

ON ARCHIVES

An antique lead-roll-archive was discovered in the agora in Athens in the 1970's. The inscribed lead tablets from the third and fourth century only provide elementary information on a cavalryman: his name, a description of his horse and its value; it is undated. On account of the material they are made of – lead – one can assume that the rolled up tablets have most likely never been opened and thus consulted. Their condition is immaculate, devoid of any traces of use. This apparently unutilised archive is a perfect archive – in the sense of a place of imperishability and constancy.

The image of the archive as a bunker still exists today, one such being the long-term archive *Barbarastollen* (Zentrale Bergungsort der Bundesrepublik Deutschland). In a drift mine in the south of Germany, approximately 29.4 million meter of microfilm is being stored in 1,369 stainless steel cases that guarantee conservation for at least 500 years without loss of information. The location along with its cultural assets stands under special protection of the Hague Convention of 1954, deeming it the official safekeeping site of the Federal Republic of Germany. This archive is not meant for current consultation. It is an archive for the tense of future perfect.

Is it the specific information about the cavalryman or a particular snippet of microfilm that gives meaning to these archives? The specifics of the cavalry archive do not seem substantial enough to have ever prompted consultation (as a system of insurance for the horses for instance). One can only speculate over their importance – the information could have been common knowledge in times of its construction, and perhaps the records only existed for the sake of their recording. We can't tell. As with the photographed documents in the *Barbarastollen*, they are not meant for sharing either. (Notwithstanding that in both of these examples, the information provided therein would only serve as a basis for interpretation.)

If not the informational content, what lends these places significance, then? Something disconnected from information all together? The idea of the lead rolls that seem everlasting and immune to the forces of time is very powerful, as are the steel casks and the cave – perfect shells impervious to outside influences; objects of lead and steel, made to persist, buried and enclosed.

But what is it that makes them peculiar as archives, if the conditions for preservation and durability are successfully met? An archive, as we usually know it, is in fact a place of ongoing change and difference rather than a passive place of the constant. It alters as it constantly grows, accumulating more material over time. It shows traces of use. And the materiality that constitutes an archive is not a guarantee of permanence. On the contrary, every preserved material undergoes transformations. An archive is an indicator of passing time rather than a place of stasis; notwithstanding the peculiar time condition we can observe in it, oscillating between a state of permanent potential presence and diachrony. And yet – why do we still hold on to the vision of a place that, despite today’s increasing state of flux, seems to preserve stability and meaning? Again, if not mere information, nor the presumed material consistency, then what does support this impression?

When entering the magazines of an archive, we are predominantly confronted with an austere structure, that of a grid. The space is defined, divided and organised according to this configuration, starting with the infrastructural outline and continuing with the geometrical arrangement of the boxes. The grid is a means of achieving order: it abstracts, standardises, serialises, subdivides and connects. It provides an even and regular surface to a far less homogeneous content. The single components within the compartments become invisible due to the standardising forms. Though the underlying diversity becomes apparent in the partitioning as such, the fragmentary and selective nature of the archive material is lost on the structural and formal level.

However, this rigid archival structure remains notably flexible and adjustable. The grid is a non-hierarchical, open structure that can endure transformations from within: it can spatially expand, cumulatively extend, and shift its center without losing its essential properties. Regardless of this ongoing change, it conveys an integral and intact entity. The rectilinear and regular surface does not betray any gaps or voids. The self-contained boxes within the framework seem completed, both physically and in regards to content. These observations on the function of the grid in an archive arise from Rosalind Krauss’ remarks on the structure in modernist art, in which she detects two alternative readings – the centripetal and the centrifugal – in order to describe the fragmentary/open as well as the containing/closed properties of the grid.

Diversity and irregularities are also possible within this arrangement. They become even more visible precisely because of their normative framework that disregards content and form. When looking at ordinary shelves in an archive, different types of surface structures

can be detected — some material is simply tied together; some is contained in old cardboard boxes, some in new — depending on the material condition, age and relevance of the stored.

Even paper bags that carry bodily and soft properties can be “inscribed” in this structure. For over 20 years around 15,500 paper bags containing mainly hand-torn scraps of documents have been stored in different archives of the *BStU* (Bundesbehörde für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik). This federal agency responsible for the records of the State Security (“*Stasi*”) of the former German Democratic Republic holds these scraps, remnants of documents consigned to be ultimately destroyed by the *Stasi*. Since then a large reconstruction effort has been undertaken: while the manual reconstruction of the approximately 600 million scraps of paper already began in 1995, the digital reassembly, with the help of the “e-Puzzler” machine, was initiated in 2007. In the first phase of this process, the scanned fragments are being virtually pieced together by means of a pattern recognition technology according to mere physical and formal criteria such as paper strength, colouring, quality and structure of the outer edges, and typeface. A textual analysis takes place only in the second phase as single pages are reassembled into coherent files and folders. This endeavour is still in its pilot stage, and it has not yet been decided whether the information on these approximately 44 million pages will ever be entirely accessible. Until then, the shredded files are being stored partly in the original rubbish bags, partly in new ones, all being numbered. They lie in ordinary shelves that are commonly used for boxes; while almost seeming to burst this structure, they manage to fit. Before being digitised the material has to be flattened out and allocated into new containers — astonishingly 1 bag fills 60-80 cardboard boxes.

The form completely changes throughout the process: from independent intact documents to a bulky accumulation of millions of paper fragments, to a more orderly arrangement of still indecipherable and unrelated bits and pieces, to eventually an analogue as well as digital version of a reconstructed document. The meaning changes as well. In the end it might relate to the factual content again, and might, as intended with this undertaking, be available for personal inspection by the people affected by surveillance of the *Stasi*, while serving as further proof of such crimes. (Though you would need the original analogue version as opposed to the digital one to be legally effective.)

But in between, in this officially lamentable provisional state, in this condition of pure materiality, meaning is maintained by the particular structures that hold this amorphous body together. Were it not for the almost identical brown paper bags, stored more or less in file in

the steel shelves, the potentiality of the paper fragments would probably not convince us. It is precisely the interplay between the deviation in materiality and form and the conformity in dealing with it that makes this image so disturbingly powerful.

Does this effect need to be connected to systems of order? Does it have to imply a geometrical arrangement of some sort, then? “Unordnung ist eine Quelle der Hoffnung” (“Disorder is a source of hope”) is written on a cardboard strip that is attached to one of the bookshelves in Harald Szeemann’s *Fabbrica*. His personal archive consists of a seemingly overflowing accumulation of material: wine boxes filled with envelopes; notes attached to strings dangling from the ceiling; books, magazines and tapes in shelves and on the ground – creative chaos in its purest cliché. No recognizable structure is detectable. Yet one is tempted to draw lines and map a surface structure onto the overarching conglomeration. One senses connections and relationships between all these disparate elements, although direct access to this corpus of information and inspiration remains denied. As disorderly as this space might appear, its impenetrability and opacity have an effect comparable to the clean surface structures we find in institutionalised archives – we stand in front of spaces turned into surfaces, unable to get in, unable to understand. But – no need for comprehension, as we already find meaning outside of the contained, within the enclosing structures themselves.

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