

## ART OF THE ARCHIVE

Wolfgang Ernst

“Where the dead ones wait  
For the earthquakes to come”

Heiner Müller quotes these words by Ezra Pound in his poem *Mommsen’s Block* written shortly after the fall of the Wall in 1989/90 – at a time when he witnessed the reunification of the two German Academies of Art, in East and West Berlin. And then he continues as if anticipating his own literary estate ending up in the Academy Archive:

“Knowing the unwritten text is a wound  
Oozing blood that no posthumous fame will staunch  
And the yawning gap in your Roman history  
Was a pain in my – how long still? – breathing body.”

Translated by Carl Weber in: Carl Weber (Ed.): *A Heiner Müller Reader*.  
Baltimore, London 2001

That body no longer breathes. A time, a human being, have vanished. The “art” of archiving has entailed transforming Heiner Müller into an archival *corpus*, thereby turning him over to the guardians of cultural memory. Here archived papers and documents are recorded in accordance with their provenance, which means upholding the context of origin rather than sorting in terms of subject-matter. Thus German historicism in the archive: “Origin must take precedence over significance” (Adolf Brennecke, 1953). 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussian archival sciences developed a complete metaphysical theory out of this technique with the upholding of origin and respect for the spirit of what had evolved in history set against the cold rationality of mechanistic ordering of subject-matter. People talked about the “body” of an archive: “The work of the archivist [...] thus becomes a creative activity. The task is to discern with great artistic sensitivity the secret laws of the coming into being and the growth of an archive’s holdings.”<sup>1</sup> However this body is not implicitly organic; it is rather an organless memory-machine. Many definitions of archived artists’ estates insist on the concept of “the organic” in the forming of the holding.<sup>2</sup> Can an individual’s creativity be preserved as archival order and encoded in such a way that the secret of its functioning can once again become accessible? Let us take a look at that in the way taught to us by the poetry and plays of Heiner Müller who

“himself” now lies there. That means in accordance with all the rules of the science of archiving: files rather than a body; dating rather than history; mechanical memory rather than dynamic recollection.

The Archive of the Academy of Arts is based on the order of life (leaving aside the stored administration, strictly speaking the “true” archive). However these biographies are preserved more in the state of a photomontage by John Heartfield whose personal legacy itself constitutes an important part of the Academy Archive. “Anyone who has had to try and read from yellowing manuscripts the vanished traces of the developmental history of a great man knows only too well how this difficult undertaking depends entirely on time and again juxtaposing these pages, thereby really coming to grips with changes in handwriting and style, combined ever anew with changes in content and diverse outer characteristics.”<sup>3</sup> So montage is also a way of reading. Perusing the past as information entails modular decoding of the archive and thereby a genuine archival aesthetic, which does not confuse memory with history and (freely adapting Gottfried Benn) *mentally manipulates* what is there rather than narrating it. Anyone who adheres strictly to what is available and does not rush into imagining between the lines, or even hallucinating what is not there, recognises (following the media theory of Fritz Heider and Niklas Luhmann) that the archive is a medium rather than a form precisely because its elements are loosely coupled.

Scarcely have we started to talk about recollection than we are already nested within an immense imaginary realm known as the past whose only stable reference-point, the archive, as a bottomless foundation consistently allows its apparent context, given the name of history, to fall back into discrete, isolated units and islands of discourse – a brittleness that we constantly recompose and reconfigure. This is the discrete character (even charm) of archived artefacts, separating them from the ongoing nature of life. “The archive is a metonymic device that ‘formalizes’ experience”<sup>4</sup>, but these fractures (the conditions of text-production) are generally smoothed over in narrative representations based on archive research. Let us instead advocate a montage theory of archival writing – in the spirit of Heartfield.

### Archives of Life? The Ordering of Names

The usual approach to history takes place by way of names (Friedrich Nietzsche). Biographies are the address-book-like recollection of a vanishing. Human memory inclines towards making such data come to life – in ghostly, mediomistic fashion. However these spirits are the media of recollection. In the Archive of the Academy of Arts artists’ names are a key to the documents; here the name is the address (freely adapted from Joseph Beuys). But the list of



names relating to artists' estates at the same time subordinates their memory to the impersonal logic of alphabetical ordering, giving rise to historical ironies. Walter Benjamin thus lies alongside Gottfried Benn, and Heiner Müller once again beside his first wife Inge Müller. At this point let us allow the spirits of the Academy of Arts Archive to speak for themselves by quoting them directly. "History is the exemplary case of fragmentation"<sup>5</sup>, particularly when based on the archive. "Writing history means citing history."<sup>6</sup> Evocation of the past through the medium of the archive is an invocation of spirits.

The art of the archive entails assigning names to documents – to which stories immediately adhere. Human outwitting of the coldness of the archive involves narrating rather than merely (internally) listing its memory. However the new alphabetical ordering of an archive is the genome data-bank. Life itself then becomes the archive – as a programme-code. The archive would then precede life rather than follow after it. "From the first breath [...] each life is receptive to writing like a wax tablet – and as irritable as the most sensitive film. [...] What we call the individual is initially only the living parchment where our existence is recorded in neurological cyphers from second to second."<sup>7</sup>

#### Advance Estate and Posthumous Image

Art as a whole is always dependent on storage media since any creative difference between the present day and the past is founded on comparison with what has been archived. One method of not leaving posthumous celebrity to chance entails living artists taking steps to assure afterlife in an archive. One master of biographical opening up of the past from documents, Academy member Walter Kempowski, has already been incorporated as what is known as an advance legacy – with his family archive and the collections of material for the *Deutsche Chronik* [German Chronicle] and *Echolot* [Echo Sounder], themselves already abiding archive aesthetics. But where will the hard-drive in his Personal Computer end up?

The archive is primarily a formal structure governing transformation of present records into storehouses of the past. Every operation in an archive is dedicated to this reordering. What happens when art, characterised by its development of alternative forms unfamiliar to conventional ways of ordering, or even by disorder, encounters the archive? Here an ambivalence of art and artists in an age of Avantgardes becomes apparent: on the one hand a mnemoclastic tendency (paradigmatically Italian Futurists' hostility to archives, libraries, and museums) and, on the other, an obsession to become part of art's long-term memory. While still alive characters such as Heiner Müller wasted little time on thinking about what they would hand down to posterity. Instead their

productivity grew out of constant recycling of material, out of a disorder where order was only meaningful in the specific context of intensive work.

The essence of an advance legacy accords with what Ernst Jünger diagnosed in 1934 when faced by instant transformation, accelerated by electronic media, of actual events in radio programmes: "We are possessed by a strange striving which is difficult to describe, endeavouring somehow to give a living process the character of something preserved to last."<sup>8</sup> The transition from a living body to an archival *corpus* takes place as part of an advance legacy regulated in terms of the logistics of memory. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe practiced that by having his secretary Kräuter collect and appropriately register in archival fashion all the writings relating to his life, more particularly to himself as an author. After all Goethe also knew: "It is organisation and system, not organism and spirit, that turn authors into classics." In 1822 he was contemplating a new edition of his works at the same time as Prussia was reorganising its archive management so as to mobilise the imaginative dimension of history on behalf of *nation-building* as strategically as its actual troops in the struggle against Napoleon. Goethe realised the necessity of an archival disposition as an antecedent condition for all authorial *posthistoire*, and therefore provided for "a clear-cut, orderly assemblage of all papers [...] whereby nothing was to be neglected or thought unworthy."<sup>9</sup> For mechanical storage as place of memory all data is of equal significance – unlike the literary perpetuation of spontaneous recollection in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. For this Goethe employed the archivist's technical term of *Repertorium*: "a listing compiled in terms of general and special headings, and all kinds of letters and numbers." A cybernetics of storage and an administrative infrastructure come into play prior to any cultural memory.

However the present day no longer involves just culture; it is media culture. The real selection of its estates is carried out by machines. Film-essayist Chris Marker shows this in *Level 5*. Here after the death of her husband a woman seeks to continue his life's work (the attempt to reconstruct the battle of Ikonawa on his computer). She struggles to familiarise herself with the computer until – cut – it pursues the programme autonomously.

## The New Archives

Even Classical Antiquity's *art* of memory (*ars memoriae*) was expressly the name of a rhetorical *technique*. In the digital sphere people talk of *memory* rather than *remembrance*. The power of memory has been displaced into technology: with technical redemption (wiping out) of the archive. Many models of artistic work on recollection continue to be configured as being analogous to

human remembrance and thus also *anthropological*<sup>10</sup>; but the media's archaeological gaze is strictly concerned with the coupling of memory and machine. The reservoir of memory imagery, deriving from the old media of archive and library, collection and museum, only superficially does justice to the new reality of digital man-machine interfaces (and not to the underlying source-codes). Art that is critical of the media of memory, ironical even, could provide assistance towards the superannuation of outdated images of recollection so as to open up for the present day areas of thinking where the former media memory of writing, printing, photography, film, video and television, vinyl and tape recordings, converge because everything is in the same data-flow of *computing* and *streaming*.

"The Computer Age [...] has changed both the work of archives and the awareness involved in dealings with archival material."<sup>11</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> century changes in documentary material demand new paradigms of accessibility. The options open to the digital archive entail other forms of both *access* and navigation *within* the medium. Archive aesthetics can receive new directions from the media arts. *Content-based retrieval* does not only mean digitalising old manuscripts and thereby making them easier to find; it also makes partially possible the use of images to find images, sequences to find sequences, and sounds to find sounds. Digitalisation of an archive also enables the extraction of characteristic features from digital images and music, their organisation in databases, and subsequent accessibility to media-interfaces. That is a genuine audiovisual technology of memory-culture, well beyond the classical inventory restricted to written filing-cards. Such meta-data as time, author, or description of contents – especially in an archive concerned with literature, architecture, visual arts, film, and music – is complemented by the possibility of archival comparison of these arts as autonomous media. The new statements and queries that arise from these fresh possibilities of access generate a completely new kind of archive.<sup>12</sup>

The holdings at the Academy of Arts reflect the aesthetic impact of the technical media since 1900 and the increasing part they have played in the production of art. However visual and sound media are generally not so visible in the self-presentation of a classically organised archive. They are hardly seen or heard from behind the computer data-masks. Apart from the option of a picture gallery for photographs, the Academy Archive's AUGIAS search-database offers alphabetical entries and insights only. How would it be if not just the archival listing but also the registered documents themselves became electronic, thereby circumscribing the essence of media art?

Electronic artefacts are lost over the long-term if they are not migrated to the coming generation of data-carriers – whereby constant transfer replaces storing, literally "metaphorically". What current hardware can still read an old first-generation art video? The memory-units of the past, mostly on paper, are increasingly replaced by dynamic, temporal forms of interim archiving in digital

space. The transience of new archives, their ever shorter half-life, is their fate, their curse, and their opportunity. One positive response to that situation would be to make them accessible *online*, literally broadcasting – an archive television in the age of digital accessibility. Politicians are faced with the task of taking on the challenge of media culture. First of all they must prevent publicly accessible audiovisual memory from becoming inoperational within the labyrinth of copyright issues. Let us not forget that in 1985 and the years that followed an initiative by the Academy of Arts sparked off discussion in Berlin about the cultural obligations of broadcasting companies, and about the necessity of preserving audiovisual heritage in public awareness. Since that time the idea of a German Mediatheque has drifted through the institutions. In a public meeting on June 17, 1996, Walter Jens reminded both the public and his own institution that this idea of a Mediatheque was “the Academy’s child”, and that its justifications remained topical: establishing a place for both political and aesthetic education, respective of the dialectics of image and sound in an age of electronic archivability. Here the medium (to adapt Marshall McLuhan) has by now itself become the message. The reason why Walter Jens’ call has not faded away is that a video recording of it is preserved in the Academy Archive’s “Audiovisual Media” Section (signature 39.0042), is therefore accessible, and can be listened to.

Librarian Uwe Jochum puts the emphasis on the physical presence, the place, and the space of books as opposed to their negation in electronic media of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> The concept of the archive does not merely refer to the contents, but also to the means of storage as opposed to the unplace of the Internet, *online*. In future (borrowing from a controversial book by Ernst H. Kantorowicz) people will talk of “the archive’s two bodies”: on the one hand the digitalised or genuinely digital archive, accessible *online* for Internet research, and, on the other, the physical archive where an aura of originality arises as a retro-outcome of digital culture. Just think of the nostalgic longing for material memory as shown in the respect for artists’ manuscripts, for the quality of paper as data-carrier, the hand-written note in the margin of a book – all the haptic experiences of a non-digitalised remnant of a world of continuity. Nowhere is the aura so present as in those tiny pages on which Walter Benjamin scribbled his initial ideas for the *Work of Art* essay, now a jewel of the Academy Archive.

Financed by the Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur in Hamburg, the Walter Benjamin Archive is part of the Literature Section of the Academy, but its materiality already points beyond that. Part of the bequest now in Berlin was for many years on microfilm only until in April 2004 the original material was taken over from the Theodor W. Adorno Archive (Frankfurt am Main) and Paris. So memory of Benjamin, author of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, was itself subject to mechanical reproduceability. The newly re-assembled collection of original material will be

the first holding of the Academy Archive to be totally digitalised. From a media-theoretical point of view it would be an attractive option to scan large quantities of handwritten material using pattern-recognition for the detection of particular forms or markings, which no archive could or would previously register; in practical terms, however, this innovative approach can hardly be realised in the near future. Yet multimedia visibility is achieved at the price of the invisibility of technicalised archival materials. If need be, microfilm is still readable using a simple magnifying glass, but electronic data-carriers are only decipherable by machines and no longer by human beings. Old storage media – for instance Edison’s wax-rolls, which were worn down at every use and ultimately deleted – can now be read optoacoustically by a computer and thereby brought back to life again. Here nevertheless it is no longer human beings speaking, or making something speak; the equipment’s memory is activated by equipment. Once upon a time the phonograph signified sonification of the archive: in the *recording* of voices the previous silence of archival *records* (documents) was broken. Yet where voices from the past speak they are on tape, functions of a techno-archive. The voice of Kaiser Franz Joseph I, in a recording from Bad Ischl on August 2, 1903, says it all: “I am very happy to speak into this apparatus at the request of the Academy of Sciences, thereby making my voice part of its collection.”<sup>14</sup>

Will digitalisation of analogous archival memory lead to the vanishing of its object in generalised signal processing? No longer just storage for the preservation of intellect, memory-techniques will be perceived in the light of information-culture as potential n-dimension data-space. Archival processes will thereby shrink to the invisibility of the micro-processors which constitute an electronic medium (data-recording, storage, further processing, and distribution). The 21<sup>st</sup> century will develop a media culture beyond the archive; what will remain are islands of storage, heterotropic counter-stores, the remaining space of material memory. Freed of other functions by technical media which perform them better, archives make a virtue of this necessity and do not compete for virtual worlds; instead they awaken a sense of what is unique, authentic, original, worthy of protecting and handing down, what shapes tradition and constitutes culture.<sup>15</sup> That gives rise to a dual strategy: on the one hand, mobilising archives as digital space but, on the other, preserving them as a media-critical and conservative counterweight, their simple means contrasting with electronic information.

### Information Aesthetics in the Archive

One answer to futile attempts at order involves stochastic cultivation of disorder – the highest degree of potential information since only what is not already recorded in search-engines can really be a surprise. Improbable processes and

the diverse forms of what is owed to chance also long ago discovered the arts as aesthetic objects. As a non-message, white noise in an archive is, positively formulated, the sum of all possible messages.<sup>16</sup> In his novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* Gustave Flaubert once satirically described the capitulation of scientific archaeology vis-à-vis ultimate ordering.<sup>17</sup> The challenge of all attempts at creating order calls for mastery of a seemingly impenetrable mass of material. Writers' drawers and desks, and the accumulation of objects in artists' studios, are *anarchives* of lost time. Anyone who clears up here destroys their existence: "Disorder knows what it is doing; it protects against memory which distorts us."<sup>18</sup>

Archives are also subject to time's arrow of physical entropy, the tendency – as defined in the second law of thermodynamics – of all things to disintegrate into disorder over the course of time. That challenge is answered by information theory as contained in the Academy of Arts Archive as past future. Available in the Music Section is the bequest of physicist, phoneticist, and communications scientist Werner Meyer-Eppler (1913-1960). It is not just that his papers and writings can be quantified (5 running metres, 208 volumes). The information theory he developed, and applied to electric instruments and electronic music, teaches us to comprehend aesthetics as a function of order and predictability – which is very close to Max Bense who described artistic work as a negentropic process that establishes improbable aesthetic conditions.

In Meyer-Eppler's *Grundlagen und Anwendungen der Informationstheorie (Foundations and Applications of Information Theory)* the archival afterlife of scholarly texts is defined as a structural theory of signals. Concerning news to the (after)world "all information which must first be 'enlivened' by energy applied from outside is called 'dead' information. [...] Dead information is to be found in all places where signals are passively stored, as in configurations of colour in printed texts or pictures, and as magnetic configurations on magnetic tape [...]."<sup>19</sup> It is the energy of utilisation which activates the archive. Here, nevertheless, time that passes plays an active part – an archival function. It is precisely what is removed for a period from discursive circulation, in other words from contemporary consumption, which is potential information for the future – to the extent that in accordance with communication theory information is (at long last) understood as the measure of unexpectedness and surprise in a piece of news.<sup>20</sup>



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**KÜNSTLER**  
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KÜNSTLER.ARCHIV – Neue Werke zu historischen Beständen  
 ARTIST.ARCHIVE – New Works on Historical Holdings

**Christian Boltanski, Jochen Gerz, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, Christina Kubisch,  
 Carsten Nicolai, Miguel Rothschild, Eva-Maria Schön, Hans Winkler**

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