

BACK TO THE FUTURE

by Anne-Sophie Garcia

In a seminal article, art historian Hal Foster observes the emergence of a trend in contemporary art that he terms “an archival impulse.”¹ From Dada and Duchamp to conceptual art and Andy Warhol, visual artists have been especially interested in archives since the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet what distinguishes this new movement from former practices is the fact that “archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present.” Foster notes that “these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects [. . .] that might offer points of departure again.”

In collective imagination, archives conjure images of dusty, lifeless papers, nonetheless conveying an aura of mystery and power. One easily envisions endless rows of cardboard boxes classified according to a secret code incomprehensible to mere mortals. It is as if time had stopped for these documents as they awaited someone’s beneficent touch to arise from torpor and come back to life. Why not do precisely that for one’s anniversary, the perfect time for introspection, redefining oneself, taking stock of past, present, and future?

Etymologically, the word archive derives from the Greek *arkhe*, meaning to begin, but also to rule, a matter of authority. Indeed, an archive requires an authority to establish a system of rules to order a collection of documents. An archive is an archive because it is preserved and filed. In exercising the power to decide what must be preserved, one is also deciding what shouldn’t. Archives are therefore the product of the social systems of their time and reflect positions of power—and exclusion—of different groups within these systems. When Skol makes the archives available to artists, it is in some sense returning

power to them, and reaffirming that this is a centre run by artists and for artists.

By reclassifying and reinterpreting these documents, the artist is placing them at the heart of discussion and giving them new meaning. Such a practice reexamines the conventional life cycle of archives, by which documents are created in their original context and then withdrawn from ordinary usage either for archiving or for destruction. This cycle is increasingly called into question, and archivists, such as Jay Atherton, prefer the term *continuum* to that of cycle, pointing out that archives have both past and present meaning. The archive is no longer perceived as a document arrested in the past, but rather as continually used and understood in new contexts. As Derrida had already observed, we may know the past meaning of an archive, considered in its original context, but we will never know its present and future meanings beforehand.

The archival artist has a truly “utopian ambition,” to quote Hal Foster once more, translated by a “desire to turn belatedness into becomingness, to recoup failed visions in art, literature, philosophy, and everyday life into possible scenarios of alternative kinds of social relations,” “to turn ‘excavation sites’ into ‘construction sites’,” in short, “to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia.” The exhibition “Embracing the Archive” enables the archival artist to function on a level where notions of the past, present and future are put on hold, to take the archive beyond its conventional domain and into the realm of the imagination.

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¹Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 Fall 2004, 3-22.

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