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The first person singular in collective archives

Federica Martini

At the centre of Danielle Evans' short story *The Office of Historical Corrections* (2020) is the plight of a woman hired by the Institute of Public History to work on the front line of the crisis of truth.¹ The Institute, charged with the task of verifying the criteria and the words used to document history, is the nemesis of the economy of attention. History is conceived here as applied research that interacts with fringe voices and personal considerations on major events, revealing individual glimpses and leaving the seams in full view. The task at hand is to investigate, to arrive at an agreement between official memory and civil society, digging into the folds of history to find marginal glosses and openly question their accessibility and shareability. Alongside this corollary of having to rectify, or fill gaps in the documentation, comes the idea that loss of memory is an endemic condition of institutional archives.

Akira Mizuta Lippit believes that “shadow knowledge” lurks in the nooks and crannies of archives.² The term refers to the bright light that classification and indexing systems shed on some facts while obfuscating others. Significantly conceived within the framework of the debate on freedom of telematic speech that took place during the pioneering phase of the Internet, *The File Room* (1993-94), by artist Antoni Muntadas, was one of the earliest projects to offer a concrete and quantifiable vision of the ambiguity inherent in document classification processes. *The File Room* is a database of cultural censorship cases stored in eight hundred metal boxes still accessible online, and, at the time of its first presentation, kept in the physical space of an former public library in Chicago. The documents collected by Muntadas through a research process extending well beyond the exhibition, retain a trace of the motivations, temporality and methods” that censorship process enact to “do away with individual viewpoints, making them invisible, inaudible or illegible”.³ The stance he takes in *The File Room* echoes the hypothesis, formulated by sociologists Yaël Kreplak and Yann Potin, that an archive has a social life of its own nurturing a congenital “culture of secrecy”, conceived as the flip side of their status as a public and democratic space.⁴ The reasons for its reticence may lie, not unlikely, in the confidential nature of the facts it holds. Amy L. Stone and Jamie Cantrell expound on this point by distinguishing between the silent and private nature of the “closet” in queer

¹ Danielle Evans, *The Office of Historical Corrections: A Novella and Stories*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2021.

² Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic light (shadow optics)*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2005.

³ Antoni Muntadas, www.thefileroom.org (last accessed: 30 June 2023).

⁴ Yaël Kreplak and Yann Potin, “La vie sociale des dossiers”, *Genèses* 1 (2022).

theories as opposed to the full visibility and “discursive promiscuity” that the archive can generate.⁵ If you think of it as a queer space, the archive displays again its propensity to render the lives it documents simultaneous legible and illegible according to variable disclosure/over-exposure and secrecy systems.

Feeling the documents

The 1970s and 1990s have been frequently referred to as the decades of the “archival impulse” and the “archive fever” in the visual arts.⁶ During those two decades and then again in the 2010s, aesthetic experimentation with documents was more intense and far more layered than the often univocal and monolithic use of the term seems to indicate. Their topicality is renewed as artistic practices grapple with history, information, data, the limits of the documentary, memory technologies, and institutional recording methodologies. The trajectory of the archive as an artistic medium includes, but is not limited to, the comeback of history after the subjective art movement of the 1950s; reflecting on the documentary genre; the rise of counterculture and counterinformation; the institutional critique; the advent of the notion of artistic research; the embracing of a feminist approach and decolonial thinking; the new technologies - recorders, cameras, video cameras - that enable reality to be documented live; the aesthetics of the database; the relationship with memory and its public processes.⁷ In quantitative as well as qualitative terms, the archive in the visual arts is a matter of militancy, as it is caught up in the debate on the public and private dimensions of knowledge, the sources of collective knowledge and their unequal legitimacy. Its presence in artistic practices is persistent not least on account of its reactivity to the accessibility of information and its critical view of the possibility of recording the real in an exhaustive manner, in contrast to what Okwui Enwezor describes as “the documentary industry and its project of inquiry, measure and examination to prepare data to be acted upon by the variable modalities of power”.⁸ But what can a subjective vision do when it is offered a chance to write its own history?⁹

⁵ Amy L Stone and Jaime Cantrell (eds.), *Out of the closet, into the archives: Researching sexual histories*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2015, p. 3.

⁶ Okwui Enwezor (ed.), *Archive fever: uses of the document in contemporary art*, International Center of Photography, New York, 2008 and Hal Foster, “An archival impulse”, *October* 110 (2004): 3-22.

⁷ On this point, see: Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “Documentary is/not a name”, *October* 52 (1990): 77-98; Mark Godfrey, “The artist as historian”, *October* 120 (2007): 140-172; Renée Green, “Archives, documents? Forms of creation, activation and use”, in *Other Planes of There: Selected Writings*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014; Giovanna Zapperi (ed.), *L'avenir du passé: art contemporain et politiques de l'archive*, PU, Rennes, 2016; Cristina Baldacci, *Archivi impossibili: un'ossessione dell'arte contemporanea*, Johan & Levi, Milan, 2016; Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential history: Unlearning imperialism*, Verso, London, 2019.

⁸ Okwui Enwezor, *Archive fever*, p. 19.

⁹ Julie Ault, “Active Recollection: Archiving Group Material”, in Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen (eds.), *Self-Organized*, Open Editions, London, 2013, p. 116.

Lacunose or unclassifiable documents, sensitive information under embargo, or subject to material deterioration, constitute some of the forms of oblivion that prompt us to step in and reconstruct the interrupted narratives. In laying the foundations for writing a different history starting from the photographic archives of slavery, *There are images*, Tina M. Campt proposes that “we can see only partly (or we must deconstruct) and that ask us to syntonise on the frequencies of what the image and the document cannot reveal in their visual and verbal configuration, so as to ‘listen’ to their vibrations in multisensory mode”.¹⁰ The intent, says Saidiya Hartman, is to write the story of muted witnesses “with and against the archive”.¹¹ In this context, omissions in the documents prompt forms of “critical fabulation” that extend the attempt to imagine what happened to a desire to conjecture about what might have happened, revealing forms of resistance to certain paradigms of legibility and full transparency that are the province of archival records.

Exposé-e-s

In mid-May 2023 closed in Paris the *Exposé-e-s* exhibition curated by art critic and historian Elisabeth Lebovici. The halls of the Palais de Tokyo host Moyra Davey's series *Visitor* (2022), where *trouvées* photographs and handwritten transcriptions record the memories of an intimate exchange that took place in an intensive care unit and a tribute to writer and photographer Hervé Guibert. The works on display testify to the difference between to actively display and to be displayed. Some features along our itinerary through those halls remind us how, in the years of the AIDS crisis and afterwards, the exhibition apparatus served as a venue for collecting works and objects produced by the movement.

The title, *Exposé-e-s*, refers to the dual meaning of the act of exhibiting and its – albeit often implicit – argumentative nature: setting up works and material objects in space echoes the rhetorical dimension of presenting thoughts and conceptual objects in a discourse. Lebovici finds her curatorial position at the confluence of these two occurrences of the term *exposer* (showing, displaying), also by drawing upon her considerations on the overexposure and underexposure of the traumatic AIDS event as described in her book *Ce que le Sida m'a fait*.¹² Against the background of healthcare protocols and the medicalisation of private experience,

¹⁰ Tina M. Campt, *Listening to images*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2017, pp. 14; 89.

¹¹ Saidiya Hartman, “*Venus in two acts*”, *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12.2 (2008): 2; 12.

¹² Elisabeth Lebovici, *Ce que le Sida m'a fait: art et activisme à la fin du XXe siècle*, Les Presses du réel/JRP, Dijon/Zurich, 2017.

Lebovici observes how the AIDS years influenced the subjectivity of her contemporaries, even when not directly in contact with the disease:

What AIDS did to me. I chose to personalise the title, to give it a first-person slant. But behind this “me” there is art. There are shows. There are artistic practices. Curatorial practices. Critical discourse. A geography. And there are ways of looking, of positioning oneself, way of taking and ways of giving. In other words, as noted by American writer William Haver, “In the time of AIDS, we all live ‘in AIDS’”, and this does not apply solely to those who have had it.¹³

An extended, first-person testimony is one of the elements that make it possible to situate oneself on the scene of history and clarify one's point of observation, thus taking history “on a personal level”. One may then claim history as their own, as did artist Gianni Motti, when, in 1992, he took responsibility for an earthquake in California, or when, in 1996, he announced that he would run in the US presidential election from Switzerland. The first person singular makes it possible to measure the history of events on a human scale, gauging it in terms of its inscription on individual lives. To clarify this complex context, Daniela Comani deploys a monumental painting, packed with events, and an artist's book, by the same title, *Sono stata io, 1900-1999*. The narrator is a mask, speaking in the present indicative, who attributes to itself, one day after the other, across a century, the founding of the Communist Party, attendance at the premiere of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the inauguration of Maria Montessori's Children's House and even the expedition to the South Pole. These multiple “Is” take credit for important historical facts while remaining anonymous. Thus it becomes possible to ask what remains of official history and how much of it is worth remembering, apart from the aspects that are deemed disposable. How can the history of those who, in the end, leave nothing to be saved – no papers, no photos, no documents – be kept alive? Because there is yet another dimension to forgetting, underscores Martine Hawkes in *Archiving Loss: Holding Place for Difficult Memories*, and it is the fact that we expect memory and its loss to be consistent, credible, and lead to clear-cut conclusions.¹⁴ In other words, the documents and their absence alike can provide some direct access to the past, its objects, and its meanings.

Invisible under the sunlight

¹³ Elisabeth Lebovici, p. 9.

¹⁴ Martine Hawkes, *Archiving loss: holding place for difficult memories*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2019.

In March 2009, the collapse of the archive of the city of Cologne, in Germany, saw archivists, historians and firefighters working side by side to pull out from the rubble as much as possible of the approx. 18 linear kilometres of documents stored in the building. From the pages of *Der Spiegel*, Andrew Curry points out the confidence that the model architecture of the Cologne archive and the solidity of its bunker-like concrete structure had inspired in the 1970s.¹⁵ Some of the documents had been duplicated on microfilms and stored elsewhere, but other records had no back-up at all. To this involuntary loss I associate another, an intentional loss described by artist Daniel Knorr in his project *State of Mind* (2007). Two weeks before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the Stasi worked overtime to remove files and microfilms produced by the tight surveillance network set up in East Germany. The documents, pulverised and mixed with oil to make their content illegible, coagulated into stones that are now kept in the Stasi Museum in Leipzig. Invited to the Manière Noire Gallery in Berlin for a one-man show, Daniel Knorr proposed an exchange with the Stasi Museum in Leipzig: the cellulose clusters bearing witness to the documents destroyed were put on display in the venue in Berlin, and in the place left vacant by the loan, in the Leipzig Stasi Museum, Knorr placed a model of a Soviet tank and a series of documents rescued from the destruction.

The two events illustrate the ambivalent contexts in which memory deteriorates, but also, indirectly, the illegibility of history when it is excessively scrutinised by surveillance. The bureaucratic detail generated by obsessive registering and hypervisibility warps the information, removes it, makes it inaccessible. What will preserve data without a context? And what type of listening is entailed by an attempt to reinstate their context? In 2001, in the aftermath of 9/11, Hasan Elahi was erroneously reported to the FBI and subjected to an intense and lengthy investigation. Exonerated, in 2003 he created an online database, *Tracking Transcience*, where he makes his every move public in an act of self-monitoring. Elahi simulates on a 1:1 scale the bio-political surveillance process, describing both the controls put in place and the system that presides over this control and operates, through the ages, in the archives of migration. *Tracking Transcience generates* opacity through excess of zeal. Elahi's mimetic representation as a method for avoiding control challenges the belief in the so-called objectivity of the data. The criteria adopted by government apparatuses to "classify" migratory flows also engender a framework of expectations that legitimises certain information and life experiences while rendering others inaudible. As writer Hassan Blasim enunciates it:

¹⁵ Andrew Curry, "Archive collapse disaster for historians", *Die Spiegel*, 4.03.2009, www.spiegel.de (last accessed: 30 June 2023).

“Everyone staying at a refugee reception centre has two stories: the one for the record, written in the immigration offices and kept in their private archives, while the real stories remain locked in the secrecy of the refugees’ experience”.¹⁶

In *The List* by artist Banu Cennetoğlu, the hypothesis of the avoidance of administrative control resorts to an appropriation of governmental record-keeping methods for radically opposite purposes and agendas. As its name indicates, *The List* is a register containing the names of and information on migrants who lost their lives during their journey. Of each of them, *The List* details place of origin, name, age, cause of death, and source of the information. In an attempt to produce a sort of grassroots statistics, Cennetoğlu joins forces with Amsterdam-based NGO United for Cultural Action to put their names in a public register. Displayed in public spaces throughout Europe, *The List* serves as a temporary memorial and a reliable source of information on undocumented migration, which administrative reporting pares down to the identification of a movement and a border crossing, at the expense of subjective experience.

While the life stories and the cognitive contributions of migrants are rendered invisible by surveillance, the infrastructure through which this pervasive control is exercised is substantial. Like the exemplary archive building in Cologne and its imposing concrete structure, present-day data centres, (the so-called) migrant asylum centres and customs houses materialise and quantify the magnitude of the undertaking. *Appunti del passaggio*, a film realised between 2014 and 2016 by artists Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo, investigates the vicissitudes of Italian seasonal workers in the Switzerland of the 1960s and 1970s and reveals the presence of a hospital, right across the border, the Grenzsantität in Brig, charged with the task of examining the lungs of the migrants coming from Italy. The official motivation for the health checks was to combat the spread of tuberculosis. Creators of the grand modernist architecture for the “compulsory medical examination” were architects Heidi and Peter Wenger, who, having completed the Grenzsantität building in 1956, built a similar structure in Chiasso, in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, in 1961. The guidelines governing the spatial organisation of the buildings in Brig and Chiasso clearly reveal the circulation, sorting and segregation criteria adopted for the control of migrant workers. A note written by the two architects when work was underway at the Brig construction site reveals their awareness of the function of the building they designed: “Und trotz allen immer noch Angst vor dem Arzt (And despite all, still afraid of

¹⁶ Hassan Blasim, “The reality and the record”, in *The Madman of Freedom Square*, Comma, Manchester, 2009, p. 11.

the doctor)".¹⁷ It was perhaps out of a form of indirect compassion, I would think, that the Wenger architects initially designed their buildings in such a way that they could be converted to other functions. But what functions can be attributed to a biopolitical and health control structure that was in operation for so many years, and is the repository of so many stories that have been removed from public debate in Switzerland and Italy alike?

In 2014, the city of Brig announced its intention to tear down the Grenzsantität, which had fallen into disuse since 1992, that is, a decade before the Bossi-Fini Law (30 July 2002) reproduced in Italy the treatment experienced by seasonal workers in Switzerland. A group of former seasonal workers objected to its elimination, and, in doing so, brought attention back to architecture and its memory. Besides the hospital, the Valais canton, where Brig is located, preserves another essential testimony of this traumatic story, i.e., the X-rays of the lungs of the seasonal workers. As I close this essay, the duo Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo are working, together with historian of medicine Jelena Martinovic, artist Laurence Rasti and architect Andrea Bagnato, on a research project that aims to preserve the individual memories of the health screenings, which, apart from informal accounts collected from the migrant community still residing in Switzerland, have remained largely ignored.¹⁸ Research has found a footing and an opportunity to exist through the fragility of the images. The X-rays stored in the State archives of the canton of Valais are doomed to vanish due to the vinegar syndrome, a form of chemical degradation affecting acetate film. At present, the degradation caused by this process is considered irreversible. The images – and hence the visual evidence – of the health screenings are condemned to vanish, in a time span yet to be determined. Where the tangible document cannot withstand the wear of time, querying its absence or the circumstances of its disappearance may work as a form of preventive conservation.

¹⁷ Pierre Frey, *Heidi et Peter pour la vie: Wenger architectes*, PPR, Lausanne, 2007, p. 57.

¹⁸ The project, entitled *Medical Borders*, is run at the EDHEA– Ecole de design et haute école d'art du Valais.