

## JORGE BLASCO GALLARDO

### **Archive cultures: a project that is up and running**

*Archive cultures* began at the Antoni Tàpies Foundation in Autumn 2000. As an exhibition format and set up, it forms part of a historiographic tendency in which many of the systems that organise pictures and texts share a common genealogy, and in which the theatres and palaces that commemorate the renaissance, the displays of curios, the first scientific exhibitions, the first photography shows, propaganda exhibitions and the more recent representations of the Holocaust (or other tragedies connected with repression) constantly cross the line that exists between archive and exhibition. However, its starting point lies, not so much in this genealogy, but in the way that 20<sup>th</sup> century artists and narrators have intervened in the archive and in the light that their work has shed on a way of containing information, constructing memory and arranging reality that has undoubtedly marked, and continues to mark, our entire cultural and social environment.

Throughout the editions of the project, various areas have been dealt with, either through its portal, its exhibitions, its publications or through workshops, seminars and lectures. The texts with which all the material and each edition of the project have been presented clearly document this amalgam of processes and study cases that, in *Archive cultures*, jointly help to define this *archive culture* that the project is trying to define by starting out from the very heart of the matter; that is, not on the basis of a definition or external commentary, but by directly sharing it, engaging with it and taking part in it, as if it were just another agent:

“The family album as a repository for intimate memories; the historical, anthropological, ethnological, scientific, repressive or police archive; the various categories of museums as a public destination for documents; the private compulsion to store things as pictures; the construction of national and/or ethnological identities by identifying their objects, landscapes or individuals; the tension between truth and documentary fiction, between archives and exhibitions, between the use and abuse of documents; the iconographic and conceptual repercussions of the structure of archives and documents on contemporary aesthetics and creation; certain absurd taxonomical customs; the contemporary ramifications of the art of memory; the capacity of organisations of images and texts to catalogue, and at the same time, to construct the reality that they represent: each of these concepts and areas of knowledge forms part of this “archive culture” that this book aims to define by using the iconographic codes and the exhibition structures that this culture itself provides.”

Introduction to the book, *Archive cultures*

“The perversity of constructing an identity by collecting and classifying cases, on certain occasions, or the therapeutic process required to reconstruct identity that has been shattered by trauma, on others; the power of representation to form viewpoints on reality, by arranging, controlling and shaping it in accordance with the predominant poetics and political situation at any given time; the ease with which documents acquire an aura behind which their original use is hidden; the analysis of the private management of photographs and documents themselves as a way of studying a variety of human activities; registering what is new as a necessary step to establish a piece of work or invention as something brilliant and unique, whatever the area of modernity in which it takes place; the tension when it comes to observing and identifying artistic practices in registers, images, accumulations and collections that were not conceived as art; the way that the model of the researcher and archivist has seeped into artistic practices that can be no more than a reflection of the period in which they were carried out; a period marked by this *archive culture* that this project aims to define in each edition, publication, step or process...”

Introduction to the book *Archive cultures vol. 2*

*Archive Cultures* has been running a series of workshops since 2002 that, under the same name, have been offered at the University school of Architecture in Barcelona (ETSAB, UPC). These workshops are at the very heart of the project; they are less spectacular than its exhibitions or archive spaces, but they give rise to discoveries and workspaces that it is well worth mentioning as a fundamental part of all this. The workshops start out from a simple principle: they deal with collections of documents from the city where they are taking place without using them as a source to illustrate a pre-established cultural discourse or pretext. On the contrary; it is precisely these groups of localised documents and what they themselves narrate exactly as they are systematised, labelled and organised within the archive as a whole that form the pretext for the propositions that emerge from these workshops.

We ought to point out, among others, the case of the workshop that was organised in 2003 in collaboration with the Municipal Archive of the District of Sants (Barcelona). The main interest in this archive lay in the collection of photographs that it contained; a historical collection of pictures of Sants that practically went back to the beginnings of photography. Its most important feature is that it hasn't been created by the institution itself, but by the Sants Hikers' Association. It has been created by the residents of the area who for years went to the trouble of compiling, dating and organising these pictures until the moment came in which the collection became too big. This is when they reached an agreement with the Archive to store it there. The pictures are organised in the same way as they were by the residents, and to a large extent the residents of the area are the people who still preserve and organise the collection and the new additions to it today.

For *Archive Cultures* it was vital to include a case like this, in which a public institution and a neighbourhood initiative seem to form a perfect match. On the other hand, we need to bear in mind that parts of the port and Duty-free Zone, that were once its beaches, and Can Tunis, an especially complicated area in Barcelona's landscape, belong to Sants. The mere fact of having the opportunity of seeing how their own area was represented in an archive created by its residents was in itself a really interesting step. Some work groups focused precisely on the way that the early photos in the section grouped together as "Beaches" – from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century- correspond to romantic visions in which boats, homes and waves were recurring themes, and on how the photographs from the Civil War period followed chronologically –most of these were aerial views- and on how the "Beaches" series ended with black and white photographs of families posing for the camera with their food and balls. There is nothing after this period. There are no pictures showing what the area is currently like; an area that feels it's not worth representing itself, for obvious reasons.

As far as possible we have aimed to ensure that the result of the workshops has a format that makes it possible to leave a copy in the archive that they have been collaborating with, so that their vision of this heritage of documents can be made available to future users.

If there is something that has occurred in *Archive Cultures*, then it has been the fact that it has established interrelations with institutions with a broad variety of political tendencies and highly diverse intellectual structures. In this respect the project has gradually become a tool in the hands of those of us who work on it and of the institutions and archives that collaborate with it. It is a catalyst for situations in which institutions, professionals, artists and others come together on this endless search to define what *archive culture* means.

The approach to the collections of documents that are shown in the exhibition section of the project consists in putting "on the wall" those groups that already contain a powerful discourse in them due to the mere fact that they have been preserved and organised in one way or another over time. When they are shown in other kinds of exhibitions, they are usually displayed because of the individual importance of one of the documents in events that illustrate historical or pedagogical discourses. *Archive Cultures* exhibits them in order to link different ways of organising pictures and texts throughout time. These are ways based on a variety of poetical and political approaches, and it shows them together with other collections of documents, which form an epidermis of the "archive" tendency that human beings and their societies display.

The project has always stressed the authors responsible for the research carried out on the material; that is, *Archive Cultures* provides a conceptual setting for exhibiting materials that have been researched into over a long period of time by archivists and professionals from different fields, and they are the people who have earned the credit for having kept and analysed this material and have made the gesture of sharing this work with the project. This is an exchange in which *Archive Cultures* proposes to be a working area and never a space for appropriating or discovering other people's intellectual work. As far as possible all relations with the institutions that loan documents and the people who work with them take place under this tacit agreement in which work that usually appears through other channels is provided with a fresh setting. A space is provided where interpretations can be brought to

light that researchers and agents have already considered –that coincide with the interests of the project- but which are usually difficult to display in standard exhibitions.

It is the construction of a space that makes things possible that characterises the model, resource or tool that all this work has been turned into during the five years that it has existed. In the same way that this is the relationship that the project, in its most curatorial aspect, tries to establish with the artists that join the team in each edition, by aiming to ensure that the relationship with these creators of “personalised archives” starts out from the construction of an area where these archives can be placed, and in which they can be reinforced or modelled by coming into contact with sets of documents that have quite different political and poetic bases to those in a “personalised archive” but which they are inevitably connected with. In this way they are added as just another item in order to help to define this *archive culture* that they also form part of. At least this is how we have collaborated, among others, with Pedro G. Romero’s F.X. Archive, Technologies To The People (Photo-collection and Video-collection) and with Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas (Transaction project).

The specific case of the collaboration with the Archive of the Royal Chancellery in Valladolid may illustrate the type of relationship that the project establishes with the institutions that it works with and the way in which the project is able to give rise to interpretations about collections that –even when the people who work with them for years have them in mind- would be unlikely to find a context where they could be displayed and published at the most usual kind of cultural events. The history of the Archive of the Royal Chancellery of Valladolid can be easily obtained through publications or its own web page, so that there is no need to spend a lot of time on this. However, it is worth knowing that it was once the archive of an active legal institution, (a court), so that what we are now dealing with is the transfer to the public domain of what in another period were documents for specialists. In the archive there is a particularly surprising collection of oil paintings and drawings. This is a collection that has been in serious danger on certain occasions and which the current staff at the Archive have managed to preserve and restore. The oil paintings, that show areas of land that for one reason or another were in dispute, are geographical illustrations used to show whether one party or the other was in the right; that is, they are documents or evidence, some of which measure 2x2 metres, painted and accompanied in the archive by the corresponding dispute in which, among other things, the truthfulness of this painting was judged. This material has been displayed in various ways in other contexts, and has often been used in exhibitions or editions devoted to geographical areas or regions of the State in order to illustrate these.

However, as far as the study of the pictures or the organised collections of these is concerned, it is obvious that this collection is enormously interesting in itself: legal illustrations of a landscape painted in oils, pictorial evidence, documents modelled by the know-how of the paintbrush when it came to focusing on the reality illustrated here, and all of this is organised in a collection with its corresponding written justifications; with the document along with its certificate.

We shouldn't forget that in the four exhibitions of the project and in its various publications the General Archive of the Spanish Civil War has collaborated with us. They have collaborated generously, as they have loaned a large amount of documents to the project to be displayed and this has been the case in all the exhibitions. The dates of the first edition (2000, Antoni Tàpies Foundation) and of the latest one (2005, Autonomous Government of Castile and León) need to be borne in mind. Both took place at the same time as the last two important crises to do with the demand for the documents that had been seized by "Nationalist" troops -or during the dictatorship- and used for control and repressive activities by the Political Social Brigade or by the Special Tribunal for the Repression of Freemasonry and Communism. Documents from the following series: Political-Social Photographs, PS-Barcelona, Catalan Autonomous Government, PS-Catalan Autonomous Government, PS-Santander, PS-Madrid, Special Section or Freemasonry, Theosophy Section, etc have been included in the in the archive-spaces in successive exhibitions. If we go beyond a specific study of each group or document, or of the reasons why these documents are in the archive-spaces, (basically for the same reasons as in any other case, because of their characteristic powerful discourse), one thing is made clear after dealing with legacies of this type: this is a heritage marked by a condemnation that is common to all groups of documents that are produced by a tragedy: it becomes, in one way or another, a symbol; and a historical miniature of what it is; and it is idolised, so that all its possibilities as a tool for providing knowledge are defused.

For further information: [www.culturasedearchivo.org](http://www.culturasedearchivo.org)

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