Archival practices in art/The art of networks

Archival art: an aesthetical, political and conceptual application

“Archival art is as much pre-generative as it is meta-generative. (Karaba, 2011:52)”

Archival practices in art are related to Derrida and Foucault’s approach to the concept of the archive, as it attempts to transfer the power of potentialities and probabilities. Contemporary digital archives such as the internet turn the democratic and liberal characteristics of archive into control and oppression. However, episteme and art hopefully avoid the obstacles of freedom of speech and expression, even in places of inequality. Archive in art is an example of democracy, since the artist/archivist shares his collection in such a way that the audience takes control, becoming the temporal source of law. The purpose of this law of arcke (authority) is to offer space in which to develop, to build (Foster, 2004). At the same time, archive in art keeps its political role “as a mechanism of organising knowledge and a communication of power (Kouros and Karaba, 2012)”.

The archive is a relatively new element in contemporary art. More specifically, the concept of archive in art and curatorial practices has only developed in the last 20 years (Rossaal (Saether), 2010). However, approaches to archival art are found even earlier in the history of art, with examples from both the pre-war and post-war period. Part of archival art deals with the loss of history and strives to represent facts lost in time, a memorial to oblivion which becomes part of history, of records, again though this process (Foster, 2004). Archival practices in art include a number of archival processes such as collection, classification, and documentation, which can be found in pieces in several medium like photography, video, performance and installation art, where archival pieces are most commonly found (Kouros and Karaba (2012)). However, we can assume that photography is one of the first widely known approaches to archival art, with characteristic examples including pieces by Sophie Calle¹ and Gerhard Richter².

However, with the fast pace of technological development, archival art passed this era, with archival installation evolving in both physical and cyber space. Here, cyberspace does not take accusations of inequality into account and should not be thought of in such terms. Nevertheless, the physical world is not a place of equality and freedom, yet art still strives to be a vehicle of expression free from censorship and control. One of the reason that there are so many contemporary debates about the characteristics of cyberspace is because it “was sold as a tool of freedom (Chun, 2006:2)”.

Below are three contemporary pieces of art with archival forays, examples of alternative communicative tools which tie together the concept of wholeness—in terms of probabilities/communication—with individualities, and my personal interpretation of them as a common place of reality.³

---

³ I did not find these works in a database/list of archival art. It is my approach to the subject. Some of them are closer than others to the introduction to my thesis on archival art. In I had totally different works to cite as examples in mind at the start of the process, works more closely related to personal interpretation and stories. However, after developing the previous section, I found that these works can present and conclude the aspect of archive discussed in this essay. Some images of more archival art pieces will be cited in the appendix for a more formal image of this field of art.
Algorithmic search for love

The first choice is Julian Palacz’s “algorithmic search for love”, since it serves as a bridge between the physical and not physical: a non-materialistic piece made by code and digital data presented in physical space, where even the basic experience won’t change a virtual one. The choice is based on the artist’s comments on the digitalisation of personal archive collections—mentioned and developed above—and not on its communicative qualities, since the interaction concerns the relationship that the audience develops with the machine rather than another individuality within a wider network. Palacz devised and developed a search engine that is able to enter text to search personal film and video archives for spoken language. By typing a word or phrase, users activate an aggregation of sample mini-clips taken from clips related to the words entered. “Algorithmic search for love creates an algorithm that unfurls for the viewer new possibilities for audiovisual narratives,” comments the artist. The work is part of the Ars Electronica archive.

Artist website: http://julian.palacz.at/en/

Tracing you

“Tracing you” has a dual character as a piece. On the one hand, it is a confirmation of sovereignty on the internet; on the other, it is a place of meeting/appointment in cyberspace for people from around the globe. Benjamin Grosser built a site through which visitors can see the location of other people who visit the piece/site; the communicative tool among the visitors is the coordinates of their location, traced using the visitors’ IP addresses, and the closest image found on Google’s database. Benjamin Grosser mention that the aim of the piece is “to see the world from its visitors’ viewpoints”. The piece’s archival application is based on the collection of the locations of people who visit the site, but also in the “history” of the site, where the visitor-centred subjective narration, or sub-truths (supposition), are generated by visitors. My experience when I first visited the site was to start thinking about the other visitors and inventing my own story about them depending on the image of the location and country. I realise that my experience was shaped by the images of culture diversity, while my mood was also a filter of the experience.

Artist website: https://bengrosser.com
Work page: http://tracingyou.bengrosser.com

So like you

“So like you” is an internet- and social-media-based piece (it has been also exhibited). Erica Scourti came up with the idea to digitalise her personal photo archive and upload it to Google image’s search in order to find similar pictures of others. After searching and gathering images similar to her own, she randomly contacted people whose images appeared in the search to ask them for permission to include their images in her project. She also asked them to send her a similar image from their personal archive, which seemed to be the more challenging part: they agreed with her using the picture found online but not with sending another image
from their collection, and only 22 agreed with this second condition. Every image is also accompanied by words their owners use to describe it, using social media tags. Scourt mentions that the paradox of the project is that while she actually exhibits the work of others, all of this happened as part of her own project, in which she is the temporal law until somebody else reads and participates in the piece. In my view, this is a very successful archival piece, since it combines the concept of archival art but at the same time uses the network tool against itself.4

Artist website: http://www.ericascourt.com
Work page: http://similarselves.tumblr.com

4 http://similarselves.tumblr.com