

Elastic Notions of The Archive

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Firstly, I'd like to honour the space that Jo Holder and Gavin Harris have created here with Cross Art Projects. A space that is not quite commercial gallery nor artist-run initiative; social history museum nor archive; community arts centre nor political thinktank, and yet draws from the potentials of these philosophical spaces without being weighed down by their impossibilities. Now that they have created this space for us, we realise that it was something we really needed. Thankyou Jo and Gavin.

In his 1975 book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: (From A to B and Back Again)* Warhol discusses the need to live in one big empty space, with cupboards for storage located elsewhere. He says: 'What you should do is get a box for the month, and drop everything in it and at the end of the month lock it up. Then date it and send it over to Jersey. You should try to keep track of it, but if you can't and you lose it, that's fine, because it's one less thing to think about, another load off your mind.'

Following his own advice, Warhol accumulated 'an anthropological sampler' of his life and times, stored in 612 boxes (or *Time Capsules* as he called them), filled between 1974 and his death in 1987. These *Time Capsules* are now archived at The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, and a selection was recently on display at the National Gallery of Victoria. As NGV curator Amy Barclay has observed, beyond their cultural heritage value, *the Time Capsules* can be seen as another form of Warhol's artistic practice and artistic expression.

Whilst Warhol's relationship to The Archive was more about collection and acquisition, other artists have taken up the archival themes of recordkeeping, classification and description; the creation of complex corporations and agencies; and the reworking of official and personal records.

Taking in the works brought together as part of the Elastic Archive Project, we can see a mix of cultural heritage and artistic practice also at play. For me, the works are capsules of archive flavour; each item releasing a short, sharp, surprising burst of archive sensation.

When I applied for my current job at State Records NSW, I did not know anything about the State archives, and they certainly did not know anything about you. But it was artists who revealed the creative potentials of working with archives to me and drove me to apply for the position.

As I observed in a presentation to the Executive in my first weeks at the archive: 'Seemingly unbeknownst to State Records a parallel universe of practitioners already exists whose attention and interest has been captured by the realities and potentials of archives. Individually and in collaboration they have been at work over the last 10 years', interpreting the collections and spaces of a diverse range of institutions. 'Sometimes these artists have interpreted a discrete archival collection ... At other times the influences and artforms are more abstracted'.

Fresh in my mind at the time was the work undertaken by Ross Gibson on a series of crime scene photographs from the Scientific Investigation Bureau of the New South Wales Police. Gibson went on to collaborate with new media artist Kate Richards to create an exhibition based on the images, held at the Justice and Police Museum in Sydney, as well as a performance and cd-rom.

It wasn't so much the final outcome of the exhibition and its associated elements that inspired, but that Gibson had evoked the visceral detail of his intellectual, conceptual, emotional and even physical responses to being in the presence of the archive; and that he shared his nuanced pursuit of an appropriate genre to interpret this very particular series of photographs.

Gibson's experience of being in the thrall of the archive may be no different from the experiences of better-known archive habitues, such as professional archivists, researchers, genealogists and historians.

But what keeps drawing me to the work of artists is their drive to realise an aesthetics from their experience of the archive; often an aesthetics which evokes the narrative of the ethical journey they have taken in coming to terms with the lessons of the archive.

I guess it has been my job ever since arriving at State Records to make the archive more elastic. For it to be more open to interpretation from outside the profession, for its borders to dissolve a little, and to allow others in without fear of contamination.

Just as the archives knew little about the parallel universe of artists engaged with the idea of The Archive, many artists know little of the workings of actual archives.

You might be surprised to hear, for example, that most archives aren't actually collecting institutions at all. They do not collect records in the way a museum, library or gallery might. It's not a case of seeing an artefact of interest and making the curatorial decision to acquire it for the archive collection. Nor do archives hoard and then later try and make sense of it all.

In classical archive theory, archives aren't 'collected', they are 'formed'. Archives do not have 'collections', but 'holdings'. In the case of State Records NSW and other government recordkeeping institutions around the country, the process is one of 'records appraisal', governed by law. State Records appraises the records created by NSW public service agencies and nominates which classes of records should be kept indefinitely as State archives.

At this stage, the elastic nature of the archive may seem to be contracting, even strangulating, like a garrote perhaps. But I can assure you that the 'appraised' archive is still full of unfolding stories. Like those revealed in records of the Aborigines Welfare & Protection boards which recorded the boards' intervention in the lives of Indigenous people. Like the archive boxes of porn collected by the Department of Services from the 1950s until the 80s. Whilst the archives are appraised and regulated, they still throw up the unknown, the untold, even the unspeakable.

I encourage any of those artists who have taken great pleasure in the conceptual, philosophical, abstracted idea of The Archive, to also engage with the professional practices of actual archives, as well.

My official mission is to create : 'a cohesive promotion and communications program, which is both innovative and imaginative, in order to capture the community's attention and interest'. It's a mission I fully engage with.

But speaking to a room full of artists I would quote the worlds of artist Declan Donnellan as a truer picture of what I aim to do:

'As far as I am an artist, it's for me to draw a frame around things and bring the audience's attention to the ambiguity and ambivalence of what lies within it. Not to make everything clear, but to make it clearly ambiguous. There is an honour in that.'