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Incurable ills

ARCHIVE

1. A compilation of documents recording events that have already taken place. 2. An innate element of great tales, aspires to totality and universality, although its nature is incomplete and partial. 3. Creates breaks in the habitual perception of existence as a continuous unbroken whole. 4. It is functional in character: the archive of the past is used to attempt to make sense of the present and the future. 5. Almost nothing remains outside it and it is omnipresent in the collective *imaginarium*. Interestingly, an “*imaginarium*” is also a type of archive.

There are many possible definitions associated with the term “archive”. We will now try to analyse the reasons for "archive sickness" through an analysis of three definitions of the term.

The document as excess

On this subject there is a consensus: the world is a hostile place. What makes it hostile is the uncertainty caused by the speed at which things change and accumulate. In such a situation, the archive becomes a form of resistance to a dynamic of constant mutation and accumulation.

A useless resistance. Because, when nothing escapes the documentary record any more, can the archive ever reduce the speed at which things change? No. Does it at least manage to slow down excess and accumulation? No. If the mission of the archive is to give sense and order, then paradoxically, by generating an archive, we are only adding more noise and waste to the initial excess.

Corbis Corporation, a company owned by Bill Gates, markets digitised reproductions of artworks over the Internet. The original copies of the images, nearly seventy million of them, are stored in a number of disused mines. There are no known photographs of the interior of these depots which form part of the former industrial landscape on the outskirts of Pittsburg.

An abandoned mineshaft as a graveyard of images. This unseen image can operate as a metaphor for the document as residue. It also holds a less metaphoric meaning: that of the extremes (no less profitable for their absurdity) to which the logic of the capitalist system is prepared to go in its obsession to turn everything, even waste, into a consumer product.

The document as a fetish

The archive is *fetishistic*, where a "fetish" is taken to be any subject that replaces the absent object of desire with another one. In this view of things, the document is always the object that stands in place of the past moment of which it is a testimony.

In the space of art, the document takes on a second degree of fetishisation; one in which it stands as a replacement for the work of art. After forty years of wide-ranging artistic practices (process art, non-object art, conceptual art, etc.), we can now speak of a certain naturalisation of the document in the artistic context.

This relationship of transferral, however, does not only operate in one direction: if the document “can” not only stand in the place of, but also be an artistic object, the art object “is” always a document. Taking this further, independently of its aesthetic value, an equestrian statue of Franco may legitimately appear in a historical exhibition on the Franco dictatorship.

In the previous case, documents and artworks are levelled by retrospective distance. But what happens when these share a context in the space of contemporary art, where the emphasis is on the aesthetic? In that case the levelling operation will come from a different angle. If aesthetic value is intrinsic to a work of art, the thing that gives a document its aesthetic value in an artistic space, and alters its status, is the denotative – sometimes arrogant—gesture of the curator.

The representation of terror: the Red Army Faction exhibition held in Berlin between January and May 2005 contains documentary material and artworks by fifty-two artists. With some isolated and deliberate exceptions, the two areas, documentary and exhibition, are clearly delimited.

Downstairs, the documentation area—a small dimly-lit room in the form of a crypt—contains materials published outside Germany. On the wall are three or four black and white photos of Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin during their exile in Paris in the late 1960s. They look young and relaxed, smiling at the camera from the table of a Parisian cafe covered in mirrors, smoking Gauloises from a packet sitting next to an ashtray with “Campari” on it.

On the top floor of the exhibition area, next to a large projection of DIAL History by Johan Grimonprez, Godard's A bout de soufflé is displayed on a monitor. Belmondo and Seberg lie on a bed, talking and smoking incessantly. They are young, good-looking, wild and stylish. A bout de soufflé was Andreas Baader's favourite film.

The document as nostalgia

The archive is fetishistic. Nostalgic too. Because, as well as desiring the absent object, the archive desires the cause, also lost, of that desire¹.

Beste Bat! ran from October to December 2004 in the entrance hall of the Sala Rekalde. The project, curated by Arturo F. Rodríguez and myself, was presented as an archive with documentary material from the *Radical Basque Rock* movement. This phenomenon—a continuation of the punk scene of 1977—burst on the Basque Country in the 1980s. It was at once a symptom of and a catalyst for a convulsed decade marked by discouragement, heroin, AIDS, the dismantling of the industrial infrastructure, unemployment, a hardening within ETA and the appearance of GAL.

Any exhibition with archive material has to dodge a number of traps (sterile thematicisation, didacticist totalitarianism, arbitrary mystification...). But undoubtedly the greatest of all the spectres hanging over a project like this one, which addressed issues that were so close to all our personal biographies, was the phantom of nostalgia. We did not want to mythicise a past which, (as someone noted in the visitors' book),

Eskorbuto had said with their usual nihilistic lucidity “... has passed / and there's nothing can be done about it/ the present is a failure / and the future can't be seen”².

However, the hidden agenda of the *BB!* exhibition was closely related to the nostalgic drive. In justification, we told ourselves it was more a matter of exorcising our ghosts than staging some self-complacent celebration. One of the aims was to identify the discontinuity between now and then, to contradict the idea that “twenty years is nothing”³. In theory, the exercise would help identify the cause of the desire, lost once things have irredeemably changed. Using an archive format, which “would deprives us of our continuities”⁴, seemed like the most suitable approach. In any case, however, it is impossible to escape nostalgia.

Those discontinuities and the ambivalent attitude we all shared were all the more obvious in the round table discussions, the concerts and the notes in the visitors' book: “I really miss all that”, said one. Another wrote “Since we came into the Sala Rekalde I feel as if I've been embalmed (set fire to the Sala Rekalde!)”⁵.

The last comment is understandable. The entrance to the exhibition in the Sala Rekalde—just a few minutes' walk away from the Guggenheim and mentally hours away from the bars and squats where the radical Basque rock movement had had its heyday in the 1980s—was more than just a funeral service. The remark was true: in the bourgeois environment of the Abando district, the rebels of the RBR phenomenon were finally embalmed.

The exhibition and representational format (and the resulting de-activating isolation) combined with the actual location of the gallery, served to highlight those discontinuities in ways we could not have imagined:

Twelve o'clock noon. The Sala Rekalde opens through a huge glass entranceway onto Avenida Rekalde, one of Bilbao's main thoroughfares. This glass front creates a mirror relationship between the inside and the outside. On one side, a number of young people are examining fanzines and watching video monitors. On the other, the street is blocked by a demonstration. The protesters have their back to the glass. Their anger is directed against the building opposite, the headquarters of the PSOE, the socialist party. Hundreds of middle-aged men dressed in boiler suits are handing out flyers and chanting slogans. They are workers from La Naval, the last great shipyard in the Basque Country, which is about to be closed down.

Inside, one of the videos on the monitors shows the protests at the closure of the other great Basque shipyard, Euskalduna, twenty years before. The protest against the closure (which had also been decreed by a socialist government), turned into a symbol of struggle and dissent and the solidarity of Basque society during the process of industrial dismantling.

However, despite several institutional attempts to revive that era, what is happening on the other side of the glass is not the same. The story is similar, but the circumstances are very different. Twenty years ago (when the workers of La Naval were criticised for not showing solidarity), there was a massive popular protest. Times have changed; not only have we seen the emergence of delocalisation, but also a local economic bonanza, individual solutions and multiple new options. In

the meantime, the predominant feeling continues to be one of vulnerability, resulting from the loss of a sense of collective history and of the tragic. Despite that, “the impetus to cling to the past is very strong, and it is difficult to understand why those things that once functioned no longer do”⁵.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. ZIZEK, Slavoj: *El frágil absoluto*, Pre-textos, Valencia, 2002. (In the melancholy we are faced with the “object of the private desire of his cause”).
2. ESKORBUTO: *Cerebros destruidos*, Anti-todo, Discos Suicidas, Getxo, 1986.
3. GARDEL, Carlos and LE PERA, Alfredo: *Volver*, 1935.
4. FOUCAULT, Michel: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1982.
5. *Visitors' Book*, Sala Rekalde, Bilbao, 2004.
6. MENAND, Louis: *American Studies*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York City, NY, 2002.