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Fine Arts

2010

Critique of Archival Reason: Research Report

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Recommended Citation

Stott, T. (2010). Critique of archival reason: research report. *maKHUzine: Journal of Artistic Research*, 9, Summer, pp.43-47. doi:10.21427/D7QN08

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2010

Research Report: Critique of Archival Reason

Tim Stott

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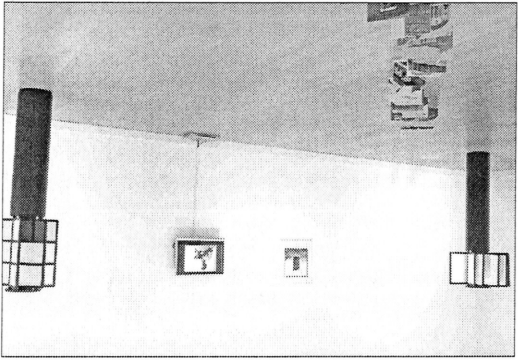
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RESEARCH REPORT:

CRITIQUE OF ARCHIVAL REASON

AND WHAT IF WE TOO SEE NOTHING? THOUGHTS TOWARDS A GENERIC ARCHIVE The aim here is to report on the exhibition *Critique of Archival Reason*, held at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin (2010) and to pursue two lines of enquiry that follow from this. Firstly, I shall take the exhibition very much at its word, asking how the works in the exhibition in their different ways understood archival reason and made it an object of critique. Secondly, it will be a question of how certain techniques of display correlated, productively or otherwise, with the research practices of the artists included, as the exhibition exemplified some of the persistent and crucial difficulties encountered in this correlation. I want to begin from these lines of enquiry, in order then to end up somewhere else. To do this I shall pursue something of a phantasm – and of course, research and enquiry is always in pursuit of one phantasm or another, which implicates itself into our methods and our desires.¹ My phantasm is that of a generic archive, that is to say, an archive consisting of generic objects or artefacts, which would be subtraced from any particular membership or constituency, thereby offering perhaps a quite different understanding of the commonality an archive holds together. I do not claim this phantasm as mine alone. Borrowing from Walid Raad and Jalal Toufic, it emerges from the opening sequence of Alain Resnais' 1959 film *Hiroshima mon amour*, where a Japanese man repeats to his French lover, despite her protestations and the testimonies she gives to the contrary, that she has seen nothing of Hiroshima. Nothing is witnessed of an event that appears to offer countless indexes of its taking place. In time, however, it becomes clear that the Japanese man too has seen nothing, so that the witnessing of nothing is what they share and hold in common, and in fact might be what allows them to love. Just how such subtraction and sharing might be relevant to us will become clearer in due course; and as it does so, I hope it will reframe some of the questions that we might ask of the Dublin exhibition, along with our understanding of the questions that the exhibition itself might ask us. First of all, then, what is the archival reason that is to be subjected to critique? Is it (1) the techniques of categorization, of counting and accounting that seek through the archive to keep watch over the boundaries of inclusion and legitimacy, of same and other? The keen observations of sameness and difference certainly appears to be the object of Irene Kopelman's enquiry, which she demonstrates by mimicking techniques of cataloguing, but without purpose. The object of her observation is a random selection of stones from the bottom of a fish tank, which are then catalogued and displayed in folios according to size. Where the archive begins and what it delimits are trivial and arbitrary, then, relative to the *practices* of archiving, of collecting, selecting and cataloguing.



01 / 02 ARCHIVAL REASON: *RITA: Irène Kopelman, Jewish Day*

¹ Roland Barthes, *Comment vivre ensemble*:

cours et séminaires au Collège de France

(1976-1977) (2002) : 34 Paris, Seuil

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This arbitrariness demonstrates that there is no necessary correspondence between our systems of categorization and the stuff of the world, and so the world could always be ordered, and, therefore, be known and represented, otherwise.

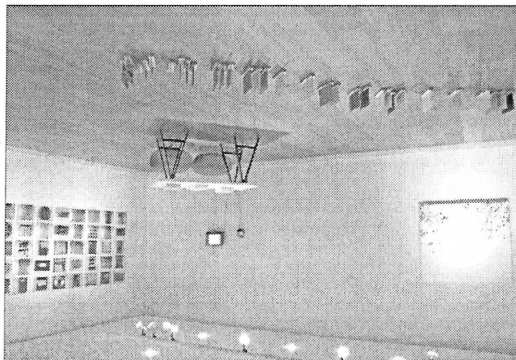
Or (2), is the object of critique more specifically epistemological, concerned with the conditions of possibility of statements that can be made about the world and the reasoning that can be done given these conditions? With this reasoning, all that cannot be thought falls away, beyond the purview of the archive of our epoch. To follow Foucault: as "that which, outside ourselves, delimits us," the archive is an epistemological horizon at once both close to us and indescribable in the here and now.

Its description requires distance, historical, cultural, critical or otherwise.² We come across fragments of this horizon in Sean Snyder's *Archive* which re-edits footage of an exhibition of Mexican art in Kiev in 1966, featuring tours of the museum and discussions among the audience as to its significance, their expectations, and so on. Here we face the strangeness, even the absurdity of the questions that could be asked of art at a historical moment that is not our own – that is neither our present moment nor, for many of us now, part of the memory of that moment. How many of us, after all, would currently hold that the primary criterion for the evaluation of art is its "truthfulness"? Snyder's work (rather sardonically, perhaps) addresses the prejudices of the conversations that we ourselves might have before it – their ambitions, their certainties, their attempts at openness –

if only by indicating the amount of hermeneutic work required for us now to establish a common locus where these two horizons would meet. Or (3), is it a question of the hierarchical distribution of hermeneutic rights and competences that allow access to the archive and protect it from illegitimate statements, dirty hands and untainted eyes? One might then ask just what the mode of address was of the works in the Dublin exhibition. How did they present themselves to be interpreted? How did they distribute roles throughout a hermeneutic situation?

One of the core aims of the Dublin exhibition might have been to critique the use of standard archival forms as the privileged mode of presentation for research-based practices, yet for the most part it followed another, equally familiar format, that of the group show: a display of discrete, authored objects, more or less consistent in scale and extension, each of which makes a particular address to a viewing and reading subject within a gallery environment and does not necessarily redistribute hermeneutic rights and competences to an archive any more than the use of the more text-and-interface-dominated archival formats that it seeks to critique.

There is a broader problematic here, How might it be possible for a work, without having recourse to standard archival forms, to reintegrate a mnemonic value into its display, now that this value has been displaced from the displayed object or artefact to online archives, catalogues, interactive centers or "contextualising infolabs" as Henk Slagter describes them?³ A result of this displacement might be that design and display are placed primarily in the service of exhibition value and its correlate exchange value, now rendered almost autonomous.⁴ What kind of memory structure is it possible for a work to elaborate, and indeed, to what extent is such a structure possible, without submitting memory again to the primacy of exhibition value?



02 / 02 Left: Sean Snyder, *Shop Kids*, (exhibition opening)

³ Henk Slagter press release for *Critique of Archival Reason*

⁴ *Archival Reason*

⁴ *Neil Foster Archives of Modern Art in Design and Crime: and other diatribes* (2002)

London: Verso

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Or finally (4), is archival reason primarily the exclusive methods of historiographical institutions, the seemingly inevitable, if not always deliberate, forgetting of so many memories and testimonies from the records of history? If this is the case, then the task would be to restore to the present what has been forgotten, to re-narrate histories, and in doing so to show the past as heterogeneous, its description always incomplete and its continuities arrived at by force. But then more than an exposition of knowledge, perhaps also to engage in what Hal Foster describes as a “passionate pedagogy” – to work on the horizons of love and desire as much as to distribute information, because in forgetting certain histories one also forgets certain desires, just as one can rarely recount these histories without passion.⁵

⁵ Hal Foster An Archival Impulse, October 110 (Fall 2004) : 6, I am indebted to Edia

Connole for making the connection between

Foster's description of Hirschhorn and the story-telling of Day.

⁶ Walter Benjamin Theses on the Philosophy of

History, in Illuminations, translated by H. Zorn (1999) : 247 London: Pimlico

discontinuous images.

It is significant in this regard that Day and Snyder each describe their practice as didactic, recognizing perhaps that a practice that struggles with conformism in the representation of the past must deal with pedagogical methods of some sort, and that these methods must again involve more than disclosure of information. For example, when performing the *Turbashah Carnival* (2009), Day recounts an anxiety or at least a difficulty concerning the representation of poverty in Istanbul, witnessed whilst sharing a residency with Can Altay at Platform Garant. He tells of his unwillingness to simply report this poverty, as this would be too open to misrepresentation and might give the false impression that something productive was being done. Again, we encounter the problem of hermeneutic rights and competences, here concerning the vast archiving and historiographical operations of the media in which forgotten stories and documents are, more often than not, like Poe's famous purloined letter, hidden in plain view.

So what is the model of critique operating in the above examples of archival reason? In a 1981 interview, Foucault speaks succinctly of critique as

⁷ "There is always a little thought even in the most stupid institutions. There is always thought even in silent habits." *Michel Foucault*

Est-il donc important de penser? (1981)

Interview with Didier Eribon, republished in *Deleuze, D. and F. eds. Dits et écrits:*

volume IV, 1980-1988, (1994) : 180 *Paris: Gallimard*

⁸ *Michel Foucault* Histoire de la sexualité II: l'usage des plaisirs (1984) : 19 *Paris: Gallimard*

⁹ *Michel Foucault* What is Enlightenment?

(1984), in Rabinow, P. ed., *Michel Foucault: Essential Works 1954-1984*, volume 1: Ethics (2000) : 319 London: Penguin

uncovering thought in silent habits and trying to change that thought.⁷ Elsewhere he writes that critique is to make things difficult where they are otherwise all too easy, or it is to make a problem once again of those practices which, although initially developed in order to handle certain problems, have now settled into an ontological domain, becoming simply *what is* – what are the problematisations through which this domain is given to thought, and what are the practices that form them?⁸ Are we to understand a research-based arts practice as broadly consistent with this critical attitude or ethos, this critique of what we are, conducted by way of the historical analysis of our limits and experimentation with how to go beyond them?⁹

If this is the case, if such is indeed the ethos of research-based practice, then in the critique of what we are at present, we might pause to consider just how a discourse of critique itself functions as legitimisation of the

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already as an archival fact, the interpretation and categorisation of its statements have already begun, even as it seeks to move along the limits of the archive of what we are. It is an archival fact that has a special

currency throughout the discourse of contemporary arts practice.

Taking heed of the *worldliness* of such a critical attitude, to borrow Said's term, complicates just what we might expect of critical arts research and the works by means of which it is disclosed as they contribute to a critical

discourse and discourse of criticality.¹⁰ One might ask also just how often a research-based practice encounters its discursive limits by way of the

questions it asks of its methods and the methods it appropriates in the course of its enquiries.

Consider the following rather arch statement from Sean Snyder.

In the art world, people don't entirely know what they are talking about. They ask a lot of questions ... It is in fact those who ask questions who make the entire mechanism function.

He goes on:

The single most interesting discussion I have had about art was not with an artist, curator, critic, or the like, but with an El Al security officer a few years ago when I was detained and subsequently escorted onto a flight to Tel Aviv.¹¹

Just how can our research be a critical enquiry into our limits if critique or critical questioning itself is one of the key functions by which our discourse

reproduces itself, organizing its fields of knowledge and domains of legitimacy? Seeking a response to this tricky question will lead us to the particular signifi-

cance of the phantasm introduced earlier.

A key negative characterization of archival reason is that it tends towards homogenization, that it forcibly schematises the stuff of the world, privi-

leges equivalence or consistency over difference, and in doing so overlooks singularities and reduces complexity. Conceived thus, the archive seems to

consist primarily of a policing of borders. It follows that where there is police there should be critique. As we know, arts practices have engaged with this

archival policing for some time in order to interfere with it, appropriate and divert its taxonomies, reconfigure its materials, and generally demonstrate

the contingency of those differences that make a difference, thereby counter- ing homogenizing reason with the disclosure of heterogeneity.

But what if archival reason is already heterogeneous? What if it is not at all uniform and based upon equivalence but is, rather, multiple and complex?

And what if the archive, "that which, outside ourselves, delimits us", consists of the rules of a practice, a *practice* of differentiation that, insofar as it is

our own, cannot be described in total and yet cannot be avoided?¹² If this is the case, then it would seem that the claim for heterogeneity is

fully consistent with this rule of practice, that it demands the expression of further particularities and further differentiations to be added in an

expansion of our epistemological and categorical horizons, because there are always more forms available for recombination, always more ways to

connect what cannot be connected.

Here, we might argue instead for subtrac- tion. Perhaps it is by subtrac- tion that we might encounter the limit of our present archival reason.

A practice of subtrac- tion rather than differentiation would, paradoxically enough, add nothing to the archive. It would present us with the oppor-

¹³ tunity to see nothing.

МАХКУЗМЕ

Mass. MIT Press

edited by *Jos-Alain Boas* (2009) : *Cambridge,*

Bachsch Refuse and Refuge in Gabriel Orozco.

the past couple of decades. See *Benjamin H.D.*

Bachsch has described a key tendency of art of

muted or voluntarily silenced objects', as

¹³ This is not a call for 'an aesthetic of willfully

¹² *Michel Foucault* *Larhéologie* : 176

(2009) : *1-elux journal* 5

Self-Interrogation on 'Research-Based Art'

¹¹ *Sean Snyder* *Disobedience in Byelorussia:*

Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press

The World, the Text and the Critic (1983)

¹⁰ *Edward Said* *Secular Criticism*, in

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lover repeats "You have seen nothing of Hiroshima"; that there is nothing to be seen of this disaster is, for Jalal Toufi, a result of its having been surpassed by a further disaster – the withdrawal of the cultural materials of a tradition prior to it. With regard to such a situation Toufi claims that "art acts like the mirror in vampire films: it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there."¹⁴

¹⁴ Jalal Toufi, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*

Past a Surpassing Disaster (2009) : 57

Forthcoming Books

Near-Eastern cultural traditions, but I wonder if we cannot observe the archival limits of our own moment as littered with minor disasters, just as Benjamin's angel of history looked upon the wreckage at its feet. Such disasters do not mean that one cannot record, catalogue, and construct an archive, but the prior tradition is no longer available except in the form of a counterfeit or simulacrum.

Witnessing the withdrawal of what appears to be extant and available has a peculiar power. When the Japanese lover repeats "You have seen nothing in Hiroshima" it could mean, on the one hand, that without direct experience of events, the French woman cannot share in the experience of those who were present. On the other hand, it might mean that she is included in the community of those who have witnessed *nothing*, i.e. those who have experienced, following the surpassing disaster, the withdrawal of what appears to be still available in the hospitals, museums, reconstructions, newsreels, scars, and various other indexes or documents of what happened in Hiroshima, which the woman lists as evidence of her witnessing when she replies: "I have seen everything at Hiroshima. Everything." This community of those who have seen nothing includes her Japanese lover, who also was not present. This sharing of nothing offers them an equality without predicate, the condition of their love.

In the Dublin exhibition, there are two works that can be approached by way of this subtraction and this sharing of nothing. The first is Jeremiah Day's *Fred Hampton's Apartment*, especially the photograph of a banner showing the cover of Richard G. Stern's *The Books in Fred Hampton's Apartment*. Fred Hampton was Deputy Chamber of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panthers, and died in his bed in 1969, assassinated by the Chicago Police Department at the behest of the F.B.I. The contents of Stern's book are not available; they constitute a gap in the archive.

So, instead of asking how these books can be made present again, Day seems to have asked himself how he might exhibit something that is not available or how he might show that there is nothing to see. The first way in which to understand subtraction, then, is as a display of the withdrawal of what we otherwise believe to be available or what we believe could be made available as a result of appropriate research. The second way of understanding subtraction immanent to archival reason is as the display of the real of the archive. One finds this with Snyder's *Index*: an archive of nothing in particular, but here the nothing to be seen is not so much a gap as the substrata of the archive's apparatuses of recording and registration, from which any particularity of reference has been subtracted. It would be too much to suggest that either way might yet provide the conditions of love, but there is at least the offer to share in a subtraction at the limits of what delimits us.