

SPACES OF ARCHIVAL SLIPPAGE AND '[...] THINGS [...] NOT NECESSARILY MEANT TO BE VIEWED AS ART'

The archive eludes easy figure/ground interpretations – it slips between modernist binary concepts of reciprocal legibility. I see it more as a complex fold than the presumably neat suggestion of discrete positive figure and negative ground making up an idealised whole. Despite its obsession with formality, chronology and orderliness, the archival condition embodies a strange entanglement of figure and ground, visibility and hiddenness. Critical engagements with archival structures reveal how figure and ground contain one another, respectively: the figure crashes against the submerged shelf of the endless archival sea; the ground swallows the figure.

Rather than the clear system the archive portrays on the surface of things, its entangled substance threatens to become a trap atmospherically similar to the unnerving labyrinthine library in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. On the one hand, through stubborn isolation and its continuous battle against redundancy, the archive revels in its separated self-importance and its attachments to the task of remembering. Yet despite the ostensible separateness of its site- and material-specific sanctum, the archive is undeniably caught up in – in fact, dependant on – the ordinariness of the everyday. 'The lives of others' and the clandestine recordings of such extra-ordinary lives (as alluded to elsewhere in this book) have resulted in an unintentionally accessible archive of personal, social and cultural damage on a massive scale. What, the reader might ask, is the weight; the worth of the torn up paper composing this particular and relatively new archive of illegally captured and documented moments of the everyday – under the panoptic eye of the German secret police (*Stasi*) – pre-1989? How do we define the value of this disjointed mass of secretly extracted and documented information?

Via its translation into the realm of art in Ariane Pauls' (born 1980) photographs one might argue that from a Dadaist perspective its fragmented state suggests a satisfactory legibility, perhaps even comprehensibility. The contemporary artistic register is useful here in that it opens various potential readings of the paper-based *Stoff* at hand. What matters most is the promise this predominantly fragmented archive holds, of an entropic potential of *re-becoming*. The possibility of its crystallisation into a form of *conventional* legibility makes the currently incoherent fabric of this specific archive of pain particularly important. It is preserved to ensure individuals are held accountable; even if they are long dead by the time the anomalous paper puzzle pieces of the *Stasi* archive congeal and become cognitively accessible. The archive, in this case, is a machine for the production of *re-remembering*.

As crucial as the maintenance of memory in countless cases may be, surely some things could or perhaps even should be forgotten? The challenging possibilities attached to contexts of the justifiability of forgetting to remember and remembering to forget is where I believe the role of artists interrogating archival environments is critical. Their explorations into archival territory – via a provocative questioning of entrenched norms attached to the hierarchical selectiveness of remembering – help us to begin to think about what might be the ballast worth casting off the archival ship.

Certain artists have made their own versions of 'archives' over the last few decades. Some of their archival attempts harbour dynamic process: Robert Morris contained material-specific sound in an opaque timber container – in *Box with the Sound Of Its Own Making* (1961). Hans Haacke via a transparent vitrine made visible the climatic effects of different 'internal' and 'external' conditions – in *Condensation Cube* (1963-5). Whereas both the above examples consisted of sealed cubes, Hélio Oiticica's *B33 Box Bólido 18: Homage to Cara de Cavallo* (1965) consists of a cube-like container, one of its six faces absent, inviting unfolding. Similarly and bravely

vulnerable Eva Hesse in her complexly dualistic cubic creation, *Accession II* (1968), injects the 'archive' of male-dominated and often hard up 'Minimalism' of the late 1960's with a welcome dose of flaccid contradiction. On the more static side of the spectrum sits Sol LeWitt's *Buried Cube containing an Object of Importance but Little Value* (1968). The process of the last-mentioned object's burial was documented photographically, as evidence of the work's archival function.

Just as the above artistically derived archives are legible as such because of the nature and configuration of the materials defining their 'facades', so larger institutional archives are defined by physical envelopes. Such material encasements suggest the convincing protection of archival content. The separateness of the archive stems from the manner in which its enclosing membrane – whether architectural or natural – simulates such separation. In truth though, the perceived discreteness and defence associated with a given archive's wrapping is a myth. The archive's obsession with protection is to a large extent futile. When we collapse 18th, 19th and 20th century conceptions of the sublime into the current period we are reminded of the irreverence of (un)natural systems towards archival aspirations. Nature has recently again demonstrated its disrespect for the preciousness and precariousness of the archive: whether via its assaults on the museum basements of New York, during *Sandy's* 'visit', or its penetration of 'archived' energy in Fukushima. The much older natural disaster of Pompeii represents an anomaly to this rule. Its rapid destruction, in retrospect, reads as almost benevolent because of what it 'archived' for archaeologists to discover much later.

The book you are holding is full of archives and archival references Pauls has grappled with for some time now. The lure that the world's archival seas have on this artist results in her continued probing of the often murky territories archives occupy. It is not surprising – in this ambivalent terrain of archival selectiveness – that her works interrogating archives conceal at least as much as they reveal. For the accomplishment of such acts of simultaneous obscuring and divulging, her often-chosen medium of photography remains uncontested.

She further complicates the 'clarity' of photographs by introducing *photograms* into some of the booklets making up this collection of texts and images. The addition of these cameraless images exacerbates photography's eternal struggle with appearance and reality. This favourite technique of photo-graphing in the darkroom, employed by earlier practitioners such as Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy, visualises the fact that figure and ground, ground and figure, mutually consume one another. The placement of an object, be it a book or other item, becomes – on the enlarger glass – both bachelor and bride. Nothing needs to be 'stripped bare' or isolated. A third space of slippage, *between* what we think we perceive as figure or ground, engulfs those categories and cannot be named, possibly cannot even be archived. This emergent meta-space, equated to the fold earlier in this text, prompts new ways of recollection – ways of remembering which challenge the normative oversimplification of the role of the archive.

Over a number of years, through my own artistic and pedagogical practice I have contemplated the possibilities of the transferral of the term 'archive' into contexts of the everyday; into situations not immediately associated with the weight of what is generally perceived as being of archival relevance. A case in point is exemplified by the one-hundred-year old house I currently occupy. What might be stylistically perceived as a kitsch mosaic work is located on the property's rear boundary wall. To me the marginal and personal work demonstrates what Joseph Beuys meant when he declared that 'everyone is an artist'. What struck me most immediately about this work was the way it had been situated chronologically by its author, dating it '1968'. This date places the mosaic, by default, into a *lived* 'archive' much larger than the geography of the compact suburban backyard it physically occupies. The year links the fraught, socially engineered politics of 1968 Johannesburg to the streets of Paris and New York, and the site- and universally-specific politics which disturbed those particular urban environments at the time.

Johannesburg is highly relevant as a case-study representing the inherent difficulty of the archive as a flawed, unbalanced and highly selective model. For example, the undisputedly impressive (from a western point of view) art collection of the

Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) can be read as a text about archival absence. For all the art historic significance of what this particular archive contains, it is equally noteworthy for what had, until 1994, been omitted from it. The century-old institution's first acquisition of a work by a black artist took place a full thirty years after the gallery was established. The purchase of Gerhard Sekoto's *Yellow Houses* in 1940 did not represent an awakening in the gallery's collection politics. The possibility of a more balanced and representational collection was ignored and Sekoto's remained – for almost half a century – an isolated yellow house in a sea of whiteness.

Apart from the more intimate 'archives' by the mid- 20th century conceptual artists mentioned above, there have been, earlier in that same century, calls for the reduction of bulky and space-consuming museum collections. Kazimir Malevich's radical attitude and his urgency to start anew resulted in his plea to burn museum collections and translate them into pulverised space-saving versions of themselves. We know that the Constructivists, Malevich and his contemporaries, were in fact themselves the earlier garde of 'conceptual' artists to the LeWitts, Hesses and Haakes of the 1960s and 70s. Again in the guise of an artist, Malevich encourages us to rethink the reasoning behind what and why societies collect, and archive. In this vein, in 2010 as part of an invited group exhibition, *Time's Arrow*, I made the work *Accumulation #1: Approximately a Century's Worth of Cornice Dust from the Johannesburg Art Gallery*. The brief to participating artists asked for an interrogation of the JAG's substantial archive. I chose to address and collect a substance embodying part of the building's unintentional 'collection': namely the dust of Johannesburg which had settled high up on the gallery's neoclassical cornices over the course of the museum building's then almost century-long existence. This action and the subsequent translation of the dust into an artwork subverts the more recognised codes and systems employed by the gallery to ascribe value and meaning to the things it (consciously) collects and thickens its official archive with. The above exercise – via a mode which hierarchically reverses notions of value, currency, relevance and meaning – draws attention to the necessity of considering and interrogating the often politically loaded and biased agendas inherent in the narrow structures of archives. It appeals to the importance of looking more closely and critically at '[...] Things [...] Not Necessarily Meant to be Viewed as Art'. Pauls, in numerous explorations in this dense artist's book, addresses such things of the everyday to expose spaces of archival slippage we would otherwise miss. In one of her works, a volume describing the extent of a traditional Japanese room – underwritten by the multiplication of the tatami module – is literally made to float. It hovers unsettlingly above the parquet of a room in a private fin du siècle Berlin residence; a room within a room; an architectural, cross-cultural manifestation. On the surface of the photograph which documents this Russian nesting-doll-like relational superimposition, the amalgamating shadows of the monolithic Berlin architecture and the Spartan Japanese armature could be read as another version of the slippery third space – the meta-space of interpretive possibility – alluded to above. A closer look at the tectonics of this work shows that it constitutes the joining of a series of metric folding rules. The piece depicted on the photograph is measured. Its calibrated detail situates, delineates and temporarily anchors this gently rocking – thanks to a Berlin late summer draught – acontextual manifestation. In my view this work develops Mel Bochner's *Measurement: Room* series (the first of which was realised in 1969). For this ongoing series Bochner applied exact linear measurements onto the given exhibition space's walls and around the respective door and window openings contained within those walls. His one-to-one scale annotated insertions dematerialise what we perceive as walls. Bochner's perfectly applied dimension marks translate the flat abstraction found on annotated architects' drawings into real space. This results in the sense that when traversing an iteration of his *Measurement: Room* environment one may experience the sensation of suffering from a type of scalar tension. One might for a moment forget one's own body and be caught in an oscillatory bind between full-scale human and a proportionately smaller occupant of a schematic doll's house. The folding rules used in the tatami-based work borrow a physicalised register of the abstract (western) metric system to describe the Japanese room. At the same

time they appear as layers of stencilled information, evoking Bochner's work, which have detached themselves from the monolithic European walls which serve as their cross-cultural backdrop. In this scenario the anthropological measure is figuratively suggested in the proportions of the tatami constellation and of course literally legible in the more precisely scientific increments marked on the unfolded surfaces of the western folding rules.

The tatami-metric amalgam floats in a Magritte-like way. This hybrid hovers doubly – above the apartment floor (the closest visible relative horizontal plane); and above the horizontal street-scape of the metropolis, below. The acontextual and symbolically collapsed nature of the image updates and complicates Magritte's surreal fascination with the limits of pictorial and linguistic attempts at representation. In the photographed tatami-metric levitation Bochner and Magritte, in a sense, meet. Respective obsessions with apertures – for Bochner, epitomised by 'the archaeology of doubt' and for his predecessor, 'the human condition' – are what galvanise this meeting.

The photographic image of this floating structure communicates a combination of representational and cultural systems. Here an archive of art historical images, accidents and events is assimilated, consciously or less so, into a laboratory-like space of experimentation which results in a place which is 'no-place'. This particular utopian fusion of occidental and oriental is rooted in, but also uproots, a long-time fascination of artists along a European-Asian trajectory. In Pauls' case known spheres of influence begin to aesthetically and functionally blur, reinforcing the cloudiness of still generally assumed discreet figure-ground distinctions, and highlighting the limits of the cataloguing and classificatory task of the archival project.

BIO:

Alexander Opper lives and works in Johannesburg, as educator, writer, artist, architect and designer. He directs the architectural master's program in the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture. Here he practices a teaching-and-learning approach premised on 'folding' the architectural studio into the field. As an artist, his site-specific interventions subvert entrenched codes attached to the white cube and interrogate uneven power relationships embedded in, and *in-between*, urban conditions. His artistic outputs rely on an approach he refers to as 'Undoing Architecture'. In 2013 Opper's debut solo exhibition – *Separ(n)ation* – completed its run at GoetheonMain, Johannesburg.