



VISITOR ACCOUNT

Event and Duration Introduction
Cygnus Gymnasium, Amsterdam
24 February 2016, 12–6.30pm

Affective Archives

LISA SKWIRBLIES

I

An event that chooses its own conditionality as an object of inquiry deserves a documentation that does the same. I will therefore face the challenge of documenting the introductory event to *Edition VI – Event and Duration*, that took place on 24 January 2016 in the Cygnus Gymnasium, Amsterdam, while reflecting on the practice of documentation and its claims to embedded truth. I will approach this challenge through looking at a related, long-contested relationship: that of performance and the archive.

An archive stores, transmits and enables the experience of knowledge. An archive is visited to acquire evidence from or about the past. An archive is also understood to house documents, or rather to hold them under “house arrest”, as Derrida argues in *Archive Fever*¹. Whatever makes it into an archive is closely linked to the idea of documentability. In other words, it is the *logic* of the archive that determines what is documentable and what isn't. And it is this logic that turns performance into its *ephemeral Other* in the first place. The prevalence of the document over other forms of cultural expressions in Western societies, also indicates the prevalence for text over embodied practices such as performance. And here I am, producing yet another text.

The consequence of all of this is that performance is usually characterised by its allegedly ontological ephemerality, as that which vanishes, that which resists storage, recording and documentation. And I do not limit my idea of performance here simply to performance art but include cultural performances as well. Standing in contrast to or conflict with museological and archival aspirations, performance also holds the promise of countering the logic of the archive. I therefore suggest taking this promise of performance and performativity seriously, and ask what kind of alternative models of storing, transmitting and enabling

knowledge these ephemeral repertoires of time-based and embodied practices hold for us. The question here is thus not only how performances *are* remembered, but how performances *do* remember, or rather how we remember *through* performance.

II

“What is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way”, says Derrida in *Archive Fever*. In other words, the logic of the archive has an influence on how we imagine we know what we know, and how we imagine our lives should and could be lived. To challenge the archival logic therefore means to challenge its social coordinates that legitimise particular epistemologies over others. And this means to make space for different, new, and becoming sets of knowledges to (re)appear. That this has everything to do with our perception of time was underlined in the opening presentation of philosopher and essayist, Peter Pál Pelbart, on that foggy Sunday morning in the Cygnus Gymnasium. Seated on the floor of the auditorium in a large circle, on an even larger pink carpet, I felt as if transported into a time in which sit-ins in gallery spaces and universities were an obligatory Sunday morning practice. Pelbart suggested rethinking time not as linear or circular but as a ‘crumbled handkerchief’ or as a ‘chunk of dough’. Once crumbled or kneaded, the events spread out on the time-handkerchief and time-dough are brought closer together. Which events are brought together upon such crumbling and kneading, and which are not, stays unpredictable. *That* they are brought together however highlights the multiplicitous nature of historical facts and breaks with our conventional understanding of history based on facts that are dated.

While kneading the dough of time in my mind, my eyes met the clock on the other side of the room, only to realise that it had stopped working. Time stood still for a little while in the Cygnus Gymnasium. While looking at the clock, I remembered that Walter Benjamin had somewhere said: “The catastrophe is that it just goes on like this”². Catastrophe in that sense is not what threatens to occur at any given moment but what is given at any given moment. This statement is even today disturbingly true, I thought. ‘Our’ time, marked by the overuse of the word ‘crisis’, could just as well be described by the word catastrophe. Or does that apply to any period of time? In her attempt at translating the unpublished play *De Groote Staking: Een Spel der Massa* (1925) by the Dutch socialist and poet Henriette Roland Holst, Vivian Zihlerl is concerned with the question of what promises and potentials the past holds for our present. The play is therefore not only translated from Dutch into English but also from the last century into the twenty-first century. Making her way from the pink carpet up to the balcony of the school’s auditorium, Zihlerl was not just performing Roland Holst’s play in the role of the strike-leader, but turned us, the people on the pink carpet, into the choir of angry workers repeatedly shouting “Into misery we sink away!” We were a hesitant rather than dissident choir, I have to admit, but maybe the carpet was simply too comfortable to sink away from. But the mis-performance of this choir was surely a sign that Zihlerl’s research underlies an urgent question: What kind of action is a meaningful action today? What does mass action mean in 2016?

Feminist practices have for a long time emphasised the politics of the collective. They have also for a long time challenged the patrilineal logic of the archive with embodied and performative modes of transmitting knowledge. The archive is not only a place for conserving the content of the past, content that would have existed anyway. Rather, the archive’s specific technical structure, the practice of *archiving*, also determines the structure of the

“archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future”. This means that the archive is always a socio-political force. Alex Martinis Roe’s genealogical endeavour into feminist practices offered an inspiring way of rethinking history as an affective transmission of showing and telling, as a body-to-body transmission. The encounter between the women from *Psychanalyse et Politique* and the women from the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective documents the transmission of knowledge through ‘*friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...*’, as the title of the two channel video installation suggests. It is the strength of Roe’s project to highlight the political character of these kinds of encounters, and to ask how knowledge can be transmitted over time and space *differently*, and thus allow for different futures to be imagined.

III

One way of understanding the “preposterous aspects of our present”⁴ is thus to actualize the revolutionary potentialities of the past. Historian, Svetlana Boym, calls this viewpoint, which often includes the “eccentric aspects of earlier modernities”, the *off-modern*. An *off-modern* perspective is not anti-modern but akin to the experimental spirit of modernity and is understood as a critical tool against the existing forms of post-industrial modernisation today. Leonor Antunes’ delicate installations can be described as *off-modern*. Inspired by feminist modernist design and architecture her grid made of a single golden nylon thread is geometric and allusive at the same time. It seems to refer to a clear pattern and in the same moment obscures any possible references to another space. Almost self-referential the thread becomes a vector of measurement, of length, of scale, of time in space. Instead of talking about her own work, Antunes told me about the modernist architect and furniture designer, Eileen Gray, a contemporary of Le Corbusier and vociferous opponent of his philosophy, and a great inspiration to Antunes. Because the Cygnus Gymnasium is in its design inspired by Le Corbusier’s architecture, Antunes’ reference to Gray made me curious. Why did she mention Gray in this context and how did she herself feel about exhibiting in this building? Antunes clearly shares the antipathy for Le Corbusier with Gray and found for her work the one space in the building that reaches out of it as far as possible. Installed in a small glass annex next to the main entrance (or exit), Antunes’ work seemed to suggest it was trying to escape from the building, or, as Gray would have called it, “emanating into the world”. Her work reminded me how important it is to stay aware of whose history we silence when actualizing someone else’s.

IV

How then can we put performance to use to challenge the archival logic? Three of the presentations addressed this question directly. Joke Robaard had invited a group of students from the Cygnus Gymnasium to perform ‘an access’ to her own image archive. In its technique it reminded me of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*⁵ by Aby Warburg, art historian and modernist. With his *Atlas*, Warburg offered in the 1920s a technique for making the inefable process of historical change and recurrence comprehensible. This technique relied on his assumption that gestures and affects have an afterlife fossilized in images. While Warburg laid his emphasis less on the process of juxtaposing images than on the result of such juxtapositions, Robaard’s methodology focuses on the process of it. Her project, in contrast to Warburg’s, reveals thus the performativity behind the reading of images and behind the structuring of an archive. The performance of the students can therefore be described as offering an access to an archive, an access that is provided *through* performance.

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa's presentation, on the other hand, used performance to access another kind of image archive – the image archive of our collective memory. Through staging the bodies of his performers live on stage in a kind of *tableau vivant*, and through using the shape of the bodies as a canvas, a stencil and a stamp, Ramírez-Figueroa temporarily conjured up images from the Guatemalan Civil War between 1960 and 1996. Here, performance functioned as a tool through which we were invited to remember. Not in the form of a re-enactment, but in the form of a trigger for actualising those images dormant in our memory about a particular historical event.

In the presentation of Erin Alexa Freedman and Lili Huston-Herterich the archive itself was discussed as a performative medium. Intrigued by the Toronto-based artist collective, Chromazone, and their 1983 exhibition, *Chromaliving*, which was modelled after a home decor show, Freedman and Huston-Herterich asked how one can access an historical exhibition. Their solution is one similar to Vivian Ziherl's translation project: Instead of simply re-enacting the exhibition, or merely re-exhibiting the objects from 1983, Freedman and Huston-Herterich plan on actualising the narrative, the underlying idea, that informed the exhibition back then. They plan to reach out to contemporary artists in Toronto today, asking them to contribute artworks of their own according to ideas of *Chromaliving*, in which the objects of the exhibition had to be 'liveable' rather than simply aesthetically defined. In that way, the archive of Freedman and Huston-Herterich escapes the logic of documentability and performs an access to the past that is grounded in the present.

V

The last classroom door I opened on the day revealed a video made by Wu Tsang with Fred Moten. After entering the classroom I squeezed myself into one of the student's desks. The video was screened through the usual classroom beamer onto the whiteboard of the class, as if this video had been part of the curriculum of this particular class on that particular day, and someone had forgot to turn it off. I thought, would this video installation remain and become part of the knowledge transmission in this class? I stayed for quite some time alone in the intimacy of the dark classroom watching Moten dance with his closed eyes in rays of sunshine, accompanied by the sound of a soft and soothing voice singing about something that I could not understand. I imagined that it had something to do with 'dreaming towards the future together'.

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*. 1995. Transl. by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

² Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

⁴ Boym, Svetlana 'The Off-Modern Mirror'. *e-flux*, 19, (2010).

⁵ Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Atlas. How to Carry the World on Your Shoulder*. (Exhibition Catalogue). Madrid, Karlsruhe, Hamburg: Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, 2010.

