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2008

Archives, Documents? : Forms of Creation, Activation, and Use

This is a conversation with a collection of documents. They include a combination of video footage, still photos, books and periodicals. I've decided to allow words spoken in the video documents to insinuate themselves in my activity of writing.

"History is always also about now."

[Raqs Media Collective, *Spheres of Interest* seminar. February 2006, video documentation]

This invitation to think about the differences between documents and archives allowed me to focus on an operation I've been engaged with for nearly three years: the development of a series, of which video and text documents have been amassed. A publication series growing out of a seminar and lecture series I began in 2005 is taking shape.¹ Amidst that process a collection of documents is growing. The contents are swelling and assessment, as well as some form of ordering, is necessary. The materials are now in that liminal zone between the document and the archive. In exploring distinctions between "having an interest", "browsing," and "research", as well as editing—for text and for film—I'd like to relate instances that are waystations along the journey to creating something else, which is what both documents and archives can allow to those who are astute in extracting information and transmuting it into various forms of knowledge. This is an attempt to move away from a notion that seems prevalent of the archive or of documents as fetish, rather than being deeply and repeatedly examined. I will use two examples from the video documents to assist me in thinking about these topics, as well as to ponder relations to books and other sources of information, pleasure, and provocation that can lead to different kinds of knowledge and feeling.

"An ethics of dialogue rather than an ethics of expertise."

[Kobena Mercer, *Spheres of Interest* seminar. February 2006, video documentation]

The project is a stimulating and sustaining one, as it has both a private and public, or shared, dimension. It focuses on dialogues, on probing questions and processes involved in various forms of creation. The presenting participants who are invited to engage in this exchange respond positively to my curiosity, as well

as to that of the other seminar participants. They are all willing to state their ideas and explicate them for a two-hour period. Afterwards we have a nice meal together. All of the participants have been interested in forms of concentration and how to use that in varying ways. As a list, as well as individually, the participants demonstrate impressive bodies of work; at least they are stimulating in relation to my interests. A point I'd like to return to. They all journeyed to San Francisco, from nearby Berkeley or from further distant Los Angeles and also from New Delhi, São Paulo, Paris, Oslo, Berlin, London, Vienna, Lisbon, Durham, Providence, and New York.

In my mind they form a network of very compelling thinkers and creators with whom I continue to be in contact. When not physically in their midst I have the documents of their expressions and our conversations. Upon rewatching the video footage, new information always emerges. This process attests to the difficulty to comprehend anything in one encounter. My encounters with the traces of these concentrated two-hour visits allows me a profound intimation into little discussed aspects of our present. I witness evidence of life beyond the constraints encountered in most media, academic or art world discussions. The way in which interests emerge in these particular discussions, officially described as seminars, is rare elsewhere; we discuss deep passions, complex ideas and complex feelings. A certain intimacy is achieved. In watching different of these conversations in conjunction, new meanings and intersections of concern and thought emerge. Like the reason some writers give for having written their books, I too have the desire to experience something I haven't known, yet would like to encounter and I create what I recognize has been lacking. Words, sounds, spaces, structures, things, or films—works I'd like to encounter and explore. I have a similar feeling as I review these documents. The words uttered are like water for parched earth. This is the way I feel as I review these documents. Words used, places referenced and names mentioned stimulate further digging and exploration. Material for creation.

Forming renewed networks? Constellations? Configurations? This is one of the things that can take place in the construction of archives that are historical repositories, as well as tools for active engagement.

“It’s not only a statement of facts, but it’s also a statement of certain kinds of desires of seeing the world. That element of how one sees the world, how one actually frames a vision of the world, has something to do with the imagination. It has something to do with the terms on which one would see the world. Is your vision of the world going to be a commanding vision of the world, does seeing or knowing necessarily mean domination? Can it also mean something else?”

[Raq Media Collective, *Spheres of Interest Seminar*]

These are questions of history and of the present, as well as questions of ethics and of the imagination. Discussions concerning documents and archives are compelling entry points for ruminating on these.

“I think history is really important, not simply as a chronology, or a record, or a document, the status of each of those terms is a contested one, but in terms of how it informs contemporary practices.”

[Kobena Mercer, *Spheres of Interest* Seminar]

We often think we know what happened in the past and we have selective versions of it that have been transmitted through the teaching and education we've been exposed to, through our own interests in terms of what we seek out. But the archive is full of surprises and even though we weren't able to use all the material that was selected, it was a really rewarding experience. History is not fixed, it's actually made from the point of view of the present, so that was a decisive influential experience in terms of seeking a more historical, genealogical approach... The archive is full of surprises that can challenge your conceptual framework, that force you to rethink the presuppositions you had to start with.”

[Kobena Mercer, *Spheres of Interest* Seminar]

Annotations are footnotes, notes we make in the margins of books. It isn't a counter history, but rather a rethinking of history and that's manifested in the fact that the series unfolds over four titles.

[Kobena Mercer, *Spheres of Interest* Seminar]

In all cases the participants produce something specific, whether it is a film, sound, writings, publications, art works, or performances. There is always an object, or a non-object, of knowledge or inquiry, usually saturated with emotion—even when restrained, that is a jumping off point for considering; the evidence experienced by the participants during the conversations and in the aftermath by viewers of these documents. . What is evidenced are attempts at coming to some form of recognition not merely between the receiver/perceivers and the instigator/creator, but in terms of what is being expressed. This recognition is not a simple knowing, but rather an unfolding of possibilities to follow, an invitation. The object of inquiry is composed, even if it appears to be an open-ended work. Its composition is a crucial aspect of investigation, which also includes a querying into what was meant in its creation, how that diverged during the process of making, whether others were considered as an audience or public and in what ways. How do others and oneself respond to this object/process? What was not anticipated? Or, what was astonishing?

The subtitle of this project is *Experiments in Thinking and Action* and its umbrella title is *Spheres of Interest*. The seminars allow a space for knowledge and its sharing among creators. These kinds of generative spaces are quite rare.

Fortunately they don't depend upon an institution, but can exist between two or more people sitting at a table or on a park bench. The process of documentation is a basic one: a video camera, videotapes, a microphone, headphones and a power source.

These issues can't be resolved all at once...Producing knowledge takes time and money ... The idea that you can do a kind of instant address that takes the form of large scale anthologies—they're incredibly valuable, and my own work has been included in many of them, but I know from a teaching point of view that they can be counterproductive. If you've got a book with thirty chapters there and each chapter is relatively small, that can be overwhelming because it's difficult for students to process it. What is most relevant? What is useful? What is not so useful? What's in the background or in the foreground? ... The idea of unfolding history in a series of four volumes is to demonstrate that this process of rethinking and rewriting is one that unfolds over time, it doesn't happen in an instant... The key issue is to move from the kind of theoretical critique of Eurocentrism, parochialism, those world views that have limited our understanding of 20th century art and to move from a kind of theoretical critique to the challenge of how do you go about constructing that history from a multi-perspectival approach? ... The key word is recognition... Where's the vocabulary that's going to be flexible enough to be able to be inclusive, but to be precise enough to move beyond theory of the abstract and talk about diverse modernities, these diverse experiences of the contradictory, overlapping across the 21st century, or how far back do you want to go? You can go back to the Enlightenment to think about how that was experienced across the globe....

[Kobena Mercer, *Spheres of Interest* Seminar]

Who can claim complete competency of the ever-expanding field and mass of information on, for example, "the global"?

[Kobena Mercer, *Spheres of Interest* Seminar]

The participants/conversants I've chosen to focus on here have been selected because of their involvement with the issues this text is in part about: The document and The archive. Their attempts at producing documents for present and future reference and the ways they approach how archiving can take place are a part of what interests me about them. In both cases they are changing the sphere for discourse, thinking and creating, but producing books that can be accessed, whether in a library, a bookstore or online, via purchase or downloads.

Allow me to introduce a version of Raqs Media Collective and of Kobena Mercer, based on documents of their production and of the video footage we're discussing. Raqs has been involved in the production of a serial publication called *Sarai Reader*. Kobena Mercer is an art historian, who has been the editor

of a series entitled, *Annotating Art's History*. Both are, as I am, involved in editorial functions. Both are also involved in research.²

Research: n. 1. Diligent and systematic inquiry or investigation into a subject in order to discover or revise facts, theories, applications, etc. 2. A particular instance or piece of research. 3. to make researches; investigate carefully. 4. To make extensive investigation into. Syn. 1. Scrutiny, study. See investigation. 4. Study, inquire, examine, scrutinize.³

“There is a pressure to feel and look with the moment. There can also be a pressure to look and feel with the moment in the manner that you’re supposed to given that you’re from Delhi.”

[Raqs Media Collective, *Spheres of Interest Seminar*]

When one focuses on discerning what can be found via in-depth investigation into an object of knowledge, which I believe some works of art to be, possibilities are opened. But this requires time and awareness.

“Straddling the faultline of the artist and the intellectual.”

[Raqs Media Collective, *Spheres of Interest Seminar*]

In the case of the operation I’ve presented here, the process, includes repeatedly reviewing the tapes, the tedious fastidiousness of accuracy, the immense time it takes to examine (i.e. watch) the documents, and the resources necessary (a space to gather, a place to store, electricity, tapes, cameras, microphones, duplication fees, paid transcription), would in addition include the process of archiving —establishing a system before the materials are even archived —thus insuring that once archived they would be locatable by a public.

The organization, knowledge and resources necessary for such an endeavor is reminiscent of two examples of previous projects of mine that include making films.⁴ Here I will focus in two projects: *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992-1996), and *Code: Survey* (2003-2006). In these instances art was conceived as an object/process capable of allowing deep knowledge. In particular, these works are attempts to replenish aspects of perception and experience that appeared lost and focused differently on what had been disregarded, highlighting the relativity of the word and concept, “normal.”

THE WORLD IS HERE RIGHT NOW: SIMULTANEITY

The above mentioned heading is a phrase stimulated by watching the Raqs Media Collective videotape documentation.

An excerpt of their words combined:

“Asymmetry of ignorance, ignorance that is seen as something other than ignorance; by intervening in debates you produce this possibility of continuously keeping this tension alive for yourself, not to be swarmed by a discursive formation, not to fall into the linearity of what’s given to you as time—simultaneity; the network of history in the present, you don’t take the present as a separate given. Why should an intellectual consider being an artist? When you begin to ask a few questions about the received narratives of history you can’t just posit a counter narrative. The received narratives of history have a certain affective or even emotional register, a register of feeling, which has something to do with confidence; it may have something to do with entitlement. When you’re encountering these things you have to also consider other registers of feeling. How does one disturb the idea of enlightenment? Or disturb the idea of the entitlement that comes from that history? And in doing that...I think, there’s a line from Bertolt Brecht in Galileo which talks about the fact that the shortest distance between two points when there is an impediment is a crooked line. The willingness to enter a path navigated through the crooked line is what would make an intellectual consider the danger of being an artist. Of not having to qualify every statement, only in terms of veracity or only in terms of the codes of how knowledge is verified, but also occasionally insist on making imaginative leaps, that then can be provocations for new pictures of the world.

[Raqs Media Collective, *Spheres of Interest* Seminar]

ANOTHER ENCOUNTER

A travelling assembly of used books of one owner, on view and available for perusal and limited copying. A named assembly of books loosely ordered by subject in the physical encounter and by name and title for an online search, in the process of being catalogued, but nonetheless temporarily public.

What are its distinguishing features?

What did I discover?

What did I find curious?

How did this oddness or curiousness lead to imagining a portrait of the lender of these books?

Clues, indications; but of what?

In this case, the knowledge formation of a college-educated North American woman spanning the 50s, 60s into the 1970s, with a strong interest in Marxism, Jewish history, documentary photography, New York City, the West of the U.S.,

Latin America, transportation, political economy and social-historical information, feminism emergent in the 1960s and 1970s, etc.

Ongoing interest in a Marxist, leftist, progressive perspective of the world via journals, such as *Telos*, *New German Critique*, *NACLA*, *The Nation* can be observed. An interest in theoretical thinking via the Minnesota University Press series *Theory and History of Literature*, which translated into English works by Lyotard, Paul de Man, Deleuze and Guatarri, among others.

In contrast to unpacking a library, as described by Benjamin, this is a case of temporarily shedding much of a library.

Choices made in creating a library or in collecting books inevitably become part of a portrait of the collector; otherwise, why spend any attention on the annotations in the books of a particular person?

This assembly of printed matter made me wonder about other personal libraries. Many artists and writers I've known have had libraries in some form. I have manifested my curiosity regarding the books of others, as well as other objects of collection, such as of vinyl records and CD collections, in a work which, in part, focused on the library of writer, music critic and cultural analyst Diedrich Diedrichsen. The work became *Import/Export Funk Office*.

This project stemmed from my interest in another person's collection, the collector's intellectual, creative and subjective processes; the initial stimulation was based very much on a resonance with things that I too found interesting and also had in my collection.

Passionate interest, something like being a fan of particular authors and kinds of music, as well as different musicians and sound producers initiated the work.

The focus was hip-hop, but this linked to other cultural forms, including literary, filmic and experimental sound ones. For this reason it was compelling as a process of exchange and dialogue between ourselves and others, who also shared these interests in Cologne, in NYC and in Los Angeles. We met in New York with my friends who wrote for the *Village Voice* or were DJs, in Cologne with Diedrich's friends and colleagues from *Spex* magazine, as well as with people I learned about and met in L.A.: MCs, a writer and photographer of the L.A. hiphop scene from Ireland...

Books from Diedrich's and my library were gathered, as well as audiotapes; it was 1991 to 1993. I taped the music that D.D. identified as crucial to his development, and collected contemporary hip-hop music from the U.S. and Germany, as well as antecedents to these. Forms of classification and my interest in these became apparent, as they indicate mental processes for designation, and thus an articulation of perception, both of mine and of others. These forms of classification were a part of the project.

Some of the many points that I note when studying someone's book collection/library include:

- 1/ Periods during which the books were collected, as well as their publishing date.
- 2/ Time of translation, and the effects upon readers of these in different locations.
- 3/ Finding things I didn't know about, or weird correspondences to things I'm interested in, unusual and odd findings, obscure things, things that were very popular at a particular time; or, in certain areas finding little I'm interested in.

Regarding the active use of someone else's library:

It is interesting to note what each person detects differently; for example, how certain books and journals resonate for others in different times and places and also for people in the same city. NYC, for example, where Hélio Oiticica also lived for a time. How might he have perceived then the materials we find collected during the 1950s-1970s in North America, as mentioned above? What might have appeared interesting? What might he have yearned for, especially while in exile in New York when presented with such a collection? What might he have collected? He was interested in Jack Smith and worked at nights as a translator—from Portuguese to English and the reverse I would imagine—in addition to making his works and filling his many notebooks with writings and proposals, his own forms of organization. Of course, this is a speculative leap.

When I think of my own library, the references wouldn't necessarily be analogous or easy to identify as linked with particular projects, as many seemingly unrelated sources are used for these; the sources span different languages and many countries and regions. They include other references from childhood, like Langston Hughes's poetry; or literature of writers from the African Diaspora, that would also encompass books by Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Caetano Veloso, Ousmane Sembene, C.R.L. James, Maryse Condé, Jamaica Kincaid, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Cedric Robinson, the novels and short stories of Toni Cade Bambara, Gwendolyn Brooks, Aimé Césaire's and June Jordan's poetry, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's writings, James Weldon Johnson's collected writings, Brazilian film, Patrice Lumumba in Portuguese, a lot of Godard, monographs on Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Chantal Akerman, poetry and non-classifiable books by Muriel Rukeyser, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha...

A vast array of explorations into subjectivity and experience, my formation. Some of the books and periodicals were collected while living in different countries. Some were gifts and others were acquired during my work in publishing. Others were acquired in the course of designing books and other projects.

Forms of taking a sort of self-inventory for an individual can also be deduced by observing reflections people may come to have about their books. This can resemble a form of memoir or sensation, one's collection mapping the passage of time.

What does this investigation bring or what has already been brought? One instance I'm thinking about: Orhan Pamuk reflecting on Istanbul.⁵ Another subjective encounter for the collector and for the reader?

But when the inventory organizer (or recaller?) is an outside person and when the primary recaller/collector is still alive, how to think about that?

One thing is certain, I am a book person. This is not to be confused with what might be assumed of a bibliophile—a dubious moniker which can veer towards an idiotic mania for books—although there are intersections with my interest. Also there are links to being a bookworm.

I like and note all aspects of books—everything tactile and sensual from the paperweight, the bindings, the look and feel of the type, the spacing and fonts, the color and printing processes, different formats for different feelings, and of course the words or images and their intersection. There isn't enough space or time now to describe the many ways I enjoy and engage with books to date, despite my interest in using digital technologies. To unpack this profound interest leads to a complex portrait, as each book, periodical or piece of ephemera leads to mental trajectories and associations of varied kinds that can branch out into others. Different stories.

Maybe this is why I am also fond of the ways in which books are arranged, as well as the various systems people have for putting their things, as well as their ideas, somewhere. *Code: Survey*, completed in 2006 as an online source “permanently” located on the Caltrans District 7 website⁶ and physically located in its headquarters in downtown Los Angeles, has been my most recent attempt at finding a place to put a directed collection of images, words and voices in an order; an order with many permutations which, like browsing in a library, can lead to unexpected discoveries.

Interlude

A few quotes to be thought of as entry points to describe case studies of a relation to books, and by inference, intelligence:

“Discovery is nothing. The difficulty is to acquire what we discover.”

Paul Valéry. *Monsieur Teste*.⁷

“It happens that someone has been asked whether there is a crisis in intelligence, whether the world is becoming stupid, whether there is a distaste for culture, whether the liberal professions are suffering, perhaps dying—their strength declining, their ranks thinning, their prestige gradually diminishing, their existence more and more thankless, precarious, and near its end...”

Paul Valéry. *Remarks on Intelligence*.⁸

That autumn (1954) On Growth and Form followed me to Majorca; back to Paris two years later; finally, two years after that, to Lans-en-Vercours (a mountain village near Grenoble). I wrote and published a novel. My marriage ended. I published more novels. My children went away. For a while I lived in Venice, without my books. I returned to Lans to begin life with a new family. I began teaching in America. My father died, my best friend died, my mother died. We moved to Paris. In 1996 we began spending summers in Lans once again; and it was there, on July 29, 1997, that I began reading my last stolen book. My progress was interrupted between September 23 and February 11, 1998. On July 18, once again in Lans, I finished On Growth and Form.

Harry Mathews. *The Pursuit of the Whole*.⁹

A Stopping Point, as this Topic Could be Endless

Rethinking genealogies and earlier contexts, as well as how to gain substance and memory-fuel from them, rather than reject them has been an objective in this examination of documents, that may in time become archived. Hopefully in accessible libraries, archives and online sources. Ways of imagining intersections that exist and can be further thought, as I earlier mentioned, was a stimulus for beginning *Spheres of Interest*, which I consider to be an extension of previous work that I've been interested in examining and in producing, as well as a way to concurrently engage with others' interests in both activities of examination and production.

Looking back, I recall different instances of some of these possibilities and moments, many still yet to be reexamined. Some examples are from Nova Scotia School of Art and Design in their publication series that spanned the 1960s and 1970s. These include Yvonne Rainer's, *Work 1961-73*. That series also included Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre in conversation, Michael Asher, choreographer Simone Forti and others. I remember also receiving stimulus from the Dia Art Foundation's publication series during the late 1980s "Discussions in Contemporary Culture," some of which I attended, were both a part of the series of publications that grew out of projects, including the books *Black popular culture*, a project by Michele Wallace ; edited by Gina Dent, *Democracy*, a project by Group Material and *Culture on the Brink : Ideologies of Technology* , edited by Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey. The atmosphere of probing ideas and lively debates from these two publication series and from the Dia presentations and discussions provided an impetus for developing an attempt in the present to

encounter partially buried knowledge that continues to be produced in different spheres. This dynamic process of thinking and dialogue regarding forms of creating, is being continued in the present.

Nostalgia isn't the intention of the encounters I've described, participants of different generations are invited, but rather reflection on the past and a rethinking of the past from different creators' perspectives in the present; creators who have different perceptions about the world informed by their experience of many countries, languages and diverse forms of interest in and access to knowledge. One example that can provide a model of how this process can exist is that of the Projecto Hélio Oiticica;¹⁰ a private foundation organized by Oiticica's family members in Brazil to manage his collection of papers, notebooks and ephemera; these materials are now available for public research. Online access to these and other resources, in addition to a tactile encounter in the depths of an archive or library, can provide other ways to think about living, producing, creating and diffusing what can matter.

¹ *Spheres of Interest: Experiments in Thinking and Action* is the name of the series taking place at the San Francisco Art Institute. Initiated in 2006 with a pilot season, 2008 marks the 3rd consecutive year in which a roster of invited guests visit San Francisco to engage in private seminars, and public lectures. During these years guests and events have included: Cindy Bernard, Chris Gilbert, Activating the Medium Festival 9,10 and 11, Sabeth Buchmann, Rainer Bellenbaum, Helmut Draxler, Stephan Geene, Ashley Hunt, Taisha Paggett, Michael Eng, Kimberly Lamm, Diedrich Diedrichsen, Noise Symposium: Florian Hecker, Curtis Roads and Yasunao Tone, Kobena Mercer, Raqs Media Collective, Trevor Paglen, Alfredo Jaar, Sarkis, Allan deSouza, Barbara Vanderlinden, Claire Daigle, Beth Coleman, Simin Farkhondeh, Avery F. Gordon, Fred Moten, Marko Peljhan, Judith Barry, John C. Welchman, Retort, A conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha, Elvan Zabunyan, and Renée Green, Anthony McCall, Eduardo Cadava, Judith Hopf, Jürgen Bock, Lovett/Codagnone, Lia Gangitano, Françoise Vergès, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Camille Norment, Acoustic Landscapes and Noise: Florian Hecker and Chris Watson, Dont Rhine/Ultra-red, John Miller, Christian Philipp Müller, Tony Cokes, Phill Niblock, Florian Zeyfang, Laura Harris, Sowon Kwon, Karim Aïnouz, and Sharon Hayes.

² Kobena Mercer is editor of the publication series *Annotating Art's Histories: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in the Visual Arts*. Published by MIT Press, and co-published by Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts) <<http://www.iniva.org>>. The series has four volumes: *Cosmopolitan Modernisms; Discrepant Abstraction; Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers; and Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures*.

Raqs Media Collective co-edit *Sarai Reader*. Published by The Sarai Programme; Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. Seven volumes have appeared: *The Public Domain; The Cities of Everyday Life; Shaping Technologies; Crisis/Media; Bare Acts; Turbulence; and Frontiers*. The *Readers* circulate as books, and also can be accessed online at <<http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/>>

³ Adapted definition from the *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Dillithium Press, 1989.

⁴ These would also include another project of mine *Wavelinks* (1999-2002); seven films were produced on electronically produced sound: *Mediations: The Wire; Electronic Music?; Into the Machine: Laptops; Activism and Sound; The Aural and The Visual; Spectrums of Sound*, and *A Different Reality*.

⁵ Orhan Pamuk. *Istanbul: memories and the city*. New York: Knopf, 2005.

5. *Code: Survey* website: <http://www.dot.ca.gov/dist07/code_survey/intro.htm>

⁷ Paul Valéry. *Monsieur Teste*. 1st American edition. New York: Knopf, 1947: 13.

⁸ Paul Valéry. "Remarks on Intelligence," *The Outlook for Intelligence*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963. (Harper Torchbooks; The Bollingen Library; TB2016). "Originally published in 1962 by Bollingen Foundation as part I of *History and politics*, which is volume ten of the *Collected works of Paul Valéry*."

⁹ Harry Mathews. "The Pursuit of the Whole," *The case of the persevering Maltese: collected essays*. Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003. Mathews is referencing D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form*.

¹⁰ Hosted by the Itaú Cultural, a cultural institute located in São Paulo, Projecto Hélio Oiticica can be accessed at the following URL:

<http://www.itaucultural.org.br/aplicExternas/enciclopedia/ho/home/dsp_home.cfm>