

Constructive Alternatives to the Archive

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An Archival Turn

Might history be different? Can we imagine the history and the narratives we see as our common heritage being replaced or supplemented? And would that change our understanding of our reality?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I will correlate and compare two different approaches to how the archive can be used to create a new perception of reality. We shall begin by considering a surrealist archive and move on to a contemporary Lebanese archive of war history, which plays with the traditional notions of an archive in a mesmerizing mix of fiction and facts.

The conception of the archive holds relevance to the avant-garde because it shows us examples of an art form that reaches beyond the Institution of art and acquires modes of expression that point out towards the society. In this context the ideas of Bürger can be used to accentuate the element of social criticism within the avant-garde. According to Bürger the avant-gardes move towards turning the practice of art into the practice of life. The cornerstone being that art must have an effect on our social reality. The avant-garde is thus seen as a raid on the bourgeois order and systems. Bürgers approach to the avant-garde brings to light the avant-garde elements in the archival projects presented in this paper and make visible why they possess a revolutionary potential.ⁱ

The power of the archive to select, interpret and define our collective history has been problematised within the history of ideas, and art. One might say that there has been an archival turn or, to use the term used by e.g. Hal Foster, an archival impulse.ⁱⁱ That turn evinces certain trends and strategies within contemporary art that address the traditional archive and conventional history writing. Artists have worked with the archive as form and format, taking a critical look at what versions of the past have been passed on to us and what might lie beneath those versions – i.e. at what power structures, what motivations, what political choices are behind the inclusion as well as the exclusion of the past as it is housed in the archive.

The Surrealist Archive

There are claims stating that this impulse has emerged within art from the last couple of decades. However, the role and function of the archive was addressed further back, by the early surrealists. With the Surrealist Manifesto from 1924, surrealism manifested itself as a revolt against everyday life and the existing society. The surrealists wanted to liberate themselves from reason, recreating the world and pointing it in a direction where everyday life was set free from all aesthetic and moral norms. They wished to see everyday life adapting to human urges, desires, and yearnings. The objective for the French surrealists of the 1920s was to reach a different reality – to be able to see the world in a new way, thereby allowing it to be reborn. They wished to communicate with what Aragon calls *le merveilleux*, the marvellous, i.e. the irrational and illogical. There was an interest in all that which is suppressed in our waking existence, and so attention was focused on the social forces governing us as individuals; on the “invisible” factors behind the surface appearance of the modern world – the unseen things that determine the relations of modern man.

As was noted in the above, the archive has been interpreted as exercising such a social force, a force governing each individual. Michel Foucault describes the archive as the law determining what can be said, and as the system selecting which statements should be seen as unique events. It follows, then, that an examination of the archive constitutes one way of investigating what has been articulated at different times. It reveals what statements have been held to be true. It shows what discourses have been deemed suitable or desirable for preservation and continued circulation, thereby qualifying for inclusion in the archive.ⁱⁱⁱ

The early surrealists addressed this power of the archive and used it in their artistic struggle to revolutionize everyday life: *Le Bureau Central de Recherches Surréalistes* was in operation between October 1924 and April 1925. It set itself up on two floors, one serving as a “main office” and editing room for the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste*, the other as an archive that was open to the public in the afternoons from 4.30 to 6.30.

Through public invitations, the press, posters, and flyers the general public was invited to visit the office and to “deposit” their unconscious lives to the archive. According to the surrealists the main objective of the *Bureau Central* was to capture, collect and record the unconscious in action. It constituted an attempt at bringing together the various modes of expression of the unconscious

through e.g. recording dreams, filing instances of automatic writing, and documenting *fait divers*, which were strange and troubling occurrences.

Le Bureau Central de Recherches Surréalistes was intended as a place where the existing order of things was put to rest and the potential of the unconscious was examined in order to let something new arise. One of the tactics used to bring this about was to rethink the method used for classifying the contents of archives. One example of such a re-classification appears in Artaud's notes from March 1925, recorded in the log:

1. Putting the restrictive tendencies of American thoughts in the dock
2. Glossary of the marvellous
3. Notes by everyone on their personal anomalies
4. Noting mysterious or inexplicable facts found in books and newspapers
5. Répertoire of surrealist and revolutionary ideas^{iv}

This appears to be an attempt at capturing information that would traditionally slip through the cracks. The artists employed the media of conventional archives, such as the protocol, the written document, and the index card, whereas that which was archived and the system used for filing both seemed to reject traditional taxonomy and rationalisation processes.

There is a point to be found in the physical form of the archive, certainly if one follows the train of thought presented by Jacques Derrida in his text *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Here, Derrida places emphasis on the site itself, on the specific building in which the archive is kept. To Derrida there is a double existence of the archive as both the domiciliation which is the concrete archive, i.e. the house, its documents and the use of them, *and* a general and more abstract cultural heritage.

The structure according to which the archive is ordered defines what Derrida terms *the principle of domiciliation*. This principle creates the form of the institution and causes the archive to act as an abstract, mental entity manifesting itself in a concrete house. The form of the archive is fundamental to its opportunity for achieving authoritarian status. Derrida calls this function "consignation", i.e. the task through which the archive conducts "the functions of unification, of identification, and classification" – the act of *gathering together signs*^v.

If we pursue Derrida's thoughts further, the documents of law are created, kept, and interpreted within the domicile. The inhabitants of the house (the *archeons*) guard the archive and have the right to interpret its documents. It follows that in the surrealist archive the inhabitants of the house, the surrealists themselves, had the power to interpret history and of what it should consist. As Judith Schwarzbart puts it in the programme for *Fundamentalisms of the New Order*^{vi}: "critique can assume many forms, but it always carries within itself the paradox that it takes place within existing structures and discourses while challenging those very entities." The surrealists mimed the archive and the office in terms of their interior, complete with typewriters, and with their company letterheads and opening hours; all this sent a message of "serious business", allowing them to subvert what an archive contains from within, as it were. In so doing they effected a shift in habitual notions of how things work and interact, displacing our customary ways of viewing the world. They created an archive which did not file the official version of our collective history, preferring instead to archive the unconscious, dreams, and the marvellous. An archive that, according to their beliefs, held within itself the foundations for a revolution.

The Atlas Group Archive

We have seen, then, that even as far back as "the roaring 20s" the archive played a part in how art commented on the perception of reality we have. 80 years later *the Atlas Group* would create a new version of an archive, this time consisting of collected as well as manufactured source material. The project ran for five years, from 1999 to 2004. *The Atlas Group* was established by the artist Walid Raad, and the archive itself occupies two physical locations, in Beirut and New York, and is documented on the group's website (www.theatlasgroup.org).

The sworn objective of *the Atlas Group* is to conduct research on and to document Lebanon's contemporary history, paying particular attention to the Lebanese civil war that took place between 1975 and 1991. Incorporating allegedly found materials such as notebooks, film footage, video tapes, photographs, and other objects alongside similar objects manufactured by the artists themselves, they have created an archive, *the Atlas Group Archive*, where these objects are arranged according to whether they were manufactured by the artists, created by anonymous sources, or produced by named sources. Each individual file features a fictitious account of where they were found and how they came into being, and *the Atlas Group* deploys fictional characters –historians,

interpreters, witnesses, and archivists – who offer contributions to shed new light on this contentious field of war memoirs.

While the Lebanese war has been, its history is subject to negotiation and interpretation; it has been the object of manipulation exercised by ideological and sectarian forces. By creating fictitious narratives and versions of history *The Atlas Group* evade participation in the negotiations of hermeneutical readings, pointing instead to how History is a construct and calling attention to the various methods used in the service of creating history. These counterfactual versions of history are not necessarily any less true, for they, too, can formulate and communicate significant and important experiences and reflections. This is, I'm aware, quite a post-modern approach. Others would say that not everything is equally truthful. One can argue that some things are more probable than others, and that there are some aspects of history you can document as more probable than other aspects.

The Atlas Group Archive employs formats different from those of conventional archives: “mixed-media installations, single channel screenings, visual and literary essays, lectures and performances.”^{vii} In so doing the artists provide a comment on how conventional archives are built. Their approach forms an opposition to the classical archive, which favoured a specific type of material: the written document. An historical favouritism that coincides and arises out of, among other things, a prevalent empiricism and positivism, which was dominant up to the 20th century – i.e. a mode of thought where truth, visibility, experience and evidence were viewed as part of the same whole.

When *The Atlas Group* use materials other than the written document, attention is turned to how history is created, to who writes, collects, and orders it. *The Atlas Group* challenges whether the history presented to us in history books, archives, films, etc. can in fact be trusted, a challenge offered by pointing to how our history is constructed. Whose memoirs are regarded as sufficiently important to become part of the national history? This is precisely the issue also addressed by Foucault when he compares the archive to the monument; another entity that separates out those aspects of history that are not accentuated. The archive, he states, is an organ that accumulates and differentiates with a single, sweeping movement. When the archive accentuates something, thereby also leaving out something else from history, this takes place as a processual activity. The archive

is, then, a practice and a principle which produces statements. The archive is the practice regulating what holds significance at a given point in time.

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The Atlas Group and the surrealist archive can both be regarded as micro-Utopias in a Bourriaudian sense, presenting alternatives to conventional archives. Whereas conventional archives are places where you find the “established”, collective history, the two examples provided here are places where you find that which never was. They do not present revolutions the way they are described, monumentally, in historical documents; rather, they present the “unclassified ideas and revolutions in progress”^{viii} of surrealism and episodes from the Lebanese civil war that probably never happened.

The Atlas Group and *Le Bureau Central de Recherches Surréalistes* reveal the choices made in our history writing by presenting alternative archives. In so doing, they point to how history could be different, how our perception of reality could be different. They do not constitute a revolution of reality, nor an alteration of history, for you cannot reach behind the history that is there to uncover a truer version. The important thing is to point to the performative aspect of history writing. The works are about how we *make* history, and how each of us produces narratives, our own versions of reality. The two examples are works with multiple meanings, which Bürger meant was the potential of art to change the practice of life. The two archives turn against the present state of order and logic. For the surrealists it was a revolt against the bourgeois society whereas *the Atlas Group Archive* is an attempt on the ideological and sectarian forces in Lebanon.

In both cases it is about making a break with the definitive forms of the terms *the past* and *the truth*, opening up for the possibility of alternatives in the creation of constructive, alternative archives.

ⁱ Bürger, Peter: 2007 [1974]

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- ⁱⁱ Hal Foster: October 110, Fall 2004, p.3
ⁱⁱⁱ Knut Ove Eliassen
^{iv} Kelly, Julia Kelly: 2009, p. 95
^v Jacques Derrida: Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression.
^{vi} Judith Schwartzbart, p. 15
^{vii} Information from the homepage <http://www.theatlasgroup.org/>
^{viii} Aragon in *Commerce*, October 1924.

Bürger, Peter: Theory of the Avant-Garde. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007 [1974]

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