



## **Memories of the Future: The use of archive material in contemporary art**

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### **PART 1 - The concept of Re/Writing: The archive as a device for Re/Writing history**

I recently had the opportunity to watch a documentary produced by Chilean director Patricio Guzman and presented in 2010 at the Cannes Film Festival. It is called *Nostalgia da Luz* (Nostalgia of the Light), and it begins with an unexpected approximation between three activities performed in the Atacama Desert. In a hi-tech observatory, astronomers investigate the stars in search for the origins of the Universe. Geologists study the traces left by prehistory in archeological beds. At the same time, a group of women scans desert soil for the remains of their families killed during Pinochet's military dictatorship.

Although it seems like the search for remains from the past are so disparate among themselves, Guzman, in *Nostalgia da Luz*, settles solid connections between the stars and human bones and skulls as if these were files of a history to be deciphered. A history regarding the inception of the universe and the birth of ancient cultures as well as the social, political path of a nation; in short, histories that seem to touch each other by the human desire to cross the fine line of the present and to understand how the past can be a fertile vehicle towards knowing out history.

If on one hand the theme of the movie touched me in particular because I am Brazilian and my parents fought during our military dictatorship and I am therefore conscious that great part of the history involving this period is yet to be known and written through the unrestricted access to the documents, testimonies and files related to the deaths and numerous disappearances of political activists, on the other hand we know that the archives and the documentaries have

become a fertile vehicle for the contemporary politicization of history. That is the case of the documentary *Cabra Marcado para Morrer*, by Brazilian film-maker Eduardo Coutinho, which narrates the life of João Pedro Teixeira, a peasant leader from Paraíba, murdered in 1962 after the persecution of peasants before the military dictatorship in Brazil. Also in this case, we perceive how ideas such as documents and the past must be seen as powerful living forces for the construction and understanding of the history of our culture.

It is also important to highlight, back to Guzman's documentary, the explicit reference to the museum, in this case of Atacama, as an area for the preservation and documentation of a culture. In the documentary, Guzman discusses the way in which the bodies of primitive peoples, their bones and skulls are preserved, filed and ordered as true treasures of the cultural history of Chileans.

In fact, it is impossible to deny that contemporaneity has been taken up by a compulsion of researches involving archives. We live an **archive fever**; a wish that ranges from theoretical discussions putting into debate the etymological, philosophical, legal aspect and the different possible aspects in rescuing our history – whether political, social, ethnographic or cultural – pervading, specifically in art, debates and practices that take over the subject concerned.

Expositions based integrally or partially on issues pervading this concept, artists that work with archives and/or discuss methodologies of classification, archivology and museology, heated disputes between private collectors and public museums for the acquisition of art works and files, reaching the current debates about institutional policies of archives and acquis, are only some of the issued inside the "specific" context of art nowadays.

The first question we should ask is: what is/are the motive (s) for this archive fever as a part of contemporaneity?

Far from intending to end the subject, we can say this archive fever of "archivemania" has, at first, an intrinsic relation to the so-called "crisis" in history or, more particularly, with the desire and the need to write "other" histories to go further those dictated by hegemonic thought.

One of the discussions in the heated debates of the so-called postmodernity is the idea of a supposed end to the story; such idea has been revisited and debated by a series of thinkers, both in social, political fields and in art history.

Inside this perspective, we find thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, who is opposed to the illuminist concept of history, proposing alternatives for another history narrated in contrast with the so-called official history. In his theses "Sobre o conceito de História" (On the concept of History), he points to a necessity to write history against the grain; history that, opposite from the official hegemonic narratives, incorporates all which is left behind.

Inside diverse perspective we could number a series of discussions, turned to the field of art history and art historiography that put into debate the idea of a supposed end. The best known ones are those undertaken by Hans Belting in his book *O Fim da história da arte: uma revisão dez anos depois*, and by Arthur Danto in *Após o fim da arte: a arte contemporânea e os limites da história* (2006). Regardless of the issues sinalized by the authors, and of the fact that they do not propose alternatives of diverse historiographic methods for the comprehension of art practice, it is perceivable that both situations detect the crisis in the eurocentric art history model and the end of a tradition.

What has come to an end to these authors is an allegedly linear history of art that – from 1400 up to the end of the modernism in the first half of the twentieth century – has been told entirely under a Euro-Western point of view, as if it was a unified, universal culture. Part of this alleged universality would have been debunked whether by the existence of cultures that are far from identifying with the Euro-Western model, or because the traditional way of narrating history, through linearly precise styles and features, wasn't able to handle the new artistic development that came up after the end of modernism in the field of arts.

It's an entire world established by the hegemonic thought that is destabilized when repeatedly applying a process of reactivation of cultures so far discarded, as the case of Latin American culture, which is set aside from that what is considered official in art history, and, obviously, when they come up, they often do inside epistemological cutouts that do not reflect the particularities of our culture.

The archive fever appears precisely in this context, marked by a "war" between forces disputing for a new geopolitical definition of art, a reflex, whether of the strengthening of cultures previously taken as peripheral, or of the necessity to construct "other" histories.

## **PART 2 - Archive displacements in contemporary art: from the archive as a document to the archive as poetics and performatic device**

To some authors, the artwork as an archive, in Brazil, is a consequence of a process that began around the 60, when a series of artists, often marginalized from the official system of arts, began to develop more experimental projects, questioning the fetish of the art object and the system of arts in that historical context (Freire, 2006).

Such practices, that come from conceptual art – i.e., from conceptualism, speaking in a broader way – often circulated outside the official art circuit back then, and can be found today in the possession of artists, in their private archives.

In fact, it is perceived that part of the critical thinking and art produced in that period were discarded by a hegemonic official narrative captained by a model reproduced according to the dictates of the North-American current matrix at the time in that country.

Paulo Brusky, as observed by Freire (2006), is one of the Brazilian artists who made explicit this relation between the archive, the new ways of circulation in the field of arts and the critical strategies against the object of art and the art system in the 1960s. Paulo Brusky's archive currently gathers over 70 thousand items (productions in postal art, performance recordings, collective publications, productions in fax art, among others) and can be seen as a testimony of the rich exchanges of information between artists and the creation of an art circuit parallel to the official circuit of galleries and museums at that time, nowadays, this archive can be seen as a rich source for the construction of new narratives on conceptual art in Brazil.

More than a mere space for document storage, artists' archives from this period are the expression of a number of speech-forming systems, more properly the ideas about conceptual art in Brazil: about the way artists in this period understood the role of the artist and even the methods for production, reception and circulation of art.

### **The Archive as poetics and *modus operandi* in the context of contemporary art**

Many of the artistic practices performed between the 1970s and the 1990s incorporate some prerogatives outlined in the 1960s: the concern about the dematerialization of the object, the interest for the development of proposals

which incorporate the dimension of time and artistic process, the development of projects to propose diverse circulation processes in the field of arts, the usage of new ways, the criticism to the art system (Arantes 2005).

Many of these practices lead the artists not much by an interest in the production of a finished object, but the production of actions in process of which their fragments were kept. These 'remains', vestiges, traces of these productions in process, ephemeral, dematerialized, in progress, were often registered by archival mediatic devices – photos, videos, papers, documents, images of the actions, oral reports, etc – as a sort of testimony of the actions developed.

On the other hand, these archival devices, such as video and photography, for instance, many times were elements of creation and production of language. The video *Marca Registrada*, developed by Letícia Parente in 1974, in which the artist embroiders onto the sole of her own foot the inscription *Made in Brasil*, is a good example in this aspect. The duration of this video is exactly the time taken by the artist to embroider the inscription/writing on her skin. We could wonder if the video, in this case, is but a register or documentation of the artist's performance or if it is a device for language construction in itself; a videoperformance. If this discussion goes beyond the scope of this text, it is worth highlighting one question: the fact that there is an intrinsic relation, in contemporaneity, between work and function, inter alia, of the advent of the mediatic devices that are, at the same time, producers of language and register devices.

In this context of artistic production that goes beyond the objectual art and an art of presence, very peculiar inside the different branches of Brazilian contemporary art, the vestiges, the traces, residual documents become, in some cases, part of the intrinsic 'operation' of the work itself.

In these cases, it's not about reducing the work to its documents and records, but also realizing that there is an "archival" operation of some sort, inherent to contemporary art due to the process of artistic dematerialization and the incorporation of the new ways in the field of arts, as well as the incorporation of the dimension of time and of the process in its making.

This case is not only about a simple cultural paradox of preservation, i.e., of an impulse to perpetuate what is transitory and ephemeral, which deeply marks the contemporary art productions, but of the understanding that certain aspects of

the contemporary art work – which dialogue with the dimension of time, of the ephemeral and transitory – incorporate a certain symptomatic and incomplete dimension – as Jacques Derrida would put it – as an operation intrinsic to its making. We could risk saying that the “necessity for a registration of the event and gathering documents of its existence lead us to the discovery of the archive as a concrete topological modality of the work itself” (Costa 2008)

Another example, in this matter, is the work of Taiwanese Tehching Hsieh, presented at the 30th Biennial of São Paulo. The artist shaved his hair off in April 11, 1980, and initiated what would be his second *One-year Performance*. At that time, already living for six years as an illegal immigrant in the U.S., the artist put on a worker’s jumpsuit and registered in a check clock every hour of 365 days, up to April 11, 1981. The work is presented in rows of daily photos that served as a register of the artist’s every action, the clock cards and the check clock itself; the original documents of his work and a projection in 16mm that shows, in a “fast forward” way, the passing of time through Tehching’s pictures. In this work, photography is not only a register device, but an essential element of the work that can be interpreted as a sort of photoperformance.

### **PART 3**

Not coincidentally, it is possible to detect a number of events in contemporary art in which the issue of the archive becomes a fundamental axis.

The matter of the archive has been discussed, for instance, in some practices of Brazilian artist Rosângela Rennó. She works with records and documentaries and makes archive images gain a new dimension. Her sources of inspiration, such as newspapers, family pictures, libraries, dead archives, are material for the construction of something alive.

In *Vulgo*, Rennó works with archive material that belongs to São Paulo’s state penitentiary, composed by photographic material intending to identify the prisoners by number, physical characteristics (features, skin color, height, weight and body deformities) and marks (tattoos and intentional or accidental scars).

None of the images shows the face of the person in it, most of them focusing only on the nape and scalp of the models. The artist’s digital intervention is restricted (at least apparently) to a light red color added exactly in the core of the swirl of each individual’s scalp.

### **88 de 14.000, by Alice Micelli**

In a similar perspective we may highlight the work of Brazilian artist Alice Micelli: *88 de 14000*, which I presented in the *Crossing* curatorship at Paço das Artes in 2010.

The project is a video composed by 88 ID pictures, selected by the artist in the photographic archive of the old S-21 prison, in Phnom Penh, capital of Cambodia, where 14 thousand people, among men, women and children, have been executed by the Red Khmer's regime. The images of the 88 dead prisoners are projected in a sand curtain, according to the time spent by each one inside the prison: one day is equivalent to one kilogram of sand, which means four seconds of visibility in the video.

In this project, the artist worked with original negatives which are currently at the Genocide Museum, located at the old prison in Cambodia. From these negatives, she amplified and recorded the photographs projected on a sand curtain. The original photos were taken, as told by the artist, moments before the death of the prisoners: "these people knew, at the moment the picture was taken, that they were going to die, if not moments after the picture, certainly a few months later", she observes (Arantes, 2010, p. 71-73)..

The work is a double testimony: the testimony that the artist was there and that she had access to the files, and the testimony, exposed to the public, of the barbarisms perpetrated in history. In this aspect, it works as a sort of valve against the neglect of situations and archives that are often buried in our history.

### **Meta4walls by Lucas Bambozzi**

Another artist working with archival material, but putting in debate issues of electronic and digital files, is Lucas Bambozzi. In *Meta4walls*, a net art project presented at the XXV International Biennial of São Paulo, the artist develops a sort of metalanguage about the issues pervading the cyberspace, more particularly, about the processes of surveillance and privacy invasion on the web.

The project displays to the public an archive of junk mail received by the artist as SPAMs since 1999. All sorts of messages: illicit links, pornographic links, links for trading fake diplomas; i.e., links that put in evidence the underworld of the cyberspace that we all receive daily without previous permission in our inboxes.

**Dentro e fora do tubo, by Maurício Dias and Walter Riedweg**

Inside another perspective, we can mention those projects that bring to public space personal testimonies and/or personal archives. More traditional monuments, which are generally built to celebrate an important social event or to honor an eminent person, these projects, developed in public space, can be read as a sort of monument to give voice to “common” people for the comprehension and edification of our history.

In this perspective, we find *Dentro e fora do tubo* (1988) developed by Maurício Dias and Walter Riedweg. Executed from recorded statements by refugees from lands in conflict, living in Switzerland waiting for the legalization of their political asylum, the idea of the project – coming from an intense relationship with the group of deponents – was to record oral statements about the memory of the path traveled by the immigrants when leaving their hometown until their arrival in Switzerland. These remembrances, voices, memories of the refugees, testimonies, were recorded in walk-talks and spread, inside tubes, in urban space, available for the population. This case is about putting in evidence, in public space, emotional states resulting from specific situations related to marginalization processes.

**O Canto das Sereias, by Claudio Bueno**

Also in this line of work we revisit the project of Brazilian artist Claudio Bueno, *O Canto das Sereias*, a sort of audible and invisible document, installed in the old port of Québec (Canada): it is a tribute to 8 Canadian women who died at sea, working with broadcasting on the ships of World Wars I and II.

The idea of the project was to pay a sort of tribute to these women through an audible performance executed by the Saint-Laurent River by singers invited by the artist. The performance can be heard as we approach the riverside, with a mobile app. The work, according to the artist, “deals with a way to hack the history of the city. Telling the story in a new way, poetically and critically rewriting it, even fictionalizing it – with no need for too much permission. Either a more poetic way of perpetuating history or a way that diverges from the traditional policy of creating monuments, installed in our mobiles” (e-mail Jul. 2012).



## **Conclusion**

In a moment when history, more precisely art history, has been revisited, it is natural that debates on how art history is built – what are the documents, what archive has served as a base for its formation – will come to light.

The issue of the archive, in a moment when the archives of Brazil's military dictatorship have been open, has been part of a facet of art production in Brazil that not only puts in debate the importance of rescuing art files for the construction of new narratives in the field of art history, but also the vision that the archives, and therefore history, are always open to other possible interpretations.

If, as told by Jacques Derrida, it is impossible to reconstruct history in a whole, because archives are always incomplete and symptomatic, on the other hand, it is up to us, historians, researchers, curators, editors, managers, students, to look into our archives so as to contribute to the edification of our history.

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