWETHER, ED. *THE ARCHIVE*  
 (LONDON, CAMBRIDGE, AND MASSACHUSETTS: WHITECHAPEL  
 GALLERY AND THE MIT PRESS, 2006)”

Barbara Beckers

Art in the twentieth and early-twenty first centuries has increasingly concerned itself with history, memory, testimony and identity and has done so through a turn to the archive, one of art's most potent developments since the 1960s of which Christian Boltanski, Aby Warburg and Gerhard Richter are the most obvious representatives but that also touches upon the work of Andy Warhol, Nicole Jolicoeur, Eugenio Dittborn, Ilya Kabakov, Susan Hiller and The Atlas Group. In *The Archive* editor Charles Merewether brings together writings on contemporary art, or relevant for its study, written by theorists, critics, curators and artists. The book appears in the series *Documents of Contemporary Art*, a joint project by White Chapel Gallery, London and The MIT Press, aimed to map the ways in which visual culture engages with an ever more pluralistic environment and in which each volume zooms in on a specific topic that has influenced art and art history worldwide. In this volume ‘the archival’, in art is to be understood not so much referring to the dusty and often romanticized archive of the traditional historian's daily practice, but metaphorically, in terms of traces, inscriptions, contestations and retracings. Essentially, the volume revolves around questions of whether to keep things or throw them out, how to order them if they are kept, how to say goodbye if they are discarded, and to what extent art itself constitutes an archive.

The book is divided into four sections. The texts in ‘Traces’ shed light on residual marks left by events and experiences and thus on the indexical relationship between art and archives. The section opens with Sigmund Freud's ‘A Note upon the Mystic Writing-Pad’ – his classic analogy between the children's toy and the systems of the human mind that simultaneously retain and erase memories – and closes with artist, filmmaker and author Renée Green's ‘Survival: Ruminations on Archival Lacunae’ in which she asks



the fundamental question: 'In what ways are what we remember, memorialize, organize and archive predicated on chance operations?'

'Inscriptions', consisting of only four texts, shows how laws of the archive have been inscribed in definitions of the body and the document. It features work by Walter Benjamin, Paul Ricoeur, Allan Sekula and Jacques Derrida. In an extract of *Archive Fever* Derrida returns to Freud's 'A Note upon the Mystic Writing-Pad' and combines it with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to arrive at an understanding of the death drive as something that 'destroys in advance its own archive' (78). He goes on to suggest that 'the death drive is above all *anarchivic*, one could say, or *archiviolithic*. It will always have been archive destroying, by silent vocation' (78).

In the next section, the largest of the book, titled 'Contestations' Hal Foster sheds new light on the radical undermining of the archival desire when he looks at contemporary artists-as-archivists, a phenomenon that most often entails an assumption of fragmentation as a fundamental condition of the archival. Other texts and extracts in this section include Benjamin Buchloh's analysis of the visual atlases constructed by Warburg and Richter, interviews with Okwui Enwezor on memorials and with Anthony Spira on Polish film archives and Merewether's own 'A Language to Come: Japanese Photography after the Event.'

Finally, 'Retracings' presents texts that speak against the dominant construction of archives as historical records and its societal, political and cultural effects. What the texts in these last two sections have in common are their reflection on how post-war artistic practices have worked to juxtapose individual and group archives with institutional and organizational archives and thus laying bare a countermemory. Or in Merewether's words: '... the work of these artists is anti-monumental, standing against the monumental history of the state' (16).

Essentially, all of the sections contain texts that are critical of the very notions that give the sections their titles; texts that reveal the vulnerability of traces, that discuss the absence of inscription, that scrutinize the nature of counter memorial contestations and that doubt the power of the archive in retracing the past.

The book's value lies in its diversity. *The Documents of Contemporary Art* series calls its volumes 'source books' that provide access to a 'plurality of voices and perspectives'. And indeed, *The Archive* brings together classic texts, hard-to-come-by flyleaves, pamphlets, artists' statements and interviews covering nearly a century, the

oldest from 1925 (Freud), the most recent from 2006 (Jayce Salloum's 'Sans titre/Untitled: The Video Installation as an Active Archive'). The book's richness also comes to the fore when one tries to read across the four sections and discovers cross-references connecting texts into other categories based on art forms such as installations and photography, on metaphors like the atlas and the box or on concepts of memory and testimony.

To achieve as much diversity as is possible under 200 pages Merewether has chosen to print extracts of longer pieces alongside the characteristically short flyleaves and artist's statements. This approach has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it makes for an anthology that is clean-cut, crisp and fresh. Its texts are short, some no longer than one or two pages, with only two 18-page articles standing out. It also enables Merewether to highlight those passages relevant for the archival in art. On the other hand, presenting extracts instead of full texts implies that these texts were produced in a vacuum, independent of a larger argument and only in connection to the selected texts.

What an anthology like this needs is an introduction that works to do at least two things: contextualize the pieces and tie them together. Merewether who is an art historian and writer and currently Director at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, does provide us with a concise, to-the-point introduction in which he skilfully summarizes the texts and establishes relationships between them, aligning them and juxtaposing them to such an extent that they seem to form a universe in itself. In 'Archigraphia: On the Future of Testimony and the Archive to Come' Dragan Kujundzic speaks to the texts of Freud, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Derrida elsewhere in the volume. Green's text is effectively a dialogue between Agamben and her own artistic practice. And the two-and-a-half pages from Agamben's *The Archive and Testimony* are in turn a reply to Foucault's historical *a priori*.

However, in terms of contextualization one wishes that Merewether's introduction, compiled of potent one-paragraph analyses of texts, had been more extensive to include reflections on the authors' positions and about the social, cultural or political circumstances of the creation of their art. What exactly is 'the monumental history of the state'? What do the historical records try to accomplish? What exactly does the art – that the volume builds on but does not show, with the exception of a fragment of Richter's *Atlas, Sheet 9* on the cover – represent and remediate, doubt and deny?

Fortunately, the texts itself largely make up for this as they comment on the world at large, the world contemporary art cannot do without, especially not art that seeks to confront history, memory, testimony and identity. In this sense it are the three short texts by The Atlas Group and from The Atlas Group Archive that stand out most in that they clearly start from a political engagement in contemporary history, in this case that of Lebanon. The Atlas Group is an imaginary non-profit research foundation established in 1999 by Lebanese born artist Walid Ra'ad who currently lives and works in New York both as an artist and as Associate Professor of Art. The group aims to 'locate, preserve, study and produce audio, visual, literary and other artifacts' (theatlasgroup.org). The Atlas Group Archive thus exists of (constructed) notebooks, videotapes, photographs and other material that document the Lebanese Civil War and that the group then uses in video installations, collages, performances and other expressive forms. In 'The Operator #17 file' (from 2000) and 'The Secret File' (2002) The Atlas Group comments on what they call 'found files,' files produced by the group and attributed to anonymous individuals. Operator #17 is a Lebanese Army intelligence officer who chose to point his surveillance camera at the sun during sunset instead of at the assigned target at the Corniche, a seaside boardwalk in Beirut. The Atlas Group Archive holds a videotape that tells the operator's story and includes the footage of the sunset he was allowed to keep after he was dismissed from service.

Interestingly, in a footnote Merewether remarks, without further explanation, that these three texts were written before 'the events of July 2006.' He is referring to the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict, followed by the Lebanon War that was the beginning of a series of conflicts in the region leading up to the government collapse in 2011. The selections of Ra'ad in *The Archive* deal exclusively with the 1970-1990 civil war but the nature of his work will lead him to focus on these most recent events as well. In 2011 Ra'ad was awarded the 2011 Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography in recognition of his continuing efforts to deconstruct the relationship between documentary photography, history and the archive.

But one cannot help wonder if perhaps some texts in the volume speak for themselves. Can they? And should they? Perhaps some do not need an extensive introduction distinguishing between contemporary Japanese photography and French nineteenth century photography, between the artistic climate in Europe and the United States, between psychoanalysis and pop art. Perhaps the texts and extracts collected by Merewether do constitute a universe in themselves in which art engages with the archive, is in dialogue with the archive or becomes the archive. Perhaps it is enough to just read Warhol's words:

...now I just drop everything in the same-size cardboard boxes that have a colour patch on the side for the month of the year. I really hate nostalgia, though, so deep down I hope they all get lost and I never have to look at them again (31).

All in all, Merewether has done students of contemporary art, or any form of visual culture for that matter, a great favour by collecting these texts in such an attractively designed volume in which typographic compositions of authors' quotes make up for the absence of illustrations. Ultimately, this anthology is a valuable survey and if not the end-station then, with the aid of the biographical notes and the extensive bibliography, the first step into a world of theoretical writings, artists' philosophies, and a plethora of oeuvres all dealing with the archival condition of art and life itself.

**Art Expressions**

**“BOOK OF LIFE”**

Courtney Books oil on panel, 2008, 44” X 63”



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Artist Statement: “A childhood friend of mine used to share folk tales passed down orally through generations of her family. This particular narration, derived from her grandmother’s rendition, pertains to a story of “angels.” These were not angels of the Christian sense, but described to me as entities of phantasm that rested up an individual’s shoulders throughout one’s life. One “angel” rested on the right shoulder

and diligently recorded in a tome all the positive details of that individual's life, the left in turn was charged with recording the negative occurrences. At my friend's behest, I stripped off any original religious connotations of the image and in turn rendered an archival play on the "good" and "bad" self-conscious. The trope of the "shoulder angel," associated with Victorian imagery, had transformed by the mid-twentieth century into the more secular version of the self-conscious popularized by cartoons."

“THE PERSONALITY LABORATORY”

Abi Shapiro



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*The Personality Laboratory* contains 221 jars and bottles filled with ingredients, instructions and equipment with which to concoct a personality. The installation is designed to make the visitor feel as though they have stumbled upon an experiment in progress, with weighing scales, rubber gloves and handwritten notes line the shelves and a lab coat draped over a chair. Ingredients include discarded ephemera from the

natural and man-made world, such as fresh flowers, seed pods, animal bones, rusty nails and shards of glass. Each jar is labelled as a specific personality trait including a dosage and possible side effects. Ingredients include examples such as "misplaced affection", "visual apathy", "morose narcissism". The artist labelled each jar's trait based on encounters during a three-month period of travel where she documented one individual aspect about each person that was unique to her experience of them, nodding to the impossibility of objectivity in research and data collection. The visitor is invited to consider how they might create their own or an others personality if given the chance and what the implications of this kind of power might be. This reflects current ethical questions over medical interventions in genetics and also what we think, rightly or wrongly, is unique about ourselves, recalling debates over the essentialist and social constructionist theories of the body.