Exploration of Artexte’s audiovisual collection

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**DOCUMENT**  
Etymologically speaking, the word document is rooted in the Latin word docere (to teach) and documentation (example, lesson, proof). It was first used by the French in the 15th century, and was picked up by the English 200 hundred years later. The –ment of document – from the Latin –mentum – refers to the result or product of an action. A document is the result of explaining, teaching, or proving. Somewhere along the line, document became a verb. Artists are always documenting their work. Some of this documentation is pedagogical in nature. It teaches arts funding juries what art looks like. It ends up on web sites, in slide shows and PowerPoint presentations, in catalogues and history books. Artexte is a documentation centre. It is full of art documents and artists’ documentation.

XXL of course, stands for extra extra large. I initiated my research in Artexte’s oversized document collection. This was the main repository for 12” vinyl records when I began working (this has since changed). It is also, curiously, where many rare or valuable items are stored. XXL is oversized and over-priced. It is double oversized. The program duration: 57 min. Rather than strictly referring to size or volume, I chose to interpret X, X, and L as philosophical instruments: quasi-mathematical figures that allow me to play with documents, and with ideas. To X is to multiply, to combine one thing with another, i.e., 10 X 10 = 100. The power of L allows us to open a hinge dimension, a vertical axis on a horizontal plane, i.e., 1 X B = L, like opening a spatial axis on a linear time continuum. This is L. It allows ideas and phenomena to be folded and unfolded, to be open or closed like a vertical axis on a horizontal plane, i.e., A X B = L, like opening a hinge dimension, a vertical axis on a horizontal plane.

As I mentioned somewhere else, though widely known as a resource centre for print documentation on contemporary art, Artexte also possesses a significant collection of audio-visual materials: films, videotapes, DVDs, vinyl records, audiocassettes and CDs. The status of these objects varies: some are actual artworks; others are documentary evidence.

Occasionally, while digging for documents, it occurred to me that Artexte is like a fossil of life before the internet: the world-wide web before the web. It reflects a time when data was not so easily accessible. Photocopied documents in files seem precious, perhaps even more so than in front of me, more so than in the sense that in this age where seemingly all information is digitized and accessible on the web. The bounty and inclusivity of the web is, of course, an illusion, and Artexte’s strength is that it offers an alternative to the post-truth virtual. It is real, tactile and tangible. Its existence in physical space allows one to make weird or unexpected connections.

Unlike the web, Artexte is finite. The physical limitation of what is contained in the Artexte database, and what is recoverable from it, became one of my primary curatorial limitations. I didn’t feel I could, or should, work outside of this structure. I decided not to bring anything in from outside (though I did cheat in one or two instances.) This lead me to question whether what I was doing was real curating or not. I wasn’t free to follow a research question and respond to it by looking for things in the vast expansiveness of the world. Instead, I responded to what I found within the boundaries of the database: a kind of top-down curating that emerged from a pre-existing, finite body of documents, rather than one bounded by unspoken constraints.

A widely circulated cliché about artist-curator is that they only pick work made by their friends. Fair enough. I have been guilty of this type of curating at certain points in my career, but I believe it’s a vice I have overcome. In any case, even curator-curators – real curators – can be just as prone to this type of nepotism, so perhaps this isn’t a meaningful way to distinguish between artist-curators and other kinds people who engage in this activity. By my part, I believe that an artist-curator works differently from what we might call a vocational curator: a person who isn’t engaged in the process of making art, and who I assume has some specialized training other than picking nice wall colours. I envy vocational curators because they can look at and think about art, without all the problems of having to actually make the stuff. Their minds must be less cluttered.

When the artist Steve Renke was curating an exhibition of my work in 2010, I let him take liberties – play and improvise with my artworks – in ways I wouldn’t have allowed a regular curator to do. This was in part due to my long friendship with Steve, my admiration of his output, and my trust that the risks he took were in some ways calculated ones. Renke was founded in his rigorous and skilled practice as an artist. When I told Steve and a curator about my distinction between artist-curators and curator-curators, they both laughed. They insisted that there was no difference between the two. So perhaps the claim I am trying to make is a false one, dated or unfashionable. After all, curators like Hou Hanru think of themselves as artists, combining works in risky ways that favour cross-contamination. Curated exhibitions in the hands of these individuals become meta-arts – works that constructs that outstrip the reach of any individual.

In her excellent article on the exhibition curated by the artist Danh Vo for Punta della Dogana in Venice (Artforum, September 2015), Claire Bishop describes the show negatively, as an extension of Vo’s own interests and art practice. Curating by artist-curators is a means for artists to build their own family tree: they bolster their own authority via a kind of genealogy-by-association. Certainly this is a risk with DOCUMENT XXL as well. That aside, what struck me about Vo’s exhibition was the extent to which the artists and works he selected unpacked or unfolded Vo’s own practice. This was something of which Bishop was also critical. But if artist-curators are engaged in the process of making stuff as a kind of research, shouldn’t the work of an artist-curator also extend from, or reflect research already conducted?

My curatorial method was: I picked stuff that I liked, that I was attracted to. This, somewhat problematically, led me to the questions: Why do I like this? Why do I gravitate towards these materials, these forms, these ideas? The curatorial choices I made did seem to extend from, or were informed by, choices I make as an artist. Trying to get to the bottom of the question of what I like seemed to overthink the problem. It was as tiresome as trying to explain a joke, or analyze why you find someone sexy. It robbed the activity of all pleasure. Words failed. And anyway, what artist’s practice is unbiased by preferences for certain materials, methods, or themes? What curator has ever picked out art they didn’t like by artists they didn’t care about? Is there a way we can talk about these attractions and affinities, without resorting to taste?

On one hand, one could say that the work of saying the unsayable, the inarticulable, is the real labour we are all engaged in, both curators and artists. It’s the heavy lifting we need to do, and we shouldn’t shy away from it. Fearing accusations of intellectual laziness or a lack of rigour, I would counter by saying that this kind of pleasure – the pleasure of attraction – operates before or after language. This is the hinge dimension of XXL: the kind of thinking outside of words that artists do through making. This is the realm of affect.
The paradoxical condition of an object that is both seen and heard. The problems of presenting time-based work in gallery contexts, and in a broader sense however, the exhibition became about time, about generative procedures and processes. But more on this elsewhere. In text-based art, conceptual or post-conceptual practices, and to their words guide my selection. I found myself gravitating towards about determined some of the sub-themes of the exhibition: I let an annotated text. To some extent, what artists are speaking preoccupation shared by my 2015 video installation through the oversized documents, looking for 12” vinyl records. About hip-hop and rap and guest rapping on tracks. I began combing building up attractions and affinities. Using this as a model, I began approach: like someone flipping through a record bin, picking out breath. What would it mean to curate like a DJ? It’s more about songs they feel will work well together, building up rhythms and which in the process becomes something else.

This type of thinking was paralleled by reflections on another question, the problem of presenting time-based art in gallery settings. For me, this frustration is illustrated by the paradox of, for example, presenting Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 080 Brussels on a plinth equipped with headphones with no bench or seat in sight. Here, the curator is not inviting you to experience the work in any meaningful way; you can’t watch a three-hour and forty-five-minute film standing in a gallery. Clearly this sculptural presentation of time is meant to act as a signpost: it points to somewhere outside the gallery. It might be referring you to your own memory of seeing the film previously, or perhaps it is asking you to rent or buy the film, and watch it when you get home. So this pointing function of the artwork – the film standing as a marker or indicator for itself somewhere outside the gallery – intrigued me.

As a beautiful object, the 12” records operate on this level: they are a lure, a trap to engage you to unpack or unfold its contents. For this reason, merely putting the records in display cases, or framing them and hanging them on the wall, seemed wrong. It left them mute, and tended to emphasize their presence as fetish objects, rather than exploiting their use-value. From here, I moved onto the idea of, or in them, action, allowing people to see and hear them simultaneously, the appeal of a physical object that can be unfolded upon a temporal dimension, in which the process becomes something else.

DOCUMENT XXL stands halfway between being a curated exhibition and an original artwork. From the start, I was aware of the ethical problems in doing this. Even if curators such as Hou Hanru see themselves as artists and feel free to combine the works of artists be just another material to create meta-artworks, this method could be seen as disrespectful of the artist’s original intentions. On the other hand, as an artist who has presented my work group shows, I am well-aware of the need to be flexible when it comes to pollution from other artworks. I have even built works with long passages of silence to accommodate sounds coming from other works the gallery, or the gallery itself. Some curators have even used this notion of anti-contamination as curatorial criteria. Art seldom exists in a vacuum.

This taken into consideration, my approach was to try to find two things that could live together in harmonious proximity, without one obviously overpowering the other. In the case of videos or films, for example, I judged it best not to provide silent works with a soundtrack. I occasionally let somethings stand on their own, establish themselves, before combining them with something else. Ultimately, my goal was to orchestrate a conversation between the artists. If I came to define the curatorial, I pulled back. If I have appeared to do this in any way, my apologies. It was not my objective.

In any case, the ethical considerations of this practice were mitigated somewhat by the documentary status of the ephemera collected here. Only a few of the objects bear the status of being artworks. Most of material presented is excerpted, and not presented in their entirety, thus another reason to seek out the originals in the documentation centre.

As I mention somewhere else, artists’ talks and artists’ speech, became a kind of central thread for DOCUMENT XXL. As such, it was necessary to respond to what they were talking about. There are a number of chapters in DOCUMENT XXL. Some sections are concerned with the notion of documentation – audio-visual recording – and a kind of tipping point where documentation becomes art, and vice versa. Others are about travel, politics and movements. Others are about frames and fires (burning documents). And then there is the time. But this preoccupation quickly shifted to the question of how to showcase the material I had collected. Clearly what began to refer to as the Jeanne Dielman Method was not adequate. Presenting hours and hours of material in the gallery wasn’t going to go unnoticed, and was making an unkind demand on the audience. Here is where the model provided by DJing became useful. By playing two documents against one another, by allowing them to mix, one could experience double the material in half the time.

Editing or excerpting works, like sampling or mashups, became a means of condensing the content. The structure of the exhibition follows tonds time L onto itself.

That said, the pointing function of The Jeanne Dielman Method was intriguing. Ultimately, DOCUMENT XXL is meant to point back to the database, to the documentation centre. I see this as a way of activating the archive. Viewers who enter the gallery would see a display case or two, which presented documents directly in the documentation centre, to see, touch and hear them, and experience their physical presences as objects first hand.

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1 This is an issue that Jason Simon also addressed in his essay for the exhibition Changeover, presented at Artexte from December 2014 to February 2015.