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## **Aesthetics of Protest**

**Protesting the Archive: The Artist as Producer** online publication 26/03/2014

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### *Preamble*

#### *Archive Fever*

In 1994, in the Kenneth Clark Lecture Theatre at the Courtauld Institute in London, UK, the philosopher Jacques Derrida gave, for the first time, his talk on “the Archive”, which was then published in the American Journal, *Diacritics* and subsequently became a book, *‘Archive Fever-A Freudian Impression’*.<sup>1</sup>

He lectured for well over 5 hours, non-stop, as can be seen by the publication, which ran to some 80 pages on the actual lecture with some additional ‘theses’ to follow.

I comment on this lecture in order to take from it some key observations Derrida makes about the archive. The archive is a ‘memory structure’ which has two important facets to it,

- 1) Archive is something about seeking after origins (arche- origin-e.g. archaeology) profoundly so, as, in Freudian terms, we can understand it has something of the ‘death drive’ about it- seeking that prime point from which ‘x’ came, in order to return to a stasis- hence the compulsion to repeat or in some collectors terms- the compulsion to complete.
- 2) Archive has something of a control- a ‘call to order’ and ordering or ‘bringing into discursive articulation’ about it. This connects with the philosopher Michel Foucault’s notion of the archive as the arch-originating ‘system’, the ‘order’ of knowledge and discourse of knowledge which Foucault sees a defining different historical ‘eras’; that which enables the conceptualisation of the ‘era’ as such

The most compelling observation however comes from Derrida's further radicalisation of Foucault's idea. In reference to Freud's founding of and originating of the science of psychoanalysis, Derrida suggests that this science would not have been what it was, if the mode of understanding it as a science, had not been produced by the *technology of its archive*.

Freud began to think psychoanalysis through a series of hand-written letters to his colleague Wilhelm Fliess. Freud thus produced *impressions* on a page and layers of impressions and traces as the pages of these letters; letters also being words and messages that may indeed, as letters sometimes do, go astray. These letters thus form the very archive of psychoanalysis.

At the same time Freud had modelled the science of the psyche and its mode of functioning upon the 'mystic writing-pad' which retains the mark within its surface of *erased* images and words and messages 'disappeared' from the surface. It is through this remarkable alignment of the writing of the archive and the model for the science of the subject, that psychoanalysis emerges as it does as knowledge.

It does so of course by *performing* the dual functions of the archive, through the seeking of the memory and the 'call to order' through the collected papers.

#### *Art, Art History, Museum as Archive*

In an essay in Hal Foster's book *Design and Crime*<sup>2</sup> he refers to the archive as Michel Foucault has it as 'the system that governs the appearance of statements'<sup>3</sup> and more specifically Foster refers to the archival relations of modern art *practice*, the art *museum* and art *history* and "the 'memory-structure' that these three systems *produced through a kind of encountering of opposites or dialectics of seeing.*"

[Quotation modified]<sup>4</sup>

Once again the archive is the *producer* or *performer* of the knowledge as much as it is the reservoir for its examples.

Foster starts with Baudelaire and Manet. For Baudelaire, memory is the great criterion of art-art as the ‘memory-technology’ of the beautiful.<sup>5</sup> The greatest work of the tradition must evoke as its memory, the after-effects of its “major precedents” as its ground and support without pastiche or parody. So Baudelaire sees Gericault’s *Raft of Medusa* in Delacroix’s *Barque of Dante* and the latter ‘re-acts’ upon the ‘reading’ of the former.

For this memory structure to prevail the archival architecture of the museum is necessary- the space of the museum ‘as the structure of mnemonic effects, as the place (...imaginary) where artistic tradition happens.’<sup>6</sup>

Manet comes along and subverts this memory structure by taking it to a second-power. Manet reifies this structure to its dialectical ‘breaking point’ by foregrounding it as the *raison d’être* of painting; that painting comment and ‘play’ upon its own “trans-European” tradition, Raphael, Giorgione, Velasquez, Titian, Le Nain; together with the mixing of genres in one painting, landscape, still life, portrait. All of this is in the swirl of the burgeoning modern spectacle that was painting’s resource in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, whilst still dependent upon its ‘imaginary’, the museum architectural structure.<sup>7</sup>

Foster then turns to the museum as archive and a dialectic between Paul Valery’s understanding of the museum as the ‘death’ of art and end of its ‘life’ and Proust’s notion of the museum as the very place and space where the life of the work is animated with the reception of the viewer- reification and re-animation in tandem again.<sup>8</sup>

The next key antinomy in Foster’s essay, for my purpose here, is that which takes place *within* ‘art history’ as such. Contemporaries Erwin Panofsky and Walter Benjamin both wrote positional essays on art and its historical import in the shadow of Nazism.

For Panofsky art history was the vehicle for the reanimation of art-works, redeeming their reified fragments through the systematic application of its historical reading. Benjamin rather sees the new technologies of photography and film so transforming

our engagement with memory and the memory of art *outside of* the archive of the art museum as fundamentally pushing the ‘meaning’ of art beyond its reification and out to its other side; art’s future as *art* remains only in its exhibition value in so far as it ‘stays’ in the confines real or imaginary museum *or* its future can indeed be *away* from the museum and into the ‘life world’ which is a *political* question for art.<sup>9</sup>

Invention as Derrida has pointed out has a tendency to ‘invent’ the same, which is no invention at all. With the advance of technologies we have actually, contrary to Benjamin’s view of the possibilities for art, seen the increasing proliferation of the exhibition value of art. As Foster points out although the reproduced work loses much of its ‘original’ and ‘actual’ properties as an object, it gains considerably in terms of trans-location, dispersed and wide provenance in a ‘hugely expanded’ museum.<sup>10</sup>

The digitisation of reproduction and huge publication industry for artworks has gone along with the increase in sites for the *exhibiting* of art as opposed to the situations of its political intervention.

As Foster says, “what the museum exhibits above all else is its own spectacle value”<sup>11</sup> which paradoxically has split its memory function from its visual function- memory is in the digital archive whilst visual experience is in its own architecture.

### *The Artist as Producer and art’s ongoing protest*

Hal Foster and other writers such as Alex Coles have followed Walter Benjamin’s thread in staking a claim for the work of certain artists which wants to challenge the terms of the historical fate of art in 21<sup>st</sup> century and bring into question a certain history of art which is predicated upon the museum for its ‘architecture’, its ‘founding’ and its perpetuation even into the spectacle of its own exhibition.

In 1934 Walter Benjamin wrote an essay, ‘The Author as Producer’ which amounted to something of a call to arms for artists to recognise the political reality of their situation and to move from a tendency to aesthetic *representation*, even as it might be in sympathy with radical proletarian causes, to a position of *production*, whereby the

artist as worker adopts a certain position as labourer amongst labourers in transforming social relations by way of material practice. The Russian constructivists of the post-revolutionary Russia remained Benjamin's examples.

Foster in his book, *The Return of the Real* returns to the trope of 'author as producer', re-writes large for the eighties and nineties in terms of *cultural* positioning. What does it mean to 'produce' not just 'represent' on the terrain of cultural difference, indifference and oppression and as we increasingly find it, in the unpredictable and fragile terms of ecology as the artist as *ethnographer*? How does this fit with an archival impulse which 'ends' the 'history' of art as *framed* by the *architecture* of the museum and *produces* instead the 'art' or 'artifice' *framing* the history of that which we familiarly associate with the *truth* of historical archive and museum? <sup>12</sup>

*Re-Producing the archive's memory as 'order' or 'origin'*

To respond to this question I shall focus mainly on two contemporary artists as examples who I take to be 'producing' via one of those two threads of the archive, The first of these is Mark Dion. Dion is known for his various 'personas' as a naturalist and ecologist making journeys into rain forests and producing installations in response to his findings, as surveyor and re-maker of 'cabinets of curiosities' working with and re-shaping existing University or other public collections, or as in the case the *Tate Thames Dig*, or the '*Raiding Neptune's Vault*' in the Venice Canals, as a form of archaeologist. I am interested in Dion especially for the latter for its connections again with 'archive' as origin and as 'collection' in shaping our knowledge of the past.

Dion presents a form of 'artist as producer' producing on a very particular plane of activity which is undertaking a Brechtian type of epic 'displacement' and 'making strange' of the 'work' of archaeology and its display. This is in order to draw our attention to both archaeology and its display's role, but also that of the museum itself in determining our attitude to the 'life world' of the past and present and our 'actual' human stance towards this life world, as borne out by the detritus 'we' make or leave behind. Dion 'elevates' this detritus to the importance of museum display and 'archive'.<sup>13</sup>

As Alex Coles points out in *Tate Thames Dig* the twin sites opposite each other across the Thames figure the ways in which the Tate museum has participated in the purloining of the past for a renewed *gentrification* of an area and a re-positioning of ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ across the Thames waters.<sup>14</sup> Dion stages and exposes the entire process of ‘digging up’ this ‘past’ in its three stages of labour, Digging, Dredging and Beachcombing; Cleaning, Cataloguing and Conserving via Cabinets of Curiosity. Each stage has its performative dimension involving helpers and audience participants in the form of ‘platforms’ of ‘epic theatre’ as opposed to hierarchical theatre ‘stages’ and as Coles says:

“Dion’s performance of the analysis of the detritus invites the audience to use the dialogic work as a platform In [Walter] Benjamin’s words, this platform “does not merely transmit knowledge but actually engenders it” and so energises the audience into taking up a position...and provokes them into asking a series of questions of themselves about what they see here and in history museums instead of just passively accepting it as scientific truth.”<sup>15</sup>



[flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/markdion/)

**Mark Dion "Tate Thames Dig" 1999 Mixed media**

The final act in this ‘epic theatre’ is the constructing and placement of the cleaned and conserved detritus in its ‘container’ for posterity, the cabinet. Here again an estrangement and reversal takes place as the ‘rubbish’ is ironically ‘wrenched from its wasted ‘life’ to ‘empowerment’ via the ‘collection’.<sup>16</sup>



[tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk)

**Mark Dion**, Tate Thames Dig, 2000

Alex Coles quotes that Benjamin states:

“The true passion of the collector is always anarchistic, destructive. For this is its dialectic, by loyalty to the thing, the individual thing salvaged by him, he evokes an obstinate subversive protest against the typical, the classifiable”<sup>17</sup>

Dion’s ‘anarchy’ is something more. As Coles explains, “where the collector, in Benjamin’s terms rescues things from commodity circulation, the detritus Dion retrieves has already been rendered outmoded. By cleaning, cataloguing and displaying the detritus Dion catapults it towards a new life as ‘fiction’, as ‘art’, as “this is *not* archaeology”<sup>18</sup>

I now turn to Christian Boltanski’s work exhibited in Paris and in the USA



This work was at Grand Palais Paris as *Personnes* and then Wade Thompson Drill Hall, Park Avenue Armory New York as *No Man's Land*.



Personnes - Monumenta 2010 **Christian Boltanski** exhibits at the Grand Palais in Paris

Reviews describe the work's intimations of death and 'the dead', with the sound of 15,000 heartbeats recorded by Boltanski, a long high wall of stacked rusted boxes, each of them numbered and beyond this a 'field' of 'cast off' clothes, laid out like plots-gardens of remembrance or 'graves' marked out via rusted vertical posts lit by harsh strip lights- then a huge pile of similarly lost or discarded clothes as a 50 tonne mound picked up and re-dropped by fair-ground grabber. The heartbeats he also intends to be housed on a remote inaccessible Japanese island ['presumably' as heartbeats of 'the dead' to be heard in the future].<sup>19</sup>



Christian Boltanski 'No Man's Land' 2010 Photo by James Ewing Park Avenue Armory

Another project is for the artist to be filmed in his studio 24 hours per day from now until his own death. There is a live feed to a cave in Tasmania owned by a collector who can watch Boltanski but cannot rewind the film until Boltanski has died. What are we to make of this mountain and huge archive of being-towards death?

Michael Newman writing some time ago now, but I think it is still relevant, characterises Boltanski's work as playing on and between memory (personal) and commemoration (public) after the 'death of God'.<sup>20</sup> Previous works like 'Monuments' have taken 'found' photographs of children which Boltanski commemorates as now 'dead' in the setting of a 'makeshift' memorial whose harsh light blackens their eyes and sets up a sense of torture as well as votive commemoration. What he appears to do is re-position and re-examine' memory in terms of its belonging narrative and replace it with a form of important '*artifice*' and almost '*fetishisation*' of commemoration and photographs as abstracted death masks.

Boltanski does this more pointedly in 1986-88 where he takes found photographs from a Jewish school in Vienna in 1931, where the likely association of the death of these children in the Holocaust is unavoidable. These and other works also re-use and replay the 'storage containers' of personal memory such as the biscuit tins where we tend to keep our treasured photographs.

The later work *Personnes* seems to augment both in size and vast anonymity this aporia between personal memory and public commemoration. This very augmentation into 'cathedral' like proportions places his commentary upon life's 'being towards death' as an impossible relation between individual memory and the public commemoration of mass loss into its own mass 'impossible' spectacle, where archive and architecture meet in the vast aftershock of material consumerism.

Here is a complex quote from Newman, not in relation to this recent work but pertinent:

...in the modernity of organised mass death and oppression which continues to this day, there can be no politics without mourning, without the asymmetrical non-reciprocal relation to the suffering of others to whom ...recompense can never be made. Such mourning cannot have a result that can be incorporated into an economy of production, consumption and exchange. Such mourning can only succeed by failing...Yet how to avoid the pitfall of such failure; the *fetishising* repetition of melancholia? How to confront the question of judgement..."<sup>21</sup>

What effects judgement if the work avoids identification in such a nameless being-towards death?

*Quiet Protest; look, listen*

Both Dion and Boltanski exhibited in the Folkestone Triennial in the UK.

Dion produced a mobile Seagull office as the centre for seagull spotting providing an 'order' of 'truth' and 'information' *collecting seagull observations*. Boltanski produced a sound-piece *made up of Folkestone residents reading letters of WWII*

servicemen embarking from Folkestone to participate in the war; the piece being activated by sitting down on the sea front benches. The differing pieces captured something of the character of each of these artists and what drives their ‘production.’<sup>22</sup>

Both it seems to me are examples for the 21<sup>st</sup> century of the author as producer but in very different ways – protesting history and the archive, *questioning* through foregrounding, our two key conditions of archive, 1) the seeking of the memory of origin- the need to return and redeem in the completion or stasis (Boltanski) and 2) the call to order and ordering about it...the arch-originating ‘controlling’ order of knowledge and discourse of knowledge (Dion)

Here it seems is the questioning of *how the history of art might be writ in the archives. The protest is offering instead how the archives and the history are made strange* as ‘artifice’ by the producers; the ‘*artificers*’ of art.

### **Personalia**

Dr Jennifer Walden is an Associate Dean and lecturer at the University of Portsmouth, UK. She teaches art history and theory and has a strong interest in contemporary continental philosophy and its contribution to the politics of history and memory in art. Jennifer has written on related topics such as that of history and memory in the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais 1959), published as a chapter entitled “It’s extraordinary how beautiful your skin is” in *The Future of Beauty in Theatre, Literature and the Arts* edited by Daniel Meyer-Dinkgrafe Cambridge, UK, Cambridge Scholars Press 2005 and had edited a book *Art and Destruction* Cambridge, UK, Cambridge Scholars Press 2013

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, Jacques *Archive Fever A Freudian Impression* trans Eric Prenowitz Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1996

<sup>2</sup> Foster, Hal, “Archives of Modern Art” in Foster, *Design and Crime* London, Verso 2002 pp 65-82

<sup>3</sup> Foster op.cit p 65

<sup>4</sup> Foster op.cit pp 65-66

<sup>5</sup> See Foster op.cit p 67

<sup>6</sup> Foster op.cit p. 67 modified

<sup>7</sup> See Foster op.cit p 68

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<sup>8</sup> See Foster and the argument he develops about Valery and Proust's positions out of the work of Theodor Adorno, op.cit pp 71-72

<sup>9</sup> See Foster op.cit pp 74-76

<sup>10</sup> See Foster op cit p.78

<sup>11</sup> See Foster op.cit p. 80

<sup>12</sup> Foster, Hal 'The Artist as Ethnographer' in Foster *The Return of the Real* London, USA, Massachusetts, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press 1996 pp 171-172

<sup>13</sup> See Alex Coles "The Epic Archaeological Digs of Mark Dion" in Mark Dion *Archaeology* Coles and Dion eds. UK Black Dog publishing 1999

<sup>14</sup> See Alex Coles op.cit p.29

<sup>15</sup> Coles, A op.cit p, 29

<sup>16</sup> See Coles. A op.cit p, 30

<sup>17</sup> Coles, A op.cit p, 31

<sup>18</sup> Coles, A op.cit p 32

<sup>19</sup> See Adrian Searle Christian Boltanski: It's a jumble out there" 13 January 2010

[www.guardian.co.uk/.../Christian-boltanski-grand-palais-paris](http://www.guardian.co.uk/.../Christian-boltanski-grand-palais-paris)

<sup>20</sup> See Newman, Michael M "Suffering from reminiscences" in Barker, F, Hulme, P and Iversen, M *Post-modernity and the Re-reading of modernity* Manchester, Manchester University Press 1992

<sup>21</sup> Newman, M "Suffering from reminiscences" in Barker, F, Hulme, P and Iversen, M *Post-modernity and the Re-reading of modernity* Manchester, Manchester University Press 1992, p.108

<sup>22</sup> See Andrea Schlieke *Folkestone Triennial: Tales of Time and Space* England, Cultureshock Media Ltd. 2008