The Great Imaginary

Art and Archives in the Twentieth Century

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Introduction

The phenomenon of memory and the act of remembering are elemental to culture as we know it. Collective memory – that is, the shared cultural memory of a society – comprises the stories by which we know ourselves and how the present ought to make sense as part of the historical whole (Misztal, 2003). As it functions in every act of perception, intellection, and language (Terdiman, 1993: 9), memory is perhaps the most essential condition of our cognition and reflexive judgement as both individuals and members of society. Archives provide us with the tangible record of this mnemonic service. Much like memory, however, archives are selective, and as such, partial: to remember, one must also forget (Taylor, 2002).

The following paper concerns itself with how various artists have engaged with the archive in their creative practice in reaction and relation to archival procedures and the notions of collection, category, order, and authority. There is rich body of artistic work which has been explicitly and implicitly linked to archives in these ways, and those that are cited here have been chosen as significant and representative examples of these various archival engagements as evident in the twentieth-century. The discussion of these artists and their work is introduced by way of a review of archival definitions and concepts put forth by archival professionals as well as thinkers and writers of social and cultural theory. The final portion of the paper attempts to draw together the artistic examples and theoretical content in a concluding discussion, where the conceptual overlap observed between archival practice, concepts and art work are found to relate to the interdisciplinary structures of an increasing amount of cultural heritage institutions that house both historical, bibliographic, and object or art-based collections. This last point of increased convergence is specifically related to the operational structure of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, located here in Montreal.
Definition, practice, and concept: What is the archive?

In the recent literature, there is a rising regularity in papers and publications that are concerned with archival research and representation in artistic practice, matched by an increasing number of contemporary artists who have made the archive central to their creative processes, methodologies, and works - so much so that it is enough to be termed a tendency in its own right (Foster, 2004; Godfrey, 2007). Before delving into the existing conversation on archives and art, however, it is perhaps useful to revisit the history, definitions, and various ideas of the “archive” itself.

We will begin this revisitation in the professional and technical spheres. Going back an earlier period, Dutch archivists Muller, Feith and Fruin once defined archives as written documents, drawings, and printed matter that are officially received or else produced by an administrative body or one of its officials (1905), while Jenkinson, an English archivist with what are considered rather stuffy views at this stage, defined it as being made up of documents drawn used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction, and subsequently preserved in the custody of the host organization for their own informational purposes (1965). However, this definition was heavily challenged by that view offered by Schellenberg, the ahead-of-his-time-guy in archives, who noted that if operating under the notion that archives are to be something distinct from mere records that “to be archives, materials must be preserved for reasons other than those for which they were created or accumulated” (Schellenberg, 1956: 13).

In the contemporary professional sphere, this is the logic archivists have run with (Stapleton, 1983); archives are generally understood to be the accumulated body of records and primary source documents evidentiary of the activities of an organization or individual (Cox & O’Toole, 2006), and are valued for their research potential. Modern archival thinking as we
know it now is a much more refined and complex field, with many of its roots stemming from the intellectual overhauls of the French Revolution and the ensuing practices of preserving original order we per the principle of provenance, or “respect due fonds” which is key in leaving archives intact without imposing a secondary, subjective categorization (Cook, 1984).

Following this shift in archival thinking and practice, archiving has risen from the status of the final custodianship of “dead records” (Leavitt, 1961), to a post-industrial, informationally and technologically revolutionized age, where archivists have broken from stasis, charged up the basement stairs, and are now dynamically interacting with both the creators and users of archives in ways previously unthinkable. However, the life breathed back into archival practice has also worked to destabilize their apparent evidentiary authority. The following section will examine the rise of this so-called “archive fever”.

**The Archive and the End of the Meta-Narrative: Whose Story, and for Whom?**

During the last few decades, numerous scholars have become critical, even alarmed by archives (Ferguson, 2008). With its departure from being solely a tool of the historian’s trade, the archive has been elevated to a new theoretical status with enough cachet to warrant distinct billing, worthy of scrutiny in its own right (Stoler, 2002).

Mike Featherstone, discussing the archive as the storehouse of the modern state in and for which national memories are constructed, points out the role it has played in exercises of disciplinary power and surveillance, ominously suggesting that we live “in the shadow of the archive” (2006). Scholars Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris and Graeme Reid made similar observations in their investigations of archiving practices in South Africa during and after
apartheid, remarking with equal (though perhaps justified) gloom that archives are the “best way to ensure that the dead do not stir up disorder” (2002: 22).

Such epistemological scepticism has generally taken the fields of historical and cultural study by storm, where postmodernist, poststructuralist and postcolonial scholarship have repositioned historical records as tissues of politically-charged narrative. These important conversations about the historical record and the narratives they facilitate have worked to help shift the interpretation of archives away from being seen solely as items of source, and more as subjects of study; less as sites of information retrieval, and more as sites of knowledge production (Stoler, 2002).

It is in this treatment of the archive as a site of production where I argue that the creative interpretations and sourcing of archival material found its genesis. The relevant literature appears to second this feeling: Pick up almost any volume dedicated to detailing the relationship between the archive and art, and you are likely to find lengthy passages describing the paradoxical character and theoretical ambiguity of the archive. With almost absolute certainty, within such a passage one will immediately come across references to the now infamous Archive Fever by Jaques Derrida (1997). In the opening passages of McGill Universities’ well-thumbed copy, Derrida immediately points to the dualism inherent to the etymological root of the term, *arkhê*, which means “at once the *commencement* and the *commandment* (1997:1, italics in original). The first reading of the term, “commencement”, establishes the linear, sequential order of the archive, “the originary”, the beginning. The latter reading of the term is nomological, locating this order in the named space of power, “a house, a domicile, an address” (Derrida, 1997:2), which harks back to the previously discussed historical treatment and conception of the archive as epistemologically and geographically located within sites of authority.
However, once establishing this distinction between readings of ‘Order’ and ‘Voice’, Derrida immediately goes on to remind us that there is almost more than one of either, and always “more or less than two” (ibid.).

These two components of Derrida’s archive relate to what Kathy Ferguson, a researcher involved in the archive of the anarchist Emma Goldman at the University of California, Berkely, identified as the “specific archive” and the “general archive” (2008). The former is conceived as the physical records and explicitly crafted narratives; a sanctum of for the discursive investments of those in authority (Featherstone, 2006). The general archive is understood and explained to be the general collective discursive context of society, explained by Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) as “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (1972: 130). Society’s general archive, then, is constituted of the “patterns of habit, intuition, doubt, solidarity, resistance, rebellion, affinity and aversion that contribute to collective self-knowledge” (Roberts, 2002: 21), embedded in the layers of thought apparent all around us, even so far as in the very cities we live in, as mused by Walter Benjamin in writings on the city as an archive (1969).

In so being, this general archive both makes and unmakes specific archives, working at once to inform the content and character of our documents and narratives while disrupting, shifting and fracturing the regulated surface of the specific from underneath. And as I will argue in relation to certain art works, instances of the specific have also behaved as odd shapes and interruptive wedges, driven into the amorphous cloud of the general. Still further, many archival instances and projects envelope this proposed duality. In any number of forms and interpretations, it is in this dynamic interplay and tension between the point and the ether,
between attempts of order amidst inescapable disorder, where artists have demonstrated the archive’s creative and interpretive potentials.

With this in mind, the following portion of the paper provides a review and discussion that begins with what I argue to be among the first instances of ‘archival art’, by the early twentieth century avant garde. While it is beyond the capacities of this paper to include all works possible to relate as instances of archival practice or commentary, those selected for inclusion here have been chosen for their presence in the existing literature, and/or for being as what I deem to be especially significant and representative of this theme and the related concepts of contingency, order, category, and time.

**Disturbing the Archive: The Early 20th Century Avant Garde**

While we have previously reviewed some of the more prominent conceptual discussions of what, and how, an archive is, the sphere of artistic production is where I assert that some of the most searching questions have been asked concerning what the archive comprises, and what authority it indeed holds in relation to its given subject (Merewether, 2006).

Sven Spiker, writing in *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (2008), looks at the way in which the bureaucratic (or specific) archive has shaped art practice in the twentieth century. He contends that artists practicing in relation to archival material throughout the twentieth century were reacting to the historicism of the previous century in a period of upheaval. This upheaval is what has been referred to elsewhere as the “control revolution”; namely, the period between 1880 and 1930 whereby a loss of economic and political control occurred at local levels of society during the Industrial Revolution (Beniger, 1986). In his control revolution thesis, Beniger asserts that the prior reliance on face-to-face interaction became replaced by impersonal
systems of bureaucratic organization along with new technologies and infrastructures of transportation and communication. However, despite this newfound infrastructural architecture, the means through which political, economic and informational control came to be reconfigured and established contributed to an uncanny loss of control. The typewriters and card indexes that came into widespread office use between 1970 and 1930 were not only able to process records at record speed, but also produced record amounts of new data. The result was an intensified information crisis in the form of an overwhelming surplus (ibid.).

This nineteenth century’s confidence in the registration of time and events through the archival record was thoroughly upset by these changes as well as the growing push of the Modernist ethos. Working in that moment of transition, the early twentieth century avant gardes strove to critique and ultimately dismantle this prior confidence in the Order of Things. The artistic movements of the Dadaists, Constructivists, and Surrealists all favoured the discontinuous and the nonlinear in archives, and all that which resisted hermeneutic readings and ordered presentation (Spieker, 2008). However, their works often involved distinctly archival rationales, and produced many alternative archives while disturbing those of the mainstream.

Take, for instance, the ‘readymades’ of French artist Marcel Duchamp, who was working in the very early 1900s. While his readymades are often viewed in art history literature as items that make irreverent inquiries into what we determine to be “art” on account of institutional (gallery), categorical, and linguistic determinations, they have also been discussed as critical interventions on the nineteenth-century archive and its ambition to reconcile the contingency of time with the continuity of symbolic representation (Kachur, 2001; Spieker, 2008).

Prior to his transition to art, Duchamp was trained as a library assistant. I think we could speculate that this influenced the ideas and attitudes he problematized in his art work, in addition
to the archival attitude he held to his own work in a number of ways (Joselit, 1998). His approach was often ironic and replete with pun, pointing to the ways in which our ideas and insistence on procedural order are often arbitrary exercises of desire – a strange eros of control where the missed, almost-missed, and missing are generated into records, and as such, proof of being (and a staving off of death). Furthermore, Duchamp was keen to play with the notion of that which is “tacitly judged as worthy of being kept”, as per Jenkinson in his assertion of when documents become archives (1965), and that this moment of capture is always amenable to chance.

Duchamp may have been most explicit in how his work related to this ‘archivization of chance’ in the piece 3 Standard Stoppages (1913), comprised of three pieces of tailor’s thread dropped from the height of one meter onto a strip of painted canvas, famously referring to them as “du hazard en conserve”, translating roughly to “chance in a can” (Appendix A). Here, the three fallen threads embody not only a chance composition, but present a physical metaphor for a failed controlled encounter with time, made manifest as a disruption of order through random marks or fissures on the otherwise well-regulated surface of the document- in this case, the prepared canvas (Speiker, 2008). Again, while abstract, the work is an archive of an event of small chaos that subverts the ideology of order and meditated selection that underpins archival theory and practice.

Wonderfully, the piece is also a bit of semantic play, as the English term “file” is etymologically related to the French word fil (string), which originally meant to line something up on a piece of string, which describes some of the earliest known archival collections (Speiker, 2008). In some Romances languages, as in Spanish, file is translated to archive, resulting in a rather brilliant “string” of connections.
Perhaps more legible to those less familiar with thickly conceptual art practice and parlance are the efforts of the early twentieth-century Dadaists. *Alarm Clock 1*, by Francis Picabia (1919), offered a much more literal deconstruction of order through presenting a smashed Swiss clock, the parts of which were dipped in ink and whose imprints were transferred on to paper (Appendix B). Dadaist photographic collages disrupted and reconfigured the archival and evidentiary authority of the photograph through aggressive disassociation and re-assemblage of the visual record (Foster, 2004), as is found in the collages of John Heartfield (Appendix C) who used photographic collage to present ‘truths’ in response to the narratives emitted the massive propaganda machine of the Nazi regime.

Dadaist montage was also very archival: made of the recycled garbage of everyday items like newspaper clippings, cloth, and photographs, the montages were then arranged in layers as so many levels of cultural sediment in a pseudo-archeological fashion (Appendix D). These works aimed to mock and subvert nineteenth-century archival order by re-presenting piles of discarded minutiae in a reaction to that same loss of centralized, ordered control described by Beniger (1986) in light of the paper jam caused by the immense generation of paperwork in the wake of the First World War. Walter Benjamin commented on this practice as such, saying that the Dadaists realized that the establishment of order had become an impossibility: “They mounted old rags, tram tickets, pieces of glass, buttons, matches and were saying: You can no longer handle reality. Not this little pile of garbage and not the troop movements, the flu epidemic and the banknotes.” (Benjamin,1980: 556).

Early Surrealist art also presents an interesting dialogue with the archive. Surrealist film worked to question the contingency of time and linear narrative provided by the reel of the moving image, which after all, constitute the sequential showing of so many still images, so
many successfully captured moments in time (Enwezor, 2008). In other avenues, despite its anti-bureaucratic stance, Surrealism is characterized by the near fetishization of office technology and organizational procedure (involving typewriters, card indexes, lists, and memos), while pronouncements by members of the group often contain references to the office and its record-generating media. (Speiker, 2008).

In addition to these tactile and procedural relationships, early Surrealist practice was also archival in its concern with documenting the contents or ‘data’ of the unconscious mind: in the “Manifeste du Surrealisme” (1929), Andre Breton wrote of the Surrealist ambition to function as a modest receptacle of the unconscious, transcribing without additional remark or being duly mesmerized by the results. The Surrealists even went to so far as to open the Bureau de Recherches Surrealistes (Office of Surrealist Research) dedicated to producing and keeping records related to the research and art work of those in the original Surrealist group in France (Dion et al, 2005), an oddly bureaucratic entity. But while the Bureau did manage to produce many records relating to who was present in the office, what inquiries were received, and letters both received and sent, the lax manner in which the centre was run did much to undermine the effectiveness of the project (in the opinion of Andre Breton particularly), and left a partial and ad-hoc record body (Speiker, 2008).

But perhaps this partial record was fitting. The avant-garde in general were concerned with disrupting the ordered linearity of event, association and time, and were possessed with a recognition of the necessarily partial and fragmentary nature of the specific archive. Furthermore, by attempting to record the data of the unconscious and dedicating a Bureau to the ‘surreal’, the Surrealists have sought to create archives of what was missing from the archives (the intangible,
the imagined, the suppressed), ironically producing documents in the process that serve as transactive evidence between specific and general archive.

Be it through Dadaist montage, Surrealist records of the unconscious, or pastiches of jarring reference in film, the works of the early twentieth century avant garde were all concerned with the partial and the fragmentary in some capacity - a quality to which the archive is especially susceptible. All archives, even the most counter hegemonic, are inescapably constructed through processes of selection, preservation, and exclusion (Fergeson, 2008), with each act of memory also necessitating a parallel action of forgetting (Taylor, 2002).

While the early part of the twentieth century proved to be fertile ground for the questioning of order, an artistic interest in historicism and the archival record did not re-emerge in a significant capacity in until a few decades later amidst the cultural revolution of the 1960s. The following section examines archival art in this era.

**Archiving the Missing and the Present: the 1960s and 1970s**

In later decades of the twentieth-century, the avant-garde’s critiques of nineteenth-century historicism were gradually overtaken by a trend in the art world that treated information as art, and by conceiving of the archive as the model for the rules and process of artistic production (Speiker, 2008). The 1960s and 1970s are typically sited in the literature as decades characterized by a considerations of the archive in creative practice (Breakwell & Worsley, 2007; Foster, 2004; Godfrey 2007). The works made by artists in this era are often demonstrative of creative projects initiated from a point of intent that was conceptually situated in the *historical a priori*; the underlying epistemological order of culture in a given time asserted by Foucault in *Archeology of Knowledge*, appropriately enough in 1970.
Looking back on the archive of art as a blatantly male-dominated sphere, second-wave Feminist art and art-writing generated numerous works and installations that staged the female presence in the gallery, or stated differently, dramatized its absence (Pollock, 1999; 2007). Much Feminist art of this time was a reaction to female absence in the artistic record, thereby creating a counter-archive while bringing attention to the fractures of art history as cultural document; the gaps in the museum and in the literature where female contributions are missing, and as such, present in the spaces in-between. The absence of female contributions addressed and resolved by the Feminist art movement of the 1960s and 19770s serve to make the incomplete, fragmentary nature of the archive apparent once again. In turn, the general and specific archives are cross-engaged via their creative practices, as the misogyny of the general archival dialectic is prodded and altered by the generation of new, specific documents of Feminist art now present in the Museum collection; in the archive proper.

Pop art was a movement that developed in this time as well, drawing from the archive of consumer society and re-positioning it as artefact. Mark Godfrey, in *The Artist as Historian* (2007), asserts that when Pop banished the abstraction formerly seen in Modernist work that supposedly prevented artists from addressing history (though I would argue that such a dramatic turn from realist and historic representation is a direct reaction, and therefore type of dialogue with history), Pop art addressed specific historical experience but did so in a manner that did not hold historic representation central to its purposes: it was concerned with the “now” as an implicit reaction to “then”.

Andy Warhol, with whom Pop is most popularly associated, actually initiated his own archive of sorts in a work entitled *Time Capsules*, a serial work consisting of 610 cardboard banker’s boxes filled with items that came into his possession or passed through his studio on a
daily basis, including personal correspondence, dinner invitations, trinkets, printed matter and photographs (Appendix E). Depositing these items into a box placed next to his desk, when full, they would be sealed and sent off to storage in another location. The objects designated to this personal archive were not chosen for any particular value or significance; in Speiker’s words, they were simply just “there” (2008: 3).

While the contents of this archive are superficially meaningless, what is recorded is only of value or significance on the chance some object connects to an event, idea or moment for those rummaging through it. For Speiker personally, it resonated when he encountered a series of paraphernalia for a particular airline that had suffered a fatal crash just days before he visited the archive – a moment he elegantly related to Duchamp’s missed moments in time in that an archive often commemorates something we didn’t realize was missing, or a significance that has not yet materialized until later. In my mind, this relates perfectly to the contents of most archives; we create meaning within them when we seek - or - chance upon it.

Also from the 1960s, perhaps the most literal example of art drawing directly from the archival model in this period is to be found in Robert Morris’s Card File: July 11 – December 31, 1962 (1962) (Appendix F). The piece consists of an industrially produced hand-operated Cardex file containing individual card files upon which are transcribed the steps of its own production as an art object. The files include material relating to the “decision” to create the work, “errors” encountered while doing so, and cards dedicated to “title” and “signature”, upon which the artist has signed the work. All steps pertinent to the creative process are contained in a physical metaphor that at once records creative procedure, and exists as a creative document in and of itself, and is therefore indicative of Morris’s interest in Minimalism, process, and archives (Berger, 1989; Speiker, 2008).
While the projects and movements cited here have all engaged with the archive in varying capacities, there have been still others who have drawn on their own and other archives specifically in their creative processes (Breakwell & Worsley, 2007). The following section examines examples of such artistic work that has treated the archive as a collective and personal memory resource, with a special emphasis on the exploration of the photograph-as-document and visual information.

**Contemporary Art and Archives: The Image, Play, and the Imaginary**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the use of photography in archival art is prolific – the medium lends itself to investigations of authenticity in the visual record, along with the evidentiary associations of the ‘captured’ image (Enwezor, 2008; Sekula, 1986).

Susan Hiller’s *Dedicated to Unknown Artists* (1972 - 1976) is comprised of over 300 numbered and indexed postcards of clichéd motifs from British seaside resorts taken by anonymous photographers and arranged without any attempt at chronology. While comprising an archive of photographic objects, much like the more conceptual work of Duchamp’s readymades, the greater significance in these image-records is that they constitute an archive of missed moments; of wish-you-were-here’s; of frozen movements of the tumbling ocean we would otherwise never see. The handwritten personal messages on some of the postcards also serve to testify to private and informal communicative practices far removed from the universalizing aspirations of nineteenth century historicism (Speiker, 2008). The archive of *Unknown Artists* is thus a storehouse not of objective facts, but rather a catalogue of surrogates for physical and personal experience – recalling those aspects of desire discussed earlier in relation to other works.
More diverse and ambling in intent, the oft-cited piece *Atlas* (1964-1995) by German artist Gerhard Richter is a massive found photo-archive, typical of several similar photograph-archive projects undertaken by European artists from the same era who also collected found or intentionally produced photographs and presented them in a grid panel format (Buchloh, 1999) (Appendix G). *Atlas* is an immense archive, composed of panels of photographs sourced from just about everywhere, begun while the artist still resided in East Germany, using family photographs and amateur landscape shots, expanding after his move outside the communist state to encompass the suddenly-encountered abyss of American and European advertisement photography, soft-core pornography, and a massive collection of areal and satellite photography.

Richter’s *Atlas*, aside from existing as an image archive at the most pragmatic level, also seems to consider photography and its various practices as a system of ideological domination, and more specifically, as one of the instruments by which mass amnesia and repression are socially inscribed (Buchloh, 1999; Richter, 2006). This skepticism creates an interesting parallel with that of the avant-garde, in that where early twentieth century artists engaged with archival elements in reaction to the failed totalizing attempts of record generation, (and archiving those moments and memories otherwise absent from the dominant narrative), Richter confronts the image and photograph specifically as an obliteration of the memory (ibid.). In this way, *Atlas* is a sample of the general archival dialectic; a near-endless archive of the banal, the beautiful and the commercially obscene, accumulated in the original provenance of the artist-as-collector.

In an exercise of archiving typology, other German artists Bernard and Hilla Becher assembled an a collection of photographs of various industrial architectural typologies over the course of forty years (beginning in the 1950s), providing an archival product that is much a serviceable record of building types as it is an homage to the devotional quality of repetition.
Within more contemporary projects, numerous artists have investigated archive theory and practice in various attempts to understand the implications of the archive in both personal and cultural realms (Bassnett, 2009). Hans-Peter Feldman’s *Portrait* (1994) (Appendix H) is another example of a collected photo-archive, this time in the form of an album containing hundreds of snapshots taken by numerous photographers (none of whom are Feldman), all allegedly of the same person. The selection of which was supposedly based on documentary, objective criteria. The album also contains an index of several pages that lists the number of the photograph, the year it was taken, and what the photograph allegedly shows. However, the photographs in the album sport no correlating numbers, and none of the claims Feldman makes about the work are verifiable with any degree of accuracy, thereby deliberately dramatizing a crisis of archival authority (Speiker, 2008).

Still other photographers have made use of photography to present archives of event and personhood otherwise absent from the specific archive and narrative in mainstream or nationalistic narratives of the state: Greg Staats, a Canadian photographer and member of the Mohawk Nation, uses archival sources of family history and Iroquoian tradition in pieces like *Memories of a Collective Reality – Sour Springs* (1995) to address individual and cultural loss in life lived and in the records of the Canadian nation-state. By archiving sites of the artist’s past in his home community of Sour Springs, the photographs enact memory as they translate private experience into the public discourse (Bennet, 2005; Bassnet, 2009).

Achival art is also developed as a result of archival research and drawn material. Here, artists explore archival material in order to indicate the histories recorded therein while simultaneously pointing to the fallibility of the archive and the inscrutability its contents (Godfrey, 2007). Arnaud Maggs’ enlarged reproductions of garment labels in *Travail Des*
Enfants Dans L’industrie (Child Industrial Workers) (1994) (Appendix I) acts as a collection of informational documents that serve as portraits or memorials to forgotten, unseen female child workers. Each photographed label shows the name and task of a girl who was employed in the weaving industry in France before child labour was outlawed (Monk, 1999), providing an archive that gives voice to an otherwise anonymous and implicitly absent group of people.

Also in this vein, Santu Mofokeng’s The Black Photo Album/Look at Me (1991-2000) presents a collection of re-photographed family portraits made by black South Africans during 1890-1950, along with textual archival material indicating the various histories, ambitions, and reasons for why the families were photographed. This piece is especially interesting to consider in light of the racial categories and systematic segregation and prejudice previously applied by the Apartheid state bureaucracy.

Works by American artists Pierre Huyghe and Omer Fast have made use of existing film archives, creating research pieces that attempt to address the romantic and spectacularizing tendencies of American historical representation, in the The Third Memory (2000) and Speilberg’s List (2003), respectively.

Still others have practiced archival sampling in ways that push postmodernist complications and new media to an extreme, as with the collaborative project No Ghost Just a Shell (1999-2002) led by Pierre Huyghe and Phillipe Parreno. Here, the manga character ‘AnnLee’ was purchased from a Japanese animation company selling off some of its minor person-signs, and the glyph was then elaborated upon in various pieces in a chain of project by a number of contributing artists; a post-production archive in the making (Foster, 2004).
Among the last examples I will cite are works that are archival as well as playful. While tackling serious ideas, these pieces have engaged with archival practice and theory in ways that encourage mess, imagination, and a teasing of contingent confidence.

The Atlas Group Archive (1989-2004) by Walid Raad is a particularly interesting project of this nature. The Atlas Archive, while an archival collection, is unusual in that it consists of archival content created by, and accredited to, fictional archival contributors. Designed to research and document the history of Lebanon, especially the wars of 1975 to 1990, the archive (based in New York and Beirut) is part of Raad’s Atlas Group Foundation (Speiker, 2008). The contents of the archive range from personal notes, photographs and documents detailing projects and information supposedly commissioned and amassed by the Atlas Group (Appendix J). While entirely ‘fictive’, these archival entries act as a poetic means through which to communicate the trauma and complexities of the Lebanese conflicts in ways that a genuine set of historical records and archive would not be capable of.

Describing the project in an interview excerpt, Raad explains: “Our interest is in how certain stories and situations capture the attention and belief of viewers and listeners…to examine what has, is and can be said, believed and known about Lebanon, its residents, history, culture, economy and politics.” Emphasizing that the aim of the project has never been to mislead, he goes on to note how the archive and foundation operates to question the ‘known’ as it exists in both the dialectical, general archive of Foucault and the specific, official record or archive; “we need to ask about how any proposition becomes true or false and what constitutes evidence…Hence we would urge you to approach these documents…as ‘hysterical symptoms’ based not on any one person’s actual memories but on cultural fantasies erected from the material of collective memories” (The Atlas Group, 2004).
Andrea Fraser’s take on archival play does not invent an archive, or even propose an absurdist filing system (as was once posited by Duchamp), but provided the public with the complete paper records of the Bern Kunsthalle gallery in Bern, Switzerland. Arranging them at first in the middle of the floor next to a table where visitors could sit and peruse their chosen files, the scene soon devolved into a mess of disorganized paper – the desired outcome of the project. The final realization of the piece had the archive boxes installed in what was termed ‘the information room’, where all the archival boxes and binders were arranged on shelving with their spines and labels turned towards the wall, preventing informed pre-selection. In this way, all the information of the institution was available, while access was left to chance and accident (Speiker, 2008).

In the chaos and inevitable informational omissions it invites, Information Room (1998) makes subtle reference to the aspect of hazard, chance and missed moments of Duchamp’s archival disruptions, while staging a literal surrealist experience of disorder and pastiche in a blind sampling and revisitation of archival fragment. As stated by Speiker, Fraser’s project of archival play serves to remind us that the ways in which we access information does much to shape what we retrieve, and the ensuing (in)completeness of our knowledge: “There is always a blind spot in our interaction with archives, and it is precisely this blind spot to which the archive at play devotes itself.” (2008: 82).

**Concluding Remarks**

In reviewing the previously cited art works and placing them in a discursive context as per “the archive” as at once general and specific, as understood by Foucault, and as once the commencement and the commandment, as identified by Derrida, one can see how the modernist
project and the numerous instances of artistic production over the twentieth century have been influenced by archival content, practice, and theory. Well, that is what is hoped for, anyway. Relating art to the archive is an admittedly intellectual task, requiring leaps and twists of relation that range from the sublime to the absurd, but the fact remains that aspect of the archive are inexorably embedded in activities of cultural production, and especially that of art.

From my perspective, at first blush, all art represents a literal “archive” of the historical a priori of the time in which it was made. Art works, as objects of creative production made in space and time, become cultural documents in the historical record, and as we recognize and celebrate them, become part our cultural archive. But where institutional and governmental archives have been deliberately controlled to construct particular historical narratives, or have been produced as so much evidentiary waste of bureaucratic processes, documents of art may be said to lie outside the selective process of the archivist, exempt from “tacit judgement”, and existing as critical commentary, interjection and disruption of such attempts at order. And while we can be justified in pointing out that the art that is most remembered is that which was, in effect, institutionalized and accepted/selected for recognition in the context of the gallery (which has its own very real legacy of representing the accepted objects of Culture and Art embedded in the intellectual and educational hierarchies of society), the art in question here has often served to challenge and effectively change those very structures.

This last point leads to the final issue of discussion, which has to do with how the overlap and interdisciplinarity of the archive as it spans the spheres of professional practice, social and cultural theory, and art is much like the increased interdisciplinarity that characterizes the types of cultural heritage institutions liable to have archives, art, and bibliographic materials in their collections. The Canadian Centre for Architecture is one such example here in Montreal: home
to an extensive library, the centre also functions as a gallery space, museum, research centre, and
general ‘cultural centre’. Indeed, there has been a call for the convergence of libraries,
museums, archives and galleries in recent literature (Given & McTavish, 2010; Trant, 2009;
Zorich et al, 2008), demonstrating that the interrelationships discussed throughout this paper are
not merely the result of intellectual pursuit, but real-word connections that are acknowledged and
increasingly contemplated by persons dealing with archives, records, and collections in a number
of fields and with a variety of backgrounds.

The old critique of order and institution has come full-circle for many artists, scholars,
and thinkers in general, leaving contemporary practitioners free to engage with bureaucratic and
institutional methods and systems in ways that, as noted above, are playful, and largely devoid of
cynicism (Foster, 2004). The post-colonial and post-structuralist commentaries pointing to the
foibles of the archive have been countered by those who see it as a site of positive potentials; as
with curator Carolyn Stedman, who has described the archive as a place of dreams (1998). For
while we may draw from the archive, disturb the archive, examine the omissions and inclusions
of the archive, re-invent and then entirely fabricate the archive, it is because of its incomplete
and increasingly vast nature that it remains unknowable in its entirety, and is in the most esoteric
sense, a Great Imaginary.

With this in mind, I will conclude by quoting esteemed literary scholar Sarah Nuttall,
who leaves us with our parting comment: that archives “are open to the imagination. They turn
us towards life. Imagination can keep excising the archive, replenishing it with things that were
not there at the beginning.” (2002: 229).
References


APPENDIX A

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX D

APPENDIX E

APPENDIX F

APPENDIX G

APPENDIX I

APPENDIX J